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Progressive Innovation in the 1970s: Madison, Wisconsin, and the Conference on Alternative State and Local Public Policies

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Progressive cities in the United States and elsewhere have been most commonly understood as dealing with neighborhood mobilization, citizen empowerment and other forms of grassroots political involvement. Using the language of “the grassroots” in the U.S. and “civil society” for overseas cases, commentators have focused on the movement bases of progressive administrations. A different direction in progressive administration, however, can be seen in two cases from the 1970s, where the key factors were administrative and bureaucratic transformations effected by theoretically informed activist officials.

In the first case, the first mayoral administration (1973-1979) of Paul Soglin in Madison, Wisconsin, there was a left-leaning administration moving to the center and “capturing” public sector bureaucracies in order to provide good governance for the entire city. In the second case, the Conference on Alternative State and Local Public Policies, which met for the first time in Madison in 1975, there was an attempt to showcase the progressive transformation of the bureaucratic institutions of local government happening across the U.S. In both these cases, progressive activists transformed themselves into officials and administrators who governed using pragmatic policies emphasizing good governance and the formation of cross-class coalitions for continued electoral support.

At one level these are deviant cases—“normal” cities never faced even the possibility of movement activists taking control of government bureaucracies. Participatory and redistributive innovations and experiments were the exception, not the rule, in 1970s America. And, even in the cities where progressive activists came into power, many of their efforts were successfully resisted, and when implemented, changes were transitory.

At a deeper level, however, the exceptional cases of cities like Madison , and the national organizing of the conference, provide a window into a formative moment, both experimental and optimistic, in contemporary administrative practice. These 1970s innovators prefigured the “activist state” as seen in Porto Alegre , Brazil , and Kerala , India , in the 1990s and 2000s. The past few years have seen the election of a set of high-profile, pragmatic and progressive mayors in a number of U.S. cities, including Los Angeles , Madison and Salt Lake City . Now as then, movement-based activists are being forced to develop theories and practices to inform their move into bureaucracies and electoral office.

Madison

In Madison , according to recent interviews and media coverage of the time, Paul Soglin pulled together a fragile coalition of students, organized labor and liberals to win election as mayor in 1973. Although the election of the young, mustachioed mayor with a radical past was presented at the time as a startling development, Soglin’s win was based on years of organizing, a history of successful electoral political involvement and the fortunate confluence of a number of other factors: the lowered voting age, the unpopularity of the incumbent mayor and the political organization left from the 1972 campaign of George McGovern. Without these factors, Soglin would likely not have been a serious mayoral candidate in 1972. Soglin’s election marked a decisive shift in the political culture of the city, away from both the right-wing reactionism of the previous mayor and the violence and unrest of the protest years.

As a law student at the University of Wisconsin (UW), Soglin became prominent as an antiwar activist in the 1960s, although more radical activists criticized him as a political operator rather than a movement heavy. His public and continued conflicts with the Madison Police Department (MPD) began during this time— Soglin was beaten at protests, had his car tires slashed in circumstances that implicated police officers and was the subject of sustained and illegal investigations, along with other local activists, by the MPD “affinity squad.”

As frustration grew over the continued expansion of the war in Vietnam , antiwar protests in Madison and across the nation turned increasingly violent in the late 1960s. The police used teargas for the first time against white college students in Madison in 1967. An escalating series of fire bombings, “trashings” and police and vigilante reprisals culminated in the spring and summer of 1970. Final exams at the university were cancelled because of a police riot at the annual Miffland Street block party and the shootings at Kent State in Ohio . The turning point for many activists was the truck-bombing of the Army Math Research Center on the UW campus in August that killed an unaffiliated researcher. Although the antiwar protests continued, the bombing was a sobering event that caused a turning away from the path of revolutionary violence.

Mayor William Dyke took office in Madison in 1969 promising to impose control over the increasingly violent protests; he won reelection in 1971 on the same promise. He was a deliberately polarizing figure, lauding heavy-handed police tactics and calling for vigilante justice. (Dyke later ran for vice president on segregationist Lester Maddox's presidential ticket.) This polarizing aspect, however, increasingly lost him support as the excesses of the police response became more public and support for the war dropped.

Soglin entered Madison electoral politics as well in 1969, winning election to the City Council from a student-heavy district, and was reelected in 1971. By 1973, there was a strong minority of progressives on the City Council who were often able to create working coalitions with moderate Democratic and Republican aldermen. As Dyke's political positions grew more extreme, Soglin and other progressives on the Council appeared increasingly mainstream by comparison. As an alderman, Soglin's reputation as a wild, long-haired radical became overlaid with that of a responsible, mainstream progressive who paid attention to the formalities of government, could work with others and knew how to compromise.

The broad dislike of Dyke trumped the more normal Balkanization on the left, allowing Soglin to craft a broad electoral coalition with significant grassroots mobilization to win in 1972. The voting age had been dropped that year from twenty-one to eighteen, and students turned out to vote in large numbers, though particularly with the decline of the antiwar movement, they did not stay mobilized and were not a significant political force between elections.

