

COMMENT AND REPLY

Comment on Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen, ASR, December 2000

OIL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF PLACE

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To show how places achieve and reproduce distinctiveness, Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen (2000, henceforth MF&P) selected two geographically close California communities that share similar socio-demographic characteristics and “broadly similar historical experiences.” They then analyzed how each community addressed exogenous forces, namely oil development and a freeway project. By isolating differences in the way local actors responded to these exogenous forces, MF&P attempted to reveal the accomplishment of place. For MF&P, character results from the way in which cultural, demographic, economic, and social attributes conjoin, or “lash-up.” How character persists through time constitutes tradition. In measuring character and tradition empirically, MF&P attempted to show how places achieve their distinctiveness.

The communities that MF&P use to make the concepts of character and tradition “tracetable” are Santa Barbara and Ventura, California. These communities, however, do not provide an adequate case study to support the authors’ compelling theoretical discussion. Crucially, by mischaracterizing the urban histories of Santa Barbara and Ventura as “remarkably alike in their degree of involvement with oil production” in terms of

“volume and timing” (p. 798), MF&P remove one of the two principal empirical tests that comprise their research strategy. In fact, oil production, in terms of both its volume and timing, differed remarkably between the two cities. Thus MF&P’s use of oil development as an exogenous force to test the accomplishment of place in Ventura and Santa Barbara seems to be inappropriate. It also appears to be inappropriate in that oil development accounts for only part of the broader exogenous force that is responsible for the distinctiveness of place in both communities. In fact, the historical evidence recommends thinking of capital, or capitalists, as the exogenous force shaping the “durable distinctiveness” of Santa Barbara and Ventura.

Focusing on what motivated capitalists to invest in Santa Barbara and Ventura, and on how capital was subsequently deployed, enables variations in the distinctiveness of place to be explained in terms of historical material and social forces that MF&P find inadequate as explanatory vehicles. Capital came to Ventura to develop the substantial oil reserves that lay beneath its surface. Indeed, oil development accounts for much of the creation of the modern city of Ventura. At the same time, the capital that arrived in Santa Barbara in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries established the city as a retreat and resort for the successful capitalists of the Gilded Age. To be sure, a moderate amount of capital was invested in oil development as well, but without the results that investment obtained in Ventura. The quantitative importance of oil over time—the intersection of geophysical conditions and capital investment decisions based on technology and market conditions—would seem to be sufficient to explain the qualitative differences between Santa Barbara and Ventura. The recent convergence of measurable demographic and other variables notwithstanding, identifiable and measurable material and social class forces appear to shape the community identities of Santa Barbara and Ventura far more than any ephemeral sense of place.

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In this comment, I argue that Santa Barbara and Ventura do not provide a case study that adequately tests the theory that MF&P present for understanding durable distinctions among places. I also raise the larger issue of how sociologists use history to empirically test theory. MF&P assert that Santa Barbara and Ventura shared "broadly similar" historical experiences (p. 794). Yet the historical experiences of the two communities with respect to capital, class, and economic development were not at all similar. I suggest that both the level of experience and the definition of variables as exogenous and endogenous are important factors in the construction of an empirical case study. From a historical point of view, then, selecting two communities that constitute an adequate case study in support of the theory presented in MF&P appears to be anything but straightforward, as the authors suggest (p. 794). A historical approach to testing sociological theory suggests that multiple, highly textured examples may be needed to explicate trends and common experiences. From such a set of detailed studies, an illustrative case study may then serve to explain the theory.

QUANTIFYING OIL DEVELOPMENT IN SANTA BARBARA AND VENTURA

MF&P suggest that Santa Barbara and Ventura responded differently in qualitative terms to external oil forces of similar quantitative magnitude. Yet quantitative differences in the level of oil development in the two communities could suffice in explaining much of the variation between them. From the Civil War through at least the 1960s, oil activity was the primary influence on Ventura's urban development. Santa Barbara, by comparison, experienced little oil activity during its formative years. This owed more to the fact that oil reserves in and around Santa Barbara were far less substantial relative to those in Ventura than to the preventive measures that the citizens of Santa Barbara adopted.

