

REGIONAL URBANIZATION AND THE END OF THE METROPOLIS ERA

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A fundamental and far-reaching change in the very nature of the urbanization process has been taking place over the past 30 years. Efforts to capture its essential features have generated a substantial literature on urban restructuring [15, 20] and many defining terms such as postmodern, postindustrial, post-Fordist, neo-liberal, informational, flexible, and global. My objective here is to present a convincing argument that what has been happening to cities all over the world in the past three decades is best described as a shift from a distinctively metropolitan mode of urban development to an essentially regional urbanization process. Regional urbanization is still in its early stages of development but has advanced far enough in some metropolitan regions for its defining features to be analyzed and understood – and for urban scholars to begin to recognize that the era of the modern metropolis may be ending.

METROPOLITAN URBANIZATION

The metropolitan mode of urban development has been so dominant for so long a time that it is assumed by many to be the only form of contemporary urban growth and change. This often idealized and universalized view of the modern metropolis as the highest stage of the urbanization process has injected an encompassing dualism into urban studies, reflecting perhaps the most characteristic feature of metropolitan urbanization, the division of the metropolis into separate and essentially different urban and suburban worlds or ways of life. The urban world, the city, is densely filled with heterogeneous cultures, thick layers of social interaction, abundant sources of creativity and entertainment, as well as crime, drugs, intrigue, corruption, and vice. Suburbia or suburbanism as a way of life is, in contrast, starkly homogeneous in almost every way, in how families are organized and function, in where one sleeps and where one works, shops, and seeks recreation, in the repetitious rhythms and routines of everyday life.

For most of the past century, this dualism has been consolidated and extended through an urbanization process driven mainly by expansive and often sprawling suburban growth, arising in large part from a selective decentralization of economic, political, and cultural power from the once much more dominant city centers. This prevailing dynamic of

metropolitan urbanization has spawned a fulsome critical urban literature filled with both wellsprings of nostalgia for some real or imagined earlier form of urban agglomeration and waves of antipathy and revulsion for the tedious monotony and cultural backwardness of classical suburbia. So great has been the hammerlock that the urban–suburban dualism has maintained on how we think about the city that even where its essential features have begun to disappear the changes often remain unnoticed or else reabsorbed into the same old divisions and binary discourses.

This disconnection reminds me of what was happening in the interwar years with the rise of the influential Chicago School of Urban Ecology. Even as the metropolitan urbanization process was advancing all around them, the Chicago scholars persisted in theorizing the socio-spatial conditions that characterized the still prevailing nineteenth-century industrial capitalist city: compact, densely centralized, and growing almost organically from the residential and industrial agglomeration in the teeming center, neatly organized in urban rings and wedges surrounded by a vaguely defined commuting zone, all part of what was summarily called “the city.” With urban scholarship fixated on continuities with the past, indeed projecting them as idealized models for the future, the new urbanization processes transforming the fundamental nature of urban life were largely overlooked. Decades later, some would recognize the possibility of a new “metropolitan” urban form taking shape. However, the idealized Chicago School models of nineteenth-century urbanization continued to dominate urban theory well into the twentieth century. Relics of concentric zonation and axial sectors were searched for and could almost always be found in the modern metropolis, but these comforting geohistorical continuities helped very little in understanding the then contemporary urban condition.

It can be argued that a remarkably similar situation exists today in urban studies broadly defined. Theory and practice, empirical analysis and critical thinking, continue to revolve around an urbanization process that is in the midst of a profound reconfiguration. Many continue to assume that there is but one mode of urbanization, one model of urban–suburban form and function that may go through periods of perturbation and restructuring but remains essentially constant in its fundamental structures and dynamics. Almost all contemporary urban scholars dismiss the Chicago School models (often, I would argue, for the wrong reasons), yet remain fixed on a singular, universal, and constant model of the metropolis as divided clearly into city and suburb. What I am arguing here is first, that metropolitan urbanization must be recognized as a distinct phase in the development of

the industrial capitalist city, growing out of an earlier phase of more highly centralized Industrial urbanism, and second, that this metropolitan phase is currently being superseded by a new phase of multi-scalar regional urbanization.

