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## **THEORIZING MORE INCLUSIVE CITIES: A Relational Model of Boundary Transformation and Urban Research Agenda**

Leigh Graham  
*CUNY Graduate Center*

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**THEORIZING MORE INCLUSIVE CITIES:**

**A Relational Model of Boundary Transformation and Urban Research Agenda**

**Leigh Graham, PhD**

Lgraham at jjay dot cuny dot edu

*Assistant Professor, Urban Affairs, Department of Public Management, John Jay College  
of Criminal Justice*

*Faculty, Environmental Psychology Cluster, PhD Program in Psychology, CUNY*

*Graduate Center*

*The City University of New York*

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**Abstract**

To generate more inclusive environments for marginalized urban communities of color demands a strategy that privileges symbolic boundary change and uses it as the inroad towards spatial changes. This paper theorizes a three step relational process of a) communicative democratic activism, b) "multicultural" capital brokers providing access to the policy making process, and c) practices of community building that reflect the role of cities as key sites for sociospatial boundary transformation. An emphasis on discursive and ideational change, relying on communicative democratic processes steeped in historical, comparative analysis opens up our minds towards different classification schemes for stigmatized groups. Participating political elites bridge U.S. political and economic power structures that perpetuate inequality, so that efforts at symbolic change can be channeled towards and result in concrete change. These elites lead urban community organizations that carry out the processes of community building that bring this sociospatial transformation full circle.

**Keywords:** boundary making, cities, community organizations, black political thought, communicative democracy, brokers, policy making

## **THEORIZING MORE INCLUSIVE CITIES:**

### ***A Relational Model of Boundary Transformation and Urban Research Agenda<sup>i</sup>***

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In order to generate more inclusive urban environments for low income communities of color, urban advocates need a strategy that privileges symbolic boundary change and uses it as the in-road towards spatial changes. In this paper, I theorize a three step relational process of a) communicative democratic activism, b) “multicultural” capital brokers providing access to the policy making process, and c) practices of community building that reflect the role of cities as key sites for sociospatial boundary transformation. I offer this model to stimulate inquiry by social scientists about how to create more inclusive, equitable environments for marginalized groups via the transformation of discursive, ideational, group and spatial boundaries. Our efforts to build and test theories of collective identity formation, communicative democracy, brokering and bridging, and community building must be informed by real and linked racial and economic justice efforts in cities worldwide. Thus this essay also serves, where appropriate, as a call for applied research partnerships between urban focused scholars and social justice advocates to test and refine this theoretical proposition.

This exploration derives from past participatory efforts as a scholar and practitioner with community based organizations pursuing multiracial and multiethnic organizing efforts in Boston, MA and New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to create more equitable, just and secure communities with and for their constituents. It brings together a range of

theoretical foundations, including Black political theory, critical urban theory, social psychology, and political, urban and cultural sociology.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: BOUNDARY WORK IN URBAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

The notion of “linked fate” in Black politics (Dawson 1995) and Pattillo’s (2007) idea of Blackness as a political project constructed via coalition and dissent within Black communities are models for which multi-cultural and cross-class groups should strive in order to effect positive social change. These models are employed with caution: McClain et al. (2005) argue that theories of group consciousness grounded in African American U.S. history and research have mixed utility among other ethno-racial groups. Further, public opinion polls suggest a declining belief in linked fate (Pew 2007).

Acknowledging these limitations, I use these understandings of group consciousness as a starting point to understand the relational dynamics that contribute to group consciousness and collective political action. That is, my theoretical propositions here are focused on the relational processes that contribute to consciousness raising, collective identity formation and collective action, recognizing and embracing that group identity and consciousness are fluid and evolve across individuals, time, space and contexts. Indeed, this fluidity is key to collective identity formation and subsequent collective action rooted in shared urban inequality structures typically constraining diverse low income communities of color. It suggests that the relational processes outlined here could contribute to identity formation and consciousness raising across groups sharing

socioeconomic status and a broad racial minority group status but not a more narrow racial or ethnic group membership.