The oil development that is relevant to the discussion of the "accomplishment of place" in both Ventura and Santa Barbara occurred during a time of unprecedented cultural enthusiasm for technology and technological

transformation, as Hughes (1989) explains. As the authors discuss elsewhere (Molotch and Freudenburg 1996; Paulsen, Molotch, and Freudenburg 1996), oil development during an "environmental era" from 1969 to the present has done little to shape the social and economic development paths of Santa Barbara and Ventura. Hence, I focus on the period from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

During the late nineteenth century, the area around Ventura became California's first commercial oil district. The city itself became an important oil transportation center. From the time of the initial development of the gigantic fields¹ of Rincon, South Mountain, San Miguelito, and Ventura, which occurred during the interwar period, Ventura embraced an industrial ideal based on disciplined work in oil and gas extraction, and urban growth on a quantitative model. In this respect, the city's history was remarkably similar to that charted by many Los Angeles basin suburbs, beneath which gigantic oil fields were developed contemporaneously, as Viehe (1981) elaborates.

In the absence of appreciable quantities of accessible oil reserves, Santa Barbara developed in a manner that was consistent with the city's status as an elite redoubt. During the periods of Spanish and Mexican control, Santa Barbara was the political, commercial, and military center of the coastal region (Reith 1963:75-83). Powerful land-owning families also maintained homes there—a practice adopted by Anglo landowners after passage of the federal Land Act in 1851 (Cleland 1941). The members of the Gilded Age capitalist elite who made Santa Barbara their residence spent millions of dollars to create an urban environment that met the ideal of the City Beautiful movement of the early twentieth century. Indeed, the wealthy individuals who shaped Santa Barbara during this period may be considered an exogenous force to the same extent as the oil-related capital and labor that flowed into Ventura during this same time.

In the case of Santa Barbara and Ventura, differences among capitalists in social moti-

¹ A "gigantic" field is one with an ultimate recovery of 100 million or more barrels of crude oil.

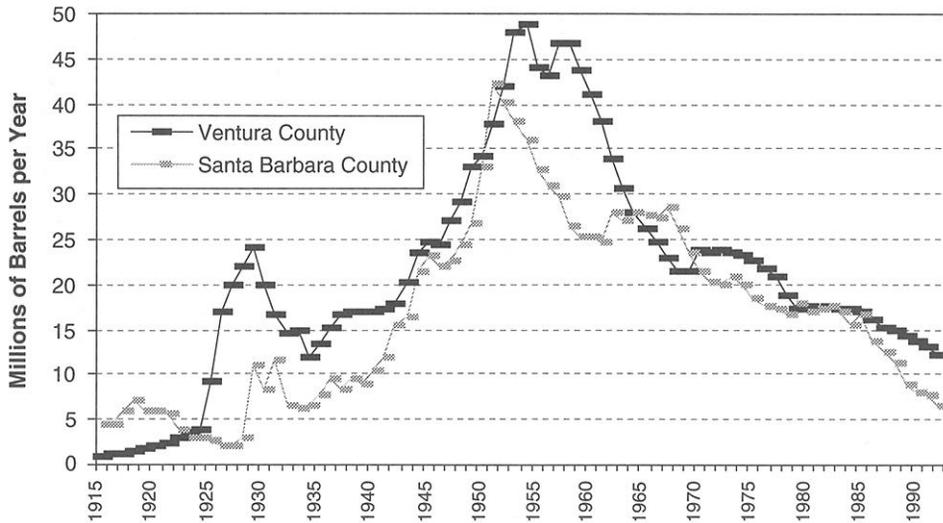


Figure 1. Crude Oil Production: Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 1915 to 1992

Sources: California Division of Mines and Mining (various years); California Division of Oil and Gas (various years); California State Mining Bureau (various years).

vation, level of economic resources, and consumption preferences plausibly account for urban differences that grew more distinctive over time. On one hand, capitalists came to Santa Barbara with resources accumulated from industrial activity elsewhere. They did not invest their wealth in additional industrial development. On the other hand, the capitalists who invested in Ventura did so to exploit natural resources. Unlike the capitalists who migrated to Santa Barbara, the capitalists who funded early coastal oil development did not relocate to Ventura. Rather, they sent their managers and subordinates to develop oil. Other labor that accompanied capital varied among the two communities as well: domestic servants, hotel operators, and gardeners in Santa Barbara; roustabouts, tool dressers, and other oil workers in Ventura. The social and economic conditions created by capital primed Santa Barbara and Ventura to become very different places. In defining oil development as an exogenous variable, MF&P appear to focus their attention on only one aspect of broader forces shaping the character of the two communities—namely, capital created by industrial activity elsewhere.