REGIONAL URBANIZATION AND THE GREAT DENSITY CONVERGENCE

So what then is this multi-scalar process of regional urbanization and how does it differ from earlier phases in the development of the industrial capitalist city? The best place to start is with what can be called the great density convergence, a still ongoing change in the socio-spatial organization of the modern metropolis. A simplified diagram illustrates this definitive trend. In Figure 1, the vertical axis measures population density, the horizontal axis indicates distance from the city center.

The early capitalist city had a steep density gradient falling precipitously from the center to what was clearly the countryside, as described by the line A–B in the diagram. As Engels observed in Manchester and the Chicago School codified iconically for the American city, industrialization tended to be concentrically agglomerated around the urban core. The majority of factories as well as the great mass of the urban proletariat and its associated labor reservoir of unemployed, often immigrant and/or minority residents, were densely concentrated in rings of relative residential quality around the magnetic, centripetal city center. Outside what was clearly the city was a shadow area where the new industrial bourgeoisie (the third new population group defining urban industrial capitalism and its unprecedented surge in urban growth) competed with the landed gentry for manor houses, villas, and local socioeconomic status, while maintaining commuter access to their wealth generating factories in the city center. Unplanned as such, the earliest industrial capitalist cities, when physical features and pre-existing urban forms did not interfere, tended toward a fairly regular spatial morphology, especially with regard to the geographical segregation of social status based on class or income.

Metropolitan urbanization as it began to develop in the last decades of the nineteenth century jumbled up, but rarely erased many of the earlier regularities and reordered them around the urban–suburban dualism. This led in most cases to a small reduction of population density in the city center, as some activities and households once densely clustered in the urban core began to move out to the periphery. Accompanying these early decentralizing trends, however, were other forces such as the formation of expansive corporate monopolies, later Fordist, and Keynesian policies that led to new clusters of corporate headquarters and government bureaucracies in growing central business

districts and civic centers. This often skyscrapered refilling of the downtown core typically required removal of at least some of the concentrated urban poor from the best central sites, a process that was rationalized in public policy as a search for urban renewal. Struggles over centrality involving different segments of capital, labor, and the state each striving for different land uses was a characteristic feature of metropolitan urbanization. The defining feature of metropolitan growth, however, was found not so much in the center but in the urban periphery, as expanding numbers of white-collar and later blue-collar workers moved out to create what was to become largely middleclass suburbia. While there remained a steep density gradient around the center, a breakpoint developed between high urban and lower suburban densities (ACD). There was also a second and mobile boundary (at D) defining the outer edge of constantly expanding suburban growth. Factories and jobs were no longer as centralized as they were before but the poorest residents tended to remain densely concentrated in the “inner city” (the term “outer city” was rarely if ever used) as selective suburbanization siphoned off the relatively wealthier middle classes. Constellations of autonomous suburban municipalities grew around the city and would together, in many modern metropolises, contain a population greater than that of the urban core. As cogently noted by neo-Marxist urban scholars in the 1970s [7, 1], the postwar metropolis was inherently unstable and prone to social unrest revolving around the increasing impoverishment and joblessness of the urban core, standing in stark contrast to the comfortable, expanding, and increasingly working class suburbs.