Discursive and ideational change, relying on democratic processes steeped in historical and comparative analysis, are critical to open up our minds towards different classification schemes for stigmatized groups. Communicative democratic activism must include political elites who can act as brokers and provide access to the political and economic power structures that perpetuate inequality in the United States, so that efforts at symbolic change can be channeled towards and result in concrete change. Increasing access to the policy making process is a particular focus here.

I use what scholars call a relational framework (Frug 1999; Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Wimmer, 2011; Young 2002) in exploring processes of symbolic and spatial boundary change. Wimmer (2011, p. 723) defines the “relational argument” as examining the “networks of political alliances and the power differentials between them to determine which existing categorical cleavages...will become politically salient and the focus of popular identification.” Collective identities, social inequalities, and spatial borders are all implicated and shaped by our social relationships (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Symbolic boundaries are defined as

conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space...tools by which [we] struggle over and come to [define] reality...[and] separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (Lamont and Molnar, 2002, p. 168).

I define spatial boundaries as a subset of social boundaries, which Lamont and Molnar (2002, p. 168) describe as

objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities...revealed in...patterns of association.

Examples of urban spatial boundaries include neighborhood borders, census tracts, zoning laws, school districts, and other geographically delineated spaces that inform the social organization of the city.

Key to creating a more inclusive environment is unpacking and overcoming the “categorical cleavages that are the most consequential and salient for the overall structuring of political relations in...society” (Wimmer 2008, p. 9). In the United States, intertwined ethno-racial and class boundaries are the most political salient, based on the institutional “incentives” (Wimmer 2008, p. 18) provided by the nation state via the shaping of policies and practices that uphold our racist and patriarchal socio-political structure. In order to increase social inclusion in the United States, we need to fundamentally alter the ideologies we hold and the discourses we use to justify racial and economic inequality in the United States.<sup>ii</sup> Katz et al. (2005) and Katz and Stern (2008) demonstrate that intra-ethnic inequalities are increasing, which suggests some weakening in the historical stability (Wimmer 2008) of political divide and conquer strategies that exploit ethno-racial antipathies to dampen class-consciousness in the United States.<sup>iii</sup>

However, signs of “integration fatigue” among middle-class Blacks (Briggs 2007; Charles 2005) and the persistently lower rates of inter-racial integration between Blacks and Whites versus Whites and Asians or Hispanics (Flores and Lobo, 2012; Lee and Bean, 2007, 2012) conversely signal how choice and constraint continue to shape patterns of social interaction and degrees of social closure between ethnic groups.

It is essential that efforts at increasing social inclusion take a long view. Continuous pressure placed on inequality structures will result in long lasting social change much more so than bounded social movements. This does not preclude the use of direct action and periods of intense mobilization, but instead views those moments of collective action as one of many tactics in a long-term strategy towards increasing social inclusion. Dialectical processes of collective identity formation and communicative democracy are the means to shift the symbolic, and subsequently social, boundaries that promote unwanted social exclusion. In the remainder of this essay, I outline the three steps needed to create more inclusive cities.

### **STEP 1: “DEEP PLURALISM” AND COMMUNICATIVE DEMOCRATIC ACTIVISM**

*Ia. “Deep pluralism” and collective identity.* Collective identity change has a dialectical relationship to larger processes of social and political change (Todd 2005). Collective practices, sense of purpose, relationships to others, and cognitive views of the world (Abdelal et al., 2006) are influenced by and shape interpretations of external social transformations. The relational content of collective identity (“us/them”) is paramount in processes of symbolic boundary change. For instance, high status groups are more likely

to privilege themselves versus “the other” (Tajfel and Turner 1985); they may use this relative privilege to justify existing systems of inequality and subsequently use their status and power to support policies that reinforce inequalities (Crocker et al., 1998; Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). Furthermore, if widespread ideologies exist that legitimize group hierarchies and domination and are internalized by stigmatized and subordinated groups, patterns of sociospatial inequality are upheld (Crocker et al., 1998; Pratto et al., 1994). Rejecting stigma and creating rewarding and purposive collective identities are central to the struggle to alter symbolic boundaries and existing classification schemes that signify cultural worth and status, and legitimate social boundaries.

