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# City-regions reconsidered

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**Abstract**

I seek to provide an overview of the historical and geographical emergence of city-regions and to reflect on some of the debates that have arisen in regard to the theoretical status of these phenomena. I briefly describe the growth and spread of city-regions in the world since the mid-1950s and I consider how contemporary capitalism and globalization have fostered the development of this distinctive urban form. The internal organization of city-regions is then examined, with special reference to four generic outcomes: (1) aestheticized land-use intensification; (2) gentrification; (3) social polarization and informality; and (4) postsuburban landscapes. Issues of governance and policy are scrutinized and basic dilemmas of political coordination in city-regions are described. The argument ends with an evaluative review of certain critiques of the city-region idea in the current academic literature.

**Keywords**

City-regions, cognitive-cultural capitalism, globalization, theory of urbanization, urban governance

## A prospect of city-regions

The idea of the city-region has been present in the literature on urban studies at least since the publication of Patrick Geddes' *Cities in Evolution* in 1915. However, it was only after the 1980s and 1990s when attention was focused on certain disproportionately large and economically vibrant "world cities" (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982; Knox and Taylor, 1995) and "global cities" (Sassen, 1991) that the term "city-regions" started to proliferate in the literature, particularly in association with the qualifier "global" (Scott et al., 2001; Simmonds and Hack, 2000). This trend, of course, was a reflection of the widespread emergence of large spatially extended urbanized areas all over the world, each of them locationally anchored by one or more metropolitan centers, and each of them spreading far outwards into diffuse hinterlands comprising mixes of agricultural land, suburban tract housing,

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miscellaneous industrial and commercial properties, local service centers, and subordinate urban settlements (Davoudi, 2008; Scott et al., 2001). Along with the term "global city-regions" came a diversity of related expressions, such as the "postmodern metropolis" (Dear, 2001), "mega-urban regions" (Laquian, 2005), "regional urbanization" (Soja, 2012), and the "polycentric metropolis" (Hall and Pain, 2012), each representing an alternative attempt to provide a concise descriptive label for this burgeoning phenomenon in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (cf. McCann, 2007; Rodríguez-Pose, 2008). In whatever manner we may designate them, city-regions are now everywhere in evidence where capitalism prevails, though at very different levels of integration into the capitalist system and with very different empirical manifestations from one case to another. Indeed, they are now so widely distributed and so intricately interconnected with one another across all five continents that the prefix "global" has become to all intents and purposes redundant.

The literature on city-regions has grown by leaps and bounds since the turn of the 21st century. One major segment of this literature is focused on the economic forces that generate these urban behemoths, with special reference to the logic of agglomeration, growth, and spatial interaction (e.g., Scott et al., 2001). Another important body of work seeks to decipher the political dynamics and quandaries of city-regions and the multiple problems of governance and policy that they pose (e.g., Ward and Jonas, 2004). Among the many other issues that have been raised in this literature, special reference must be made to the comments of some scholars—notably those of a postcolonial persuasion—that call into question the whole concept of the city-region as an object of social enquiry. In the present paper, I seek to provide a perspective of this entire terrain of investigation and to reflect on some of the debates that have arisen in regard to the origins, character, and theoretical status of city-regions. I proceed by laying out a brief conspectus of city-regions in the world since the mid-1950s. I consider how the contemporary capitalist system and globalization have fostered an evolutionary trajectory in which a certain number of favored locations have mushroomed to form a post-metropolitan worldwide grid of city-regions. A variety of critical features concerning the internal organization of city-regions in the 21st century are then brought into view and some basic issues of governance and policy are subject to scrutiny. The argument concludes by calling into question a number of current critiques in the urban studies literature that seek to consign city-regions into a chaotic mass of "ordinary" cities and to relegate ideas about them to the status of failed Eurocentric concepts fabricated in the Global North.

## City-regions around the world

As argued in detail elsewhere (Scott and Storper, 2015), all cities exhibit a common genetic and synchronic constitution that is constructed in a twofold process involving, on the one side, a set of gravitational forces in geographic space leading to spatial polarization and the clustering of social and economic activities, and, on the other side, a necessarily extensive spatial ordering of these activities leading to variegated and interdependent patterns of land use in any given agglomeration. From this perspective, city-regions are cities like any other and there can be no clear line of division that separates them from the rest of urban reality as a whole. Despite the absence of any sharply defined break, city-regions are nonetheless distinguishable as a broad category of urban phenomena by reason of their size, spatial extent, multipolarity, functional heterogeneity, political influence, innovative capacities, and global interconnectivity. These features mark them out as calling for scholarly examination, not, as Robinson (2006) avers, to the necessary eviction of other kinds of cities from the world map, but as one peculiar class of cities that is of major social and political significance

in its own right and that offers important potential insights into urbanization processes as a whole.

A rough and ready overview of the occurrence of city-regions in today's world in presented in Figure 1. Since there is no hard-and-fast line that separates city-regions from other types of urban entities, Figure 1 is constructed on the assumption that a mapping of cities with populations of one million or more provides at least an approximate sense of the geographic distribution of city-regions as such. The city-regions thus defined form a mosaic (Scott, 1998) or archipelago (Veltz, 1996) of interconnected nodes that compete and cooperate with one another across the entire globe. Three observations can immediately be made from a scrutiny of Figure 1. First, city-regions are widely distributed across all five continents. Second, they are more abundant in less economically developed parts of the world than in the more advanced capitalist countries (cf. Stren, 2001). Third, China, and to a lesser extent India, stand out as major national hubs of city-regions, and these have expanded at an accelerated pace in harmony with the high rates of economic growth and the penetration of global capitalism into both countries, especially China, since the mid-1990s (Schneider and Mertes, 2014; Wu, 2017).

The data set forth in Tables 1–3 add depth to these remarks. Table 1 shows that there were 501 cities across the globe with populations of one million or more in 2015, of which 44 were in the 5–10 million size class, and as many as 29 had populations of above 10 million. Table 2 indicates that more and more of the world's population is accommodated in cities of all sizes, but that an increasingly large proportion of the total urbanized population is contained in the very biggest centers. Table 3 shows that these trends have been associated with a recent decisive shift in patterns of urban growth from Europe and North America to other parts of the world, and above all to Asia and Africa. All three tables, taken together, make it abundantly clear that large-scale urbanization has proceeded apace on all five continents since the 1950s. Despite the comments of some analysts (e.g., Cairncross, 1997; O'Brien, 1992) to the effect that the internet is undermining distance constraints, this trend

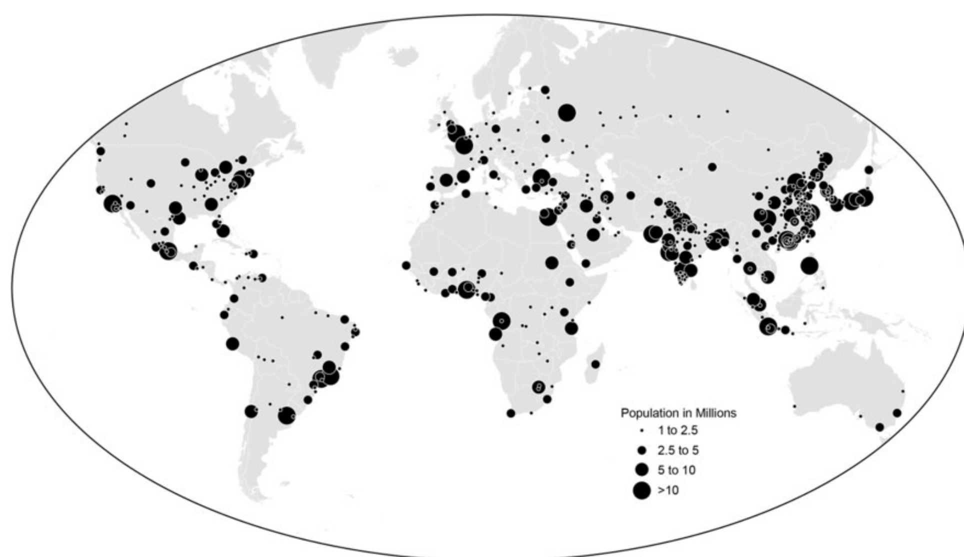


**Figure 1.** World geographical distribution of cities with populations of one million or more. Source of data: United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects* dataset, 2017.