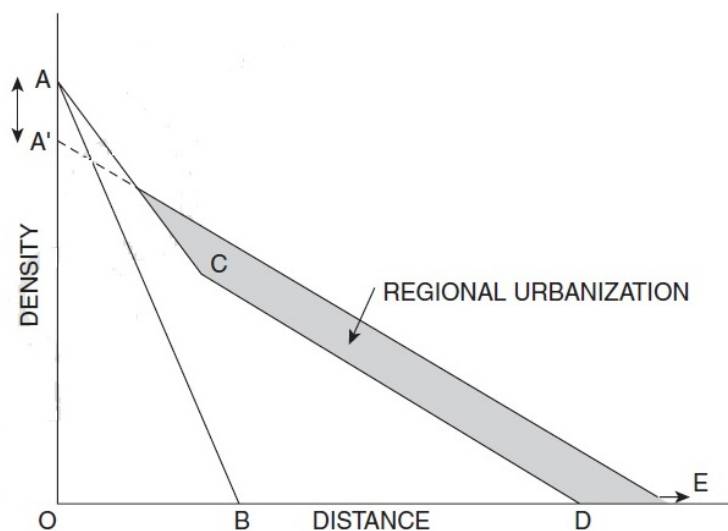


Fig 1 Density Chart

The recovery from war and the Great Depression in the United States and elsewhere was driven as much as anything else by the economic stimulus of mass suburbanization. Automobile-centered suburban life hungrily expanded consumer demand and pressured governments to invest enormous amounts of public funds to sustain the increasingly expensive and expansive infrastructure of sprawling automobile-dependent metropolitan urbanization. Library loads of literature accumulated describing these two contrasting and tensely interconnected worlds of the modern metropolis. The urban cores of modern metropolises around the world exploded in the 1960s, however, marking the beginning of the end of the metropolis era. Never again would metropolitan urbanization be precisely what it was for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

Returning to the diagram and the great density convergence, the new urbanization processes unleashed by the urban crises of the 1960s initiated a pronounced morphological change. In most of the world's major metropolises there was some degree of "hollowing out" of the central city, a reduction in density caused primarily by the outmigration of domestic populations. In some cases, this was more than compensated for by transnational immigration so that central densities were either maintained or, in some cases, increased significantly. This is shown in the diagram by the two direction arrows for line AA, as the net effect on central city density varies enormously. What is not shown in the density figures, however, is another defining feature of regional urbanization, arising from an extraordinary change in the demographic and cultural composition of the inner and outer city populations.

RECONSTITUTING THE INNER AND OUTER CITIES

Prior to 1970, the poor were increasingly concentrated in the inner city, even in the metropolises of the Third World where the center was often dominated historically and geographically by the wealthy elite. This concentration, however, was largely domestic in the sense of being comprised of national citizens rather than foreign migrants (although foreign migration has already begun in parts of the industrialized world before 1970). The new concentration of what some now call the immigrant working poor (to contrast with the welfare-dependent domestic underclass) is the outgrowth of a profound globalization of the urban population, creating the most culturally and economically heterogeneous cities the world has ever known. This cultural and economic heterogeneity of the urban poor, emerging amidst a spreading homogenization of built environments, visual landscapes, and popular tastes and fashions, is one of the hallmarks of regional

urbanization and has been the trigger for many related developments, including the rise of a new cultural politics, the reconstitution of urban identities, and increasing social and political polarization revolving primarily around conflicts between domestic and immigrant populations.

It is almost impossible to generalize about what has been happening to central cities in the regional urbanization process as the emerging conditions vary enormously. Detroit lost 600,000 people and has never quite recovered despite expensive efforts at “renaissance.” Osaka lost almost all its inner-city residents, most moving into the densifying Kansai region (Osaka–Kobe–Kyoto), but its commercial and business-oriented inner city is thriving and vibrantly alive. In Los Angeles, more than a million white and black residents left the inner city over the past 30 years, but at least five million migrants from nearly every country on earth poured in, increasing central densities to Manhattan levels. In the neighborhood where I grew up in the Central Bronx, earlier tenements and later high-rise residential towers have been replaced by tiny row houses with patches of grass in front, lowering densities substantially and suggesting something akin to the suburbanization of the city.

This variability and instability in the rapidly changing urban cores of the regional metropolis has deeply affected urban planning and policy-making, focusing attention on the problems of the “old downtown.” This has sparked the growth of such “regenerative” strategies as city marketing, city branding, and the search for a cultural or architectural fix following the now well-known model of the Frank Gehry designed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the dozens of repetitive projects by other “starchitects.” In most cases, this drew attention and investment away from issues of social welfare and poverty alleviation that drove earlier efforts at urban renewal, as socially conscious planners were transformed into competitive entrepreneurs and city salespersons. With such complexity and variability in outcomes, it becomes almost impossible to generalize about the future of any given inner city.