Capitalists invested substantial resources in Ventura oil development because, unlike Santa Barbara, there were huge reserves to be exploited on a sustained basis. The figure

that MF&P (p. 799) use as evidence to suggest that Santa Barbara and Ventura experienced similar “challenges” with respect to oil activity, reproduced here as Figure 1, suffers from a fallacy of composition.² The actual location of oil reserves relative to above-ground urban centers provides a more meaningful basis for understanding the impact of oil activity than do the county-level political boundaries used by MF&P. Under the approach taken here, oil fields are grouped together, taking into account geographical proximity, historical links to towns and cities, and industry-specific functional considerations, such as the location of relevant transportation infrastructure. Under this approach, the fields of Ventura county remain within the city of Ventura’s district. Oil activity within Santa Barbara county, however, falls into three districts: Santa Barbara in the south, Santa Maria in the northwest, and the Cuyama Valley in the north, whose fields the California oil industry considered to be part of the San Joaquin Valley region (Stockman 1955).

For purposes of clarity, I have presented levels of production for all four of these districts in two figures. Figure 2 shows oil pro-

² Figure 1 here includes state tidelands production, which is warranted, given historical experience. MF&P measure only onshore production.

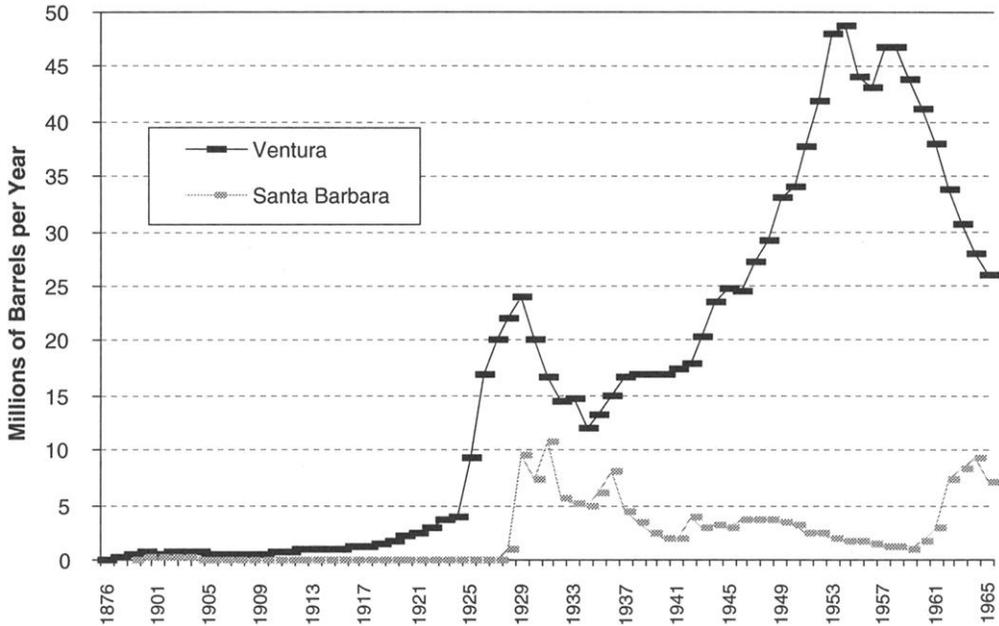


Figure 2. Crude Oil Production: Santa Barbara and Ventura Districts, 1876 to 1965

Sources: California Division of Mines and Mining (various years); California Division of Oil and Gas (various years); California State Mining Bureau (various years); *Petroleum World* (1925).

duction for the Ventura and Santa Barbara districts from 1876 to 1965. Figure 3 does the same for the Santa Maria and Cuyama Valley areas. As Figure 2 suggests, production volumes and their timing for Ventura and Santa Barbara differ considerably. As Figure 3 shows, except for the 1930s, when the gigantic Elwood field was developed fourteen miles west of the city of Santa Barbara, the bulk of the oil produced in Santa Barbara county occurred in the Santa Maria and Cuyama Valley districts. Oil development in south Santa Barbara county, such as it was, occurred after the Gilded Age capitalists who settled in Santa Barbara had gone a long way in establishing the “durable distinctiveness” of their city. Further, production in the fields of southern Santa Barbara county rapidly depleted after a short period of substantial production. By contrast, since the mid-1920s, Ventura has been a major production center—and before then, it was a key oil shipment center.