To that end, Thompson (2005, p. ix) calls for “deep pluralism” in Black communities as a means towards “greater political inclusion.” He envisions an

...open political discourse...[that] begins with unveiling painful internal oppressions and exclusions within Black politics for the purpose of increasing the Black community’s power to compel similar unveiling in broader interracial politics...such a critical self-awareness permits a more insightful understanding of others...[and less] rigid understandings of political identity (ix).

It is contentious processes such as “deep pluralism” that constitute collective identity. Thompson, like Pattillo and Dawson, writes frankly about the divisions among African Americans, and the normative goal behind a process of “deep pluralism” is to account for and heal these internal differences to strengthen Black and multiracial political coalition building. I follow Thompson’s lead in thinking about processes of deep pluralism and

collective identity development to build multiracial coalitions advocating for political and social inclusion. Thinking through the possibility of ethno-racially and socioeconomically diverse political coalitions is essential to creating more inclusive urban environments and generating concrete change in cities, given such coalitions' ever-growing importance for municipal electoral success, as NYC Mayor-elect Bill De Blasio's 2013 victory suggests (Enten 2013; Lovett 2013).

1b. *Communicative democracy.* Similar discursive, communicative (Young 2002), and participatory (Polletta 2004) democratic practices across socially bounded groups can begin to shift the symbolic boundaries that they use to exclude and denigrate one another.

Young (2002) advocates for a "communicative" democratic approach to increasing social inclusion that she describes as "communicating across differences" using the standard devices of greeting, rhetoric and narrative. She maintains that this communication and the knowledge individuals and groups bring to the practice is "situated" based on their "social position," which is constructed according to "structural relations of power, resource allocation, and discursive hegemony." One's social position, which is dialectically related to class, ethnic, gender or other social identities, "[conditions] ...experiences, opportunities and knowledge of the society" (Young 2002: 82-83).

Young's analysis is similar to the cultural sociological framework that views boundary-making as contextual and "embedded in the environment;" boundaries are constructed according to the "toolkits," narratives and customs groups have available (Lamont and Molnar, 2002, p. 171; Somers 1994). Obstacles to successful

communicative practices across social group boundaries include a lack of shared or resonant repertoires or traditions. This is a real risk due to a) high levels of sociospatial segregation in the United States. (Charles, 2003, 2006; Massey and Denton, 1993), b) conflicting or discordant worldviews based on different social positions and identities (Abdelal et al., 2006; Brubaker et al., 2004), and c) real or imagined group threat in cross racial or cross class interactions (Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; McDermott 2006), both from the dominant group's position of trying to protect its own privilege, and from the subordinated group's position that they will be victims of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 1984) and that their contributions will be discounted in the exchange. Yet, this risk of conflict is inherent in these types of democratic processes, as "...processes of political communication are more about struggle than argument" (I.M. Young 2002, p. 44). Furthermore, the benefit of a communicative approach that emphasizes narrative and narrativity, that is, the process through which "we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world" reveals that we are all embedded in historically, institutionally, and culturally constituted "cross-cutting relational story lines" that are central to our social identity and social positioning (Somers 1994, p. 606). Associational forms of interaction matter (Polletta 2004), as does the multiplicity of "others" against which collective identities are generated. Obviously the more crowded the field of oppositional groups, the more room there is for social and developmental learning (Polletta 2004; Stone 1989; I.M. Young 2002), the less binary structures of power will be, the more potential relational networks, shared histories and resonant cultural tools exist to enhance

communication, and the greater opportunity for weakening patterns of social closure and fostering symbolic boundary change.

The goals of communicative democracy are twofold. The first is to expand or shift the meanings of symbolic boundaries to be more inclusive along class and ethno-racial terms, including a more explicit acknowledgment of how the two categorization schemes are intertwined. Inclusion here is modeled on Dawson's notion of the political "linked fate" among Black Americans (Dawson 1995). The second aim is to generate or appropriate – on *participants' own terms* – new "ideational content" (Mettler and Soss, 2004) (e.g., frames, discourses) to contest dominant ideologies of the poor, non White, and their communities, for example replacing "the underclass" with a discourse that frames urban, poor communities as denied their full "social citizenship" or speaking more broadly about the structural reality of poverty as a problem of "social exclusion" (see, for example, Van Kempen 2002).