**Table 1.** Number of cities worldwide in different size categories, 1950–2015.

| | Number of cities | | | | Percentage change | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Population range | 1950 | 1970 | 1990 | 2015 | 1950–1970 | 1970–1990 | 1990–2015 |
| >10 million | 2 | 3 | 10 | 29 | 50.0 | 233.3 | 190 |
| 5–10 million | 5 | 15 | 21 | 44 | 200.0 | 40.0 | 109.5 |
| 1–5 million | 71 | 126 | 239 | 428 | 77.5 | 89.7 | 79.1 |
| 300,000 to 1 million | 229 | 413 | 706 | 1191 | 80.3 | 70.9 | 68.7 |
| Total | 307 | 557 | 976 | 1692 | | | |

Source: United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects* dataset, 2017.

**Table 2.** Total world population living in urban areas by different size categories, 1955–2015.

| | Population in millions | | | | Percentage change | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Population range | 1950 | 1970 | 1990 | 2015 | 1950–1970 | 1970–1990 | 1990–2015 |
| >10 million | 24 | 55 | 153 | 471 | 131.9 | 178.8 | 208.7 |
| 5–10 million | 32 | 106 | 157 | 307 | 230.0 | 48.2 | 95.4 |
| 1–5 million | 129 | 245 | 459 | 847 | 90.0 | 87.7 | 84.4 |
| 300,000 to 1 million | 115 | 216 | 359 | 633 | 87.2 | 66.6 | 76.0 |
| <300,000 | 447 | 729 | 1156 | 1699 | 63.2 | 58.6 | 46.9 |
| Total urban population | 746 | 1350 | 2285 | 3957 | | | |
| Urban as a percentage of the world population | 29.6 | 36.6 | 42.9 | 54.0 | | | |

Source: United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects* dataset, 2017.

**Table 3.** Percentage of total population living in urban areas by major world region, 1955–2015.

| Year | Africa | Asia | Europe | Latin America | North America | Oceania | World |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1955 | 16.1 | 19.3 | 54.3 | 45.2 | 67.0 | 64.8 | 31.6 |
| 1965 | 20.6 | 22.9 | 60.2 | 53.3 | 72.0 | 69.1 | 35.6 |
| 1975 | 24.7 | 25.0 | 65.4 | 60.7 | 73.8 | 71.9 | 37.7 |
| 1985 | 28.9 | 29.8 | 68.8 | 67.6 | 74.7 | 70.7 | 41.2 |
| 1995 | 33.1 | 34.8 | 70.5 | 73.0 | 77.3 | 70.6 | 44.7 |
| 2005 | 36.3 | 41.1 | 71.7 | 76.9 | 80.0 | 70.5 | 49.1 |
| 2015 | 40.4 | 48.2 | 73.6 | 79.8 | 81.6 | 70.8 | 54.0 |

Source: United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects* dataset, 2017.

will in all likelihood continue for the foreseeable future, given the persistent, if not intensified, force of agglomeration economies in the new capitalism of the 21st century. A remark of special importance is that of the 78 cities in the world that had populations of more than one million in 1950, two-thirds were in the more economically developed nations, whereas in 2015 two-thirds of the 501 cities in the same size class were located in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Among their many other prominent features, these large cities or city-regions function as basic motors of the global economy, as critical centers of national economic development,

and as foci of economic innovation. According to data from the Brookings Institution, 300 of the world's largest metropolitan areas in 2014 produced as much as 41.1% of global GDP. The 30 largest metropolitan areas alone produced 12.7% of global GDP, yet had just 7.1% of the global population, giving a ratio of the former percentage to the latter of 1.8 (cf. Sassen, 2012). Of these 30 metropolitan areas, 7 were located in the advanced capitalist countries and yielded in aggregate an equivalent ratio of 3.4; the remaining 23 metropolitan areas elsewhere yielded a ratio of 1.2. These reflections point directly to the high levels of economic productivity in large urban areas in the advanced capitalist countries as compared with the rest of the world. At the same time, while the productivity of major cities in low-income countries may be relatively subdued, it still remains unusually high in comparison with the less urbanized areas that surround them.

## The emergence and dynamics of city-regions

### *Intimations of a new urbanism*

City-regions began to make their decisive historical and geographical appearance in North America and Western Europe shortly after the end of World War II. The same period saw a resurgence of interest by urban theorists in unusually large and influential cities, as represented by the work of Dickinson (1947), who resuscitated the term "city-region," and Freeman (1959), who adapted the idea of the "conurbation" (a further term coined by Geddes) to designate coalescing clusters of overgrown British cities. At about the same time, Gottmann (1961) devised the notion of "megalopolis" to describe the great multi-city built-up area extending from Boston to Washington, DC in the United States. Despite these early symptoms of a phase-change in patterns of urbanization, the post-war decades were actually a period in 20th-century capitalism when the classical metropolis was the dominant expression of large-scale urban development, with its well-defined central core, its extensive but still relatively restrained suburbs, and its dominant bipartite social structure comprising blue-collar and white-collar workers who tended to inhabit distinctively different residential areas. The internal integration of the metropolis in Fordism was secured by relations between the city and the suburbs forming virtuous circles of production and consumption (Scott, 2017; Walker, 1981). This was also a period of vibrant urban growth based on Fordist economic development and Keynesian-welfare statist sociopolitical arrangements (cf. Brenner, 2003; Marglin and Schor, 1990).

In spite of an incipient surge of city-regions in the advanced capitalist countries in the 1960s, the crisis years of the 1970s were accompanied by a severe interruption of urban growth as the agglomerative forces of the classical Fordist economy waned. Concomitantly, urban and regional theorists began to express a marked pessimism about the possibilities of local economic regeneration (cf. Carney et al., 1980; Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). As it happens, the bleak prospects of the 1970s were soon, and quite unexpectedly, to give way to a new and more buoyant era. The 1980s and 1990s represent a so-called "post-Fordist" moment in which a series of dramatically new and interdependent developments across a wide spectrum of society and economy came rapidly to the fore. These developments were in major respects due to extraordinary advances in electronic technologies of computing and communication, and the diffusion of new systems of production that increasingly mobilized the mental, behavioral, and affective skills of workers. The advent of post-Fordism was also strongly encouraged by expanding waves of globalization and a change in the political winds leading on to strategies of governance and policy-making that actively fostered the reassertion of competitive markets. A number of dramatic changes in modalities of urban growth

followed on from these shifts, not only in the advanced capitalist countries, but also in areas of the world that had been bypassed by the earlier Fordist phase. This short but pregnant post-Fordist phase in the 1980s and 1990s can be seen as ushering in a third wave of capitalist evolution focused on what I have elsewhere identified as the cognitive-cultural economy (Scott, 2017).

The rise of the new capitalist economy was not uniquely responsible for the conspicuous development of city-regions that occurred all over the world in the decades following the early 1980s, but it did offer a fertile terrain that enabled many novel expressions of urbanization to blossom even as they also helped to generate new problems and predicaments of urban life. Above all, the new economy re-ignited the play of agglomeration economies without which the competitive advantages of cities as clusters of capital and labor are unsustainable, and it boosted local economic development by making it possible for favored urban centers to find specialized niches within an increasingly global division of labor, and hence to export more and more of their products to far-flung markets.

## The third wave

The 19th-century workshop and factory system formed the basis of a first wave of capitalism and urban development; the mass-production economy and its associated metropolitan pattern of urbanization in the 20th century gave rise to a second wave; and the emerging cognitive-cultural economy of the 21st century represents an as yet unfinished third major wave. It is in this third wave, with its transformative effects on urban social and economic life, that city-regions everywhere are starting to come into their own as assertive types—or sub-types—of urban agglomeration.

