



City Limits? Southern Ontario, April, 2008 (Elvin Wyly). Classical ideas on urban community were formed at a time when urbanization and industrialization were happening rapidly at the same time, and when urban - rural contrasts were sharp and vivid. Today, however, it's often hard to see where the city ends, and where the countryside begins. Viewed from the air, metropolitan areas seem to go on forever.

Measuring Metropolitan Community

Urban Studies 200, *Cities*

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Elvin Wyly

The Mother of All Cities?

As we learned in our last meeting, 'community' has often been defined in many ways, and there are different approaches to explore what makes community specifically urban. But there is no question that the urban world studied by the classical thinkers on community -- Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel, and Wirth -- has disappeared. They were struggling to come to terms with cities at a time when urbanization and industrialization were bound tightly together, and when the city -- even when it grew quite large -- was clearly, unmistakably distinct from surrounding rural areas. In the last generation or so, however, world urbanization has created enormous, expansive things that seem to defy categorization. The world's largest urban agglomeration,

Tokyo-Yokohama, has more than 34 million people.¹ Eighteen urban regions in the world passed the 10-million mark by the year 2000.² In 1800, the average population of the world's 100 largest cities was under 200,000; by 1990, this figure exceeded 5 million.³ And since contemporary transportation technologies allow people to travel over vast distances on a daily basis, many of these large cities have been able to spread over vast areas. In diffuse areas like these, with so many centers and edges, how do we think about urban-rural contrasts? What relevance is there for the ideas of classical thinkers like Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel, and Wirth?

*“Metropolis” comes
from the Greek meter
(mother) + polis (city).*

For some years now, populous and expansive cities have been called “metropolitan.” The word has a long history, traced back through Late Latin and to the original Greek, *metropolitanus*. The word “metropolis” combines the Greek *meter* (mother) and *polis* (city). Today, we’ll explore how the growth of large, vast metropolitan areas has shaped the possibilities for urban community. First, we’ll

take a look at a few case studies of how urban scholars have tried to make sense of large, sprawling metropolitan regions in various parts of the world. Second, we’ll consider how official recordkeepers -- in particular, the statisticians, demographers, and geographers at Statistics Canada and the U.S. Bureau of the Census -- try to keep track of evolving metropolitan areas. Finally, we’ll look at optimistic and pessimistic interpretations of what large metropolitan regions mean for community.

Metro Polis: Three Examples

Gottman’s Megalopolis

In the 1940s, a French Geographer began to study the many cities, suburbs, and towns that stretch along the Northeast Coast of the United States. In the 1950s, Jean Gottman spent time at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey -- an elite scholarly institution where Einstein had spent twenty years of his career. Princeton is a curious place -- a small town, but with the hustle and bustle of nearby Philadelphia and New York, and indeed with a strong sense of interconnection with many other cities on the East Coast. The result of Gottman’s studies was *Megalopolis*, an eloquent and comprehensive 777-page book published in 1961 that made the bold claim that what might seem like just a string of separate cities, suburbs, small towns and rural areas were in fact all part of one large urban phenomenon. For his title, Gottman borrowed an ancient word describing an ancient place:

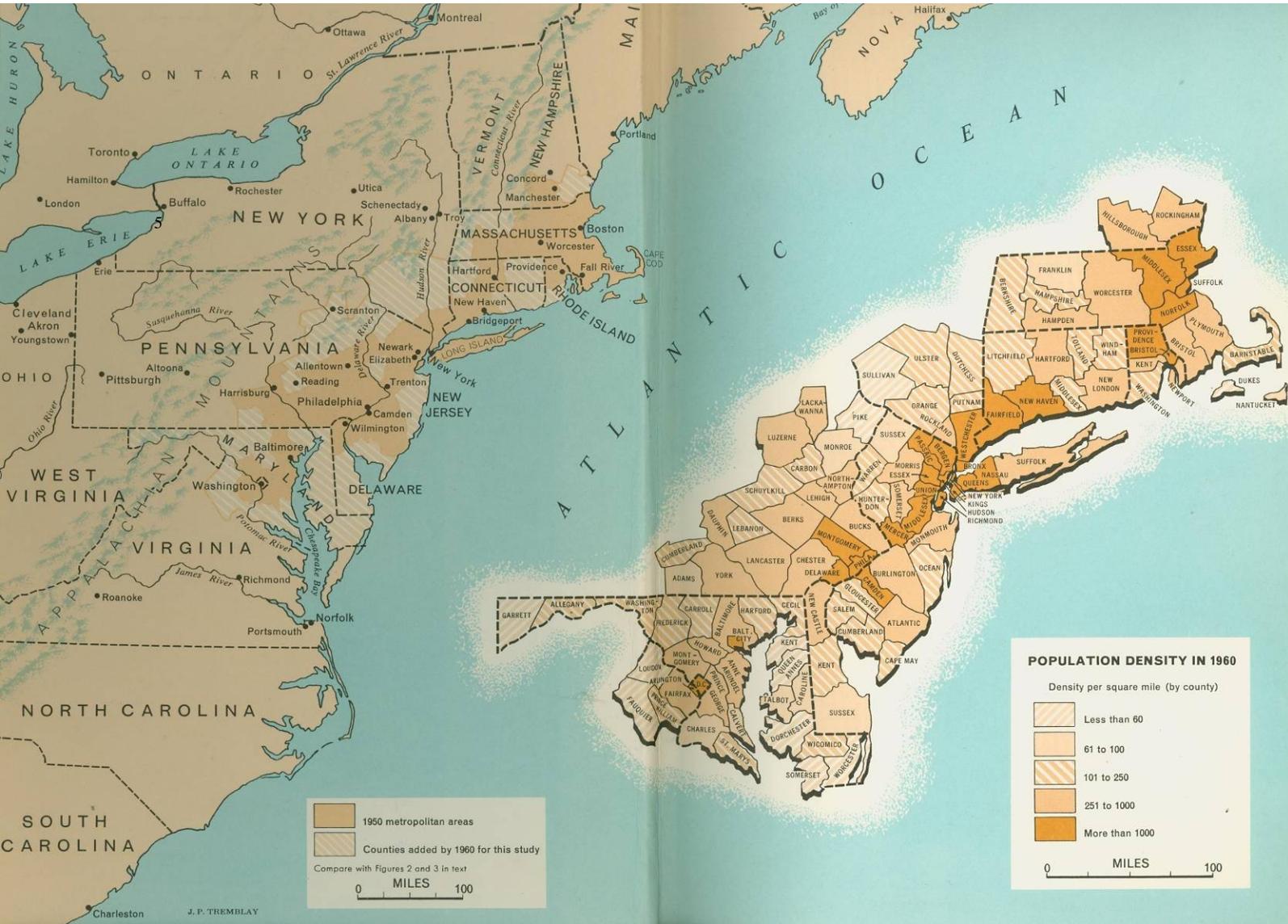
“...a group of ancient people, planning a new city-state in the Peloponnesus in Greece, called it *Megalopolis*, for they dreamed of a great future for it and hoped it would become the largest of the Greek cities. Their hopes did not materialize.

¹ Barney Cohen (2005). “Urbanization in Developing Countries: Current Trends, Future Projections, and Key Challenges for Sustainability.” *Sustainable Cities* 28(1-2), 63-80.

² Cohen, “Urbanization,” p. 70.

