From megalopolis to global city-region? The political-geographical context of urban development

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Introduction

Discussion of the development of cities has remained largely inattentive to if not blissfully ignorant of the political-geographical context of urban development. If one motif has been to find "laws" of city development independent of political considerations, for example in central-place theory, another has been to reduce city development to purely economic terms without necessarily seeing every city (or city-size category) as having the same economic base but resisting the idea that city development is an emergent phenomenon with political and cultural, as well as economic, origins. One of the great exceptions is Jean Gottmann, who organized his approach to city development with direct reference to the political-geographical processes that not only constrain but also direct the concentration of socio-economic functions and activities at discrete locations. Thus, in his magnum opus, *Megalopolis* (1961), Gottmann makes a powerful historical case for the growth of the urban concentration in the northeastern United States in terms of the region as the "economic hinge" of the emerging continental polity with a global role. This continued his long-standing focus in his explicitly political-geographical works on the relationship between the openness/isolation of polities, on the one hand, and the geographical pattern of accessibility and urban agglomeration, on the other. The problem is that reading *Megalopolis* has become separated from the larger framework of Gottmann's thought, much to the detriment of the former (MUSCARÀ, 1998).

In this essay I want to highlight the political-geographical aspects of Gottmann's urban geography to counter what I see as two problematic readings of *Megalopolis* that result from separating this work from the larger *oeuvre*.

- The *first* is associating the idea of megalopolis as articulated by Gottmann with simply the urban sprawl of big cities or the specific urban form of the northeastern US rather than with the functional interrelation between cities and hinterlands under specific political conditions that he emphasized. The term "global city-region" as used in some contemporary writing captures this feature of Gottmann's position.
- The *second* lies in missing Gottmann's focus on the geographical dynamics of urban development as the impacts of national-level regulation and global political centrality change over time.

Gottmann took a deeply historical approach to understanding the evolution of cities. Not for him the structural or timeless accounts that have tended to dominate urban geography since the 1960s with the experience of this or that city, New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, or abstract models of "systems of cities" based on a single city-center, substituting for rich historical description of urban form in historical-geographical context. His urban geography was an outgrowth of a political geography that emphasized historical oscillation between closed and open territorial systems. Consequently, according to Gottmann, urban development can only be understood in the context of the nature of the territorial system prevalent at a certain historical conjuncture.

Megalopolis: Giant city or global city-region?

In the Foreword to *Megalopolis*, August Heckscher notes how the term "megalopolis" is subject to misconception. In particular, he notes that "In recent years, while this work has been in progress, I have found the almost universal impression among those who heard of it for the first time to be that of a monstrous city, a kind of indefinite extension of Times Square up and down the whole Atlantic seaboard" (p. vii). It is not simply "a very large city," as Webster's dictionary would have it. Rather, to Gottmann it is "an almost continuous system of deeply interwoven urban and suburban areas, with a total population of about 37 million people in 1960" (p. 7), providing "the whole of America with so many essential services, of the sort a community used to obtain in its 'downtown' section, that it may well deserve the nickname of 'Main Street of the nation' " (p. 8), and "the country's chief facade toward the rest of the world" (p. 8). In other

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words, "Just as a Main Street lives for and prospers because of the functions of the whole city, rather than because of any purely local advantages of its own, so is Megalopolis related to the whole of the United States and its rich resources" (p. 8). And it provides "a connecting-link relationship between the rich heart of the continent and the rest of the world" (p. 8). In sum "It is now the most active crossroads on earth, for people, ideas, and goods, extending its influence far beyond the national borders, and only as such a crossroads could it have achieved its present economic pre-eminence" (p. 9).

Yet, much of the literature about cities since publication of *Megalopolis* in 1961 has resolutely refused to acknowledge either the "Main Street" or "crossroads" character of the urban form or its recent rise to primacy. When it comes to defining "megalopolis" the dictionary definition rules the roost. For example, Sutcliffe (1993) sees the megalopolis as a "giant city [that] has been a component of human civilization for several thousand years." Similarly, if with somewhat more attention to contemporary examples, Frost (1993) presents Los Angeles and other "Anglo-Saxon cities on the Pacific Rim" (in Canada and Australia as well as the US) as quintessential megalopoli because of their "low-density physical fabric." The source of this common usage of the term is not difficult to discover. Meller (1993) points out that much recent usage of the term can be traced to Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford who used it to signify low-density urban development or urban sprawl. This was the main feature of the aesthetics of modern urbanization that Mumford hated. Unlike Gottmann, who expropriated the term for analytic purposes, Mumford used it descriptively as a synonym for sprawl. It is this usage that has been dominant, not the careful analytic usage of Gottmann.