Old pre-Fordist and Fordist modalities of economic organization are far from having been entirely displaced by the new digital, knowledge-based, and globalized capitalism that is now moving rapidly ahead. Even so, a host of new and restructured sectors based on electronic technologies and cognitive-cultural labor processes have penetrated into vast swaths of the modern economy and have gravitated above all to favored urban locations. Among these sectors, technology-intensive production and software development, business and financial services (including corporate headquarter functions), revivified craft activities, and cultural industries of many different sorts have played a special role in promoting recent rounds of urban growth. These sectors tend to concentrate *par excellence* in large city-regions, though they may also occasionally be found to varying degree in smaller cities. There is an extensive literature on the incidence of sectors like these in urban areas (e.g., Clark, 2002; Hutton, 2015; Scott, 2017; Storper, 2013; Taylor and Derudder, 2016), and so I will at the outset offer only a few broad comments on this matter. Most importantly, the net outcome of the changing economic environment has not only been a vigorous resuscitation of agglomeration economies and urban growth, but also a broad shift in intra-urban divisions of labor and social life, and, concomitantly, in the structure of residential space. As a consequence, the dominant white-collar/blue-collar principle of social stratification and neighborhood formation that characterized classical Fordist patterns of urban residential space has tended to give way to a new configuration marked by a deep and durable divide between highly paid and qualified technical, managerial, professional, and creative workers on the one side, and a mass of low-wage, unqualified service workers shading off into an impoverished precariat or underclass on the other side (Scott, 2017; Standing, 2016).

Outcomes like these are clearly present in the advanced capitalist countries, but they are evident, too, in major city-regions throughout the less economically advanced parts of the world. Significant numbers of cities in poorer countries grew in the decades following

World War II (i.e., in the Fordist period) on the basis of import substitution, and then, in the context of post-Fordism and its aftermath, these and an ever-enlarging cohort of other cities in the same countries moved into a regime of accelerated growth founded on export-oriented strategies, international subcontracting, and foreign direct investment. Nowadays, the larger urban centers in these countries—many of them with enduring traces of a colonial past—participate aggressively in the new capitalism, not least by means of their widening role as centers of prime business and financial functions in response to local, national, and increasingly international demands (Raiser and Volkmann, 2007). Erstwhile third-world cities like São Paulo, Santiago, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Mumbai, Singapore, Seoul, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Dakar, Accra, Lagos, and Nairobi, to mention only a few representative examples, play a significant role in the new economy of global capitalism, despite the extensive swaths of poverty and informality that they continue to harbor (cf. Davis, 2006; Roy, 2011; Smit et al., 2017). At the same time, the burgeoning city-regions in low-income countries act as centers through which potent developmental impulses radiate outwards to the rest of the national territory (El Kadiri and Lapèze, 2007; Sid Ahmed, 2007; Vázquez-Barquero, 2007).

## Anatomy of city-regions: four geographies

### *Inside the city-region*

City-regions are composed of a remarkably heterogeneous variety of social and economic entities and relationships. What imbues these phenomena with an essentially *urban* character is their functional recomposition within a polarized spatial lattice or *urban land nexus*—that is, an agglomerated tissue of locations tied together by the cascading interdependencies that constitute the economic and social lifeblood of the city (Scott and Storper, 2015; Storper and Scott, 2016). In capitalist cities, the primary components of the urban land nexus can be systematized by reference to three principal types of interlocking and overlapping land use: *production space*, in which goods and services are generated and exchanged; *social space*, where differentiated residential neighborhoods make up most of the urban landscape; and *circulation space*, which channels movement and communication through the entire fabric of the city.

The city-region is also distinguishable—at least qualitatively—from other urban forms, first of all by its tendency to exceptionally active development and redevelopment on its high-density, polycentric, intensive margins, where business and retail functions cluster together, and second of all by the insistent outward spread that proceeds endemically on its far-flung, low-density, extensive margins where housing tends to lead the way. The whole of this extensive structure of social and economic life is held together by intersecting multi-modal networks that comprise the main elements of the city-region's circulation space (Lang and Knox, 2009; Nelles, 2013; Neuman and Hull, 2009). Thus, as indicated in Figure 2, the extensive city-region of the *Ile de France*, with Paris at its center, is traversed by a tentacular commuter rail network forming the *Réseau Express Régional* that complements the rest of the transport system in serving the dense daily and weekly demands for local travel. Note that the structure of the network consists of radial spokes—reinforcing the centrality of Paris—with emerging concentric links toward its geometric center. In China, to take another example, efforts to consolidate the great city-regions of Beijing, the Yangtze Delta, and the Pearl River Delta are in active progress by means of public investment in dense transport networks designed to forge each region into a single functional entity (Quan and Li, 2011; Zhao et al., 2017). Moreover, the development of transport infrastructures and the lateral

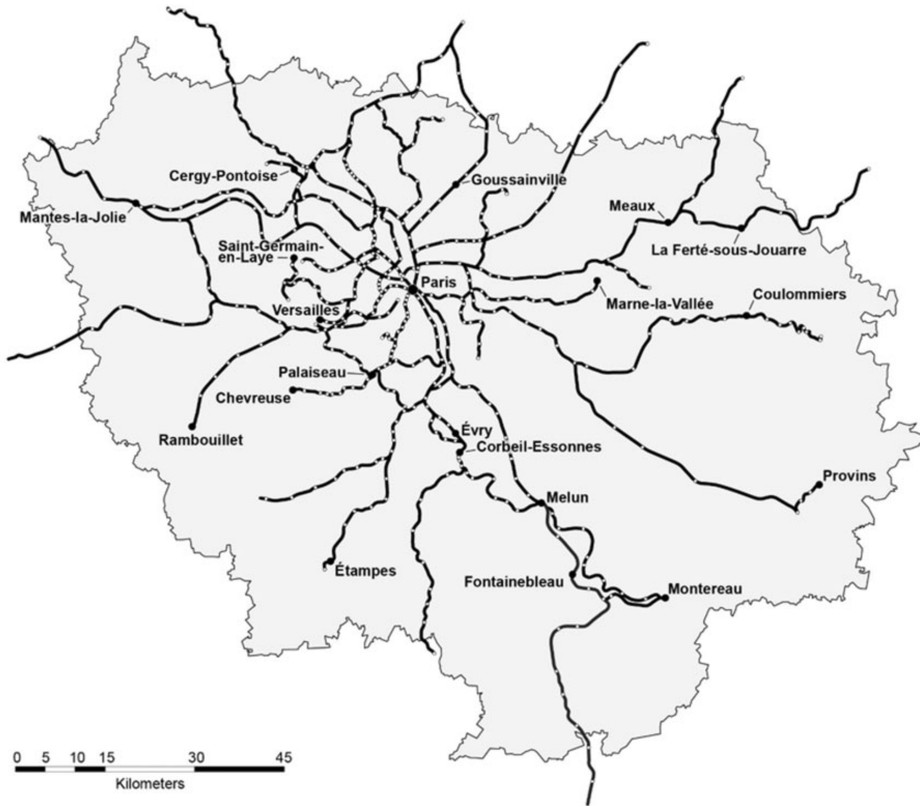


**Figure 2.** Express commuter rail lines in the Ile de France; main towns outside the Greater Paris Agglomeration are shown.

spread of the city-region tend to proceed in a recursive relationship with one another; that is, improved accessibility in peripheral zones is conducive to the further outward expansion of the built-up area of the city-region, while the outward shifts of the built-up area create demands for yet additional rounds of investment in transport infrastructure. As this twofold process moves ahead, the advancing frontier of the city-region swallows up towns and cities that lie in the pathway of its lateral spread and these settlements are incorporated into a steadily enlarging, continuous built-up area. These general trends mean, too, that individual city-regions lying adjacent to one another may expand to the point where they coalesce into a supercluster or a conglomerate city-region comprising two or more core areas of more or less equal size. The great urban expanse of the Yangtze Delta, the megalopolis of the eastern seaboard of the United States, and the Tokyo–Yokohama region in Japan are all, in varying degree, advanced cases of this supercluster phenomenon.

