



Itinerary: Warsaw, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kirovsk, and Murmansk. In 1992, the prominent urban geographer John S. Adams led an urban geography field study through Poland and Russia. This was a period of dramatic transformation right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We flew into Warsaw, spent several days exploring the transformation of that city (as well as Gdansk and Gdynia) with Professor Piotr Korcelli of the Polish Academy of Sciences, before taking the train to Moscow, where we studied changes in the urban landscape and met with faculty and students from the Department of Geography at Moscow State University. We also spent time in St. Petersburg and at Kirovsk, a mining town in the Kola Peninsula just north of the Arctic Circle. *Source:* drawing by Elvin Wyly.

From Model to Plan to Market: Socialist and Post-Socialist Urban Systems

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Among the several theoretical frameworks devised to explain the emergence and growth of urban systems, central place theory has been among the most influential. Central place theory is a framework for understanding the spatial distribution of cities of different sizes, according to the varied needs of dispersed populations for different kinds of goods and services provided in centers. Devised by Walter Christaller to explain observed settlement distributions in Europe during the 1930s,¹ the theory was subsequently refined by August Lösch in the 1950s.² By the 1960s the approach was being used widely by geographers in the United States and Canada who were trying to refine and empirically test theories of spatial organization and spatial equilibrium in market economies.³ There was some irony in the intellectual migration of theories devised in the long-settled landscapes of southern Germany across the Atlantic to the urban networks of North America, where urbanization was so closely intertwined with the rapid industrialization of the nineteenth century. James E. Vance, Jr., for example, wrote many panoramic historical accounts of urbanization, and in his landmark *Continuing City* he provides a contextual, historical explanation for the kind of landscape in which central place theory was born:

“Europe during the Counter-Reformation came to be dominated by the administrative-political city. These cities were ordered and ranked by their administrative standing and assigned politically dependent territories Trading territories overlap, but political territories do so only by design and normally with fixed hierarchical relations. Significantly, in that part of Europe where the Counter-Reformation was strongest and liberalism was least advanced, the administrative-political order and its central-places were best developed. In such a region, the kingdom of Bavaria, Walter Christaller devised his central-place system; on closer examination, it stands more as a political-place system than one of trading places free to compete with each other.”⁴

Vance’s historical narrative, tracing in this case the paths from feudalism to Renaissance and Baroque urbanization in Europe, hints at an even more remarkable paradox. In North America, the breakthroughs of urban systems theories were revised and refined in order to explain the historical evolution and contemporary circumstances of cities shaped by the dynamic and turbulent interplay of market forces. But for several generations in China, the Soviet Union, and

¹ Walter Christaller (1933). *Central Places in Southern Germany*. English translation by C.W. Baskin. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

² August Lösch (1954). *The Economics of Location*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

³ The most prominent contribution to the historical understanding of city-systems was from Allan Pred, whose work addressed the question: “What are the processes underlying the past and present growth and development of large ‘post-industrial’ metropolitan complexes and the economically advanced systems of cities to which they belong?” Allan Pred (1977). *City-Systems in Advanced Economies: Past Growth, Present Processes and Future Development Options*. New York: Wiley, 11. The dominant view of contemporary twentieth-century processes came from Brian J.L. Berry, whose book on the subject began with the thesis that “the geography of retail and service businesses displays regularities over space and through time, that central-place theory constitutes a deductive base from which to understand these regularities, and that the convergence of theoretical postulates and empirical regularities provides substance to marketing geography and to certain aspects of city and regional planning.” Brian J.L. Berry (1967). *Geography of Market Centers and Retail Distribution*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, vii. Re-issued in a revised and expanded edition in 1988, coauthored with John B. Parr. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

⁴ James E. Vance, Jr. (1990). *The Continuing City: Urban Morphology in Western Civilization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 210.

many other state-socialist economies, urban-systems theories were less important as post-hoc explanations than as frameworks for planning and policy. **Models of city-size distributions were used as part of formal state policies on industrial location, economic development, and locational restrictions on household migration, employment, and housing.** To understand relations among cities in China, Russia, and many other parts of what was once called the ‘Second World,’ then, requires attention to the history of state-socialist planning and the recent effects of globalization and selective transitions to market economies in different contexts.

