
November 1970

A Comment on Urban Legal Studies

Julian Levi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj>

Article

Citation Information

Levi, Julian. "A Comment on Urban Legal Studies." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 8.2 (1970) : 385-388.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60082/2817-5069.2579>

<https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj/vol8/iss2/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Osgoode Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Osgoode Hall Law Journal by an authorized editor of Osgoode Digital Commons.

A Comment on Urban Legal Studies

A COMMENT ON URBAN LEGAL STUDIES

JULIAN LEVI*

I would like to begin with two caveats.

The first one I make as Professor of Urban Studies in the Division of the Social Sciences. Nobody, least of all lawyers, at this point in history ought to be under any illusion concerning the capacities of the social scientists in dealing with urban problems. I have seen cost benefit analysis on urban problems and their possible solutions. As a matter of fact, I have seen this effort undertaken at considerable expense as part of a United States Government Task Force. When we got all through the economists told us that we didn't know any more than we did at the beginning.

I have seen imaginative work done at the Department of Geography and at the School of Business at the University of Chicago about systems analysis and yet the fact remains that in the United States we do not know how to make mini-government work and we do not know how to make maxi-government function. The experiment in Toronto in a metropolitan government has been duplicated only on two or three occasions in Dade County, Florida, at Memphis, Tennessee, and most recently, at Minneapolis-St. Paul.

As to the complexities, and motivations and causation in human behaviour refer, if you will, to the expert testimony of psychiatrists in criminal cases and to the collection and analysis of complex statistical and other data often made by sociologists and political scientists. The material is all there but what does the discipline do with it? And as to impressionistic accounts of urban life as the author thinks it really is and says it is, it is possible for any of the learned disciplines to become journalists.

This is not a declaration of war on the social scientists, but the notion that so-called interdisciplinary collaboration is going to provide any magic answer is just not true. The frequent statement that "if man is able to put an explorer on the lunar surface and bring him back safely, then . . . (and you may include any conclusion as to any urban problem and its solution) is simply not true. We do not know enough. The fact that the social scientists borrow the animal cage on occasion and the white coat from the biological scientists, or even that they use that most ubiquitous and deceptive of all tools — the computer, really does not move us along.

The second caveat, I think, has to go to ourselves. The essential mission of the law school, as I see it, is to train and properly educate men and women to discharge the exacting and awesome responsibilities of a profession. These young men and women who come to us, at sometime in the future will have the lives and freedom of their clients, certainly their property and their

*Professor of Urban Studies, Division of Social Sciences, University of Chicago.

economic and family futures, within their hands. The result to the client at that point will be profoundly affected by the quality of the legal service, its integrity, and the effort made. This is particularly true in an adversary system. I do not think we will achieve social justice or tranquility unless these high standards of professional competence and loyalty are met at the poverty level as well, and I do not regard interdisciplinary collaboration or a varied group of attractive courses of great contemporary significance as any substitute at all for the plain hard skills that a law student must have.

And I think we all also ought to recognize that we cannot idealize the city planner either. Prior to the 1930s the capital available to cities was largely limited to carrying out public works. The education of planners as a consequence was carried out primarily in fields of architecture and design. Commencing with the 1930s the development of public housing programs developed a mixed bag of government, administrators and social workers. And, finally, the obvious failures of the physical programs, of slum clearance, urban renewal and the rest compel recognition that urban problems are people problems; that inadequate policies and programs of welfare, of employment and of urban education, for example, lie at the heart of the urban crisis. Purely as a personal aside, I have no interest whatsoever these days in seeing people discuss housing problems, clearance problems and all the rest unless whatever these physical problems and programs are, they are subordinate to the problems of income and subordinate to the other problems which will give the poor a choice.

And it is, of course, a laudable object to train a city planner to have a general knowledge about the issues of elementary and secondary education in the central city. But, beyond an ability to talk intelligently, if he lacks the credentials and skills of the educator he cannot do anything about those schools. And the planner who is aware of the deficiencies in the delivery of medical services to poor people can do little more than ask the physician, the health administrator or, for that matter, the health insurance analyst to advise him. I suspect that what is happening with planning education is that we are developing the self-styled generalist who will know less and less about more and more.

And the other side of the equation is equally unsatisfactory. Entrenched, excessive professionalism and specific schools and disciplines result in systems conceived and administered for the benefit of the supplier rather than for the welfare of the consumer. The elementary or secondary school administrator who views the function of the public school as limited solely to the conventional hours of instruction puts the roots of community alienation which we see in many neighborhoods.

Now, there is something unique about law in this regard. The notion that the client, often ill-educated, frequently impolite and demanding, can give direction to the highly-trained school superintendent, the principal, or the medical administrator, appears passing strange and even bizarre to those people. Lawyers do not have that problem — for a long time we have distinguished between professional advice and its function, and the client's prerogative. Clients unschooled in the law and inexperienced in its ways

nevertheless have a prerogative to disregard, and often do disregard, the advice of their counsel. They do reject a recommended settlement. They do insist upon a plea of not guilty despite the probable weight of the evidence as seen by their counsel, and the profession accepts it. I think this is one of the contributions which lawyers and law students may make.