## **STEP 2: "MULTICULTURAL CAPITAL," BROKERS AND POLICY MAKING**

Of course, though deep democracy may be internally rewarding and developmental (Polletta 2004), it is only one piece in empowering groups to contest and alter symbolic boundaries towards more inclusive categorical schemes. Indeed, there are limits to the degrees of trust and solidarity generated in, and efficaciousness of, diverse settings (Briggs 2007; Charles 2005). Therefore, the positive benefits of communicative democratic processes should be channeled towards institutionalizing alternative symbolic boundaries so that new social boundaries governing patterns of distribution and

development are created. The policy making process can play an important role here in making sociospatial boundaries more inclusive.

Bryson (1996) demonstrate that high status individuals possess “multicultural capital,” comprised of variation in tastes along with the knowledge of when to invoke which preferences. Furthermore, Briggs (2007) finds that likelihood of inter-racial friendships is strongly correlated with variables associated with higher socio-economic status (SES): socializing with coworkers, joining secular associations, and having more friends overall. If different types of cultural capital are associated with different social categories, class versus ethnicity, for instance, then we can infer that individuals who are more likely to have interracial friendships are also more likely to possess multiple forms of capital, that is, “multicultural capital.” Briggs (2007, p. 265-66) refers to these friendship networks that “bond on [social traits]...while bridging...social differences” as *cross cultural ties*, describing them as the “social foundations of power sharing” in democratic regimes. I am less interested in friendship ties specifically than I am similar cross-cutting *political* ties, embodied by political brokers operating within a contemporary political context characterized by Katz and Stern (2008, p. 62) as persistent “structural rigidity” comingled with substantial “individual and group fluidity.” They call this the “paradox of inequality” that has structured U.S. society since the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

I envision “expert” political brokers who possess the cultural capital to bridge participatory democratic processes with the policy making processes that shape urban and social policy in the United States. The framework of “interpretative policy analysis” is

useful here. Policies shape a nation's "depth of democracy, inclusiveness of citizenship, and the degree of social solidarity" (Soss and Mettler, 2004, p. 60). Policies influence public and group values, beliefs, perceptions of reality, and self- and group interests. "Policy feedbacks" signify how existing policies constrain future political action (Soss and Mettler, 2004), based on, for instance, definitions of political membership, eligibility for political participation, interactions with government programs, understandings of citizenship, and ideas of who is "deserving" or "undeserving" of public largess. Policies, in sum, have a demonstrative effect on processes of boundary making and group positioning vis-à-vis their relationships to the state; opportunities for collective political action follow based on access to material resources, incentives, civic capacity, and available frames for defining social problems.

Policy feedbacks that construct access for engaged political communities to the institutional channels that shape urban and social policy are key here. The vision is of a network of politically engaged groups connected to the policy making process via elite brokers for several reasons. First, both communicative democratic processes and policy making take time; participant skill development engendered via these processes is valuable and essential to realizing more inclusive sociospatial environments, but relying solely on the empowerment of groups likely to identify and be recognized as marginal within the political system is unlikely to generate the changes they wish to see, at least on an fruitful scale.<sup>iv</sup> Issues of access to political and economic resources necessary to press on the system are fundamental. Second, Rogers-Dillon (2004) skillfully demonstrates in an analysis of Florida's welfare reform experimentation the limits to seeking and

exercising power among members (ranging in class and ethnic status) of a citizen's advisory board, based in part of their belief that the "experts" with whom they were working knew what they were doing and could be trusted in designing and executing programs.<sup>v</sup> She found this trust in expertise and in the neutrality of policy experimentation to be a major reason that ideologically designed welfare reform strategies were implemented at the state and ultimately federal level. Furthermore, we see from Somers and Block (2005) and O'Connor (2001) how ideas about markets, the poor and poor communities become embedded in the public consciousness over time and institutionalized in policy based on policy and intellectual elites' institutional channels for dissemination and adoption. O'Connor also reveals how ideas about the poor are shaped by the gender, class and racial/ethnic differences between members of the poverty knowledge "industry" and poor communities. The brokers that Briggs describes have relationships with members of low income communities as well as higher status individuals. They are strategically positioned to bridge the political and institutional networks central to processes of boundary making and increasing social inclusion.