The legacy of state-socialist countries for historical evaluations of Marxism and capitalism has, of course, been hotly-debated: a key point of contention is the degree to which these states conformed to Marxist theory or other ideals of socialism. Richard D. Wolff, a prominent analyst of the economic and historical evolution of the Soviet Union, sums up the issues this way:

“In the wake of the USSR’s collapse, China’s basic changes, and the global expansion of capitalism, many of capitalism’s champions have been trumpeting it as ‘the only alternative.’ Capitalism won, socialism and communism lost, case closed. ... Yet, two considerations of history suggest otherwise. First, emerging analyses of the USSR (applicable also to other ‘actually existing socialisms’) show that communism was never tried in its industry and that its economy was instead a state-operated capitalism (Resnick and Wolff 2002). Therefore, Soviet history proves nothing about the viability or desirability of communism. Second, capitalism’s current neoliberal revival is deepening inequalities of wealth, income, and power among and within nations. Large parts of the world suffer staggering impoverishment. ...”⁵

Debates like this have also shaped interpretations of urban patterns and processes, because urbanization was such a key dimension of political struggle in state-socialist regimes. Three factors have proven most important in shaping urbanization in different parts of the socialist world.

1. The geographical origins of revolutionary movements. Socialist and communist regimes that emerged from urban-based revolutionary movements, as in the case of the Russian Revolution of 1917, have understood cities as the leading edge of development and cultural advancement: urbanization became a tool for the consolidation of power and the achievement of socialist national goals. Regimes that emerged from peasant rebellions and rural movements, by contrast, have been more likely to view urbanization as a necessary evil, or even as counter-revolutionary.

2. International historical context. Revolutions in Russia in 1917 and China in 1949 brought regimes to power that set about using all the tools of national development -- settlement policy, industrial policy, transportation systems, and so on -- to support the goals of the revolution. Most of these efforts represented a turn inward from the expanding networks of capitalist

⁵ Richard D. Wolff (2007). “Why Communism?” *Rethinking Marxism* 19(3), 322-336, quote from p. 322. Wolff’s citation is to Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (2002), *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR*. New York: Routledge.

international trade and investment. But for later state-socialist revolutions -- in Eastern Europe, Cuba, Vietnam -- the new regimes were able to become part of established networks of trade and investment among state-socialist countries around the world. The terms of these trade and investment networks influenced the viability of certain industrial policies, and in turn shaped the prospects for particular paths of urbanization. One example comes from Cuba, which enjoyed subsidized petroleum from the Soviet Union for many years, in return for Cuba's provision of sugar, rum, tobacco, and other agricultural products. The historical-geographical context of the Cuban Revolution inserted it into a global network that allowed and required national policies favoring agriculture and rural development.



The Swan House, November 2009 (Elvin Wyly). Brussels, Belgium emerged about 1,000 years ago, after the Germans established a castle as an outpost against the French, and a cluster of services for the soldiers evolved into a village. Several hundred years later, French King Louis XIV's troops surrounded the city and fired their cannons towards the spire of the monumental Town Hall (to the right). The Town Hall survived the 1695 attack with little damage, but nearly everything else was destroyed. Brussels merchants, bankers, and traders moved quickly to rebuild, and to make a statement of defiance, and so Brussels' Grand Place is surrounded by grand, ornate "guild halls," one for each of the main professions; almost all of these buildings were completed between 1696 and 1702. One of these buildings, the Swan House, once had a bar where Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels met to draft the notes

for an essay that became the *Communist Manifesto*. The *Manifesto* gave voice to a growing international movement that sought to challenge the stark inequalities of industrial capitalism: never before had the world seen such wealth, and never before had the world seen such inequality and impoverishment of people whose only means of survival was the sale of their labor-power. The 1848 *Manifesto* inspired revolutions across Europe, and later that year, Brussels leaders felt it most prudent to banish Marx and Engels from the city.

3. **National geographical context.** The link between urbanization and state-socialist policies depended on the kind of national urban system a new regime confronted. In the Soviet Union and China, policies on settlement and urban development became crucial in attempts to strengthen linkages among diverse regions in a vast territory. In smaller states, new socialist regimes often confronted an urban system marked by a high degree of primacy -- a disproportionate concentration of population, wealth, and economic development in a single, large city.

