



## The politics of periurbanization in Asia



### 1. Our global urban transition

The human species is now in the midst of a historically unprecedented and highly consequential shift. What started some 5000 years ago with the establishment of the first cities in the world's various urban culture hearths<sup>1</sup> began to reach full florescence only in the last century, as whole societies became first predominantly urban and then, as some would say, fully urbanized. What might be argued to be the historic norm of something on the order of five to ten percent of a society's population consisting of urban dwellers – a norm that implies a particular ecological relationship between the land, rural dwellers as primary producers on the land and urban dwellers as consumers of that primary production – has now been supplanted. Economic and other innovations that follow on from technological and institutional change now allow a society's population to consist of eighty percent or more of urban dwellers, effectively turning the historic norm on its head.

When examined as a cross-section at our current point in time, this urban transition is seen to be highly uneven, both spatially and economically, with those countries that have by now completed their transitions counted among the rich-world, developed countries of the Global North, while the majority-world, developing countries of the Global South are in many instances still in their early or middle stages of becoming urban. One could therefore speak of multiple urban transitions, reflecting the differences in experiences, timing and trajectories of change between the nations of the world. But by stepping back and adjusting one's lens so as to take in the *longue durée* of the past few centuries, one discerns instead an aggregate picture of a single global urban transition. *Homo sapiens* has continued to evolve, culturally at least, and has now transformed into *Homo urbanus*.

Questions of socio-economic development are intrinsically and inextricably bound up in the complex web of relationships through which urban transitions have occurred and continue to occur. One could point to various ideologically and disciplinarily divergent explanations in seeking to understand the relationship between development and urbanization, and in particular the global urban transition. Historians of the period of European colonialism, for example, are likely to stress the suppression of urban growth in the colonies, as colonial economies were geared toward primary production for export to the metropolitan centers of the raw inputs into Europe's growing industrial production. The analysis of an economist, on the other hand, is likely to emphasize

the increased efficiency of industrial production in the urban sector relative to that of rural, primary production, with the implication of increasingly higher value added in the urban economy than in the countryside. This analytical perspective, premised on progressive improvements in economic output, can be extended to consider the tertiary (service) economy and the quaternary (information) economy as steps beyond industrial urbanization in the putative post-industrial cities of the developed world.

This statement that we are now in the midst of our urban transition may seem a bit perplexing for an observer from the rich-world, an inhabitant of a society that has already completed its urban transition, as these are societies that for generations already have been normalized to urbanism as a way of life. For many of those residents of the Global South, in Asia and Africa especially, the changes that are now unfolding as societies shift from ten percent to fifty percent urban in little more than a generation or two are so enormous and unprecedented that one struggles even to find a vocabulary to describe them. Our natural tendency as observers and reflective theorists of the world around us is to base our expectations of the future on our experiences of the past, yet when the planet's total urban population is projected to double – and its total urbanized land area nearly triple – between now and the middle of the present century (Angel, 2012), past experiences are of only limited value for thinking about the future.

### 2. The rise of the periurban

From the perspective of many in the developing countries of Asia (the geographic focus of the papers in this collection), the global urban transition has now entered a new phase, with hyper-accelerated growth both in the number of cities and in the sizes of the largest of them. A good portion of this growth, if not the majority (in both territorial and population terms) will be in locales that are now described as being periurban, on the outer edges of extended metropolitan regions.<sup>2</sup> The term itself is an apparent neologism, a contraction of “peripheral” and “urban,” and despite the specificity of its dictionary definition (“of or relating to an area immediately surrounding a city or town”<sup>3</sup>) its use nonetheless remains variable and contentious.

How periurbanization differs from conventional notions of suburbanization, for one thing, is unresolved. Considering the global locations

<sup>1</sup> Or, one could think about this trend in the even grander sweep of human experience, with the establishment of the first cities seen as a further step onward from sedentarization and the beginnings of agriculture another 5000 or so years earlier. Alternatively, one could also narrow this time-frame by dating the urban transition from the advent of urban industrial manufacturing in the 18th century.

<sup>2</sup> The Extended Metropolitan Region (or EMR), as articulated by McGee and his colleagues was seen as a region-based form of urbanization in certain Asian contexts, and therefore in contrast to conventional notions of urban growth and change as originating out of cities rather than out of the larger region itself (Ginsburg et al., 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Definition from the online edition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/peri-urban>), accessed 11 June 2014.

of places encompassed by these two terms, one might postulate that the difference between the suburban and the periurban is somehow a North/South difference, with the suburb a characteristic of the now-developed countries of the world, while periurbanization refers to processes in the erstwhile developing world.<sup>4</sup> Words also carry connotative meaning, however, and in this instance, the “peri” of periurban conjures up memories of world systems theory with its central thesis bound up in the fraught relations between core regions or nations and those of the periphery. Perhaps the periurban zones within metropolitan regions of the Global South are not just those found at the regions’ outer edges but conceptually may include more central places that are nonetheless “peripheral” in other ways (Simone, 2010). Perhaps urban peripherality (or periurbanism) is less a spatial concept than it is a set of relations, or even a state of mind, or, to put it in Wirthian terms, a way of life.