Though *Megalopolis* is obviously focused on the northeastern seaboard of the United States, Gottmann claims that his analysis has a wider relevance. This is not in the sense of a universal form of urbanization of which the northeastern US is an example, as with the usage referred to above. It is, rather, that as the processes that produced Megalopolis in this region are spreading worldwide similar forms will spring up elsewhere to serve the national and global mediating roles that the "original" Megalopolis has come to serve for the United States. This is not simply by "imitation" of the American megalopolis. Gottmann connects the rise of Megalopolis to the widening of horizons, the opening of trade, and the increased pace of technological innovation. Gottmann (1961) refers to the ancient philosopher of Alexandria, Philo Judaeus, as the teacher of the idea that what he called Megalopolis (and, hence, from whom Gottmann has borrowed his usage of the term), is first and foremost "a great *city of ideas* ... that commands the material world in which we live." Megalopolis, then, refers to an urban command center and its extended fabric that is not only functionally interrelated "internally" but also vitally connected to other cities and megalopoli.

The recent literature on global cities (SASSEN, 2001) and global city-regions (SCOTT et al., 2001), although rarely referring to Gottmann's pioneering work (but see, e.g., HALL, 2001), nevertheless picks up on the meaning he ascribes to megalopolis. The similarities are threefold.

• In the first place, this new literature links together the dynamics of city development and the larger spatial context in which this occurs. Sassen (2001) refers to this in terms of "new forms of centrality," by which she means the ways in which urban development is no longer dependent upon a centrality "embedded in the central city" but, rather, involves a "grid of nodes" scattered over broad urban regions and wider networks connecting such urban regions at continental and global scales. From this perspective, it is the connectivity of urban agglomerations that determines their relative growth not simply their "internal" characteristics. Cities are necessarily elements in networks of cities and hinterlands, not individual entities casually related to one another (BEAVERSTOCK et al., 2002) (fig.1).

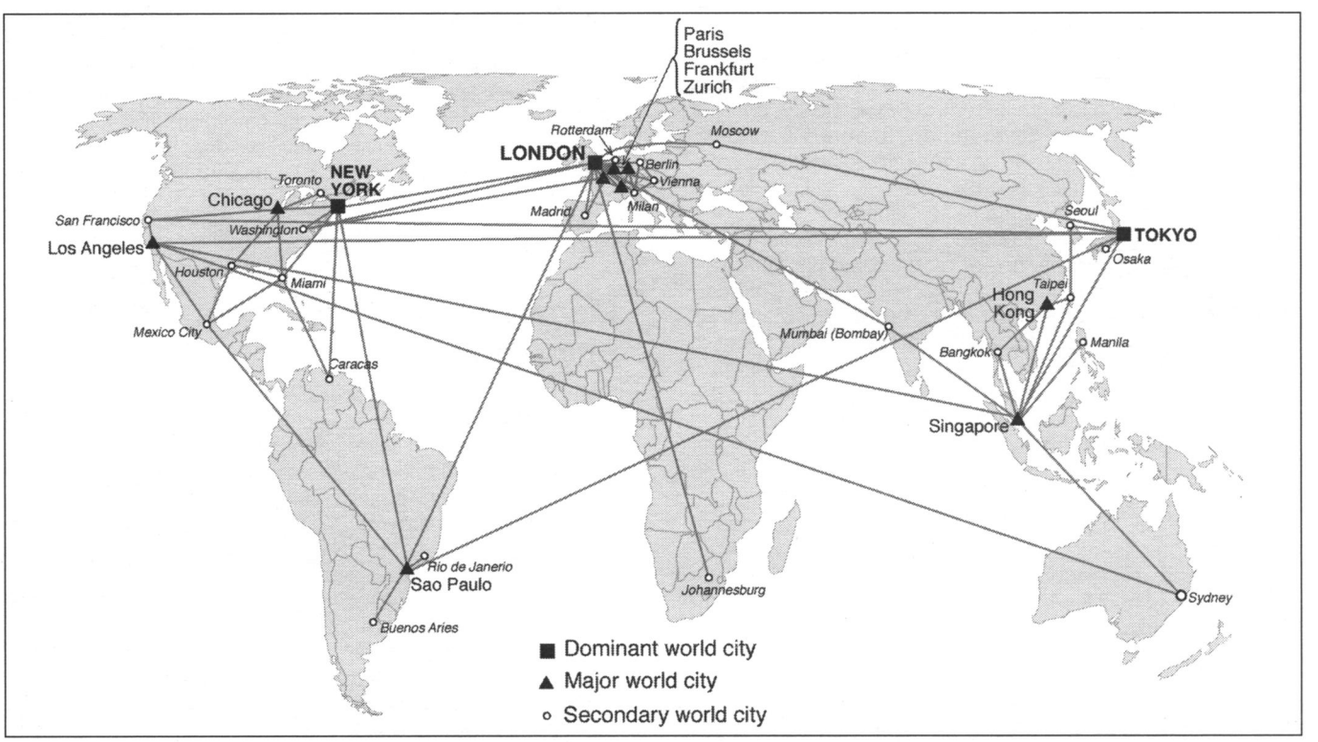

Fig. 1: A global city-regions map, emphasizing the linkages between their central nodes. (*Source:* Knox et al., 2003).