Theories of urban systems used in the capitalist world to uncover the presumed spatial regularities of a market economy were used, under state socialism, to regulate, rationalize, or guide the urbanization process.

Despite these contextual differences, most state-socialist regimes pursued broadly similar goals, and these priorities had significant implications for urbanization. “To varying degrees, such societies set themselves the task of ensuring that differences between town and country, state and collective forms of property, types of labor and ethnoregional distinctions would be overcome, if not eradicated.”⁶ Urban planning was a key component of the “command economies” of central planning that typically marked state-socialist governance. **Many of the theories of city-size distribution used in the capitalist world to uncover the presumed spatial regularities of a market economy were used to regulate, rationalize, or guide city-systems, imposing ‘optimal’ growth trajectories or size distributions.** The details of these plans varied across different parts of the socialist world, but their essential goal -- to use urban theory as part of central planning -- was much the same. The scientific approach and quantitative methodologies that would eventually evolve into the tradition of analytical urban geography, in fact, were used quite extensively to plan settlement,

urbanization, and growth. Scientific analysis, however, could never be entirely separated from politics. Consider the case of centographic analysis, a technique used to identify the “center of gravity” of population distributed unevenly across a regional or national territory. Here’s how Peter Taylor summarizes the history of this method and its use:

“Although the concept of mean center originated in the United States, its most widespread, early applications were made in Russia. This is usually attributed to the interest of the famous chemist D.I. Mendeleev in the center of gravity of Russia, late in the nineteenth century. After the 1917 Revolution, his work was followed up by a band of centographers who formed the Mendeleev

⁶ Graham Smith (2000). “Socialism.” In R.J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, editors. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, 763-764, quote from 764.

Centrographical Laboratory in Leningrad in 1925. ... The purpose of such empirical research was to aid economic planning by developing laws of areal distribution based on mean centers. Early in the 1930s, however, the advice they gave the policymakers was to bring about their downfall. When they were asked to produce a plan for grain production, they called for limitation of commercial planting in Russia's traditional bread belt in order to ensure the 'correct' location of the center of gravity. This advice was diametrically opposed to government policy to expand grain production in Siberia, and the group never recovered from the loss of prestige following on the rejection of their report.”⁷

Post-socialist market transitions:

1. *The privatization of industries forced cities to reposition themselves in urban systems.*

2. *The privatization of land and housing created new opportunities, but widened inequalities of location, timing, and power.*

3. *The collapse of central planning in the face of globalization has created new scales of urbanization.*

Most of these plans failed to achieve their stated objectives. But the effects on urban development were profound, both for those parts of the socialist world that went through a clear break -- the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991 -- and China, where economic transformation is creating a complex hybrid of a market economy and Communist Party political control.

Effects of Market Transition on Socialist Urban Systems

The globalization of trade and investment has, of course, been a primary factor in the evolution of urbanization and policy of all kinds of nation-states. But contemporary globalization has been especially profound for state-socialist economies that went through a clear break after the collapse of communist regimes. In these post-socialist cities, market transition has created three unique kinds of changes in urbanization and city networks.

1. The **privatization of industries** has created new and complex patterns of winners and losers among cities, especially for those places built on the basis of industries or military facilities that have been rendered obsolete. Cities, especially those heavily reliant on outdated industries or troubled firms, have been forced to find new ways of

competing for regional, national, and transnational capital investment. “The transition from planning to markets” in the context of post-socialist, globalized competition, “is a process of economic adjustment in which economic functions are specializing and concentrating. Internationalization is leading to a hierarchy of functions and a hierarchy of location

⁷ Peter J. Taylor (1977). *Quantitative Methods in Geography: An Introduction to Spatial Analysis*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., p. 26. For a history of the Centrographical Laboratory, see E.E. Sviatlovsky and Walter Crosby Eells (1937). “The Centrographical Method and Regional Analysis.” *The Geographical Review* 27(2), 240-254.

environments.”⁸ Put simply, the city-size hierarchies inherited from the state-socialist era of central state planning are being redrawn by the competition for transnational private capital investment. New urban systems are under construction.