It is much easier to identify a general trend affecting the suburban rings. With some exceptions, suburbia is becoming increasingly dense and demographically as well as economically differentiated. Conventional sprawl continues but is ebbing significantly, not because so-called smart and sustainable growth is spreading but due to another characteristic feature of regional urbanization, the increasing urbanization of suburbia. Almost everywhere, suburbia and suburban ways of life are changing, becoming more dense and heterogeneous, more like what the urban used to be. New terms have

proliferated to describe these changes: edge cities, outer cities, exopolis, peripheral urbanization, postsuburbia, technoburbs, metroburbia [5, 9, 15, 10]. In Figure 1, the line A'E indicates the flattening out and extension of the density gradient and points to the increasing erosion of the formerly relatively clear boundary between the urban and the suburban, a marked homogenization of the urban landscape from center to periphery. Where this process is most pronounced, the longstanding urban–suburban dualism of metropolitan urbanization has almost disappeared, as the age of mass suburbanization shifts to one of mass regional urbanization, a filling in, so to speak, of the entire metropolitan area.

Density convergence plays a key role in the emergence of a distinctive new urban form, the expansive, polynucleated, densely networked, information-intensive, and increasingly globalized *city region*. The concept of city region is often seen as just a minor twist in the terms used to describe urban globalization, from the earlier “world city” to the more recent “global city” [4, 13]. I am arguing here, however, that the city region is not just an expression of globalization but represents a more fundamental change in the urbanization process, arising from the regionalization of the modern metropolis and involving a shift from the typically monocentric dualism of dense city and sprawling low-density suburbanization to a polycentric network of urban agglomerations where relatively high densities are found throughout the urbanized region.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF REGIONAL URBANIZATION

Three major forces have been driving the regional urbanization process and shaping the formation of city regions: the globalization of capital, labor, and culture; economic restructuring and the formation of a new economy; and the facilitative effects of the revolution in information and communications technologies. Transnational migration flows in particular have refilled many metropolitan cores, contributing to the flattening out of metropolitan density gradients, especially through the urbanization of suburbia. A complex mix of deindustrialization and reindustrialization as well as decentralization and recentralization have worked to reorganize the social and spatial structure of almost every modern metropolis, creating the foundations for the emergence of a more flexible, globalized, and neo-liberal mode of urban industrial capitalism, a “new economy.”

Density convergence can also be linked to the increasing cultural and economic heterogeneity of the regional metropolis and the associated social and political polarization arising not only from traditional class and racial divisions but increasingly

from growing clashes between domestic and immigrant populations. Perhaps the most disturbing and challenging feature of regional urbanization has been its intensification of economic inequalities and social polarization. The new economy has characteristically squeezed the once voluminous middle classes of the modern metropolis, with a small spurt of yuppies and the super-rich rising from the economic pressures while a much larger flow moves downward into poverty or near poverty. The income gap between the richest 5 percent and poorest 40 percent in the US is now greater than it ever has been and while the stronger welfare states of western Europe have ameliorated the intensification of income inequality they all are facing major political problems arising from clashes between domestic and immigrant populations and cultures, in the urban core as well as former suburbs, as in the *banlieues* of Paris.

Increasing regional densities, growing cultural heterogeneity, and rising economic inequalities also play a part in the spread of what Mike Davis [2] called security obsessed urbanism, an urban condition charged with paranoid fear of the seemingly chaotic and incomprehensible character of today's inner as well as outer cities. This obsession with security and protection has encouraged domestic outmigration from the city centers in many different ways, ranging from racially induced white flight to the so-called "secession of the rich," the movement of the relatively well-off to guarded and gated communities and "privatopias" [11] hoping to insulate themselves from the invasive dangers of the inner city. Surveillance cameras and high-tech alarm and security systems are now almost everywhere. Public spaces are eroding as privatization spreads across the urban landscape and the regional metropolis is embedded with a "carceral" archipelago of fortified new enclosures.