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• Second, global city-regions are seen as "the motors of the global economy" (STORPER, 1997; SCOTT, 1996 and 1998). The geographical clustering of industries and spatial linkages between complementary industries are what drive the global economy. Not all locations are equal. Far from it. Major efficiencies derive from geographical propinquity between specialized producers. Furthermore, such propinquity has an historical basis that cannot be reproduced at will elsewhere. It rests on the accumulation of interdependencies, both economic and social, that Gottmann (1961) described so brilliantly for the American *Megalopolis*. As national boundaries have become increasingly porous to trade and investment flows the benefits of historically sedimented local networks of economic relationships have become increasingly apparent.
• Third, global city-regions are viewed as polycentric or multiclustered agglomerations. If metropolitan regions in the past "were focused mainly on one or perhaps two clearly defined central cities, the city-regions of today are becoming increasingly polycentric" (SCOTT et al., 2001). Two examples of this process at work today are Shanghai and the Pearl River Delta of south China; each of which is a global city-region (or megalopolis) that contains over 30 million inhabitants. More generally, however, "in virtually all global city-regions there has been a rapid growth of outer cities and edge cities, as formerly peripheral or rural areas far from old downtown cores have developed into urban centers in their own right" (SCOTT et al., 2001).

The language is different from that used by Gottmann (1961) and the arguments relate the advent of global-city-regions more to the onset of "globalization" than Gottmann found necessary in the case of the American *Megalopolis*. Of course, he was writing before the onset of much of the opening up of national economies that is subsumed under the label of globalization. But the general thrust or logic is much the same. Gottmann drew a tight connection between the emergence of *Megalopolis*, on the one hand, and the need for a "crossroads" or "Main Street" function, on the other. If today the emphasis is somewhat more on the global as opposed to the international context of urban development then this reflects the time of writing more than any problem with Gottmann's essential theoretical point.

The geographical dynamics of urban development?

A second problematic element in readings of *Megalopolis* has been the tendency to assimilate it and other studies of American cities into structural and ahistorical national-level accounts of urban development. Shortly after *Megalopolis* was published a very different rendering of city development came to dominate American urban studies. Associated with such ideas as "cities as systems within systems of cities" (BERRY, 1964), "national urban systems" were seen as defining distinctive national spaces with processes specific to those spaces producing the distribution of city-sizes across an urban hierarchy. The American urban system was taken as an exemplar against which other national urban systems, particularly in underdeveloped countries, were compared and found wanting because of the "excessive" concentration of population and functions in "overdeveloped primate cities." This involved ignoring the focus on urban primacy in the American context, after all that is what the northeastern megalopolis represented, and to which Gottmann had so clearly drawn attention. It also required a return to a focus on cities as individual "nodes," notwithstanding the systems language, rather than as parts of wider networks at regional and global scales. New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore were once again totally separate entities.

Ironically, political-economic and postmodernist writing on urban development that has heavily criticized the "cities as systems" type of analysis has continued on similar tracks in relation to understanding of the separability of different cities and the lack of interest in historical change in patterns of political regulation. On the one hand, specific cities (such as Chicago or Los Angeles) are taken as representing distinctive models of urban development and offered as lenses through which all other cities can be seen. So, for example, Los Angeles is "where everything now comes together." Cities everywhere are on the path towards the LA Model that has now definitively replaced Chicago as the universal urban exemplar (e.g. DEAR and FLUSTY, 1998). With *Megalopolis*, a new type of urban form emerging in the novel political circumstances of the United States during the Cold War with possible larger implications for political and economic organization was identified, now the focus is on individual cities as reflections of new patterns of production and consumption. The larger geographical contexts of political and economic change are missing. On the other hand, the enhanced interest in the spatiality of urban development (in particular, patterns of suburbanization and ethnic segregation) that is undoubtedly a strength of newer writing (e.g. SOJA, 1998), can lead to a weakened interest in the changing historical conditions under which new urban forms have evolved. In particular, urban studies typically neglect the ways in which historical-geographical conditions create new circumstances for urban development. The contemporary development of Los Angeles and its region, for example, is taking place in totally different historical-geographical conditions from the development of Chicago that inspired so much urban theory for much of the 20th century. Los Angeles is supposedly the global or postmodern city par excellence. Certainly, its global reach with respect to the influence of the film industry and its draw on immigrants are unusual. But its two major industries are quintessentially American at the same time that they symbolize old and new types of global imperialism: high-tech military and aerospace hardware (dependent on federal government spending) and Hollywood (dependent upon American cultural traditions). This complex national and global setting involving defense and entertainment industries is totally different from the national setting in which Chicago developed in the early 20th century, dependent largely on its linkages to the emerging agricultural industries of the American Midwest and Great Plains (transportation, meat packing, etc.).

