

Dr. Sean Dinces, Assistant Professor of History & Political Science, Long Beach City College, CA, Interview for the Fall 2017 issue of *e.polis*

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**What path did you take to end up researching at the intersection of professional sports and economic policy?**

I was generally interested in urban and economic history. Somewhere along the way I encountered the urban economic and econometric literature on teams and stadiums, and was struck by two things I found in those readings. The first was the consensus [which is rare in academics] and the second was that the fact that while the economists seem to be really up to speed and innovative in terms of creating research that I think proves pretty definitively that there's not a strong statistically significant link between bringing teams and stadiums to cities and metropolitan economic growth, that there seemed to be an assumption underlying all of these studies that the sports business is an aberration. It's an aberration in terms of the monopoly structure and obviously if that's the case then the solution is to create more competition so that cities can obtain expansion teams or teams from different sports or leagues and not necessarily get into these huge bidding wars. But then I got pulled in because there were obviously these shakedown artists threatening relocation to get subsidies, but actually a lot of the types of support I'm seeing is from local governments, and it's of a type that I'm also seeing when I look at other major commercial landholders in cities like Chicago or Milwaukee or Los Angeles. So is it really this unique market structure of sports that's playing a role here? I'm not disagreeing with

the economists, and I think the monopoly features are most visible when it comes to the level of the subsidies that cities offer. Rarely do you see projects of this [Bradley Center] size being subsidized to 80-90-100 percent, but in terms of the general trend of government intervention on behalf of the market with these projects that are going to benefit private interest. It just seemed to me that there was an entire boat here being missed as there was a much larger story about how this was actually not necessarily a unique economic market in cities, but actually part of a much larger set of shifts in terms of urban economics after 1970.

There's a personal side to it as well, and during my dissertation I thought about writing about the redistributive effects of publicly subsidized stadiums was a way to introduce people who might not normally be reading about urban inequality, and the causes and mechanisms of urban inequality, to engage them. In some ways it's like a Trojan horse, because you present this known quantity of "sports," but then it opens a door to all of these other urban issues. That said, I still vacillate – almost daily – on whether you can use something like sports to lure or engage or spark interest in something like policy. Sports is weird in this way, because it lends itself more to intrinsic debate (*i.e. which team is better?, etc.*) than as a catalyst for academic or policy debate. And you can see that with many of these stadium projects, where the concerns that elected officials and academics have differ enough that they aren't always talking *to* each other, and the same might be true within those groups when you're concerned about labels or ideas like fiscal conservatism or economic progressivism. Just because the catalyst or the lens is the same, doesn't mean the conversations are necessarily meeting at any point.

**If the debates about subsidies for private capital are at cross purposes, do you see anything changing in the near future?**

I remain optimistic that there is some sort of political solution. This discussion about subsidized buildings strikes me as a great place to see some sort of political action or demonstration on the part of urban coalitions as a way to start maybe building some actual and successful resistance to this process.

**Because this is an urban issue, there are scholars from multiple disciplines that work on the subject. Do you think any groups or disciplines are doing a particularly successful or innovative job at furthering this discussion?**

The groups definitely do their own things well. For example, the traditional orthodox economic literature is particularly adept at spelling out the dollars and cents failures of the promises surrounding these policies. Yet at the same time they have a tendency to treat the sports world as if it were the only inefficient market that exists. As a historian, especially when you're teaching, you cover any number of topics that would qualify as inefficient markets, from the Transcontinental Railroad to modern healthcare. And I'm skeptical about the economists proposed solutions to the subsidy issue as well. For example, I don't believe that a concerted effort to repeal baseball's antitrust exemption – even when followed by really active diversification measures supported by the Justice Department – would solve this issue. And I think a leading cause of that failure would be the history and rootedness of the baseball's brand. It's stature – or former stature – as America's pastime would probably reject any amount of manufactured or artificial competition.

That said I think the mixed methodology approaches that scholars are taking appear to be the best path to a broader reception of the research being done. For example, with my current project, because it's a case study I'm always answering questions about how representative it

really is. And I've also done large-*n* studies, so I'm familiar with both. But, for example in this project, and I talked about this in my presentation, you can see how the development of the United Center affected local street vendors. A small subsection of the population that was affected by the policy in a meaningful way, that had real effects on Chicago, but that would be missed entirely by these more heavily quantitative studies.