These overall processes of growth and development peculiar to contemporary city-regions are accompanied by significant shifts in intra-urban patterns of land use and social life. The outward forms of these emerging patterns differs widely from one instance to another, but all of them can be comprehended under the broad diagnostic umbrella of capitalist urbanization in the third wave. Four particularly dramatic cases are now examined.

## *Aestheticization and land-use intensification*

Locations in intra-urban space where relatively high levels of accessibility prevail are frequently subject to a syndrome of rising rents and increasing land-use density that pushes them continually to ever-increasing prominence on the urban landscape. This syndrome takes on particular emphasis as it becomes manifest in the formation of hierarchical, polycentric, and spatially ordered commercial centers in city-regions, or, in the more arcane vocabulary of Batty (2013), as it is expressed in the fractal dynamics of the city. The biggest, most functionally diverse, and most visible commercial center in any given city-region typically lies at the gravitational core of the system as a whole and serves as the dominant central business district (CBD) of the entire built-up area.

In the crisis years of late Fordism, the CBDs of many large American metropolitan areas entered a period of stagnation, and, in certain instances, serious decline. The new capitalism heralded by post-Fordism, however, marked a turn in the fortunes of these areas that was forcefully inscribed on the urban landscape by the economic and architectural resurgence of their CBDs. This expansionary trend was echoed in major city-regions in less economically developed countries as the new capitalism penetrated beyond North America and Western Europe into other parts of the globe. One of the signal features of the new capitalism is the important role that advanced retail, service, business and financial sectors play in the economy as a whole, and the more upscale producers in these sectors have a definite proclivity to locate in major business districts where their information-rich interactions generate mutually sustaining agglomeration economies. A large segment of the economy of these districts functions, by the same token, as a burgeoning employment hub for qualified professional, managerial, and administrative workers drawn from all parts of the city.

In view of their centrality and accessibility, major business districts are especially susceptible, as they always have been, to continual rounds of vigorous *land-use intensification*, where the latter term is defined as the redevelopment of real property in order to raise output levels and to increase land rents per unit area. One of the signs of this process is the persistent, often cyclical razing of buildings in central areas of the city and their replacement by yet higher buildings with increased floor space. Since this process is especially assertive at locations where land rents are already high, it is almost always most pronounced in the CBD and especially in those parts of the CBD that specialize in advanced office functions (Scott, 2018b). As a result, the towering buildings that accommodate these functions almost always play a prime role as visible icons of wealth, power, and influence. Indeed, the iconic status of these buildings is more often than not consciously emblazoned in overt aesthetic symbols constituting much of their visible form. Even in Fordism, aestheticization of landmark CBD buildings was commonly practiced, especially by means of the spare, streamlined, and understated architecture of the so-called "modern movement" that in its heyday flourished in large US cities. In today's dominantly cognitive-cultural capitalism, the deepening impulse to aestheticize the landscape of CBDs is more likely to be projected through highly ornamented structures that tend to emphasize idiosyncrasy and ostentation. Sklair (2001, 2005) has argued, as well, that the bombast of many buildings in the cores of major city-regions today owes something to the self-conception of a brash transnational capitalist class whose members circulate with increasing frequency across the globe from one major bastion of finance and business to another. In any case, the unmistakably upward-thrusting and aestheticized structures of advanced CBDs in all parts of the contemporary world are readily identifiable in flagship cases like One World Trade Center in New York, the Swiss Re Building in London, and La Défense in Paris. Equivalent, if not more conspicuous, illustrations can be found in increasing numbers of

city-regions in the Global South, such as Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Towers, the Taipei 101 skyscraper in Taiwan, and the Burj Khalifa in the United Arab Emirates (cf. Schmid et al., 2011).

Nowadays, central-city redevelopment is also typically accompanied by large public and private investments in cultural facilities and other amenities calculated to enhance the attractiveness of downtown spaces to consumers and workers. In the spirit of the new cognitive-cultural capitalism, this sort of redevelopment is not infrequently staged in the guise of Disneyfied or aestheticized set pieces (Relph, 1976; Sorkin, 1992), as illustrated by the pedestrianized shopping and entertainment plaza that now occupies pride of place in Times Square in New York. In parallel with this trend, CBDs in the current wave of capitalism are also becoming more than ever before prime sites for ostentatious cultural projects such as Disney Hall in Los Angeles, the Shanghai Cultural Plaza, London's Royal Opera House, or Tokyo's National Arts Center, all of which affirm their individuality by means of assertive symbolic gestures. The striking visual montages of CBDs in major city-regions today serve not only as indications of their upgraded retail, cultural, and business-service functions, but also as cyphers or branding devices that reinforce and dramatize the unique identity of each individual city (Anttiroiko, 2014; Dinnie, 2011). In this manner, they also function increasingly as beacons that serve to draw in flows of capital, tourist dollars, and highly qualified labor from across the entire globe.

### *Residential gentrification of the inner city*

Over much of the classical period of Fordism, inner-city residential areas in North America and many parts of Europe were dominated by working-class families who drew their livelihoods from the profusion of blue-collar jobs available in the factories, workshops, and warehouses located in adjacent parts of the city. After World War II, accelerating streams of these jobs were directed from the inner city to the suburbs and beyond, thus encouraging—often with a considerable time lag—the outmigration of blue-collar workers who could no longer earn an adequate living if they continued to reside in their traditional neighborhoods. This outmigration continues even today, though in contemporary city-regions it is countered by complementary inflows of relatively affluent white-collar workers seeking housing in selected inner-city neighborhoods. The remaining low-income residents of the inner city accordingly have a further incentive to vacate the area, either because of rising rents and property taxes resulting from these changes, or because they have quite simply been evicted to make way for more prosperous residents (Slater, 2006; Wacquant, 2008). These are the core outward signs of the gentrification process in contemporary city-regions, where the term *gentrification* was first advanced by Glass (1964) in her pioneering study of some early manifestations of this phenomenon in post-war London. The burning question that many theorists of gentrification have sought to resolve is why did white-collar workers begin to move in such large numbers after the 1970s from their traditionally preferred zone of residence in the suburbs to inner-city neighborhoods, and what accounts for the timing of the changeover? I propose to argue here that this question can only be effectively answered by reference to the rise of city-regions in the third wave of capitalism.

Several different answers to the puzzle of gentrification have been forthcoming in the literature, including the perhaps dominant response that invokes Smith's concept of a rent gap or an anomalous depression in the urban land-rent surface in areas close to the CBD (Smith, 1979, 1987). While some researchers (e.g., Bourassa, 1993) have contested the very notion of rent gaps, others have provided plausible evidence of their empirical existence (e.g., Clark, 1988; Hammel 1999; Porter, 2010). As early as the 1930s, Hoyt (1933)

established that a rent gap existed in the inner city of Chicago, though (crucially) there was apparently no associated process of gentrification at this moment in time. More to the point, other researchers (e.g., Hamnett, 2003; Ley, 1986) have suggested that the rent gap—whether it exists or not—is neither necessary nor sufficient for gentrification to occur. Where a rent gap is present in the urban land-rent surface, gentrifiers will assuredly seek to take advantage of it, but if we are to account for the full extent of gentrification, we need both a time-dependent mechanism that accounts for the initiation of the process in the fading years of Fordism together with some means of accounting for the continuing surge of white-collar workers into central cities even in situations where rising land rents and property values have eliminated whatever elements of a rent gap may have previously existed.