2. The **privatization of land and housing** has created new opportunities for individual wealth accumulation. Market processes have reshaped relations between cities, and have created competitive land markets inside urban areas. But these opportunities have come with increased household inequalities based on location, timing, and differential access to connections, information, and other types of what we might call ‘institutional’ capital. “Growing social polarization and the elimination of state funded housing programs coupled with the high cost of urban services and housing, jointly contribute to homelessness and social marginalization.”⁹

3. We are seeing the creation of **new scales of urban growth, planning, and politics**. Key facets of economic decision-making have drifted ‘down’ from central-planning ministries to cities and regions, and ‘up’ to the forces, firms, and institutions of transnational investment networks. The result is a partial and selective hollowing out of the nation-state scale, and greater instability in various parts of national urban systems (particularly in large, dispersed networks like Russia). This hollowing out process is also happening in capitalist economies, but the effects are more severe in the former socialist world, where the state historically played a much larger role (both positive and negative) in individual lives.

Let’s consider how these changes have played out in particular regions and cities.

The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe

Soviet urbanism was deeply shaped by the historical dominance of Moscow prior to the Revolution of 1917. With the development of a command economy in the 1920s, “The Communist leadership ... established a hierarchical urban administrative system to assist in carrying out its political and economic agendas, as well as to reflect the new ideology.”¹⁰ The resulting system of *oblasts* -- territorial administrative units -- became the anchors for an evolving and heavily-planned series of industrialization drives and city-planning directives that shaped the entire urban system. Planners “used mathematical algorithms to choose the optimum location for investment in economic activities leading to the construction of new cities in previously underdeveloped regions like Siberia. Planners often determined optimal locations close to natural resources” but they also “chose sites that dispersed production to make the national economy less vulnerable to crippling losses if attacked militarily.”¹¹ Military objectives also figured prominently in the creation of secret and closed sites for various types of installations and research facilities. The Post-Soviet period has seen remarkable changes: unlike Europe and North America, the decline of small towns in Russia has not been closely associated with the decline of rural agriculture. Rather, the phenomenon of ‘disappearing cities’ has been

⁸ Sasha Tsenkova (2006). “The Post-Socialist Urban World,” in Sasha Tsenkova and Zorica Nedovic-Budic, eds. (2006). *The Urban Mosaic of Post-Socialist Europe*. Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag, 349-366, quote from p. 356.

⁹ Tsenkova, “The Post-Socialist Urban World,” p. 352.

¹⁰ Beth A. Mitchneck and Ellen Hamilton (2003). “Cities of Russia.” In Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald J. Ziegler, editors. *Cities of the World: World Regional Urban Development*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 222-253.

¹¹ Mitchneck and Hamilton, “Cities of Russia,” 226.

ted to the obsolescence of the urban-industrial networks constructed during the Soviet period.¹² “The Soviet planning system resulted in the construction of cities in unexpected, potentially



Kirovsk, July 1992 (Elvin Wyly) This city was established in 1929, and renamed in 1934 after Kirov, one of Stalin’s deputies. The city served two purposes in the Soviet era: as a source of apatite, and a low-level uranium ore. Workers in Kirovsk were paid significantly more -- up to 50 percent more than comparable salaries in Moscow -- to compensate for the unpleasant experiences of long, dark, cold winters north of the Arctic Circle

hazardous, and ultimately unsustainable sites, such as the remote reaches of Siberia and the Arctic. Cities were often sited near natural resources,”¹³ regardless of location, in part because of state policies that viewed transportation and energy costs in non-market terms. The resulting urban system was an intricate blend of industrial-firm *efficiencies* and social/household-community *inefficiencies*. The location of a mining town might very well have been optimal

¹² Mitchneck and Hamilton, 236.

¹³ Jessica K. Graybill and Beth A. Mitchneck (2008). “Cities of Russia.” In Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams and Donald J. Ziegler, editors. *Cities of the World: World Regional Urban Development*. Fourth Edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 254-295, quote from p. 260.

and efficient given the overall needs of the national economy or a particular industrial enterprise, but state decisions on the population sizes of towns like this were almost always distorted by central planning formulas that ignored market prices for transportation and energy. “The Soviet system created an urban spatial pattern of economic flows between quite distant cities because the locations of suppliers, intermediate producers, and markets were of little concern” with fixed, subsidized transport costs.¹⁴ What was best for the productive needs of industrial enterprises, moreover, was not always optimal for the social life of households and communities.