³ J.E. Hardoy, D. Mitlan, and D. Satterthwaite (2001). *Environmental Problems in an Urbanizing World*. London: Earthscan.

Megalopolis still appears on modern maps of the Peloponnesus but it is just a small town nestling in a small river basin. Through the centuries the word Megalopolis has been used in many senses by various people, and it has even found its way into Webster's dictionary, which defines it as 'a very large city.' Its use, however, has not become so common that it could not be applied in a new sense, as a geographical place name for the unique cluster of metropolitan areas of the Northeastern seaboard of the United States. There, if anywhere in our times, the dream of those ancient Greeks has come true."⁴



Megalopolis. Source: Jean Gottman (1961). *Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, inside front cover. Reproduced here under fair use / fair dealing provisions.

⁴ Jean Gottman (1961). *Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, p. 4.

⁵ Jean Gottman (1961). *Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund.

But if Gottman borrowed an ancient term, he spent those 777 pages providing a comprehensive redefinition of the term and what it meant for urban life. The combination of density, proximity,

Jean Gottman saw the separate cities and suburbs of the U.S. East Coast coalescing into an entirely new kind of city:

Megalopolis.

and interaction amongst the different settlements between Boston, Massachusetts and Washington, D.C., “call for a profound revision of many old concepts, such as the usually accepted distinctions between city and country. As a result new meanings must be given to some old terms, and some new terms must be created.” The key elements of Gottman’s vision of

tightly together by sustained interaction and exchange, 2) the “unique ways of life and of land use” made possible and necessary by the network of settlements, and 3) “a kind of supremacy, in politics, in economics, and possibly even in cultural activities,” that resulted from an urban region that wound up being more than the sum of its parts.

McGee’s Extended Metropolitan Region (EMR)

For many years, a prominent urbanist has been documenting the distinctive trajectory of contemporary city growth and development across Asia. In a series of books and articles, Terry McGee has analyzed the emergence of unique urban features known as “**Extended Metropolitan Regions**” (EMRs).

The Extended Metropolitan Region (EMR) is created by

- 1. A thickening of market relations for rural areas that serve nearby cities.*
- 2. The penetration of global market forces into the countryside.*
- 3. Rapid industrialization and development of rural areas that alters traditional patterns of rural-urban migration.*

The EMR has three main features:

1. A “‘thickening’ of market relations of production and distribution in areas that were once considered ‘rural’ and/or ‘hinterlands’”⁶ for nearby large cities.
2. A “deep penetration of global market forces into the countryside,” thanks to trade and export ties that affect not just industrial activities, but also local agricultural production.
3. Industrialization and rapid development are “coming to affect the people of these regions *in situ*” -- with industrialization often coming to the countryside, and not

⁶ Scott Macleod and Terry G. McGee (1996). “The Singapore-Johore-Riau Growth Triangle: An Emerging Extended Metropolitan Region.” In Fu-Chen Lo and Yue-man Yeung, editors, *Emerging World Cities in Pacific Asia*. New York: United Nations University Press, quotes from p. 417, 418.

necessarily requiring mass rural-to-urban migration. That's not to say that migration is not involved -- large numbers of migrants are indeed drawn to the extended metropolitan region. But traditional urban-industrial-development theory portrayed migrants going to the large, dense city, and in today's EMRs, migrants are often going to small towns or rural zones that are tied into regional processes.

One of the most important parts of an EMR is what McGee calls the *desakota*, from the Indonesian words for *kota* (town) and *desa* (village), which are

The desakota: from the Indonesian words kota (town) + desa (village). Regions of mixed agricultural and non-agricultural activities in corridors between big cities.

“regions of an intense mixture of agricultural and non-agricultural activities that often stretch along linear corridors between large city cores. These regions were previously characterized by dense populations engaged in agriculture generally dominated by wet-rice cultivation.”⁷

Taken together, all of these processes emphasize a model that

“both breaks through the artificial urban/rural dichotomy and emphasizes the uneven geography of the regionalization process. The model takes the emphasis of analysis away from issues of defining boundaries and relations between artificial constructs such as ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ and moves towards a deeper consideration of processes. The processes of economic and spatial development need increasingly to be seen as regional rather than as rural or urban. Thus, we suggest that one needs to consider ‘region-based urbanization’ instead of ‘city-based urbanization.’”⁸

EMRs have been identified in:

Japan (Tokyo to Osaka)

China

the Shenyang-Dalian Corridor

Beijing-Tianjin

Shanghai-Nanjing

Hong Kong-Guangzhou

Taiwan (Taipei-Kaohsiung)

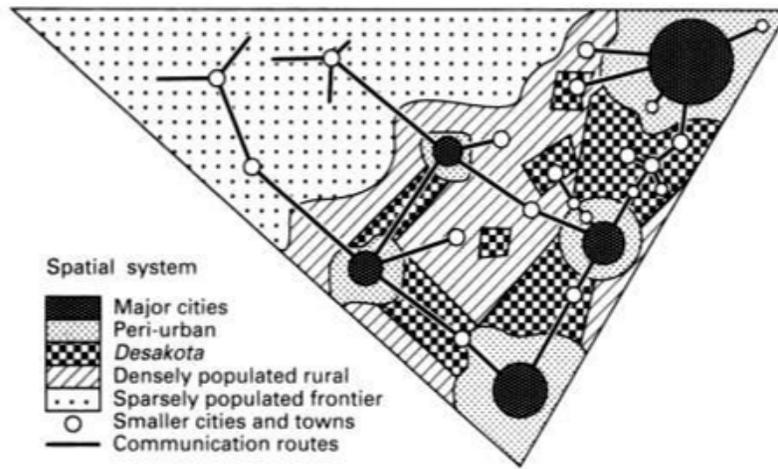
Thailand (Central Plains)

Indonesia (Jabotabek, the Jakarta metropolitan region)

Singapore (into Malaysia and Indonesia)

⁷ T.G. McGee (1994). “Labour Force Change and Mobility in the Extended Metropolitan Regions of Asia.” In Roland J. Fuchs, ed., *Mega-City Growth and the Future*. New York: United Nations University Press, pp. 63-102, figure from p. 74.

⁸ Macleod and McGee, “Singapore-Johore Riau,” p. 418.