I have elsewhere offered statistical evidence to the effect that much of this puzzle can be resolved by reference to the changing employment patterns of the central city (Scott, 2017, 2018a). Thus, on the one hand, the decline of blue-collar jobs in inner cities significantly loosened the competitive grip of high-density working-class housing over nearby neighborhoods after the 1970s; on the other hand, the explosion of high-wage service-sector jobs in central areas since the early 1980s has increasingly put a premium on land in these areas for white-collar settlement. Hamnett, (2003), Ley (1986), and Zukin (1982), not to mention Glass herself, have likewise surmised that the explanation for the historical emergence of gentrification can be found in the relatively recent rejuvenation of business, financial, and high-level service employment in CBDs and the concomitant revalorization of accessible inner-city locations for white-collar residence. To be sure, the incipient gentrification that Glass (1964) observed in parts of London in the late 1950s and early 1960s occurred at a particularly early stage, but central London at this point in time was already well on the way to becoming a global city-region with an abundance of high-wage elite labor. This explanation fits neatly into the wider proposition that the final decades of the 20th century were characterized by a major transition from Fordist to cognitive-cultural capitalism with concomitant radical changes in forms of production and employment in large city-regions. The social *zeitgeist* of cognitive-cultural capitalism no doubt also helps to accentuate the gentrification process as a whole, given the increasing disenchantment of many middle-class individuals with traditional low-density suburban existence in contrast to the widening appeal of central cities as foci of lifestyled cultural consumption and associated amenities (Bridge, 2001; Clark, 1992)

The foundations of gentrification theory have been developed principally with respect to urbanization in North America and Western Europe. In recent years, some analysts have sought to extend the theory to city-regions lying well beyond these areas and have purportedly uncovered instances of gentrification in places as far-flung as Cairo (Abaza, 2001), Istanbul (Islam, 2005), Santiago (Lopez-Morales, 2010), and Seoul (Shin, 2009), to mention only a few. Other analysts, most notably Ghertner (2015), have criticized this projection of gentrification theory to city-regions outside the West on the grounds that the political context of land redevelopment in these areas usually differs radically from that which exists in more advanced capitalist countries. Ghertner's specific claims are that the discourse of gentrification cannot be extended to situations involving land-tenure change from non-private to private ownership or situations in which evictions are carried out by extra-economic force. However, there is actually no compelling reason why these political pressures should be inconsistent with the essential meaning of gentrification as a process entailing the tension-ridden shift of land use from low-income to high-income housing. In fact, complications of these precise kinds frequently attend gentrification processes in the advanced capitalist countries and are acknowledged explicitly as such in published research

(cf. Paton and Cooper, 2016; Wacquant, 2008). I shall take this general issue up again later when I deal with questions of idiosyncrasy and abstraction in the study of city-regions.

### Social polarization and informality in contemporary city-regions

Cities are invariably marked by social divisions that in turn are inscribed on the urban landscape in segmented patterns of geographic space. In particular, a primary class division almost always materializes in relationship to discrepancies between people with differential command over material assets and/or position in the division of labor. Divisions of this kind are frequently articulated with variations of race, ethnicity, culture, and so on. This ancillary process of social differentiation is especially associated with subaltern migrant populations who arrive from far outside the mainstream of urban society, and who, by reason of deeply rooted differences from the majority population, are channeled into distinctive neighborhoods or residential niches (Waldinger, 2001).

Streams of poor migrants seeking to escape from destitution, hardship, famine, and other sources of social distress have always been attracted to large and relatively prosperous urban centers. Contemporary city-regions, from Los Angeles to Mumbai and from London to Shanghai, are subject to the same kinds of inflows, but with unique modulations that are becoming increasingly evident as the 21st century progresses. As much as 39% of the current population of Los Angeles is composed of foreign immigrants, many of whom are undocumented workers from Central and South America. Equally, a reputed 37% of Mumbai's population consists of migrants from rural India. A large proportion of these migrants constitute a sort of new servile class or precariat that is sporadically engaged either in the local informal economy or in providing low-wage labor to the rest of the urban community in activities such as casual restaurant work, domestic help, infrastructure maintenance, janitorial services, informal recycling operations, and temporary or part-time tasks in manufacturing—especially in low-grade workshops and factories that systematically contravene employment and environmental regulations.

The specific social forms assumed by this new servile class, and the intra-urban communities that emerge wherever it is present, differ widely from country to country and city to city depending on regulations governing population movements and on the capacity of any given city to absorb new immigrants into its employment structure. In countries where controls on inward flows to the city are few or non-existent, and where local capacities for the absorption of outsiders into the urban mainstream are severely limited, there is a tendency for the immigrant poor to accumulate in dense and overcrowded shantytowns, like the *barrios*, *bidonvilles*, *favelas*, etc., that occur in many city-regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (UN Habitat, 2003). Even in advanced capitalist countries, urban life is severely disadvantaged for low-wage immigrants, though usually to a much lesser extent. In any case, wherever they may be located, and even given their tumultuous variety, communities of poor immigrants and other marginalized social fractions can almost always be characterized in terms of certain general features revolving around social exclusion, spatial segmentation, unstable employment prospects, and political dispossession in the wider context of large-scale urbanization. Variations on this theme can be found in the rundown racial and ethnic ghettos in contemporary American city-regions (Wilson, 1987); in the migrant and Roma encampments in many different parts of Western and Eastern Europe, such as the *Jungle de Calais* where, until recently, several thousand refugees were concentrated (Wanneson, 2015); and, of course, in the proliferating shantytowns of cities in the Global South, where poverty and informality exist cheek by jowl with some of the most advanced expressions of modern urban development. The proletarian slums that sprang up in the

wake of the so-called "drift to the towns" in 19th-century Britain (cf. Engels, 1845) exemplify the same basic trends. Intra-urban social and spatial disadvantage, in short, is continually created and recreated as a direct effect of the dynamics of urbanization in capitalism and is amplified to a high pitch in modern city-regions.

Some contemporary scholars would doubtless argue that the conceptual amalgamation of these assorted urban facets of poverty, social insecurity, and ghettoization in time and space represents a signal act of theoretical overreach.[1] By way of rejoinder to this putative charge, the broad etiological features comprising the magnetic allure of large third-wave cities for the inhabitants of peripheral regions, the formation of a burgeoning subservient or servile class in contemporary urban society, and the persistent segregation of low-wage and minority populations in urban space, suggest that these phenomena raise common and mutually informative conceptual challenges, notwithstanding the enormous diversity of the cultural, administrative, and political logics that help to shape their concrete realization on the ground (Acquistapace, 2018; McFarlane and Silver, 2017; Roy, 2011; Sampson, 2012).

## *Postsuburban mutations*

The Chicago School of Urban Sociology had painted a picture of the American suburbs in the early 20th century as a homogeneous white-collar residential zone (Park et al., 1925). Yet even at the time when the Chicago School theorists were promulgating their views of the city, the suburbs were already assuming a very much more complex character. Further, many large metropolitan areas in Europe had followed an altogether different pathway to suburbanization, as represented in the mid-19th century by widespread industrialization of peripheral locations complemented by broad tracts of housing for the working classes. As spatially distended polycentric city-regions were starting to make their historical and geographical appearance in late Fordism, North American suburbs had already reached a stage in terms of social mix and functional diversity such that some analysts were ready to concede that the resonances of the term itself were no longer adequate to the social reality it was supposed to represent. The concomitant and necessary work of reconsideration was in many ways galvanized by the publication in 1991 of Garreau's *Edge City*, which showed that in addition to residential diversity, many parts of the urban periphery were being extensively colonized by economic and cultural functions like business, shopping, and entertainment that were more traditionally thought of as being concentrated in downtown locations. In the same year a further influential commentary was presented by Kling et al. (1991), who described the burgeoning community of Orange County within the great Southern Californian city-region as a postsuburban phenomenon that in many ways resembled a metropolis in its own right. Even in these early accounts, the sense of the deepening functional separation of the suburbs from the central city was becoming apparent.