Also, I would remind you that law needs more than loose anecdote and description. The barrister learns very early that abstract doctrine or general impression forms an inadequate substitute for exact knowledge of the facts. The growing field of poverty law is an evident example. Consumer fraud transactions in which the ignorant, disinterested buyer makes purchases as a result of misrepresentation, today comprise an appreciable share of the business of legal aid offices. Law students active in these offices report with satisfaction that they have arranged settlements over the phone with creditors. A closer analysis of the situation would suggest that the settlement transaction includes the sale of a hunting license. The consumer fraud vendor knows that only a small proportion of his clientele will ever seek legal aid. He settles with the fraction who do get legal aid and he thus insures a clear field as to most of his business. And so the legal problem is more than just a representation of the individual client. The requirement is, rather, an economic and financial analysis of resource and mechanism to the end that a legal remedy can be fashioned with a broader effect.

I think, incidentally, along this line that this is where we make a mistake in our model of legal aid, very often drawn from the clinical medical model which, in effect, says the physician always has to see the patient. What we strive to do as a matter of law is to produce a climate and a set of economic consequences where this is not required.

Similarly in the relation between landlord and tenant — it is not enough to propose the extension of the tenant's rights without the consideration of the economic consequences. While the law of landlord and tenant does require reform (as evidenced by work done here in Ontario under the direction of the Attorney General and work which I have supervised for the American Bar Foundation and which is now being carried on by the Commissioners on Uniform State Laws) I would remind you that it is very easy to so tip these rights that the only people who will own urban property rented to low and middle-income families will be either knaves or fools.

Law at its best is expressive of a culture in which ancient doctrine is often skillfully applied to solution of contemporary problems. One enterprise presently is underway in my seminar this quarter in Law and Urban Problems at the University of Chicago. The United States Congress has enacted a National School Lunch Act, which Act provides that the Department of Agriculture will enter into contracts with state departments of education. The state departments of education will enter into contracts with local school boards, and the aim of the program is that children who are poor will receive either free or reduced-price lunches. This has not worked. One of the reasons, incidentally, it hasn't worked is that everybody who is connected with the administration of the program has something else to do and they regard this particular program as an unnecessary chore and a headache. There have been six or seven lawsuits filed over the country. There are serious problems

as to jurisdiction. There are serious problems as to substantive law. There are serious problems as to remedy. Moreover, this legislation came out of the Agricultural Committees and the whole discussion before the Committees was built around getting rid of surplus foods rather than having to pay storage on it or to burn it. And the public policy is not clear. So, what happens? First, a group of graduate students in the School of Social Services Administration, working in collaboration with people in the Department of Education and the Medical School, are putting together a "Brandeis brief" on what is, or ought be, the public policy regarding the feeding of hungry children. One of the problems which has arisen in connection with the trial of these cases has been the assumption that, to show eligibility within a school district, parents had to be induced to testify. This is an enormously humiliating, difficult thing and it seemed to us that this ought not be required. The result is a group of people at the Center for Urban Studies are at work gathering up what there is available in the public demographic field as public records that could be subpoenaed and put together for any school district in the country. Now, what do the law students do? One group is looking at the problems of procedure, jurisdiction, etc. — and they are very serious; the second group, substantive problems; and the third group, the remedial problems. What will come out of this will be not only model pleadings but a trial brief. What more than that? In the middle of this month, that is in November, the lawyers who are involved in these seven or so cases will come to Chicago, sit on the other side of the table from these fifteen or sixteen young men and women, and will argue some things out. Now, from my point of view, this is what I think urban studies ought to be in the legal curriculum. First of all, this is the practice of the craft of the lawyer at its best. Second, it says to our young people, as nothing else does, that legal skills and professional skills can be used to solve problems. And it says something to them about what their ultimate goal as citizens ought to be and, incidentally, if this job is well done hundreds and thousands of children throughout the country will be benefited.

This is not the first time this kind of an enterprise has occurred at Chicago. A couple of years ago in a course of legislative draftsmanship twenty pieces of suggested legislation and housing were drawn, each with a brief as to its legality. When the smoke cleared, twelve of those bills were law in the State of Illinois. A year ago in the consumer fraud buying situation in Lawndale, as a result of work done by a team of students class actions were filed in the United States District Court which stuck. The complaints, the briefs and the judge's opinion were filled with quotations from the students' papers.

Finally, I think we ought to look at this problem in one other way. I think that we under-rate law as an education. I think we have made a mistake in requiring the Bachelor's degree before we admit students. I can think of no finer liberal education than the introductory courses in law. Second, I am not clear as to what we are doing in the third year of law school. Speaking to both students and faculty I often encounter boredom. It may be that the third year in law school ought to be a kind of sophisticated internship. I would regard it, however, as most unfortunate if urban studies was viewed simply as a source for filler material for that third year.