There are many other negative manifestations of regional urbanization and the growing density convergence. Longstanding problems related to the jobs-housing- transit imbalance, the degree to which the distribution of jobs, affordable housing, and available mass transit facilities do not match, are being aggravated further by urban restructuring. Homelessness expands in various ways in the inner city, ranging from the abject poverty of those hopelessly stranded in the streets to the relative deprivation of vital workers (police, firefighters, teachers) unable to find affordable accommodation near where they work. In rapidly urbanizing suburbia, booming new cities often grow well in advance of job creation, forcing large portions of the local workforce to commute more than two hours each way to work. In some cases, this leads to rising rates of divorce, child and spouse abuse, suicide, home foreclosures, impacted schools, bankrupt public services,

conditions once associated with inner-city slums but now arising in what some call postsuburbia [15].

The characteristic features associated with regional urbanization are also contributing to increasing environmental degradation at multiple scales from the local to the transnational and global. From more positive geo-economical perspectives, the city is increasingly being seen as a generative source of economic development, technological innovation, and cultural creativity [6]; but the city, and the regional city in particular, is also the generator of major negative spillover effects, from increasing economic inequalities and social polarizations to worsening air and water pollution, climate change, and global warming. The environmental justice debate at the global scale is not only about whether and how much climate change might be caused by human actions. It must also address the likelihood that resurgent urbanization and especially the regional urbanization process that is reconfiguring the modern metropolis are the *primary* cause of accelerated environmental degradation all over the planet and must be recognized as such in any attempt to deal with the accompanying problems. This becomes more starkly evident when regional urbanization is viewed in its multi-scalar manifestations.

EXTENDED REGIONAL URBANIZATION

That the line A'E in Figure 1 does not quite touch the base is indicative of the unconstrained character of regional urbanization. The modern metropolis, in a significant sense, has become "unbound." Just as the clear internal border between city and suburb has begun to disappear, the external boundary of the city region is becoming less confining, opening up the urban hinterland to ever larger regional scales. More than ever before, the urbanization process is global in its reach and impact. Its socio-spatial effects do not just decline with distance from the center to some outer boundary, they become virtually asymptotic, never and nowhere completely absent. This multi-scalar spread of regional urbanization is almost impossible to understand if one maintains a conventional metropolitan perspective.

The city region is the anchor and archetype of this multi-scalar regional urbanization. Its growing importance and recognition are exemplified in a recent decision by the United Nations to collect data on the size of city populations not by metropolitan region but by city region. A related change in defining the size of cities was adopted some time ago by the US Census Bureau. Data are now collected on the size and population density of what are called urbanized areas, defined by the relatively contiguous area of densities greater

than 1,000 per square mile. The urbanized area of New York, for example, covers 23 counties and has the largest total population. In 1990, however, the Los Angeles urbanized area, whether defined as two counties (Los Angeles and Orange) or five (with parts of San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ventura added), surpassed New York as the densest in the US, a stunning turnaround as Los Angeles was probably the least dense major metropolis 30 years earlier.

The comparison between Los Angeles and New York is reflected in the difference between the lines A'E and ACD in the density decay diagram. New York more closely resembles the metropolitan urban model (ACD) while Los Angeles presents an advanced form of regional urbanization, with dense outer cities and an intermixture of the urban and suburban, more comparable to the polycentric regional cities that have emerged around Washington, DC, the San Francisco Bay Area, and, for that matter, around European cities such as London and Paris, and in the Randstad in the Netherlands, arguably the first city region to be defined as such.

According to UN data, there are now close to 500 city regions of more than one million inhabitants in the world. They contain at least a third of the entire world's population and, according to some estimates, nearly two thirds of the world's wealth and an even larger share of its innovative capacity. This pronounced concentration in the world's city regions is another major expression of regional urbanization, even more so than the now often repeated UN statistic that the majority of the six to seven billion people on earth now live in cities. But regional urbanization does not stop at the boundary of the city region. Edging higher in scale is the megacity region, with a population of at least 10 million but now growing, in some cases, to over 50 million. Even larger "megalopolitan" city regions (Florida 2006) coalescing together many city regions of various sizes, are creating the largest regional conurbations the world has ever known. The Pearl River Delta in South China has more than 60 million inhabitants; the Yangtze Delta-Greater Shanghai region now surpasses 80 million; and if one added together the two adjacent megacity regions on Honshu (Tokyo-Yokohama, Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto), the total population would be over 100 million [19]. Regional urbanization extends still further to vast sub-continental urban "galaxies" of more than 250 million inhabitants, the largest being in eastern Asia, Western Europe, and Atlantic and Pacific North America. Today, it can be argued that every square inch of the world is urbanized to some degree, with the influences and effects of regional urbanization, the latest phase in the development of urban industrial capitalism, extending into the Amazon rainforest, the Siberian tundra, and even the