Comparing oil development adjacent to, or within the city limits of, Santa Barbara and Ventura, yields an even starker contrast. The Ventura field, discovered in 1917, accounted for 50 to 85 percent of annual production for

Ventura county once large-scale production began in 1925.³ Production reached 21 million barrels in 1929, peaked at 29.9 million barrels in 1953, and surpassed 500 million barrels in cumulative output in 1954 (Stockman 1955). At the end of 2000, total production stood at 959 million barrels (California Division of Oil, Gas, and Geothermal Resources 2001). By contrast, the Santa Barbara Mesa field, discovered in 1929, produced only 4.4 million barrels through 1971—its last year of production. The Summerland field, to which MF&P refer in their article, was another minor field, yielding a mere 3.2 million barrels from the late 1890s until 1958. Despite the “tension between locals and the oil industry” that the development of these latter fields generated (MF&P, p. 804), under the existing regulatory regime there was little that the locals could legally do to prevent entrepreneurs from drilling on the beaches of Summerland or on town lot leases on the Santa Barbara Mesa. The major, integrated firms and large

³ Unless otherwise noted, production figures may be found in the sources cited in Figures 2 and 3.

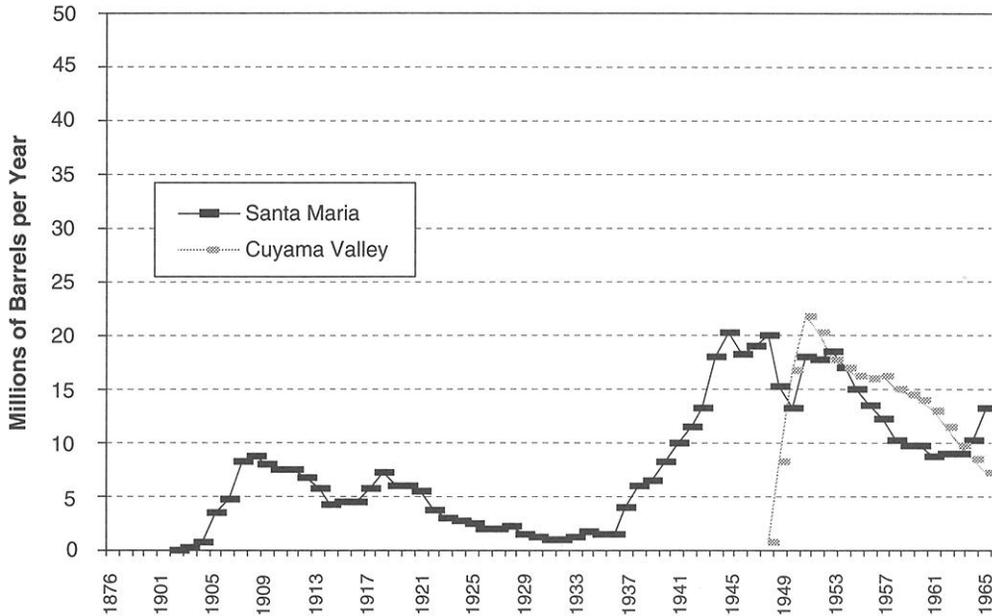


Figure 3. Crude Oil Production: Cuyama Valley and Santa Maria Districts, 1876 to 1965

Sources: California Division of Mines and Mining (various years); California Division of Oil and Gas (various years); California State Mining Bureau (various years); *Petroleum World* (1925).

independents that invested hundreds of millions of dollars to develop the fields of the Ventura district ignored these minor fields, leaving them to numerous small firms. Thus to isolate oil development as an exogenous force for purposes of measuring character and tradition in Ventura and Santa Barbara seems to be inappropriate. Further, it is difficult to think of oil development as a simply an exogenous force, given its centrality to Ventura's history. The evidence suggests that, once the oil industry became interwoven into the fabric of urban life with the development of the major fields, oil development became an endogenous force for Ventura.

Defining oil development as an exogenous variable also causes MF&P to analyze Ventura's twentieth-century urban planning choices ahistorically. For instance, because oil was integral to the city's social, political, and economic development for at least 100 years, Ventura never made a historical choice of oil over tourism or any other industry. Until the post-1945 period, its residents did not even think in terms other than oil. To suggest, as MF&P do, that "in many ways Ventura's setting . . . provided better

opportunities" than Santa Barbara to leverage its natural endowments to attract tourists and create a more attractive built environment, or that Ventura's leaders might have used the wealth created by oil "to set up Ventura for long-term economic and cultural innovation" (p. 807) is an ahistorical interpretation, given the importance of oil to Ventura's development.