This is where a renewed appreciation for Gottmann's fusion of political and urban geography enters in. His entire approach in *Megalopolis* is premised on seeing urban development as profoundly conditioned by changing historical-geographical circumstances.

The political-geographical context of urban development

The idea of *Megalopolis* as a crossroads or *carrefour* that is so important to Gottmann's argument about modern urban development, though lacking in so much discussion of megalopolis in the years since Gottmann first developed it, did not simply come out of thin air. For many years before writing *Megalopolis*, Jean Gottmann had been deeply involved in developing a general theory of geographic space with particular attention to the politics of territorial partitioning.

This theoretical framework must be understood to truly appreciate the theoretical contribution of *Megalopolis* to urban studies. For Gottmann the most important feature of human history has been the oscillation between closed and open territorial systems. This binary model of historical-geographical conditions is based on the idea that people and their social

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practices can be oriented in two different ways:

- on the one hand, they can prefer a rigid territorial partitioning of space so as to enhance safety, group identity, and self-sufficiency;
- on the other hand, they can opt for greater opportunities that arise from open connections and accessibility that facilitate circulation across wider geographic spaces.

If Plato recommended the first of these options, then later philosophers, beginning with Plato's pupil Aristotle and his protégé Alexander the Great, were advocates of the second. The crossroads place or city (*carrefour*) is where the two orientations come into tension with one another. Cities can either serve closed territories or knit together open spaces. Much of Gottmann's career before and after *Megalopolis* was devoted to this approach to understanding the political partitioning of global space. Political territoriality is seen as the product of the tension between territorially-rooted human communities with common symbols and beliefs (*iconographies*) and the force of external change (*circulation*) that moves people, goods, ideas, and information from place to place (see, e.g. GOTTMANN 1947; 1952 and 1980).

This understanding of global political geography is central to the approach to urbanization taken by Gottmann in *Megalopolis*. The northeastern US Megalopolis grew in the way it did as a result of a changing balance between pressures for closed and open space. From this point of view, urban form cannot be separated from the shifting nature of political territoriality. The development of Megalopolis was only possible because of the relatively open territorial system of the United States that set a premium on accessibility and efficiency in economic linkages (or *circulation*) at the expense of preservation of historic forms and symbols (*iconographies*). This open system was the outcome of a substantive shift in the role performed by northeastern US cities for the US, and increasingly, world economies. As a developing global *carrefour*, Megalopolis was the urban form par excellence of an emerging global order that pointed beyond the supremacy of the national boundaries that had come to dominate political territoriality in Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its combination of higher density centers and lower density fringes provided an auspicious environment for innovative activities, supportive services, and agglomeration economies. Though obviously problematic in various respects, not least in its constant recycling of land uses and complex internal flows, as Gottmann himself noted, Megalopolis provided the model for an open urbanization appropriate to a world moving away from rigid territorial partitioning.

Conclusion

In *Megalopolis*, Jean Gottmann provided the earliest example of a theoretical reasoning akin to what is now associated with the idea of global city-regions. But he was not simply a prophet of a new urban form. He clearly linked his case for the emergence of an American Megalopolis, and possible ones elsewhere, to a particular model of historical-geographical change. This model is based on the tension between pressures towards openness and closedness in territorial systems such as modern states. Both the connection to recent ideas about global city-regions and the fundamental insight about the political-geographical underpinnings of urbanization have received little or no attention. Instead, *Megalopolis* has been increasingly, and misleadingly, associated simply with urban sprawl and assimilated to a literature in urban studies that still sees cities as largely separable entities that exist in a time warp independent of political-geographical restructuring. Forty years after publication, therefore, *Megalopolis* stands in need of a radical re-reading that re-asserts the continuity between Gottmann's political and his urban geography and that shows the continuing relevance of this great book to the emerging idea of global city-regions and the present world order of cities and spaces.

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