Apatite Mine near Kirovsk, July, 1992 (Elvin Wylly) Apatite is a mineral of calcium and phosphorous. It can be readily processed into phosphate-based fertilizer. The local relief in this image -- from the top of the mountain to the bottom of the mine where the large trucks are moving around -- is about 1,000 feet. In turn, the bottom of the mine is about 1,000 feet above sea level. Trucks dump crushed apatite into large holes at the bottom of this mine, and the mineral is then loaded onto rail cars in a tunnel that heads south. For many years, the apatite was shipped to the Ukraine, which served as the most productive agricultural region in the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's ability to buy cheap fertilizer on the international market, the mine and other facilities in Kirovsk have struggled to find new markets and a new economic base.

¹⁴ Graybill and Mitchneck, “Cities of Russia,” p. 260.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has led to dramatic changes in the trajectory of urban growth and decline.

1. Cities established under **non-market locational considerations** are now struggling to adapt to fluctuating costs and market demands. Cities in Russia's west have moved aggressively to become attractive locations for Western European business. Cities like Khabarovsk in the far east have become gateways for expanding Russian-Chinese trade and investment networks.
2. Cities created as part of the **military-industrial complex** have undergone restructuring processes that often resemble the deindustrialization of cities in Western Europe and North America. The Soviet era saw the creation of hundreds of "closed towns" -- cities that served as strategic locations for military bases or military research -- and even a large number of "secret cities." Movements to and from closed towns were tightly controlled, and in the case of secret cities, the settlements did not even appear on published maps or in national demographic statistics. Closed cities were more likely to be brand-new cities built as strategic sites, whereas closed cities had a more established history (and thus it was not really possible to conceal their existence, only to control movement).

*Post-Soviet
Russia
experienced an
unprecedented, if
temporary, shift:
de-urbanization.*

Most of these closed and secret cities are now in decline with the end of the Cold War. But some remain important. Star City was once a secret installation, northeast of Moscow, that never appeared on the maps. It has long served a central role in the Soviet and then Russian space program. And now it is a crucial link for the U.S. space program as well. In 2011, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration shut down the "space shuttle" program, which relied on aging and risky technology developed in the 1970s. But the next

generation of American spacecraft will not be available until 2015. During that period, NASA will purchase seats on Russia's Soyuz spacecraft in order to get astronauts to the International Space Station; "...Star City will be the only place to send astronauts from any nation to the International Space Station."¹⁵

3. The combined effects of economic transition and military-industrial conversion have produced a **unique, and perhaps unprecedented, de-urbanization**. Between 1989 and 2002, the percent urban population for the entire Russian Federation fell from an estimated 73.6 percent to 73.0 percent.¹⁶ This seems like a very small decline. But falling rates of urbanization are almost never seen in the world's wealthier industrialized countries: even in those cases where certain cities are declining due to deindustrialization or demographic change, the national level of urbanization continues to rise slowly. The post-Soviet reversal is a remarkable indicator of wrenching changes in economy and society. The urbanization rate has since stabilized at around 73 percent, but Russia still has quite a few declining cities.

¹⁵ John Schwartz (2008). "One Way Up: U.S. Space Program Relies on Russia." *The New York Times*, October 5.

¹⁶ Graybill and Mitcheck, "Cities of Russia," p. 262.

Economic decline at the scale of cities and firms, however, does not translate to individual decisions in any simple, direct fashion. Even if a city has been rendered obsolete by market changes, that does not change the fact that many people will consider it home after spending much of their lives there. In 2003, Russia began a policy designed to encourage migration away from a vast region stretching across the country's north -- all the way from the Kola Peninsula to Chukotka -- because of the enormous energy and infrastructure costs of supporting a vast and isolated network of cities. This migration process was already underway -- between 1989 and 2006, an estimated seventeen percent of people in the Russian Far North moved away -- but the "huge costs of spatial inefficiency" persisted in a region that was "extremely overpopulated" in the new market economy.¹⁷ Russia launched a program offering housing and other subsidies worth up to \$18,000 per family for those willing to relocate. In Norilsk, a nickel-smelting city of more than 100,000 north of the Arctic Circle built by workers imprisoned by Stalin in the 1930s, up to 20,000 families could be eligible for the relocation assistance. But a year after it was launched only 48 families had agreed to leave. Another pilot program, supported by an \$80 million loan from the World Bank, also attracted only a few takers. Lucrative as they seem, the subsidies make it difficult to afford the newly competitive housing markets of attractive cities in Russia, and acceptance also requires that families give up the increased pensions that have long been given to retirees living in the inhospitable North. Norilsk provides a poignant case study of the durability of historical patterns and the difficult choices people face today:

