Urban Constellations

MATTHEW GANDY [ED.]

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URBAN LEXICONS

PLANETARY URBANISATION

Neil Brenner
Christian Schmid

During the last several decades, the field of urban studies has been animated by an extraordinary outpouring of new ideas regarding the role of cities, urbanism, and urbanisation processes in ongoing global transformations.[1] Yet, despite these advances, the field continues to be grounded upon a mapping of human settlement space that was more plausible in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than it is today.

The early twentieth century was a period in which large-scale industrial city-regions and suburbanising zones were being rapidly consolidated around the world in close conjunction with major demographic and socio-economic shifts in the erstwhile "countryside." Consequently, across diverse national contexts and linguistic traditions, the field of twentieth-century urban studies defined its theoretical categories and research object through a series of explicit or implied geographical contrasts. Even as debates raged regarding how best to define the specificity of urban life, the latter was universally demarcated in opposition to a purportedly "non-urban" zone, generally classified as "rural." As paradigms for theory and research evolved, labels changed for each term of this supposed urban-rural continuum, and so too did scholars' understandings of how best to conceptualise its basic elements and the nature of their articulation. For instance, the Anglo-American concept of the "suburb" and the French concept of *la banlieue* were introduced and popularised to demarcate further socio-spatial differentiations that were occurring inside a rapidly urbanising field.[2] Nonetheless, the bulk of twentieth-century urban studies rested on the assumption that cities—or, later, "conurbations," "city-regions," "urban regions," "metropolitan regions," and "global city-regions"—represented a particular *type* of territory that was qualitatively specific, and thus different from the putatively "non-urban" spaces that lay beyond their boundaries.

The demarcations separating urban, suburban, and rural zones were recognised to shift historically, but the spaces themselves were assumed to remain discreet, distinct, and universal. While paradigmatic disagreements have raged regarding the precise nature of the city and the urban, the entire field has long presupposed the existence of a relatively stable, putatively "non-urban" realm as a "constitutive outside" for its epistemological and empirical operations. In short, across divergent theoretical and political perspectives—from the Chicago School's interventions in the 1920s, and the rise of the neo-Marxist "new urban sociology" and "radical geography" in the 1970s, to the debates on world cities and global cities in the 1980s and 1990s—the major traditions of twentieth-century urban studies embraced shared, largely uninterrogated geographical assumptions that were rooted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' geohistorical conditions in which this field of study was first established.

During the last thirty years, however, the form of urbanisation has been radically reconfigured, a process that has seriously called into question the inherited cartographies that have long underpinned urban theory and research. Aside from the dramatic spatial and demographic expansion of major mega-city regions, the last thirty years have also witnessed several far-reaching worldwide socio-spatial transformations.[3] These include:

- *The creation of new scales of urbanisation*. Extensively urbanised interdependencies are being consolidated within extremely large, rapidly expanding, polynucleated metropolitan regions around the world to create sprawling "urban galaxies" that stretch beyond any single metropolitan region and often traverse multiple national boundaries. Such mega-scaled urban constellations have been conceptualised in diverse ways, and the representation of their contours and boundaries remains a focus of considerable research and debate.[4] Their most prominent exemplars include, among others, the original Gottmannian megalopolis of "BosWash" (Boston-Washington DC) and the "blue banana" encompassing the major urbanised regions in western Europe, but also emergent formations such as "San San" (San Francisco-San Diego) in California, the Pearl River Delta in south China, the Lagos-centred littoral conurbation in West Africa, as well as several incipient mega-urban regions in Latin America and South Asia.
- *The blurring and rearticulation of urban territories*. Urbanisation processes are being regionalised and reterritorialised. Increasingly, former "central functions," such as shopping facilities, company headquarters, research institutions, prestigious cultural venues, as well as spectacular architectural forms, dense settlement patterns, and infrastructural

arrangements, are being dispersed outwards from historic central city cores, into erstwhile suburbanised spaces, among expansive catchments of small- and medium-sized towns, and along major transportation corridors such as superhighways and rail lines.[5]

- *The disintegration of the "hinterland."* Around the world, the erstwhile "hinterlands" of major cities, metropolitan regions and urban-industrial corridors are being reconfigured as they are functionalised—whether as back office and warehousing locations, global sweatshops, agro-industrial land-use systems, recreational zones, energy generation grids, resource extraction areas, fuel depots, waste disposal areas, or corridors of connectivity—to facilitate the continued expansion of industrial urbanisation and its associated planetary urban networks.[6]
- *The end of the "wilderness."* In every region of the globe, erstwhile "wilderness" spaces are being transformed and degraded through the cumulative socio-ecological consequences of unfettered worldwide urbanisation. In this way, the world's oceans, alpine regions, the equatorial rainforests, major deserts, the arctic and polar zones, and even the earth's atmosphere itself, are increasingly interconnected with the rhythms of planetary urbanisation at every geographical scale, from the local to the global.[7]