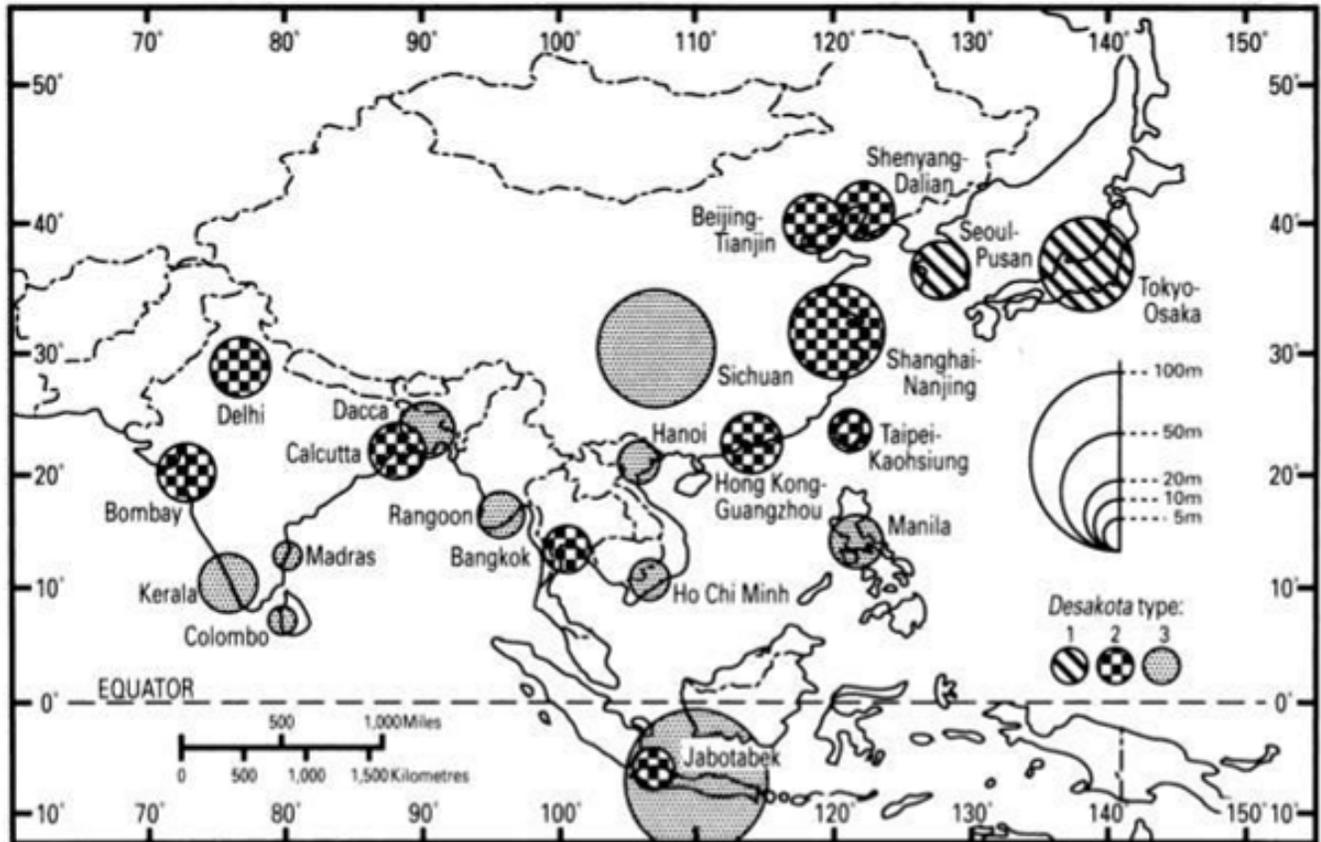
A Hypothetical EMR. Source: T.G. McGee (1994). “Labour Force Change and Mobility in the Extended Metropolitan Regions of Asia.” In Roland J. Fuchs, ed., *Mega-City Growth and the Future*. New York: United Nations University Press, pp. 63-102, figure from p. 74. Reproduced here under fair use/fair dealing provisions.

There is now a general consensus that EMRs are leading much of the urbanization process across Asia. Four main reasons explain the importance of EMRs:

1. The high costs of the urban core encourage the decentralization of certain kinds of economic activities.
2. The development of rural areas close to nearby large cities creates “a ‘pleasure periphery’ to service ‘core’ consumers who are attaining higher levels of disposable income.”⁹
3. Regional production and distribution networks make possible “tapping ‘rural,’ inexpensive workers in situ for a global market-place.”¹⁰
4. New transportation and communications technologies make it possible to integrate ever larger territories into daily rhythms of activity, exchange, and movement.

⁹ Macleod and McGee, “Singapore-Johore Riau,” p. 455.

¹⁰ Macleod and McGee, “Singapore-Johore Riau,” p. 455.



Extended Metropolitan Regions (EMRs) and Desakotas in Asia. Desakotas labeled as type 1 are those areas that saw a rapid rural-to-urban shift in population, such as Japan and South Korea. Type 2 are areas that saw dramatic economic change -- a shift from agriculture to industrial activity -- but without a pronounced rural-to-urban migration. The Type 3 areas are distinguished by high population growth but slower economic growth -- yielding widespread under-employment, informal economic activities, and self-employment in family enterprises. Source: B. Koppel and T.G. McGee, eds. (1991), *The Extended Metropolitan Settlement Transition in Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, fig 1.2, p. 12. Reproduced here under fair use/fair dealing provisions.



The “Super-induced” Metropolis? Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, January 2010 (Elvin Wyly). With a population of about 4.3 million, the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan region is small compared with many of the large EMRs in Asia. It is growing rapidly, however, with more and more development and investment “driven by ... external forces resulting from internationalization.” Some observers suggest that this “growth brought about largely from outside forces” is creating distinctive challenges in what can be called “super-induced” metropolitan regions. Lee Boon Thong (1995). “Challenges of Super-Induced Development: The Mega-Urban Region of Kuala Lumpur - Klang Valley.” In Terry G. McGee and Ira M. Robinson, eds., *The Mega-Urban Regions of Southeast Asia*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 315-317, quotes from p. 326, 315.

Soja’s Exopolis

Edward Soja points out that an entirely new vocabulary is required to describe places like Los Angeles: “Some have called these amorphous implosions of archaic suburbia “Outer Cities” or “Edge Cities”; others dub them “Technopoles,” “Technoburbs,” “Silicon Landscapes,” “Postsuburbia,” “Metroplex.” I will name them, collectively, *Exopolis*, the city without, to stress their oxymoronic ambiguity, their city-full non-cityness.”¹¹ Soja’s point is that centrality is nearly ubiquitous in this new urban form, and that most of what we have come to associate with urbanism is undergoing a profound shift. For Soja, the shift is deeply troubling, for it signals new and ever more harsh ways that space is used to conceal the failures of a lost sense of community. Consider, for instance, Soja’s attempt to define and describe Southern California:

¹¹ Edward Soja (1996), *ThirdSpace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell, 238.

“What is this place? Even knowing where to focus, to find a starting point, is not easy, for, perhaps more than any other place, Los Angeles is everywhere. It is global in the fullest sense of the world. Nowhere is this more evident than in its cultural projection and ideological reach, its almost ubiquitous screening of itself as a rectangular dream machine for the world.”¹²

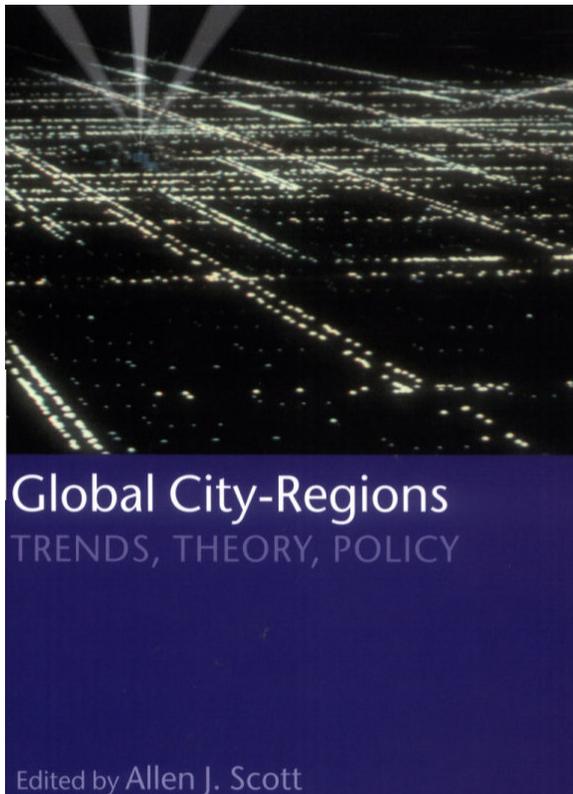
For Ed Soja, Los Angeles is exopolis -- “the city without,” where centrality is available everywhere.