"Stalin imprisoned people here, exploiting their labor to build an industry in icy isolation. His Soviet successors enticed them here with higher salaries and ideological cant to conquer the forbidding Arctic. Now Russia wants people to leave Norilsk -- only to find that most would rather stay, despite poverty, corrosive pollution from ever-billowing smokestacks and insufferable weather that plunges temperatures below freezing for most of the year."¹⁸

A similar trajectory appeared in Germany, where "...in the East all efforts were focused on production sites. In contrast to the West, where processes of concentration and dispersion were varied and autonomous, in the East the government, led by the Communist Party, determined all investments for industry, housing, trade, traffic, and public services; in short, it planned and ordered the development of all sectors of the settlement structure."¹⁹ Postsocialist changes have been marked by a flood of foreign investment, but throughout Eastern Europe most benefits have gone to capital cities at the expense of smaller settlements and places heavily reliant on outdated industries. Internal shifts have also been pronounced. "The changes in Berlin since 1989 have been dramatic," including a wide range of new development projects, including "enormous construction projects at Potsdamerplatz, just south of the Brandenburg Gate. Ironically, this

¹⁷ Timothy Heleniak (2009), "Growth Poles and Ghost Towns in the Russian Far North," in Elana Wilson Rowe, ed., *Russia and the North*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 129-164, quote from p. 129.

¹⁸ Steven Lee Myers (2004). "Siberians Tell Moscow: Like it or Not, It's Home." *The New York Times*, January 28, A1, A9.

¹⁹ Peter Schöller (1986). "Comparative Urban Change in West and East Germany." In Michael P. Conzen, editor. *World Patterns of Modern Urban Change*. Chicago: Department of Geography, University of Chicago, 63-83.

zone of land that ran along the wall -- located at the boundaries of East and West Berlin and now at the center of the reunited city -- is the most valuable building site in Europe.”²⁰

The Challenges of China

In China, the Maoist era between 1949 and 1976 brought dramatic changes to the urban network, as well as the internal structure of cities. Communist Party planning interacted with economic and demographic changes to remake ancient cities and the comparatively limited set of European colonial outposts.

“China’s large cities in the Maoist era were both production (manufacturing) centers, as well as administrative nodes of the economic planning system that focused on both national and regional/local self-reliance. The functions of business and commerce were weak. Most cities tried to build relatively comprehensive industrial structures, resulting in much less division of labor and exchanges among manufacturing centers.” ... Rural areas “controlled by the municipalities served the role of providing food for the cities. Some satellite towns in the outskirts of large cities were developed to accommodate the spillover of industries.”²¹

China’s trajectory during this period seemed to call into question everything understood about the relations between urbanization, economic development, and industrial growth. Mao had forged a path away from the experience of the Western capitalist industrial city -- and distinct from the “unbalanced urban-industrial growth” of the Soviet model.²²

“China’s presumed success, as seen in the late 1970s, at simultaneously fostering rapid industrialization and keeping urban expansion under control was enormous. This is just the reverse of what has been characterized as ‘over-urbanization’. The low level of urbanization in China has been imputed to a series of distinguishing Chinese ‘anti-urban’ policy measures, featuring mass urban population removal to the countryside, strict bans on urban in-migration, suppression of urban consumption, and rural industrialization programmes that professedly attacked the problems of development at the root.”²³

Over time, these policies became more and more contradictory. The registration and rural policies kept “millions of surplus rural labourers in the countryside,” even as the urban sector was deprived of essential services and infrastructure. After two decades of privileging industry over consumption and services, the problems “became increasingly intolerable,” and after Mao’s

²⁰ Linda McCarthy (2003). “Cities of Europe.” In Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald J. Ziegler, editors. *Cities of the World: World Regional Urban Development*. Lanham, ND: Rowman and Littlefield, 168-221, quotes from 212.