shrinking Antarctic icecap. What all this suggests is that the accelerated globalization process of the past 30 years has been carrying with it, and may be primarily defined by, the qualities and conditions associated with a regionalized version of the industrial capitalist city. Globalization and the new urbanization processes are intricately intertwined and interdependent in ways we are only beginning to understand.

THE NEW REGIONALISM: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

The growing recognition and importance of regional urbanization arises not only from its role in the reconfiguration of the metropolitan mode of urban development and its integral association with the globalization of capital, labor, and culture, but also from other significant developments in the ways we think about the world around us. Two developments in particular help to clarify the meaning and significance of regional urbanization, the unprecedented diffusion of critical spatial thinking that some now call the *spatial turn* [17] and the related rise of innovative applications of a spatial perspective that has come to be known as the New Regionalism [21, 16, 18]. They provide a useful way of concluding this essay and opening up new possibilities for further discussion.

The concept of regional urbanization is to a significant degree a product of the pronounced and trans-disciplinary spatial turn, the diffusion of spatial thinking to almost every academic discipline and subject area. This unprecedented spread of thinking critically about the spatiality of human life is much more than a passing fad. It represents a sea change in western intellectual thought, an ontological and epistemological correction of a distorted world-view that arose in the second half of the nineteenth century as an exaggerated and space-blinkered form of social historicism, a privileging of time and historical thinking that would persist in powerful ways up to the present [14, 3]. Today we are beginning to see a rebalancing of social, historical, and spatial perspectives. Space is now being seen by more and more scholars in much the same way we have previously viewed time, as dynamic, problematic, developmental, ideologically charged, and filled with action, dialectics, process, and social causality, rather than as fixed, dead background, container, stage, extra-social environment.

However one views the spatial turn, there can be little doubt that more scholars than ever before are adopting some form of a spatial perspective, even if only in the use of spatial metaphors. This has reinforced the development and widened the understanding of many concepts that relate to the spatiality of human life, including networks, territory, scale, agglomeration, and regions. It has also focused attention on what can be called critical

studies of cities and regions. It is from this eclectic interpretive focus and framework that the concept of regional urbanization emerges most directly. Spurring these developments further has been a radical re-conceptualization of regions and regionalism built primarily on new ideas and discoveries about the extraordinary generative effects of cities and cohesive city regional economies.

As presented most assertively by Michael Storper in *The Regional World*, this New Regionalism interprets regions not simply as receptacles or reflections of social and economic processes but as fundamental units of social life comparable to markets, states, and families. Cohesive regional economies, and especially those built around the network of agglomerations that define the city region, are also being seen today as the source of powerful yet rarely studied and still poorly understood generative forces. Some geographical economists [12] now claim that these generative forces emanating from the global hierarchy of megacity regions are the *primary* (most important among many) causes of contemporary economic development, technological innovation, and cultural and artistic creativity. The positive effects of agglomeration are now entering the economics textbooks as “Jane Jacobs externalities,” honoring the work many economists recognize as the earliest to identify this generative spark of urban life [8]. Emerging more slowly has been the related recognition that the generative force of urban agglomeration can also generate diseconomies, increasing social inequality and polarization, expansive environmental degradation, and other negative effects.

These regionally defined agglomerations effects, positive and negative, represent perhaps the most path-breaking and potentially transformative discovery arising from the cumulative literature on urban restructuring, globalization, and the new economy. Until very recently, there was almost nothing written about the stimulus of urban agglomeration, or “synekism” as I have called it [15]. Today, it is becoming the central theme for a growing literature that extends well beyond the fields of urban and regional studies as they have been formerly defined. Carried forward by the trans-disciplinary spatial turn, regional perspectives and such related concepts as the city region and regional urbanization are likely to become increasingly important and widespread over the next several decades.

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