And yet the material landscapes of the place are shaped by a half-century of industrial investments funded by the Cold War and the expenditures of the U.S. military-industrial complex. All of this development has created a gunbelt landscape with little hope of community. Look at these places, Soja practically screams,

“...the representative locales of the industrialized outer city: the busy international airport; corridors filled with new office buildings, hotels, and global shopping malls; neatly packaged playgrounds and leisure villages; specialized and masterplanned residential communities for the high technocracy; armed and guarded housing estates for top professionals and executives; residual communities of low-pay service workers living in overpriced homes; and the accessible enclaves and ghettos which provide dependable flows of the cheapest labour power to the bottom bulge of the bimodal local labour market. The LAX-City compage reproduces the segmentation and segregation of the inner city based on race, class, and ethnicity, but manages to break it down still further to fragment residential communities according to specific occupational categories, household composition, and a broad range of individual attributes, affinities, desired lifestyles and moods.”¹³

¹² Edward Soja (1989), “Taking Los Angeles Apart: Towards a Postmodern Geography.” *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso. Reprinted in Richard T. LeGates and Frederick Stout (2003), *The City Reader, Third Edition*. London and New York: Routledge, 189-200, quote from p. 190.

¹³ Soja, “Taking Los Angeles Apart,” reprinted in *City Reader*, p. 193.



From Theory to Policy. Recently, the “global city-region” has become an influential concept among trade negotiators, investors, national governments, and international development organizations like the World Bank. Many large urban regions have outgrown their traditional boundaries, and in the context of intensifying global competition, many networks of cities have coalesced across national boundaries. These changes have led some experts to conclude that the urban scale is coming to be almost as important as the nation-state. While we usually think of the world economy in terms of countries, perhaps what really matters is competition amongst city-regions. Allen J. Scott, ed. (2001). *Global City-Regions: Trends, Theory, Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reproduced here under fair use / fair dealing provisions.

Soja’s criticisms of exopolis hint at the importance of understanding metropolitan community, and the complex relations between society and its spatial configuration in metropolitan areas. Unfortunately, even the basic building blocks of description are becoming ever more unworkable:

“...*the very concept of metropolitan areas as an urban core with dependent suburbs is outdated.* In other words, many suburbs have become independent of their mother-cities. But official record-keepers have not yet come to grips with this spatial shift.”¹⁴

Statistical Definitions of Metropolitan Areas

Well, not quite.

Official record-keepers *are required to* come to grip with many of these spatial shifts, but the result of their work to understand and track what’s going on is very hard to summarize. The 2006 *Standard Geographical Classification* produced by Statistics Canada, for example, runs to 97 pages. Demographers, planners, sociologists, statisticians, and geographers in official government agencies like Statistics Canada have been forced to work harder to chase the

¹⁴ E. Barbara Phillips (1996). *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society, Second Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 150.

“statistical beasts” that today’s metropolitan areas have become: to be useful for planning and analysis, classifications and definitions of large metropolitan areas have to be consistent. One way to appreciate the challenges of understanding metropolitan community is to consider the work of the record-keepers who are using various combinations of population density, ‘size of the population aggregate’, and measures of commuting as a way of inferring functional interdependence.

Statistics Canada defined twenty-seven Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) in 2001, and increased this figure to 33 for the 2006 Census; in the United States, the U.S. Bureau of the Census defines 371 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (363 in the U.S. and 8 in Puerto Rico), and 581 ‘Micropolitan’ Statistical Areas (576 in the U.S. and 5 in Puerto Rico).¹⁵

The three dominant criteria used to define these metropolitan statistical creations, in both Canada and the United States, are total population, population density, and flows of commuters -- people who live in one place and travel to work in another place. The precise technical criteria become quite detailed,¹⁶ but the essential steps are fairly simple:

¹⁵ U.S. Office of Management and Budget (2006). *Update of Statistical Area Definitions and Guidance on Their Uses*. OMB Bulletin 07-01, December 18. Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President. Most materials from the Census now refer just to Metropolitan Areas (MAs). In many older publications, you will find references to MSAs (Metropolitan Statistical Areas), which many years ago were called SMSAs (Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas). When SMSAs and MSAs began to expand into each other in some parts of the country in ways that made the boundaries fuzzy, the Census folks defined CMSAs (Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas). Complicating all of these curious acronyms are the different units of local government in New England, where small towns often have the same status as counties; since counties are the basic building blocks of the Census Bureau definitions, a parallel classification system was created for NECTAs (New England City and Town Areas).

¹⁶ This hierarchy of statistical and administrative entities can get quite tedious. The important and most recent definitions for Canada are: one or more adjacent municipalities (census subdivisions or CSDs) centered on a large urban area of at least 10,000 are grouped together to form either a Census Agglomeration (CA). But then “A census agglomeration will be promoted to a census metropolitan area [CMA] if it has a total population of at least 100,000, of which 50,000 or more live in the urban core. To be included in the CMA or CA, other adjacent municipalities must have a high degree of integration with the central urban area, as measured by commuting flows derived from census place of work data.” Peter Murphy (2003). *Preliminary 2006 Census Metropolitan Area and Census Agglomeration Delineation*. Geography Working Paper Series, No. 2003-002. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. There are 33 CMAs in 2006, and 111 CAs; six Census Agglomerations were ‘promoted’ to CMAs in 2006: Moncton in New Brunswick, Barrie, Brantford, Guelph, and Peterborough in Ontario, and Kelowna in British Columbia. Seven new CAs were defined. See Statistics Canada (2006). *Standard Geographical Classification (SGC)*, Volume I (Preliminary), The Classification. Catalogue 12-571-PIE. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, p. 15. In the United States, “Qualification of an MSA [Metropolitan Statistical Area, or now just Metropolitan Area, MA] requires the presence of a city of 50,000 or more inhabitants, or a Census-Bureau defined UA [Urbanized Area] (of at least 50,000 inhabitants) and a total population of at least 100,000 (75,000 in New England).” Counties are added to the MA on the basis of various thresholds for population density and commuting. “The minimum level of commuting to central counties required to make a county eligible for consideration as an outlying county is 15 percent.” U.S. Bureau of the Census (2004). *Geographic Areas Reference Manual*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Available at <http://www.census.gov/geo/www/garm.html>, last modified July 8, 2004. Chapter 13, Metropolitan Areas, p. 13-6. Micropolitan Statistical Areas were created to provide more information for smaller cities. Micropolitan areas “have at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties.” Taken together, Metropolitan Statistical Areas include about 83 percent of the U.S. population, and Micropolitan Statistical Areas account for an additional 10 percent. U.S. Office of Management and Budget (2006), p. 2.