²¹ Jack F. Williams and Kam Wing Chan (2003). “Cities of East Asia.” Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald J. Ziegler, editors. *Cities of the World: World Regional Urban Development*. Lanham, ND: Rowman and Littlefield, 412-455, quotes from 430.

²² Kam Wing Chan (1994). *Cities With Invisible Walls: Reinterpreting Urbanization in Post-1949 China*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, p. 3.

²³ Chan, *Cities with Invisible Walls*, p. 3.

death in 1976, “it became clear to the post-Mao leaders, as in the Stalin era in many Eastern European countries, that some reform at least of the orthodox or classical socialist system must be instigated to regain popularity before it was too late.”²⁴ At the Eleventh Party Congress in December 1978, Deng Xiaoping outlined a series of sweeping reforms constituting a more pragmatic approach, with a careful “open door policy” designed to integrate China into an increasingly competitive and dynamic global economy.



The Forbidden City, Beijing, February 2010 (Elvin Wylly).

A key component of the Maoist period was the *hukou*, or household registration system established in 1958. Based on a simple division and registration of all people as either urban or rural, the system provided state guarantees to urbanites for jobs, housing, and social welfare services. Rural residents were forced to rely on their collectives, and received less generous

²⁴ Chan, *Cities With Invisible Walls*, p. 98.

entitlements. The consequent powerful incentives for rural-to-urban migration gave rise to increasingly tight administrative restrictions, and “In essence, the hukou system functioned as an internal passport system.... While old city walls in China had largely been demolished by the late 1960s, the power of this newly erected migration barrier is likened to ‘invisible’ city walls.”²⁵ This system has come under enormous pressure since the late 1970s, culminating in a “floating population” of at least 100 million living outside their formal hukou registration location – the vast majority living in cities but ineligible for the array of urban entitlements. If the hukou system was created as a mechanism for national population and settlement management, it has now evolved into something very different: by limiting the benefits and rights available to millions of workers in cities who are living outside their formal registered location, the system creates a vast pool of disenfranchised people who bear a disproportionate burden of sustaining economic growth. The system also sustains the power of local officials, who are less likely to be challenged by non-hukou status migrants.

Recent research in China suggests that increased market integration has increased the relative concentration of transnational capital investment networks in the largest cities.²⁶ At the same time, these increasing connections seem to have altered the relationship between local, city governance and the powers of the national state.

*China’s hukou
(household
registration
system) created
“cities with
invisible walls.”*

“Marketisation has created new elements beyond the reach of state work-units that represent the state’s ‘hierarchical’ control. The pillars of the socialist governing structure ... are shaken by these forces. ... Territorial organisations such as the municipality, urban districts, Street Office and Residents’ Committees are reinvented and consolidated to restore a governable society. The devolution towards the base level and the reinvention of local communities reflect the state’s attempt to reconsolidate its power to create a governable society as well as to cope with practical pressures such as the provision of social assistance to poor and aged residents, re-employment of laid-off workers and the management of ‘floating’ immigrants.”²⁷

Is there such a thing as “The Socialist City”?

These examples capture only a small portion of the expanding body of knowledge on socialist cities and post-socialist cities. But one of the most important issues raised in recent years questions the very idea of ‘the socialist city.’²⁸ In a commentary discussing several studies of

²⁵ Williams and Chan, “Cities of East Asia,” p. 448.

²⁶ Simon X.B. Zhao, Roger C.K. Chan, and Kelvin T.O. Sit (2003). “Globalization and the Dominance of Large Cities in Contemporary China.” *Cities* 20(4), 265-278.

²⁷ Fulong Wu (2002). “China’s Changing Urban Governance in the Transition Towards a More Market-Oriented Economy.” *Urban Studies* 39(7), 1071-1093.