### **STEP 3: COMMUNITY BUILDING AND URBAN COMMUNITY**

#### **ORGANIZATIONS**

Spatial boundaries perpetuate social segregation by providing "clear boundaries that indicate where 'the right' kind of people live," Frug (1999, p. 77) writes. Zoning and development in the United States is legally structured so as to create and reinforce existing social divisions such as race or socioeconomic status. This in turn reinforces inequalities in resource distribution and social relationships. We have no shortage of

comparative evidence that residential environments are central to shaping and maintaining social boundaries and collective identities.<sup>vi</sup> Furthermore, spatial boundaries are influenced directly by policies that deal with investments in low income communities.<sup>vii</sup> The role of cities now rises to the fore here. Unlike “privatized” suburbs, per Frug, cities are public places designed legally and normatively to deal with difference.<sup>viii</sup> Cities exist as intermediaries between the state (ruler) and the individual (the ruled). Therefore, the third process needed for shifting symbolic and spatial boundaries occurs in cities, which are the site for processes of “community-building.”

Frug defines community-building as the political, legal and socio-cultural pursuit of tolerance, namely by embracing four key values embodied in urban life: social differentiation among urban residents without exclusion; neighborhood “variety” that contributes to individual’s and group’s sense of place; “eroticism,” which he defines as the surprising and odd of urban life, and the sense of being in a public space and thus open to new experiences (what Frug calls “publicity”). Cities thus are sites for learning and experimentation, freedom and growth, and, in the process, confronting, overcoming and erasing symbolic, imagined threats of the other (Frug 1999; See also Davis 1992; Gans 1995; Soja 1996; A. Young 2007; Zukin 1996). This is what Frug (1999, p. 11) terms community-building: “the ideal of city life” in which “social relations [equal] the being together of strangers.” Frug (1999, p. 141) advocates for the removal of “socio-political dichotomy of separate or togetherness...city life is a compromise between withdrawal from strangers and engagement with them.”

The aforementioned “expert” political brokers step forward here, drawn from urban community based organizations (CBOs). Wong (2007) describes the institutional and leadership resources that community organizations use to empower and mobilize immigrants. She concludes that CBOs “foster [immigrant] action and involvement, with visible consequences for the political system and policy making” (2007, p. 464). My observations and practice suggest similar outcomes. Urban CBOs that represent and serve low-income communities of color act as neighborhood stewards; tenant organizers; affordable housing landlords; job trainers and workers’ rights advocates; and human service providers (among other functions). CBOs carry out these activities with funding from federal block grants, philanthropic and corporate investments, and state and municipal monies that necessitate negotiation, advocacy, and political participation at the local, regional and federal level, whether directly or through relationships with intermediaries, organizational coalitions, and public-private partnerships. As such, the leaders of these urban CBOs are frequently skilled political leaders as well as community representatives of diverse groups of neighborhood stakeholders comprised of the working poor, low income households of color – including immigrant families, the disabled and elderly, and other vulnerable groups. CBO leadership must be equally comfortable, for example, facilitating tenant meetings held in stuffy apartment building basements with children underfoot and pizza cooling on a side table as Latino, African American, Chinese and Haitian tenants communicate about housing, job, and quality of life concerns, as they would be donning suits for meetings with legislators and their cavalries

of aides in muted navies and gray wool who conceal their agendas behind their Blackberries while hashing out housing, workforce or economic development legislation.

These not dissimilar processes of community organizing and legislative wrangling situate and imbue urban CBO leaders with the necessary skills to connect integrated, diverse groups into the policy making process. Multi-city organizational networks and coalitions of community leadership connected to their supporters and allies at the state and federal levels creates a potential web of brokering relationships that can tackle unequal spatial boundaries concretized in urban and social policy (e.g., segregation and asset inequality generated by exclusionary zoning laws, minimal affordable housing mandates in new construction, unnecessary tax breaks to lure businesses to and from communities without consideration for the types of jobs created, funding for highways versus public transit infrastructure, etc.). Incorporating communicative democratic activism throughout the culture and practices of these community-based organizations can lead to much deeper, reflective and strategic thinking about how affordable housing, community benefits agreements, good jobs and other typical products of urban policy can truly transform the lives and prospects of poor urban communities at greatest risk in our globalized political economy.