**This is obviously not just an academic issue, but one that affects the majority of urban citizens. Have you seen any response at the local social level? If nothing comes to mind, do you have any predictions for how local civic groups might react to cities continuing to pursue these policies?**

One unfortunate trend seems to be that local opposition and activists groups go from outright opposition to "How can we at least get a piece of this pie?" In California right now, we have stadium projects in the works both for the Rams (NFL) and the Golden State Warriors (NBA), and I can't help but wonder if the time is ripe to use the far from perfect referenda system to enact some kind of statewide legislation to prohibit or limit the abilities of local taxing bodies to transfer revenue into these subsidy projects. The difficulty there seems to be that it's such a large scale approach that support would likely be much harder to gather than in an acute, single policy or single arena case. Mostly I'm intellectually throwing things against the wall here, but perhaps success is viable if you appeal to voters in the sense of, what is done is done, but from here on out do no harm. Take the Hippocratic approach to these types of policies.

**Your current research project is on the United Center in Chicago. What do you think someone studying or involved in similar policy arenas in a different city will be able to take away when they read the book?**

I entered into the project because I saw how the newspapers hailed it as this kind of triumph of subsidized professional sports facilities. Above all else, my research illustrates how that interpretation isn't quite true. But I also think that it's important that if the United Center *is* the "best case scenario" for social and corporate responsibility in the realm of these subsidies, and yet it was still fundamentally exploitative, then that has pretty disturbing implications for the process as a whole.

**Do you care to speculate how Milwaukeeans could use your findings to anticipate the impact of the new Milwaukee Bucks arena?**

Well if the "best case scenario" is Chicago, then Milwaukee's "best case scenario" is defined relative to that. Many urban scholars will be quick to point out the regional interconnectedness of Milwaukee and Chicago and Milwaukee's market size, their location relative to Chicago, that all affects the type and degree of impact for the project. There's also the consideration that Milwaukee is a market in a state that has been increasingly regressive economically at the state level, with increased upward redistribution. That's a result that this type of policy tends to exaggerate.

There's always been a productive tension in social science – with the exception I would say of economics or quantitative sociology or quantitative political science – between case studies and high *n*-value studies. I did a high *n*-value study on luxury seating from 1987 on. That data, for example, doesn't reveal whether working class people are or aren't going to games anymore

because it misses the story side of things. Who is and isn't going to games now, or once the new arena is built, and why they are or aren't...that's the kind of perspective I think case studies can offer.

**Do you think that we can still fund these stadiums to appease our inner fan, but work to mitigate the inequality that these redistributive policies frequently intensify?**

Maybe, but it almost definitely requires organizing beyond the local. Activism at regional levels at least should organize against the relocation threat *{i.e. build us a stadium or we relocate our team}* specifically. Colin Gordon makes a point about how cities won't ever see success against redistributive effects [and] policies if the organization stays purely local, because there will still be cities that compete against each other for that project.

I think that the cultural attachment and attraction to these teams also serve to replace forms of community that have been lost over the last forty plus years. Particularly forms of community built around the workplace in forms of class connection. For example, there actually is in cities like Chicago, a pretty direct line that you can draw from the decline in union membership and the decline in the types of identity formation that that used to be linked to, and the feeling among people that they need to be connected to others...through seemingly superficial events and types of consumption.

I also wonder if there wouldn't be more success in not directly attacking the subsidy process as problematic, but rather taking an indirect route. For example, actively cultivating the types of community and identity that were lost and which sports stepped into to sort of fill that void. Of course they can coexist, but the desperate need for belonging that sports identities seem to represent might be mitigated enough that you could successfully separate or begin to separate the

problematic duality of “I’m a fan of this team and want them to stay” and “There’s good evidence that this is not the best policy decision for our city.” In researching this book, I came across this really unique example of the temporary unity of Chicagoans celebrating a Bulls championship in Grant Park. They were from all over the city, but one thing that you saw in the surveys and in the journalistic stories was that a large number of them, while happy and celebrating the championship, also couldn’t afford tickets to the game. The community mattered, the identity, but even then in celebration they had this clear difference even within their group of self-identified Bulls fans.