²⁸ Indeed, to speak of a unitary ‘socialist city’ is as broad a generalization as the ‘capitalist’ city, which lumps together such diverse urban experiences as New York, London, Tokyo, Toronto, Sydney, Vancouver, and even Gary, Indiana. Capitalist social relations do have distinctive effects on cities and urban trajectories, but it is important to avoid broad overgeneralizations or the suggestion of a unitary or monolithic type of urbanism.

urban change in various parts of the socialist and post-socialist world (including China, Poland, Vietnam, and Cuba), Eric Sheppard notes that "...the literature on the socialist city initially emphasized a distinctive urban form, with modernist high-rises on the urban fringe and large public space, and minimal spatial and social inequality, only to subsequently begin to deconstruct this ideal (particularly the ideal of equality)."²⁹

The idea that socialism produced a distinctive type of urbanization "was based on three assumptions: that a unitary mode of production (socialism) existed, that such a mode of production is determinant...of societal processes, and that each national territory could be treated as an autonomous unit of analysis."³⁰ And thus there are compelling reasons to be cautious towards the idea of a unitary socialist, or post-socialist city:

"...differences in geographic situation create national and local differences in urbanization processes occurring under broadly similar socialist or postsocialist regimes. ... the form taken by urbanization under state socialist regimes has depended on forces external to those regimes (i.e., on their situation within the evolving global economy) and not just on national characteristics."

There are compelling reasons to be cautious about the idea of a unitary socialist -- or post-socialist -- city.

Even the idea of "post-socialist" cities can be risky. The Soviet era from 1917 to the early 1990s is the longest historical period of state-socialist urbanization. Even here, socialism did not start with a clean slate: new policies were imposed upon the inherited cities and urban networks of the Tzarist period. In Eastern Europe and parts of

Africa and Central America where various state-socialist or quasi-socialist regimes held power for much shorter periods, these historical legacies were even more important. If there is such a thing as "the socialist city," it is built on, in, and through the existing city of history produced by previous generations. The same applies to the transition to a "post-socialist city," which inevitably combines elements of free-market capitalist relations and central-planning practices from earlier state-socialist years. In many cases, the ridiculed five-year-plan obsessions of communist party officials have been replaced by the annual and quarterly report pressures of transnational corporations seeking to maximize returns for their shareholders -- a new kind of disciplined, centralized economic thinking.

Contemporary China, of course, subverts all ideas to draw clear boundaries between "socialist" and "post-socialist" cities. In the years after the 1978 "New Open Door" policy and Deng Xiaoping's famous declaration that "To get rich is glorious," China has combined elements of an accelerating, dynamic private market economy with an enduring and powerful communist party political system. In the early reform years, of course, this new hybrid was most visible in the small network of "special economic zones" where preferential tax treatment was designed to encourage investment in export-processing factories in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Xiamen, and Shantou.

²⁹ Eric Sheppard (2000). "Socialist Cities?" *Urban Geography* 21(8), 758-763.

³⁰ Sheppard, "Socialist Cities?," 758.

But by the mid-1990s, “practically the entire coastal region was one large open zone,”³¹ and the aggressive market orientation of the Chinese system as a whole was unmistakable. Is the small village at the border crossing with Hong Kong -- Shenzhen -- that grew into a metropolis of well over 10 million within thirty years a “socialist city” simply because it’s in the People’s Republic of China? Shenzhen and the network of other cities in China’s Pearl River Delta are often described as the “factory to the world,” and if we do live in a capitalist world, would not it be more accurate to say that Shenzhen is the preeminent urban expression of today’s global capitalism? Or is Shenzhen something else entirely, a hybrid of socialist and capitalist relations?

Ultimately, understanding the fortunes of particular cities -- capitalist, socialist, postsocialist -- requires careful attention to “...differences in the situation of particular cities within the national and international urban system,”³² and a careful, contextual approach to present and historical factors in the politics of economic activity and government rules on markets. Simple ideas like the socialist city, or the postsocialist city, are best used to raise questions and to begin inquiry -- to begin conversations rather than end them with clear-cut, definitive judgments on a global transition from socialism to capitalism. That transition was a mirage, and it remains uncertain and contested today.

³¹ Jack F. Williams and Kam Wing Chan (2008). “Cities of East Asia.” Stanley D. Brunn, Jack F. Williams, and Donald J. Ziegler, editors. *Cities of the World: World Regional Urban Development, Fourth Edition*. Lanham, ND: Rowman and Littlefield, 474-527, quote from 518.

³² Sheppard, “Socialist Cities?,” 758.



Shenzhen, China, March 2010 (Elvin Wyly).