Concepts used to define metropolitan areas in Canada and the U.S.:

- 1. A large, central population.*
- 2. Surrounding areas with high population densities or large numbers of commuters.*
- 3. Adjustments to consider overlapping areas and the opinions of local officials and experts.*

- 1) define a ‘central core’ including a city with a population exceeding a specified threshold;
- 2) add surrounding areas with population densities exceeding a specified threshold, or with a certain number or share of commuters tied to the central core;
- 3) adjust the boundaries based on historical comparability, and to account for areas with commuter flows to multiple urban cores. The opinion of local officials and experts is commonly considered at this stage, and there have been cases where local views have led the Census to grant exceptions to its standards and criteria.

When applied to the dynamic social and economic landscapes of North America, this procedure has two important consequences.

First, many metropolitan areas include places that still seem quite rural or small town. This is especially pronounced in the United States, where the basic building blocks of metropolitan areas

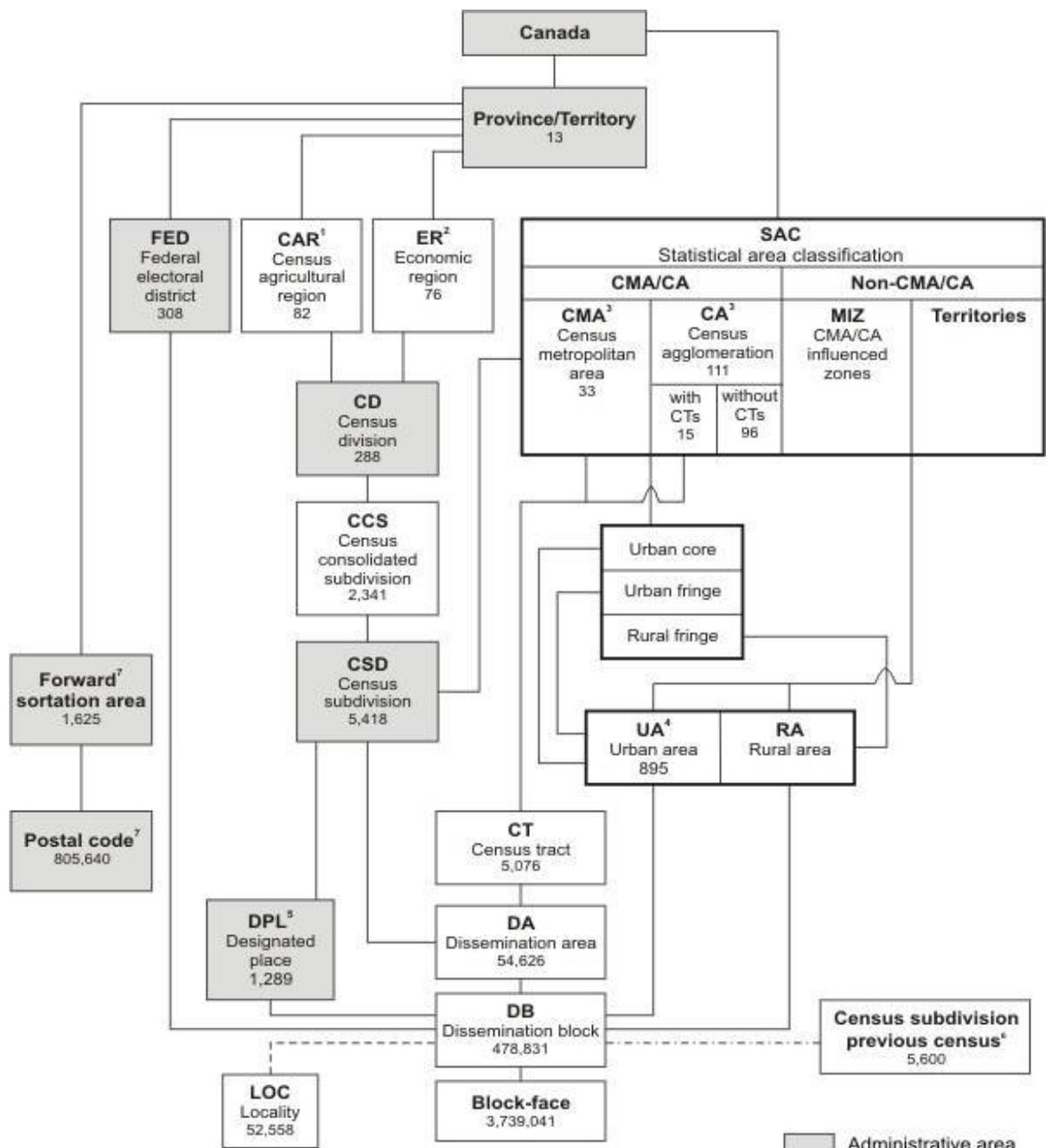
In Canada and the United States, metropolitan areas

- 1. encompass many areas that still have rural or small-town characteristics,*
- 2. are becoming more difficult to separate on the basis of commuting flows, thanks to new spatial arrangements of home and work.*

are counties. But the spatial expansion of contemporary urban regions – made possible by transportation and communications technologies which have ‘unleashed’ urban growth from the slow expansion of contiguous, wine-stain-on-a-tablecloth patterns – has included many small villages and rural areas into the orbit of big cities. As such, many metropolitan areas straddle the ‘rural-urban’ dichotomy.

Second, the rural-urban dichotomy is being further blurred by new arrangements of home, work, and life. The commuting criteria used by the Census folks goes back to a pair of concepts devised in the 1960s: the “metropolitan labor area,” or the “daily urban system.”¹⁷ These concepts referred to the interdependency of employment centers and their surrounding residential zones, bound together by the daily flow of people back and forth between

¹⁷ Brian J.L. Berry, P. Goheen, and H. Goldstein (1969). *Metropolitan Area Definition: A Reevaluation of Concept and Statistical Practice*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