Disappointing critics on the far left of the political spectrum, Soglin's administration stayed firmly "between the lines," working with existing structures and mechanisms rather than tearing down and rebuilding Madison's government on a radical model. Reflecting the history of conflict between the antiwar left and the MPD, Soglin's administration made "regaining control" over the police force a central focus during his first years in office. The appointment of a more humane chief of police, and the subsequent opening of the MPD to gay, female and minority applicants, were key symbols of democratic openness and of changing city/community relations.

Soglin implemented a range of mildly redistributive and participatory mechanisms, such as providing public daycare, funding the tenants' union and opening the city budget to greater scrutiny and citizen participation. While Soglin successfully municipalized the bus system, his efforts to municipalize sectors such as cable television and electricity failed. Soglin's administration experimented with development corporations and other public-private blendings, with mixed results.

Soglin, like other left-leaning mayors of the decade, went so far as to create a

foreign policy independent of the nation's. For example, Soglin was the first U.S. mayor to visit Fidel Castro, in 1975. These efforts were of great symbolic importance, particularly to the ideological left, but within Madison they were a side issue to the day-to-day politics of service delivery, budgets and political appointments.

Jim Rowen, Soglin's aide, ran for office in 1979 as Soglin's successor but was decisively defeated, in part because of his alienation of the Madison economic and media elite by his support for organized labor. Soglin, however, was again elected mayor in 1989, stepping down early in 1997 for an unsuccessful run for the U.S. senate. He ran for mayor again in 2003 in an election where, ironically, he was widely labeled as the conservative candidate, losing to progressive candidate Dave Cieslewicz.

The Conference

The history of Soglin's administration is intertwined with that of the Conference on Alternative State and Local Public Policies. Madison was not unique. Similar developments were happening in other cities across the U.S. The Conference, which had its first meeting in Madison in 1975, served as a key national point of interconnection for what were otherwise disconnected and isolated local efforts. The Conference is still active, although it has since changed its name twice and its leadership several times. In 1985 the Conference became the National Center for Policy Alternatives, and in 1990 it reorganized as the Center for Policy Alternatives.

In 1975, the national environment, particularly under Nixon's presidency, appeared to be as or more hostile to progressive activists than ever before. There were, nonetheless, a growing set of cities, such Berkeley , Austin and Madison , and local elected officials, including judges, mayors and city and county legislators, proposing and implementing local progressive reforms. The period between the first meeting in 1975 in Madison and the disillusionment and retreat that followed the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan captures the conference at its most vibrant, productive and influential.

The conference was a loosely organized agglomeration of progressive activists from across North America . It was meant to serve as a clearinghouse of local innovations and successes, and as a platform for the promotion of a national agenda of progressive change rooted in local electoral and legislative politics. The innovations created by conference participants were unabashedly based in an expansive vision of the public sector and incremental progress towards economic justice and direct democracy.

According to interviews and conference publications, a major effort of the conference organizers (Lee Webb, Derek Shearer and Ann Beaudry in particular)

involved the creation of a framework within which to fit the disparate efforts of the conference's participants, and then linking this framework to a realistic program of political change in the U.S. Organizers strongly advocated for structural change through public ownership and a range of what are now called "good government" initiatives. The overall model was that of the social democrats in Western Europe and Canada , with a rhetorical nod to previous American reform efforts such as the Populist Movement. Organizers were particularly conscious of the language of politics, eschewing words like "socialism" in favor of more palatable phrases like "economic democracy." But because the conference functioned as an agglomeration of local efforts, not as something with top-down authority, the organizers' vision was not applied equally to all of the local efforts within the conference. Instead, local efforts spanned a spectrum, from highly theoretically informed to what appear to have been very naïve experiments.

Most contemporary discussions of progressive cities have concentrated on progressive administrations' policies towards participation, redistribution, land use and job creation. What is immediately apparent from looking at Madison, however, and many of the cases showcased at the conference, is the holistic and experimental approach that was taken. The approach was much broader than that taken by most reformist or radical municipal governments in the U.S. today, in part because they came into power with very shallow institutional experience and genuinely did not know what were the limits and possibilities. Their analyses of the nexuses of structural power in 1970s America led them to attempt to gain control over certain pieces of the systems of food production and distribution. (Community gardens and cooperative stores are the surviving remnants of this effort.) They integrated questions of energy production and public ownership of utilities, banks and housing. And a tremendous effort was made to rein in aspects of what was seen as an out-of-control criminal justice system—in particular, many progressives had become radicalized by the indiscriminate use of police violence in attempts to suppress antiwar and civil rights organizing.

Obviously, the conference organizers' hope of a tide of local progressivism sweeping across the United States never came to pass. The conference meetings and publications, however, were important vehicles for discussing and disseminating innovative strategies and mechanisms for progressive reform. Local administrations, such as Soglin's in Madison , permanently changed local political cultures on a progressive model, and some of their innovations have today become mainstream administrative practice.

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