The term "postsuburbia" is now well established as a way of identifying the outer reaches of large city-regions in third-wave capitalism (cf. Phelps, 2015; Phelps et al., 2010), and numerous case studies have been carried out in places as far afield as Toronto (Keil and Young, 2011), Vienna (Helbich and Leitner, 2010), the Dutch Randstad (Bontje, 2004), Seoul (Lee and Shin, 2011), Santiago (Heinrichs et al., 2011), and Beijing and Shanghai (Wu and Phelps, 2008, 2011). In addition, Firman and Fahmi (2017) have shown how, in the Jakarta city-region, a postsuburban polycentric landscape fostered by private developers and local political authorities has tended steadily to override the old *desakota* form of development, originally described by McGee (1991) as a wide and relatively uniform expanse of intercalated farms and houses (see also, Hudalah and Firman, 2017). These

assorted studies all focus with varying degrees of emphasis on the character of postsuburbia as being first and foremost a terrain of widely varying land-use types and densities in sharp contrast to the conventional idea of the suburbs. Housing arrangements in postsuburban areas of modern city-regions range from traditional low-density detached and semi-detached residences to high-rise apartment buildings, often clustered around points of access to transport services. In comparison to their former relative social homogeneity, fringe areas now encompass a diversity of population groups. These include not only medium-income individuals like policemen, firemen, shop assistants, nurses, and middle managers fleeing from the central city in order to escape from high property values, but also low-wage immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities.

The residential areas of postsuburbia are at the same time systematically interspersed with both major and minor business clusters. The expansive technology and software parks and technopoles, the new office complexes, university and college campuses, shopping plazas, sports stadia, convention centers, airports, and gated communities that thrive in the fringes of the city-region represent advanced elements of this developmental model (Lang and Knox, 2009; Scott, 1990; Teaford, 1997). In many parts of the world, including China and India, new towns form part of this postsuburban patchwork (Datta, 2017). These complex and rapidly expanding spaces, extending ever more insistently outwards, are increasingly complemented by major recreational and tourist attractions with global appeal, as exemplified most forcefully by the Disneyland parks and resorts (descendants of the original Disneyland in suburban Los Angeles) that have been established in Marne-la-Vallée, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Tokyo. In addition, the sprawling suburban areas of city-regions in the Global South frequently comprise extended squatter settlements housing large numbers of poor people engaged in informal production and trading activities (Davis, 2006; Gilbert, 2018).

As the economic and social shifts brought about by cognitive-cultural capitalism have penetrated into the urbanization process generally, it is evident that this new postsuburban phenomenon represents an increasingly complex and assertive counterweight to the central city. The fringe areas of the city-region no longer function—if they ever did—simply as socially homogeneous dormitory settlements, but have become foci of variegated social development and economic growth in their own right. Perhaps nowhere are these features more evident than in the city-regions of Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area, where postsuburban communities like Orange County and Santa Clara County now rival and in certain respects surpass central-city areas as full-blown, multidimensional urban excrescences.

## Questions of governance and politics

### *Context and overview*

One of the key themes in the literature on large-scale urban regions concerns the geopolitical constitution of these entities and their relationship to the reterritorialization of the state (e.g., Etherington and Jones, 2018; Jonas and Moisio, 2018; Jonas and Ward, 2007; Le Galès and Lorrain, 2003; Lidstrom, 2018; Purcell, 2007; Tewdwr-Jones, 2000). There is a tendency in much of the literature to expatiate on this theme by invoking neoliberalism as a basic driving force behind the rise of city-regions. "Neoliberalism," however, is a highly elastic and patently overworked term whose meanings vary widely from one author to another. The term has its uses insofar as it signifies a shift (relative to Fordist-Keynesian systems of regulation) in the broad policy orientations of governing entities away

from redistribution and indicative economic planning to private ownership, competition, and deference to the demands of business. That said, any meaningful application of the term to urban situations must be very much more specific about the detailed mechanisms in play if it is to pinpoint the effects of policy on the growth and development of city-regions. Two points of departure in pursuit of this more disciplined approach can be identified. First, an irregular but unmistakable process of political rescaling is currently under way in many countries with the consequence that city-regions are taking on new significance as fountainheads of power and influence (Brenner, 2009; Herrschel and Newman, 2002; Scott, 1998). Second, and as a corollary, city-regions everywhere are sites of continuing experiments focused on attempts to build effective frameworks of governance in the effort to manage their own internal affairs and to enhance their growing influence as both nationally and globally significant actors. These two matters of contention are now scrutinized in turn.

## *Rescaling and the span of political authority*

In an early and provocative attempt to theorize the city-region, Ohmae (1995) proposed the idea that in a globalizing world, local economic dynamism and prosperity would be best achieved if traditional nation states were to give way to a system of self-governing regional divisions analogous in size to, say, Luxembourg or Singapore. Whatever theoretical merits this argument may have, it obviously has not made much progress in practical terms, given the continued political ascendancy of national states over their component geographic units. Even so, in a number of different countries today, decisive expansionary shifts can be detected in the spheres of political decision-making and maneuverability available to city-regions. These shifts are sometimes initiated by central governments and on other occasions they are secured by local political coalitions, but they all point more or less consistently to attempts to readjust the spatial balance of national affairs and to promote effective forms of subsidiarity—that is, the relegation of collective decision-making and action to the lowest efficient level. Subsidiarity here refers not only to economic development and competitiveness policies, but also to the appropriate calibration of social administration relative to local needs and problems.

Rescaling initiatives like these are very often associated with programs of local government reform. A widely cited case is the establishment of the mega-city of Toronto in 1998, formed by the amalgamation of seven adjacent municipalities around the northern edge of Lake Ontario (Kantor and Nelles, 2015; see also Courchene, 2001). Moisi (2018) refers to recent trends in Finland, where the emergence of city-regions is accompanied by local demands for a more explicit and formal voice in national political affairs. In South Africa, various political agencies in the Gauteng City-Region, which comprises a loose cluster of urban centers focused on Johannesburg, are seeking actively to build institutional conditions that will allow it to consolidate its status as the premier economic hub of Africa (Cheruiyot, 2018; Greenberg, 2010). Even Nairobi in Kenya has proclaimed its intention to build the groundwork necessary for it to play a role as "a world-class city-region" (Myers, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the massive *de facto* city-regions focused on Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou–Shenzhen in China have also been moving toward more formal political self-assertion—much encouraged by the Chinese central government—by means of strategic bundling of infrastructural investments and a search for overarching mechanisms of coordination (Bie et al., 2015; Wu, 2017; Zhao et al., 2017). Similarly, the British government has been engaged for almost two decades in attempts to establish dynamic city-regions in the North of England and hence to promote the area's economic development and productivity potentials through enhanced agglomeration economies. A further important goal of these

attempts is to build a counterweight to offset the currently overwhelming position of London and the South-East in the space-economy of England. These objectives were originally formulated as the Northern Way Agenda initiated in 2004, and were reformulated in 2010 when the Agenda was replaced by the Northern Powerhouse program, with its principal focus on revitalizing the cities of Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds, Hull, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne by means of new transport investments, the promotion of scientific and technological research, and the devolution of powers (Harrison, 2010). Devolution itself is secured by means of customized "city deals" allowing for greater local control over business support, labor training, housing and public transport (Etherington and Jones, 2016, 2018). The recent establishment of a Greater Manchester city-region with a single elected mayor represents an important symbolic moment in the unfolding of the program.

These exemplary cases of rescaling and self-affirmation are only a small sample of the many different and essentially *ad hoc* undertakings now proceeding around the world to capture the latent rewards of institution-building at the city-region level, even if some of these undertakings are also complicit in reproducing the deep social divides that unfailingly run through urban society at large (see, for example, Etherington and Jones, 2016, 2018). Conjointly, the motivation behind much recent institution-building in city-regions is ultimately rooted in a powerful logic of subsidiarization that sits well with the mosaic-like geography of contemporary capitalist society. Whether or not this trend enlarges the sphere of democracy and the right to the city remains a moot point depending precisely on the specific forms of political community that are put in place in any particular instance (Purcell, 2007).