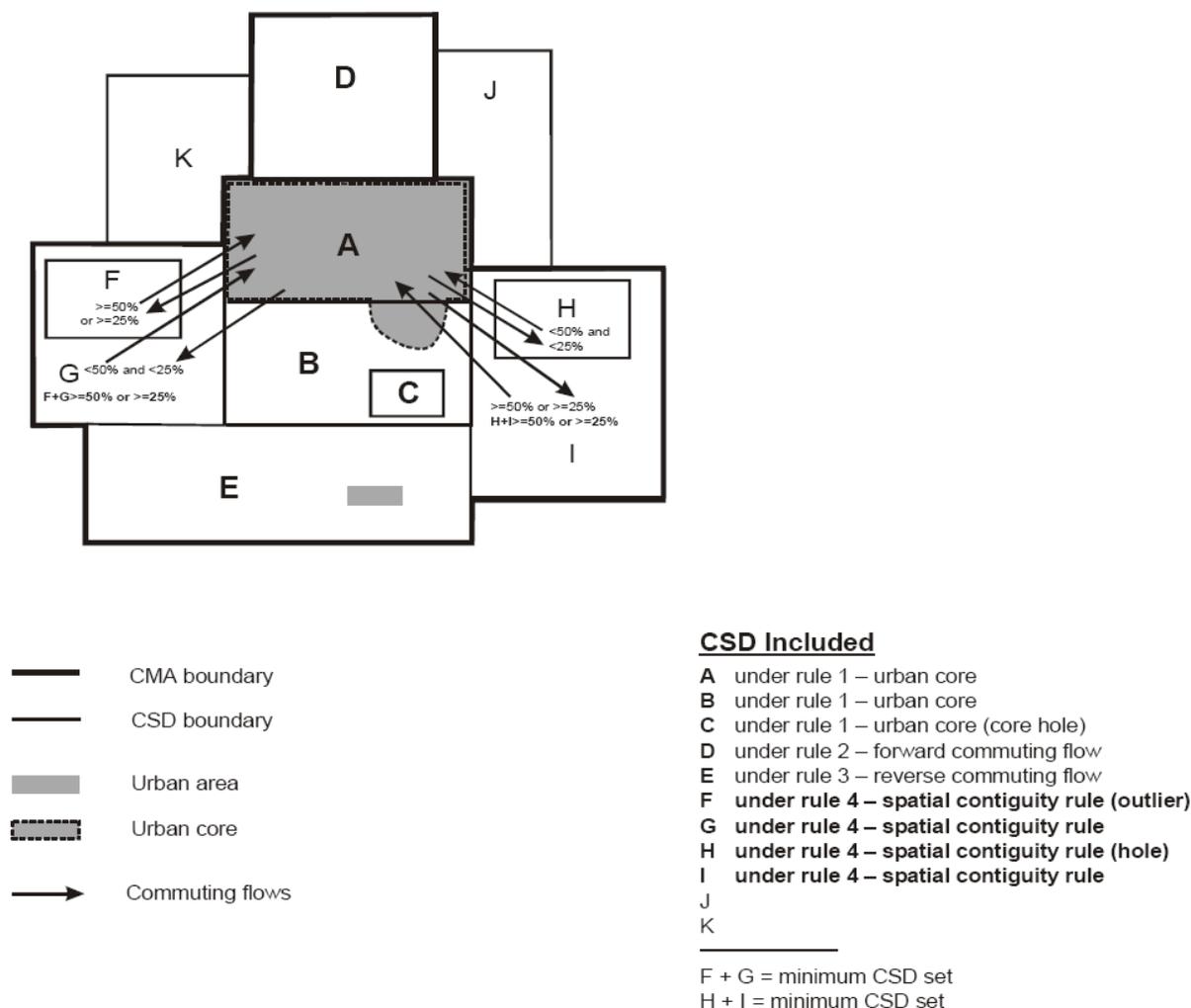


1. Census agricultural regions in Saskatchewan are composed of census consolidated subdivisions.
2. Economic regions are composed of complete census divisions except for one CD in Ontario.
3. One CMA and three CAs cross provincial boundaries.
4. Five UAs cross provincial boundaries.
5. Designated places respect CSD boundaries, but do not cover the total area of CSDs.
6. For the 2006 Census, a best fit linkage is created between the 2001 CSDs and 2006 DBs to facilitate historical data retrieval.
7. Postal codes and forward sortation areas valid as of May 2006 (Canada Post Corporation).

- Administrative area
- Statistical area
- Linkage using point-in-polygon process
- Best fit linkage

Hierarchy of Standard Geographic Units for the Canadian Census. Urbanization and metropolitan expansion have created complex landscapes of settlement that can only be measured properly with the hard work and talents of the very best demographers and statisticians. Source: Statistics Canada (2006). *2006 Census Dictionary*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

Figure 28. The Spatial Contiguity Rule



Defining Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) in Canada. Source: Statistics Canada (2003). *Illustrated Census Glossary*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

home and work. At the time, of course, the relationship between home and work was comparatively stable, and so using it as the foundation for how to define metropolitan communities made perfect sense: most households considered very carefully where their job was when deciding where to live, and for most middle-class workers, there was the expectation of having a good job with the same company (and perhaps the same place) for a fairly long time. Moreover, most of the jobs were ‘downtown’ or close to it, and many households were choosing to live in the newly-expanding suburban subdivisions. The notion of the daily urban system was specifically designed to capture this kind of dynamic, and it did so quite well. But many things have changed in the last two generations: workers now expect much more change in all aspects of their lives – where they will live, where they will work, what their household circumstances will be – and the jobs are no longer just downtown. Indeed, a growing number of jobs are inherently mobile. Some of these “jobs on the move” are poorly-paid with very localized circuits of movement (think of bicycle couriers, temporary laborers on construction sites, taxi drivers,

and workers for private home cleaning services). Some poorly-paid jobs are much more regional, national, and transnational in their circuits: the ‘daily urban system’ becomes a monthly or seasonal transnational urban system for the legions of migrant farmworkers who work their way north with each year’s harvest time for various crops. At the other extreme, the “daily urban system” for the wealthiest folks can include a different city each day, or can be adjusted to provide the best destinations at different times of the year: the old home-work linkage doesn’t really capture the labor markets of many politicians, hedge-fund managers, corporate executives, celebrity actors and athletes, ... oh, and a few academics too.¹⁸

What Future for Metropolitan Community?

But what really matters, of course, is what goes on *inside* these metropolitan areas, however they may be defined. And so what future is there for metropolitan community? Or is this an oxymoron? “Urbanism may not be a single way of life, as Wirth theorized, but it certainly does entail constant change, not the continuity of traditional community. Institutions and traditions that once promoted a sense of personal security, however miserable, no longer fulfill that function for many urbanites or suburbanites.”¹⁹ The city seems to have lost much of its social cement, and to have evolved into the lonely crowd in the metropolis, with people longing for the idyllic image of a lost rural or small-town past. And yet there is always a tension between freedom and security: “How humane the ideal of traditional community seems: a way of life built on close social bonds, friendship, mutual caring, and personal security. But recall, too, the other face of traditional life. How many of us today would choose to submit to authority in the form of a mother-in-law or a hereditary ruler? How many of us would want to spend our whole lives interacting mainly with blood relatives?” Community might indeed be ‘warmly persuasive,’²⁰ but it also has been associated with fear and mistrust of outsiders, lack of privacy, an emphasis on conformity -- in short, with the repressive legal regime Durkheim described in societies of ‘mechanical solidarity’ that have a *collective conscience*.

Metropolitan Ecology vs. the Needle

For some observers, contemporary metropolitan areas may be complex and spread out, but they are by no means dysfunctional. These urbanists draw inspiration from Durkheim’s ideas on the division of labor, and suggest that large, sprawling metropolitan areas remain functionally interdependent, bound together by ever-finer niches in the labor force and the constant stream of cross-cutting flows of commuters among different job centers and residential areas. Many urban ecologists view metropolitan areas very much as organisms, with metropolitan societies adapting (much like the organs of a human body) to change, disruption, or uncertainty. This view is best summarized by a contemporary version of Childe’s ‘POET’ acronym: population, social

¹⁸ I do not consider myself in this category, and I do not aspire to constant circulation. Being confined to the same daily urban system for too long does give me a need to go elsewhere, but being away for an extended period closes the circle by strengthening the desire to be home. It is possible to read some aspects of “daily urban systems” dynamics in the anxieties of Milo when he was going to school. “On the way he thought about coming home, and coming home he thought about going.” See Norton Juster (1961). *The Phantom Tollbooth*. New York: Epstein & Carroll Associates, Inc., p. 1.

¹⁹ Phillips, *City Lights, Second Edition*, 146-147.