In our view, these geohistorical developments pose a fundamental challenge to the entire field of urban studies as we have inherited it from the twentieth century: its basic epistemological assumptions, categories of analysis, and object of investigation require a foundational reconceptualisation in order to remain relevant to the massive transformations of worldwide socio-spatial organisation we are witnessing today. Under contemporary conditions, therefore, the urban can no longer be understood with reference to a particular "type" of settlement space, whether defined as a city, a city-region, a metropolis, a metropolitan region, a megalopolis, an edge city, or otherwise. Consequently, despite its continued pervasiveness in scholarly and political discourse, the category of the "city" has today become obsolete as an analytical social science tool. Correspondingly, it is no longer plausible to characterise the differences between densely agglomerated zones and the less densely settled zones of a region, a national territory, a continent, or the globe through the inherited urban/rural (or urban/non-urban) distinction. Today, the urban represents an increasingly worldwide condition in which political-economic relations are enmeshed.

This situation of *planetary urbanisation* means, paradoxically, that even spaces that lie well beyond the traditional city cores and suburban peripheries—from transoceanic shipping lanes, transcontinental highway and railway networks, and worldwide communications infrastructures to alpine and coastal tourist enclaves, "nature" parks, offshore financial centres, agro-industrial catchment zones and erstwhile "natural" spaces such as the world's oceans, deserts, jungles, mountain ranges, tundra, and atmosphere—have become integral parts of the worldwide urban fabric. While the process of agglomeration remains essential to the production of this new worldwide topography,[8] political-economic spaces can no longer be treated as if they were composed of discrete, distinct, and universal "types" of settlement.

In short, in an epoch in which the idea of the "non-urban" appears increasingly to be an ideological projection derived from a long dissolved, preindustrial geohistorical formation, our image of the "urban" likewise needs to be fundamentally reinvented.

As early as four decades ago, Henri Lefebvre put forward the radical hypothesis of the complete urbanisation of society, demanding a radical shift in analysis from urban form to the urbanisation process. However, a systematic application of this fundamental thesis has yet to be undertaken.[9] Perhaps, in the early twenty-first century, the moment is now ripe for such an undertaking? Indeed, in our view, the epistemological foundations of urban studies must today be fundamentally transformed, and Lefebvre's formulation provides a highly salient starting point for such an effort. The epistemological shift towards the analysis of planetary urbanisation requires new strategies of concrete research and comparative analysis that transcend the assumptions regarding the appropriate object and parameters for "urban" research that have long been entrenched and presupposed within the mainstream social sciences and planning/design disciplines. In close conjunction with such new research strategies, the investigation of planetary urbanisation will require major theoretical and conceptual innovations. We need first of all new theoretical categories through which to investigate the relentless production and transformation of socio-spatial organisation across scales and territories. To this end, a new conceptual lexicon must be created for identifying the wide variety of urbanisation processes that are currently reshaping the urban world and, relatedly, for deciphering the new emergent landscapes of socio-spatial difference that have been crystallising in recent decades. Last but not least, we require adventurous, experimental, and boundary-exploding methodological strategies to facilitate the empirical investigation of these processes. Whether or not a distinct field of "urban" studies will persist amidst such theoretical, conceptual, and methodological innovations is a question that remains to be explored in the years and decades ahead.

Endnotes

1 Saskia Sassen, "New frontiers facing urban sociology at the millennium," in *British Journal of Sociology*, 51/1 (2000), 143–159; Ananya Roy, "The 21st century metropolis: new geographies of theory," in *Regional Studies,* 43/6 (2009), 819–830.

2 Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

3 Edward Soja and Miguel Kanai, "The urbanization of the world," in Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic (eds.), *The Endless City* (London: Phaidon, 2005) 54–69; Tony Champion and Graeme Hugo (eds.), *New Forms of Urbanization* (London: Ashgate, 2005); and Allen J. Scott (ed.), *Global City-Regions* (London: Oxford, 2001).

4 Peter Hall and Kathryn Pain (eds.), *The Polycentric Metropolis* (London: Earthscan, 2006); Richard Florida, Tim Gulden and Charlotta Mellander, "The rise of the mega-region," in *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 1 (2008), 459–476.

5 Thomas Sieverts, *Cities Without Cities. An Interpretation of the Zwischenstadt* (London: Routledge, 2003); Joel Garreau, *Edge City* (New York: Anchor, 1992).

6 Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron and Christian Schmid, *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait* (Zurich: Birkhauser, 2006).

7 Roberto Luis Monte-Mor, "What is the urban in the contemporary world?," in *Cadernos Saúde Pública*, Rio de Janeiro, 21/3 (2005), 942–948; Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 2006).

8 Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2000); Allen J. Scott, *Metropolis* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, translated by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).