## **CONCLUSION**

With globalization, immigration, climate change, and unprecedented economic inequality simultaneously squeezing communities in terms of both economic security and symbolic boundaries, there are two widespread cultural responses in conflict with one another right now: a “group threat” response promoting isolationism and harsh sanctions on border-

crossers, and a progressive response struggling towards inclusion, even universalism.<sup>ix</sup> Ideological conflict, federalism, enduring racist and patriarchal social structures, and continuing demographic shifts indicate our work to make symbolic and spatial boundaries more inclusive will outlive us. The processes outlined here aim to build a sense of “linked fate” across class, ethno-racial, gender and other social boundaries, along with the acceptance that building diverse coalitions is painful, rewarding and vitally necessary for a more equitable, inclusive and secure future.

Progressive efforts at urban inclusion, using at points the various steps outlined here, include – surely among others – the Equity and Inclusion Campaign in the U.S Gulf Coast, initiated after Hurricane Katrina, and the Right to the City Alliance, launched in 2007 in response to urban gentrification and displacement, and to unite the struggle against neoliberal capitalism in U.S. cities by low income communities of color. Models of political brokers in my research and practice emerge from community development corporations, but presumably exist in community foundations, community health centers, youth centers, and other community-based organizations that serve grassroots populations, donors and investors, and policymakers.

What’s needed now is a rigorous survey of urban political action to test the theoretical proposition laid out here: what are marginalized groups doing to solidify their group identity and politically activate their group consciousness? What works for these activist groups in terms of building democratic coalitions with other marginalized groups? How does communicative practice factor here? How do groups introduce new ideational content that has the potential to shift the terms of political debate (from “poverty” to

“social exclusion,” perhaps, or “illegal immigrants” to the “undocumented”)? What does it take for this content to take hold? What is the role of political brokers in this activism; how do they successfully bridge the gaps between the grassroots and their rhetoric and frames and elite decision-makers and their traditional ways of understanding urban inequalities? What is the particular context that cities provide for this activist, base-building, symbolic and social boundary change work? Given the growing class and ethno-racial diversity of suburbs, is the “metro” the more appropriate geographic scale for testing this theoretical proposition? I hope other urban scholars committed to racial and economic justice will join me in this important exploration.

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[Insert Corresponding Author Info here]

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> [Insert Acknowledgements Here]

<sup>ii</sup> For examples of how social inequalities are concretized in policies and programs, see Feagin, 2000; O'Connor, 2001; Hays, 2003; Lieberman, 2005; Briggs, 2005; Somers and Block, 2005; Imbroscio, 2006; and Steensland, 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> A.O. Scott (2013) urges a similar progressive discourse on race in an ever more diverse nation.

<sup>iv</sup> It is worth comparing this argument to those in favor of or opposed to community development as an empowerment strategy for marginalized communities of color (Dreier et al., 2001; Fraser et al., 2003; Imbroscio, 1998a, 1998b, 2006; Stone 1989).

<sup>v</sup> See also Feldman and Stall (2004) on public housing tenants' willing deference to expert planners despite experts' efforts to follow resident leadership on planning.

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example, Katznelson 1981; Kefalas 2001; and Yancey 1976. Although there are limits to the effectiveness of residential versus workplace or associational membership in generating interethnic and democratic alliances (Bachrach and Botwinick, 1992; Briggs 2007), we have seen the limits to workplace as a site of class-consciousness raising through the history of the unions in this country (Honey 1993, Kelley 1998, Milkman 2006).

<sup>vii</sup> For instance, "federalizing" the Community Development Block Grant program, replacing the federal minimum wage with mandatory metropolitan living wages, establishing a national low income housing trust fund, mandating inclusionary zoning, minimum levels of affordable housing production, basing public school admissions on race, class and other variables, etc. are all forms of urban community investment.

<sup>viii</sup> Frug explains that norms and laws justify suburbs guarding their boundaries as legitimate, entitled, self-interest.

<sup>ix</sup> For the limits to universalism, see Thompson 1998 and Lee and Bean 2007.