Further, given the quantitative differences in the level of oil activity in Santa Barbara and Ventura, the material and social forces associated with oil development explain the qualitative differences between the two communities. The workers, managers, and entrepreneurs that oil development attracted to Ventura sought employment and the chance to get ahead. They established Ventura as a community with pro-development attitudes and class interests that were distinct from those that extremely wealthy capitalists established in Santa Barbara. The oil boom of the 1920s transformed Ventura into an industrial city. Oil activity spurred the creation of new industries, fueled urban growth and improvements in transportation, and resulted in an expansion of the city's boundaries. It attracted workers from southern California

and elsewhere, sustaining a high demand for housing, oil services, and commerce. With the boom of the 1950s, oil was the leading industry in Ventura and the largest factor shaping its character. Since oil workers earned above average wages, sustained oil development produced a postwar middle class whose ethos had much in common with U.S. cities dominated by the automobile, electrical, and steel industries.

Most important, oil-driven urban growth created economic opportunity, which reinforced class preferences for industrial growth. It offered economic opportunities that more than compensated for short-term problems, such as housing shortages and an overburdened infrastructure, in the eyes of those who experienced them. Further, the economic development associated with oil activity endured. The eventual declines in production were gradual, owing to technological advances that extended the life cycle of the extractive area. Venturans benefited from oil development, and therefore welcomed more of it. Thus the "durable distinctiveness" of Ventura would seem to reflect the material and social forces that drove its urban development during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Likewise, the "durable distinctiveness" of Santa Barbara reflected the preferences of the elites who shaped its development. In contrast to the numerous California cities that pursued growth on an industrial model during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Santa Barbara developed qualitatively. Many of its leading residents of the early and mid-twentieth century brought with them enormous wealth gained from industrial enterprise elsewhere in America. They preferred gardens, polo horses, and yachts to any additional industrial activity. In the early twentieth century, these capitalists turned Santa Barbara into the "Newport of the West" (Starr 1990:256-62). This was compatible with the attitudes of local residents, who by the 1880s had established the community as a distinctly nonindustrial place. This wealthy elite also captured the municipal government, and as a result, Santa Barbara charted a development path that was consistent with the desires of its upper-class residents. As Figure 2 suggests, oil development was not quantitatively important to Santa Barbara,

and therefore did not impede efforts to develop the city in other ways.

Santa Barbarans objected to oil activity in their own backyard because it detracted from the environment they were trying to create and preserve. Although they had to tolerate drilling under the contemporary regulatory regime, Santa Barbarans sought to limit its extent, as MF&P suggest. Their actions, however, ultimately had little impact on actual oil production through the 1950s. Nevertheless, Santa Barbara as a place emerged unencumbered by oil development. Thus in seeking to develop reserves that lay offshore from Santa Barbara during the 1950s, oil firms continued to act as an exogenous force on the city. Had the Mesa field proved to be the size of the Long Beach, Ventura, or Wilmington fields, or any other gigantic field developed during the southern California oil booms of the 1920s and 1950s, then it might be said that "the challenges [presented by oil development] have been comparable for Santa Barbara and Ventura" (p. 798), as MF&P assert. But this was not the case.

CONCLUSION

Key differences between Santa Barbara and Ventura as places may be explained in terms of material and social forces associated with the activities of capitalists who either migrated to, or invested in, the California coastal region. Certainly, not all of the distinctions that persist among communities can be explained in these terms. In other cases, factors such as race, ethnicity, and political structures may be equally important in explaining the "durable distinctiveness" among urban communities. The broader implications of the data I have presented, however, are two: namely, that detailed, rigorous investigation into, and interpretation of, key factors over time may serve as a useful point of departure for understanding what makes communities distinct; and that measures such as monied interests and their resources, and the development attitudes of civic leaders and working-class groups seem to offer scholars powerful concepts for explaining the "accomplishment of place."

As MF&P observe, Santa Barbara and Ventura today share a number of "surface similarities." It cannot be asserted, however,

that the two cities shared similar historical experiences with oil, either in the magnitude of its production or in the timing of its development. Quantitative differences in the importance of oil appear to account for the qualitative differences that, reproduced over time, explain the "durable distinctiveness" between the two cities. Capitalists associated with oil development shaped Ventura in a way that distinguishes it from Santa Barbara, where capitalists created a very different place. The historical experiences of Ventura and Santa Barbara do not seem to have been "broadly similar" at a meaningful level, at least in regard to the theoretical concepts that MF&P attempt to support empirically. This is not to say that comparative historical research cannot make character and tradition "tractable." Such an approach, however, recommends the detailed study of multiple communities that shared historical experiences at an analytically meaningful level.

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Reply to Adamson

DATA HAPPEN, BUT HOW?

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We disagree with Adamson's (2002) sense of "history" and, more concretely, with how he assembles data and interprets their meaning. For doing history, he wants to find the independent variable that explains why one place comes to differ from

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