²⁰ Raymond Williams (1976). *Keywords*. London: Fontana.

organization, environment, and technology. Put them all together, and you have a fairly optimistic take on the issue of community:

“We who live in cities or suburbs may not realize it, but we depend on absolute strangers for a wide range of goods and services. For example, unless you grow your own food, limit travel to places where your feet can take you, entertain yourself without mass media, fix a broken toilet (without calling a plumber ...), receive no government benefits, and buy nothing that must be paid for in money, you depend on countless anonymous people to sustain your daily existence. Indeed, we are so interdependent and specialized that we need one expert to find another expert! This is clear to anyone suffering from a rare illness. Finding a specialist to diagnose and treat the ailment requires the advice of other specialists. With the continuing expansion of knowledge and the ‘expertization’ of almost everyone, we are becoming increasingly dependent on the skill and good will of strangers just to survive.”²¹

The result, for urban ecologists, is a society in which functional interdependence sustains a dynamic but generally cohesive sense of community.

Urban ecologists are convinced that the complex division of labor maintains community ties, across even the largest of metropoli.

“Urban ecologists stress functional interdependence in modern society based on the complex division of labor. They see society naturally tending toward equilibrium or balance. Parts of a social system, like organs of a human body, fit together and run smoothly until some external disruption occurs; then societies, like bodies, adapt to the change.”²²

Urban ecologists view many changes in the metropolitan scene, then, as adaptations to change, or innovations to allow more people to choose their own preferred ‘urbanism as a way of life.’ In this

perspective, then, we might view the dramatic suburbanization and expansion of metropolitan areas as the way urban societies organize themselves to allow people to get the best of two very different worlds: the job opportunities of the big city, and the space and natural amenities of the country. Improvements in transportation technologies simply allowed the metropolitan community to take the spatial form that would accommodate all of these individual preferences. In an early, optimistic, and futurist expression of this idea, the city planner Melvin Webber famously described an era of “community without propinquity”:

“Information, ideas, and goods are the very stuff of civilization. The degree to which they are distributed to all individuals within a population stands as an important indicator of human welfare levels – as a measure of cultural and economic income. ... And yet, space intervenes as a friction against all types of

²¹ Phillips, *City Lights*, 148.

²² Phillips, *City Lights*, 148.

communication. ... levels of cultural and economic wealth could be increased if the spatial frictions that now limit the freedom to interact were reduced.”²³

New transportation and communications technologies were having “cost-reducing” and “space-expanding effects,” and thus “totally new spatial forms are in the offing. ... never before has it been so easy to communicate across long distances.

Since the 1960s, there has been optimism that transportation and communications technologies would sustain “community without propinquity.”

Never before have men been able to maintain intimate and continuing contact with others across thousands of miles; never has intimacy been so independent of spatial propinquity.”²⁴ Webber reserved special attention for one crucial innovation. “We would do well, then, to accept the private vehicle as an indispensable medium of metropolitan interaction – more, as an important instrument of personal freedom.”²⁵

Parts of Webber’s narrative are even more bold, optimistic, and dramatic:

“Members of interest communities within a freely communicating society need not be spatially concentrated (except, perhaps, during the formative stages of the interest community’s development), for they are increasingly able to interact with each other wherever they may be located. This striking feature of contemporary urbanization is making it increasingly possible for men of all occupations to participate in the national urban life, and thereby, it is destroying the once-valid dichotomies that distinguished the rural from the urban, the small town from the metropolis, the city from the suburb.”²⁶

If we look past that mid-century language of “men of all occupations,” we can see quite a few hints of the new webs of communications that would become possible in the “distributed society” of the Internet age.

The New International Division of Labor (NIDL, or “Needle”)

An alternative view is based on the New International Division of Labor, as elaborated by an influential group of “new urban theorists” working across disciplinary lines between sociology, economics, planning, political science, cultural studies, and geography. Many of these analysts are no longer quite as “new” as they once were: this intellectual movement first emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a challenge to the dominant urban-ecological thinking of the

²³ Melvin Webber (1963). “Order in Diversity: Community Without Propinquity.” In Lowdon Wingo, ed., *Cities and Space: The Future Use of Urban Land*. Baltimore: Resources for the Future / Johns Hopkins University Press, 23-54, quote from p. 42.

²⁴ Webber, “Order,” p. 42, 43.

²⁵ Webber, “Order,” p. 40.

²⁶ Webber, “Order,” pp. 29-30.

time.²⁷ But even if the first generation of new urban theorists are getting a bit older, they continue to develop fresh and challenging ideas -- and they have inspired several younger generations to think carefully and critically about the optimistic stories of ecological interdependence.

New urban theorists agree that contemporary metropolitan areas are tied together by functional interdependence and complex divisions of labor. But where the ecologists see natural equilibrium, the new urban theorists see inequality, injustice, and power. Contemporary metropolitan life is deeply structured by powerful and unequal flows and networks of capital investment:

“the impact of the global capitalist economy on local development, federal and local government policies, and local political coalitions -- not population increase, new technologies, and other ecological variables (as the urban ecologists think) -- best explains spatial and social change in metropolitan areas.”²⁸

In this view, a new international division of labor between the countries of the Global South and the Global North has affected all metropolitan regions. Put simply, the inequalities of a globalized capitalism have made it impossible for the old, localized division of labor described by Durkheim to play the functions it once did. People in a metropolis may now be interdependent on lots of people scattered around the world, but many of these relations are astonishingly unequal. Gayatri Spivak once famously asked, “if child labor is so bad, then why do we encourage the education of child investors?”²⁹ Her point was that middle-class and wealthy families do everything they can to get their children into the very best schools in cities of the Global North -- so they can get into good universities and get good jobs so they can build wealth. They thus become investors, and in today’s globalized economy, investment returns are tightly bound up with all the complexities of production and exploitation around the world -- with the millions of child laborers working in factories across the Global South.

For scholars working in this tradition, the metropolitan community is anything but natural or ecological: instead, it is the product of competing interests and decisions on how to structure

Where urban ecologists see equilibrium, new urban theorists see inequality, injustice, and power.

labor markets and how to mobilize government intervention or subsidies for particular places or industries. One example of the Needle interpretation of metropolitan community views suburbanization in terms of the desire of corporate owners to avoid central-city labor militancy; subsidies for highways, homeownership, and defense industries; and lobbying by land developers, automobile manufacturers, and other powerful political-economic players. Recall Ed Soja’s deep concerns about the forces that produced

²⁷ See E. Barbara Phillips (2010). *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society, Third Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 201.

²⁸ Phillips, *City Lights, Second Edition*, 149.

²⁹ Well, it was famous for me, anyway. I was in the audience for a talk she gave in New York, but I haven’t tracked down the formal citation for the paper she delivered.

‘community’ in the patchwork of cities around Los Angeles. Far from a system of functional interdependence and natural equilibrium, Soja sees a manufactured landscape in which people must struggle to create community *despite* the configuration of population, environment, organization, and technology:

“Over 130 other municipalities and scores of county-administered areas adhere loosely around the irregular City of Los Angeles in a dazzling, sprawling patchwork mosaic. Some have names which are startlingly self-explanatory. Where else can there be a City of Industry and a City of Commerce, so flagrantly commemorating the fractions of capital which guaranteed their incorporation? In other places, names casually try to recapture a romanticized history (as in the many communities called Rancho something-or-other) or to ensconce the memory of alternative geographies (as in Venice, Naples, Hawaiian Gardens, Ontario, Manhattan Beach, Westminster). In naming, as in so many other contemporary urban processes, time and space, the ‘once’ and ‘there’, are being increasingly played with and packaged to serve the needs of the here and the now, making the lived experience of the urban increasingly vicarious, screened through *simulacra*,³⁰ those exact copies for which the real originals have been lost.”³¹

Ongoing Debates

The divide between urban-ecological and Needle interpretations remains vibrant and urgent today, a quarter-century or more after these divergent perspectives first became clear.