## *Structures of governance*

No matter how well or poorly any given city-region may be represented in an overarching political identity, the predicament-laden spaces that constitute its internal fabric call incessantly for remedial action as well as for collective decision-making with respect to strategic choices about developmental opportunities.

At the best of times, urban governments have limited tools and resources at their disposal for confronting internal problems and failures, but in the case of complex, overgrown city-regions, weaknesses of overall social management are especially severe. This challenge is exacerbated by the persistent tendency to balkanization of municipal government in probably the vast majority of city-regions, not only as a legacy problem, but also as an effect of the often-haphazard lateral expansion of the urban periphery where adjacent municipalities are simply absorbed into the widening geographic orbit of the city-region. The political geography of city-regions, then, is typically composed out of multiple municipal governments that have strong incentives to focus on their own localized interests at the expense of the wider regional community, and this leads in turn to dysfunctional forms of inter-municipal competition. An argument has sometimes been offered on the basis of the so-called Tiebout hypothesis that the balkanization of the internal space of the city-region offers positive advantages to the citizenry at large because it potentially generates diversity in regard to the supply of local public goods and the quality of neighborhood life, and hence opens up a wide range of alternatives as to choice of residential location (Tiebout, 1957). To be sure, different municipalities in the wider city-region do in practice offer different bundles of consumption possibilities, and individuals do make conscious decisions about choice of community. The necessary qualification to this observation, however, is that the implied semblance of politically balkanized intra-urban space to a well-stocked supermarket of housing and environmental options is well beyond the bounds of credibility. In the first

place, options as to residential choice in contemporary cities are severely constrained not only by income but also by issues of race, ethnicity, social class, and the need for access to relevant employment. In the second place, the many different exclusionary practices that intra-urban communities can and do utilize to discriminate against unwanted types of neighbors ensure that peculiar types of segmentation and distortion prevail in spatial housing markets. A consumer sovereignty model *à la* Tiebout of the formation of intra-urban space is far from any reality on the ground.

One possible means of rationalizing the governance of city-regions might be to concentrate all political authority into a single consolidated directorate. This solution would eliminate undesirable effects of balkanization, but it would also in all likelihood introduce inefficiencies into administrative affairs, given the diverse levels of scale at which different urban services and public goods are able to achieve allocative optimality. In any case, any attempt to centralize the governance of the city-region is apt to face considerable resistance from those with vested interests in prior, more disaggregated arrangements. An alternative and probably more politically workable scheme of governance for city-regions can be found in hierarchical and/or federal contractual structures of organization, with different decision-making units taking on administrative responsibility for the tasks most suitable to their capacities and range of spatial control (Purcell, 2007). This approach is actually one that is in various stages of realization in many city-regions, and it has the advantage, too, of being able to build on pre-existing disjoint patterns of municipal geography. Possibly the most advanced case of an actual structure of this sort is represented by the Paris region, with its 1295 *communes* and *arrondissements* and 8 *départements*, under the overarching umbrella of the *Région Ile de France* (cf. Bourdeau-Lepage, 2013; Kantor et al. 2012). The latter organization is responsible for overall matters like regional planning, economic development, education, and culture, and has an elected council chaired by a president. In addition, programs of cooperation between individual communes are regulated by so-called EPCIs (*établissements publics de coopération intercommunale*), roughly equivalent to councils of government in the United States, and scores of these bridging entities are currently active in the Ile de France.

Legal instruments that provide for inter-municipal collaboration, like the French EPCIs, are of increasing importance in city-regions everywhere, not only because they make it possible to optimize the scale of local service and public goods provision, but also because they provide a mechanism for internalizing the externalities that inevitably flow across boundaries dividing one municipality from another. Groups of municipalities within city-regions are accordingly turning more and more to these instruments in order to provide services in such matters as water supply, fire protection, policing, garbage collection, pollution control, public health, and the like. It is probably fair to say that no actual city-region in the world today has succeeded in constructing a stable, durable, and comprehensive framework of governance, no matter what its organizational form. Still, an approximate template is occasionally detectable in the more successful efforts that have pushed in this direction, namely—and in sharp contradistinction to any unitary arrangement—a conglomerate structure made up of loose hierarchical relationships complemented by assorted cross-cutting organizations wherever these can significantly enhance operational effectiveness. There is no compelling reason, moreover, why a well-designed structure of this type could not also enhance the democratic assets of the city-region.

## *Rescaling and governance in perspective*

As Jonas (2013) observes, the dynamics of the city-region as such reside fundamentally in the intertwined effects of economic geography and geopolitics. On the one side, much of the

city-region's substantive character is both directly and indirectly derived from processes of economic production, the division of labor, and the social reproduction of the workforce; on the other side, its internal organization and growth are regulated by political institutions in the context of endemic social contestation over the costs and benefits of this regulation.

As already indicated, the political institutions of third-wave capitalism have tended increasingly to shift into a register that is biased toward market mechanisms rather than one that sees markets as requiring Keynesian-welfare statist intervention. One of the effects of this changeover in the operational logic of governance at both the national and local levels has been a widening gap between high- and low-income individuals as redistributive policies have been increasingly jettisoned. Another major effect is manifest in the increasingly project-oriented approach (or "entrepreneurial governance" as Harvey [1989] terms it) of local policy-makers to ameliorative and reconstructive actions in the urban land nexus, and especially their proclivity to work with business entities in private–public partnerships devoted to such ends as the construction of infrastructure, the redevelopment of land, and the provision of services (e.g., Bonneval and Pollard, 2017; Guironnet et al., 2016; Scott, 2018b). Tax-increment financing, for example, is a common but essentially regressive planning procedure of this type throughout city-regions in North America and Western Europe. This procedure is based on the assignment of any tax increases that arise from private–public redevelopment activities to the private partner (Weber, 2015). It is worth noting that the new landscape of collective action in city-regions also includes an ever-burgeoning body of organizations based on non-profit and voluntary principles of management. These organizations focus on a wide gamut of social needs but are especially critical in addressing welfare issues that lie beyond the scope of governmental intervention in the post-Keynesian, post-welfare statist city-region.

Economic geography is one crucial element underlying the rise and efflorescence of city-regions, but their ultimate viability can only be secured if a basic groundwork of administrative and political arrangements as described above is also in place. As McGuirk (2007) has remarked, "city-regionalism is not self-fulfilling." But neither, by contrast, is the political sufficient in and of itself to generate or sustain the development of city-regions (Harding, 2007). The precise roles of economic geography and geopolitics in this regard depend strongly on local and national context, but a preliminary synthetic judgment may be proposed by means of an appeal to arguments more fully articulated by Scott and Storper (2015). On the one hand, the genetic and structural roots of city-regions in capitalism revolve around the agglomeration of firms and households and the concomitant formation of intra-urban space as different social and economic actors sort themselves out into a polarized web of land uses. On the other hand, we must make provision for the collective management and coordination of this space because individual firms and households, under capitalist rules of order, can never command the political authority necessary to correct the socially threatening failures and shortfalls that are likely to be generated by the dense collective presence of so many interacting agents in one place. As a corollary, the governance capacities of the city-region are typically focused on remedial action to prevent implosions of the urban land nexus and on strategic engagements in the spatiality of the city with the goal of reinforcing the social compact and securing the present and future material well-being of the citizenry conceived of as a sort of aggregate entity. National political agencies, as well as purely local organizations, make important contributions to this broad effort, as exemplified by the cases of Britain and China, where central governments have sought in recent years to improve the operating capacities of city-regions in order to enhance their

internal socioeconomic cohesion and to boost national development generally (Jonas and Moisi, 2018; Wu, 2017).

