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### Political Branding in Cities: The Decline of Machine Politics in Bogotá, Naples, and Chicago, by Eleonora Pasotti

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## Notes

1. Manuel Castells (2001), *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press); Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen (2002), *The Information Society and the Welfare State: The Finnish Model* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press); Manuel Castells (Ed.) (2004), *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar); Manuel Castells and Gustavo Cardoso (Eds.) (2006), *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy* (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations); and Manuel Castells, Mireia Fernandez-Ardevol, Jack Linchuan Qiu, and Araba Sey (2007), *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

2. For a sustained and insightful discussion of Castells's work, see Felix Stalder (2006), *Manuel Castells: The Theory of Network Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press).

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*Political Branding in Cities: The Decline of Machine Politics in Bogotá, Naples, and Chicago*, by Eleonora Pasotti. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 282 pp. \$90.00 cloth.

*Reviewed by* MELISSA ARONCZYK

Eleonora Pasotti's new book is a detailed and innovative account of the phenomenon of urban "brand politics": a form of political exchange whereby influence matters more than affiliation, social values more than material benefits, and broad spectrum communication more than clientelistic particularism. Given the current image-obsessed and hypermediated public stage on which modern political communication takes place, the notion of politics-as-brand-management has received considerable attention. In addition to the tidal wave of popular literature on related subjects (e.g., Lakoff, 2008; Westen, 2007; Nunberg, 2006), a number of recent academic books (e.g., Greenberg, 2008; Sennett, 2006; Corner & Pels, 2003) have examined the increasingly inextricable relationship between voting and buying in an era of extreme convergence of politics and markets. But Pasotti's is the only study I am aware of that specifically defines the terms and conditions of this phenomenon using a direct comparative approach. Through a fine-grained analysis of the campaign strategies of mayors in three major cities—Chicago, Naples, and Bogotá—in the latter decades of the 20th century, Pasotti elaborates a model by which brand politics are enacted. The study

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is also notable for its attention to the practices, rather than just the policies, that give rise to this political culture of personalism.

In this “new and improved” model of political action, mayors draw on the tools, techniques, and expertise of corporate brand management—as well as the deep pockets of corporate interests—to develop political strategies that help them win over the electorate. Unlike the clientelistic structure of “machine politics,” in which voters are seen as individuals whose single votes confer legitimacy on the candidate in exchange for concrete benefits, in brand politics voters are conceived “horizontally”; they are appealed to as a collective entity whose choice of mayor reflects their identity as citizens.

According to the current wisdom informing product and service branding, marketers focus on creating a set of associations between product and image. These associations are intended to marry the functional aspects of the product with culturally inspired values. The goal is to encourage consumers to develop an emotional attachment to the product as well as a set of rational reasons to purchase it. As such a brand mediates value in both the moral and the market sense: consumers buy the product because they have “bought into” the values it stands for. In brand politics, as Pasotti demonstrates, the objective is the same. Mayors solicit the benediction of positive public opinion by promoting a strong sense of identification with their constituency. The point is to align personal values with political values so that when specific projects or policies are at stake, these appear as extensions of the mayor’s persona, and are therefore incontestable.

The greatest tension in Pasotti’s book (one that she wisely leaves unresolved) is between her observation that brand politics have the potential to lead to better democracy and the implications of her empirical case studies, which suggest quite the opposite. Each chapter addresses a different aspect of the turn to brand politics in each of the three cities under scrutiny. In Chapter 2, “Catalysts of Machine Demise,” Pasotti describes the transformation of the electoral, fiscal, and legal regimes that signaled the end of the patronage system of machine politics and the rise of brand politics. Importantly, the transformation in each city was brought about by a kind of crisis. In the institutional and ideational voids left by legacies of violence, political corruption, or scleroticism, dramatic reforms could be carried out.

Chapters 3 and 4, “Political Campaigning in the Wake of the Machine” and “Changing Public Minds,” identify the shifts in perception and persuasion that herald the transition from clientelism to brand politics. Key to the transition was a move away from political communication that promoted cleavage between parties and a focus instead on valence issues, using narratives designed to elicit consensus. In Naples, for example, Mayor Antonio Bassolino positioned himself as the harbinger of “good government” and the instigator of a broadly defined notion of “culture” (pp. 68–70). Pasotti cites internal memoranda that detail the novelty of this move: “We have to learn to communicate in a way that historically does not belong to us,” reads one memo. “Hence, it is crucial to differentiate the candidate’s campaign from the party campaign.” Slogans such as “I will be the mayor of all honest citizens” and “To all Neapolitans who care for the city” reinforced the politician’s goal to appeal to broad-based values and to conceive of the public as a mass audience rather than a set of particularistic groups. Pasotti describes this strategy as “marketing the catchall leader” (p. 68), and it demonstrates the way in which a brand is used as an empty vessel that can be filled with whatever is necessary to build consensus and profit.

Another strategy central to brand politics is the use of metaphor. Building on Lakoff’s (2002, 2004, 2008) work on conceptual metaphor, Pasotti shows how brand mayors use metaphor to reframe debates and create new associations to persuade voters. A dominant discourse Pasotti’s mayors employed was that of public space as a product of good government and a site for good citizenship. The appeal to public space had both a rhetorical

and a practical function. In Chapter 5, "Brands and Megaprojects," Pasotti shows how politicians deployed their brands to advocate for the construction of high-profile projects, what Pasotti calls "catalyst events" or "trademark interventions." To match the discourse frames of public access and universality, mayors focused on projects affecting public space and public transportation. These high-profile projects helped the mayors obtain external legitimacy and recognition as well as convince domestic audiences of the validity of their efforts.

Yet the pretense of access and universality was not matched in the execution of the projects. Indeed, the consensus game of brand politics comes with a series of contradictions: increased centralization of power in the mayoralty, creating a massive imbalance between executive and city councils; the privatization of major infrastructures; cuts to municipal budgets; and so on. Loyalty to the brand comes at a cost, as Pasotti further reveals in Chapter 6, "Elusive Representation." Is brand politics any better than clientelism after all, she asks, if all it does is appeal to business elites, the main sources of funding in public opinion politics? With a political strategy founded on the strength of public opinion, there is little room for complexity or nuance. Multiple perspectives and differences of opinion do not fit well into a brand framework.

In her final chapter, "Brand Politics in Global Context," Pasotti describes other cases worldwide, using these as a platform on which to lay out the theoretical implications of brand politics. An important legacy of brand politics, she argues, is the need for a broadened understanding of rational decision making, one that includes emotional processing and heuristics. This is just one of the many novel interventions Pasotti makes. The book is an important contribution to understandings of political communication and the emerging field of critical brand studies.

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Should we really be convinced of the emergence of candidate-centered politics as argued by some research literature? Or is the process of personalization less developed and

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