One current echo of earlier debates can be seen in regional-economic analyses of urban change. Although few regional economists would use the explicit language of ecology to describe their approach to urban issues, many of their basic assumptions make for a natural fit with the framework of population, social organization, environment, and technology used by the ecological scholars; moreover, the emphasis on function and *equilibrium* is a pervasive theme in economic modes of thinking and analysis. Michael Porter is among the most prominent economists to study how metropolitan communities have evolved in the face of globalization: for him, functional interdependence and realignments in the division of labor are key to understanding metropolitan economic prosperity. Competition, he suggests, has evolved from macro- to micro (with an increasing role for key clusters of firms and industries), from overall productivity to constant innovation, from internal to external sources of corporate success, and from separating to integrating economic and social policies.³² Particularly in the latter domain, Porter is adamant on the need to reconcile functional community relations with new imperatives of competition:

“Economic and social policy have traditionally been seen as separate agendas involving different organizations and programs. In the new economics of competition, however, social and economic policy are integrally interconnected.

³⁰ Plural of *simulacrum*, from the Latin, an inferior and deceptive likeness.

³¹ Soja, “Taking Los Angeles Apart,” reprinted in *City Reader*, 199.

³² Michael E. Porter (2001). “Regions and the New Economics of Competition.” In Allen J. Scott, editor, *Global City-Regions: Trends, Theory, Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 139-157.

A productive economy requires well-educated workers with a sense of opportunity, who are healthy, have adequate housing, and who are willing to invest in upgrading their capabilities.”³³

And yet these needs, Porter argues, cannot be imposed by welfare-state interventions that will not mesh with the functional economic interdependence that is so crucial to regional economies:

“There is no substitute for helping people be successful in the economy rather than attempting to distort economic outcomes via intervention and redistribution, and no substitute for a healthy economy in creating the resources needed to address social needs. ‘Third Way’ thinking, which seeks a middle ground between society and the economy, is flawed because integration of social and economic does not require compromise in either direction. Most of the apparent conflicts between the economy and society have to do with an overly simplified view of competition and bad public policies, which fail to equip citizens to prosper in the economy and create bad incentives through the way social programs are structured.”³⁴

A related stream of thinking, which began in political science but has become quite influential in urban and regional economic thinking, emphasizes the importance of social capital in sustaining a shared sense of community. Popularized by Robert Putnam in the bestseller *Bowling Alone*, social capital refers to the norms of trust, reciprocity, shared expectations, and webs of cooperation in social networks.³⁵ Putnam, and other analysts, have documented long-run declines in American’s participation in various kinds of community and civic groups: his title refers to the fact that at one time, people who bowled tended to be part of organized leagues, which often provided informal, relaxed settings in which people would, for instance, discuss local community issues and politics (thereby doing all the things required for an engaged, activist citizenry). The most troubling indicators of the decline in social capital are those on voter registration and voter turnout, which are often cited as evidence of mounting cynicism and disconnection.

Needle analysts have engaged with these debates in two ways. **First**, they dispute Porter’s thinking on the integration of social and economic policy as the “neoliberalization”³⁶ of

³³ Porter, “Regions, 154.

³⁴ Porter, “Regions,” 155.

³⁵ Robert Putnam (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

³⁶ It is important to note a somewhat confusing, yet understandable slippage in how the word “neoliberal” is used by different authors. Phillips equates the neoliberal perspective with left-leaning politicians who have gradually moved to the right (e.g., Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroeder). But most urbanists today use the word neoliberal to refer to a broad political movement growing out of “the rise of the New Right in the North Atlantic economies during the 1980s” that privileged “the desirability of the market as the central plank for the organization of social, economic, and political life.” The key distinction here is that Phillips uses *neo* to denote changes in relation to 1960s-style liberals, while many other scholars are using *neo* to describe how classical liberalism philosophies from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (think of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus) are being revived -- often in selective and distorted ways. Quotation is from Michael Watts (2000), “Neo-liberalism.” In R. J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, editors, *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, 547-548, quote from p. 548.

metropolitan community -- that is, making every decision in economic and social policy dependent on considerations of global competition and market logic. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, for example, argue that the contemporary urbanization of neoliberalism has evolved from a pattern of “roll-back” policies in the 1970s and 1980s to a series of more entrepreneurial “roll-out” initiatives in the 1990s and 2000s.³⁷ Roll-back neoliberalism involves cutting social welfare spending because of budget pressures -- essentially, dismantling the programs that are seen from the right as unaffordable luxuries in a time of rising global competition. Roll-out neoliberalism is a more creative program that seeks to introduce market-oriented urban policies even in times of growth and budget surpluses. In the United States, welfare reform in 1996 is often cited as a prime example; in Canada, Roger Keil argues that the election of Mike Harris and the Progressive Conservative government in Ontario (1995) ushered in an era of neoliberal governance that had to confront a more established base of support for the social policies of the welfare state; elites in the city of Toronto who wished to pursue the market-oriented policies of neoliberalism, therefore, had to avoid controversial language, and worked hard to present policy innovations as part of a “common-sense” restructuring of government.³⁸

Second, critics have responded that Putnam’s ideas on social capital, while provocative and valuable, have ignored the relationship between social capital and broader divides of social inequality. Many wealthy suburban communities have places where people feel isolated, do not know or trust their neighbors, and lack the webs of reciprocity and cooperation so nostalgically described in some of the social-capital literature. But these wealthy residents can afford to compensate for this lack of community whenever they decide to do so; but even the poor community that has a well-developed web of cooperation, civic engagement, and bonds of trust remains marginalized by the economic system. Some critics charge, therefore, that all the interest in social capital has become another way of blaming poor communities for their plight. Unfortunately, all of these debates remain unresolved as metropolitan areas continue to evolve in ways that raise troubling questions about connection and community: John Short, for example, documents the historical continuity of fears of a loss of civic engagement in urban America (going back several centuries), but also sees danger signs in new spatial shifts:

“It is difficult to gauge the precise effects of segmentation and privatization of space on the civic spirit. But as citizens are separated out into different experiences of urban living, it is difficult to see how these trends could be improving civic life. The pervading sense of fear of the other in the USA can, in part, be attributed to the urban forms that mean people rarely meet people different from themselves in public and third spaces. As we become cordoned off into the separate spaces of life experiences, we meet others only through the stereotypes and fantasies of the media. When we lose the shared spaces that allow us to see the other in person, we lose an essential element of a truly civic society.”³⁹

³⁷ Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002). “Neoliberalizing Space.” *Antipode* 34(3), 380-404.

³⁸ Roger Keil (2002). “‘Common-Sense’ Neoliberalism: Progressive Conservative Urbanism in Toronto, Canada.” *Antipode* 34(3), 578-601.

³⁹ John Rennie Short (2001). “Civic Engagement and Urban America.” *City* 5(3), 271-280, quote from p. 279.