## City-regions as objects of theoretical enquiry: realism versus abstraction

In recent years, an insistent line of critique in urban studies has pushed vigorously on the idea that every city is unique and that therefore any effort at theoretical abstraction (or, in the more alarmist language of the critics, "universalization," with its undertones suggesting machine-like empirical invariance) is doomed to failure. The concomitant and unduly cautious focus on the particular has traditionally been associated with classical empiricism, but has recently been rehabilitated in alternative guises by a number of urban analysts, most notably those of a postcolonial persuasion (e.g., Robinson and Roy, 2016). Advocates of this way of thinking are also prone to dismiss the concept of the city-region as a maneuver that assigns an arbitrary privilege to a few large urban areas while demoting the mass of "ordinary cities" to the status of residuals. In the words of Robinson (2006), the city-region idea is no more than a "regulating fiction," a distracting theoretical distortion that circulates through academia only on account of its supposedly (but spurious) global significance (cf. Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010). Postcolonial scholars are also much given to the theme that urban theories hatched in the Global North are congenitally inapplicable to cities in the Global South by reason of their alleged Eurocentric biases (Roy, 2009, 2011). Some analysts then go on to claim that only "provincialized" or geographically segmented accounts of urbanization can aspire to intellectual validity (Sheppard et al., 2013). Certainly, postcolonial and other scholars are quite correct to point to the arrant neglect of non-Western cities and viewpoints in urban studies hitherto. However, in the spirit of the entire preceding discussion, I propose that city-regions—in point of fact, all cities—can indeed be meaningfully conceptualized in generic terms by reference to a common set of innate structural conditions whose roots lie in agglomeration processes and the interactive logic of the urban land nexus. Even so, the urban process is also always intertwined with a local historical and cultural environment, and so while cities as a whole can certainly be problematized as a distinctive class of theoretical objects, they also exhibit great differences from one another in substantive terms across time and space. Three main points must now be made.

First, there can be no denial that Eurocentric bias is identifiable in many different statements about the city emanating from the Global North. That said, it is manifestly indiscriminate to assert that such statements are congenitally contaminated in this way. The appropriate response to this facet of the postcolonial critique is not so much a labored disquisition on the disabling character of research programs that insist as a matter of a priori dogma on the need to provincialize theoretical enquiry as it is simply to issue an invitation to relevant scholars to refrain from treating "Northern" theories as though they were carriers of a disease or an infection and to turn their efforts instead to concrete exercises of disconfirmation. Equivalently, as Peck (2015) has suggested, any test of urban theory (such as the proposition that agglomeration economies play a decisive role in the genesis of the city) must concentrate on the theory's claimed explanatory capacities rather than its geographic point of origin.

Second, and in contradistinction to what ordinary-city theorists see as an illegitimate privileging of one particular type of urban phenomenon, I propose that city-regions do in fact have strong identifying qualities that mark them out as posing special and legitimate

research questions. Thus, city-regions play an increasingly active role as economic and political actors on the world stage; they represent critical articulations of production, trade, and financial relationships that mediate between their immediate national economies and the global system as a whole; they are national and increasingly international centers of cultural production, innovation, and dissemination; they are cynosures of global migration patterns; they are a prime focus of state rescaling strategies; and their intrinsic gigantism means that they face unique challenges in constructing viable frameworks of governance. There is nothing ordinary at all about these entities, and there is much about them that calls for insistent generalization. By contrast, the ordinary-cities program refuses as a matter of principle to go beyond matters of substantive specificity, and, as Smith (2013: 2300) has pointed out, seeks only to understand cities "in an ideographic, provincial, nominalist, and comparative sense" (see also Van Meeteren et al., 2016).

Third, in no manner does attention to the commonalities of city-regions as a conspicuous kind of urban category lead on to inevitable disregard either of the differences between them, or, indeed, of other kinds of cities. A strong commitment to generalized theoretical accounts of labor migration and resettlement in large cities, for example, is no impediment to the recognition of such disparate empirical cases as rural to urban migration in 19th-century industrial England; the massive flows of documented and undocumented low-wage workers from Asia and Latin America into the city-regions of 21st-century America; the migration of laborers from west to east in modern China (with its unique *hukou* system of control); or the more anarchical shift of people from agricultural villages to large cities in the Indian subcontinent. The empirical integrity of these individual cases remains undamaged even as they can also be characterized in terms of general models of rural–urban and inter-urban migration (e.g., Chiswick and Miller, 2015). Similarly, in no way does a concern for generalization necessarily hinder the recognition of whatever kinds of provincial diversity may or may not exist in the way these matters fall out in empirical reality (North/South, Asia/Europe, democracies/dictatorships, Hindu society/Muslim society, etc.).

A final important comment must be made concerning the strong inclination of postcolonial scholars to assert that any attempt to build a theoretical understanding of urbanization processes is nullified by the allegedly watertight differences between cities in the Global North and Global South (cf. Marx and Kelling, 2018). "Northern" theories are judged by many of these scholars not only to be irrelevant to Southern cities, but positively harmful to any effort to understand them (Roy, 2009, 2011). In contrast to this view, I have tried to demonstrate above not only that this rigid compartmentalization of urban phenomena is unwarranted, but also that there cannot by precept be a conflict between ontological realism and theoretical abstraction. We are justifiably on our guard when theories fail to pass critical empirical tests, but by the same token we must take care to avoid the gratuitous judgment that empirical diversity is necessarily a sign of theoretical incommensurability. Nevertheless, postcolonial scholarship, shorn of some of its more egregious theoretical excesses, serves an important function in bringing into the sphere of urban research questions about the cities of the Global South. Studies such as the ethnographic inquiries of de Boeck and Plissart (2004) on Kinshasa, or the biopolitical analysis of Johannesburg offered by Mbembe (2004), or the "story-telling" approach of Simone and Pieterse (2017), for example, are valuable not only for their own sake, but also for any potential revisions of urban theory that they may suggest.

## Epilogue and exit

In the present paper I have set out to review, synthesize, and enlarge on a mass of ideas about city-regions within the frame of reference of urban theory as a whole. City-regions

have emerged in the 21st century as spatial entities with unprecedentedly massive and complex substantive content and a hitherto unmatched spatial footprint. Some of them are equivalent in size to a small country. As such, they comprise widely ranging tracts of contiguous and semi-contiguous built-up areas within a regional framework that may also incorporate outlying urban centers. Their fate is intimately bound up with 21st-century capitalism, which also, through diverse intermediations, stamps them with many of their most distinctive social and economic features. City-regions are now materializing at a rapid pace on all five continents, and all the more so as their growth is to a large extent powered by expanding global networks of trade and interaction. All that being said, city-regions are replete with severe social and economic problems, including stubborn class divisions that always threaten to break out into open social disturbances.

In pursuit of an even-handed investigation, I have paid special (but by no means exclusive) attention to the roles of economic geography and geopolitics in the historical and geographical eventuation of city-regions. I have sought to assign to these two bodies of thought their proper explanatory place in this analysis, not on account of some arbitrary urge to give them equal weight, but out of a concern to decipher the distinctive but variable role that each of them plays in the forging of city-regions as concrete empirical phenomena. In summary, we can say on the one hand that economic factors exert a critical influence on the genesis and internal organization of the city-region via their expression in agglomeration processes, transactional relationships, and the valorization of intra-urban space; on the other hand, political factors secure the viability of the city-region by means of collective action focused on strategic management and steering of the urban land nexus. In the order of history, the economic and political dimensions of the city-region are inextricably intermingled with one another; in the order of analysis, their operational modalities and effects can be seized in terms of *ceteris paribus* propositions that pinpoint particular developmental mechanisms. Once these general points have been acknowledged, it is essential to reaffirm, once again, that city-regions are always at the same time conditioned by idiosyncrasies related to local material, social, and cultural circumstances. However, whereas it is always correct to affirm that *difference* is an essential property of city-regions as a class, it is never adequate to take this as the culmination of the conscientious analyst's quest.

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## Note

1. See, for example Vainer (2014: 54): "All knowledge inexorably has a location and, consequently, is not universal."

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