Alternatively, we might consider that one is a subset, or special case, of the other, with periurbanization now put forth to describe any outward expansion of cities and suburbanization as conventionally understood seen in retrospect as the Western world’s variant, a process that occurred under particular socio-economic circumstances, including industrialization, new class formation, and the establishment and growth of a capitalist land development sector. If so, then perhaps each world region, or each subset of the world’s developing, urbanizing countries might be argued to have its own particular sets of processes and patterns that characterize the territorial expansion of the urban.

Might one therefore speak of a particularly Asian form of periurbanization as different from suburbanization, and perhaps different again from periurbanization in other world regions? If so, how would it be characterized? The dynamic interrelationship between land and population is a core issue in this, especially in those countries such as China, India, Vietnam, Indonesia and elsewhere where high population densities are found over extensive rural territories, which thereby sets a context for the sudden, in situ shift from rural to urban, or at least some form of urban. The question of the rural is therefore also inextricably bound up in the notion of the periurban. The overlapping, or interpenetration, of the urban and rural is thus, I would argue, a key characteristic of Asian periurbanization (and by extension, Asia’s urban transition), and one that distinguishes it from established notions of suburbanization. Whereas the narrative of the suburb is all about the outward expansion of cities into their immediate hinterlands, that of periurbanization is premised on the melding of two worlds, two cultures, the rural and the urban. We might consider, then, that the periurban is as much post-rural as it is pre-urban, if not more so, with the implication (as with other “post-instances”), that certain elements and aspects of the rural past persist and perhaps are re-articulated in new ways in the post-rural periurban.

The extensive and often intimate intermingling of rural and urban is not the only form of hybridity that characterizes periurban Asia. Indeed, Asian periurbanization is as much a product of its time as was the American suburb during its formative period. The critical factor here has been globalization, or particularly its Asian regional variant, with capital from the wealthier, more developed economies of the region being poured into the periurban zones in the major metropolitan areas of the region’s poorer countries. Asia’s periurbanization is thus a “glocal” phenomenon, a coming together or hybridization of global and local forces and interests. Out of this intricate, intimate mix, this hybridity of urban and rural, global and local, might we begin to perceive the emergence of new socio-economic relations, if not new cultural

formations — in short, a form of urbanism that differs from our current understanding of what it means to be urban?

### 3. Politics of periurbanization

This challenge to our teleology of the urban prompts us to consider the politics of periurbanization in a new light. Urbanization is itself an inherently political process, bound up as it is in the distribution and re-allocation of societal resources, land especially. When urbanization occurs in concert with structural economic change, as it inevitably seems to, such shifts in resource allocation may be even further exacerbated, leading to a politics of disenfranchisement as the weaker claimants of urban space (including, not incidentally, large proportions of periurban dwellers) lose their lands and livelihoods, in some instances and under certain conditions prompting reactions of societal resistance. As Asia’s urban transitions continue apace, such tensions have grown in recent years and are now increasingly articulated with reference to the discourse of the “right to the city,” with its insistence on the collective role of the citizenry to reshape the city on their own terms (Harvey, 2008). As this implies, a core concern of the politics of the periurban is with the nature of urbanism and urban life into the future. The question, then, is not only about how cities are made and lived in, but as well about who takes what responsibility — and who is able to take any responsibility — in addressing the problems and challenges posed by periurbanization, and by extension, the urban transition overall. Who shapes the periurban, and by what actions?

At one level, this can be put in terms of the daunting question of how to plan the periurban, as these are territories notoriously resistant to planning in the conventional sense, that is, as a function of the local state. This is in part because of the transitional nature of these places as well as the speed and scale at which change is occurring. Typically, periurban jurisdictions are characterized by institutional weakness, as the structures of urban administration are themselves transitional in periurban settings and are thus somewhat tentative in their ability to regulate or guide change. What might be thought of as the role of the state in shaping the periurban is thus relatively limited on the outer fringes of metropolitan regions, not only because of constrained state resources provided at local levels, but in many instances because of the relative strength of non-state sources of local authority as one moves beyond the remit of the urban core. In general, conventional state planning tends also to be jurisdictionally bounded, and thus ill-matched to the fragmented and regionally dispersed landscapes (and politics) of the periurban (Leaf, 2005).

As an alternative to state leadership in shaping the periurban, one can instead consider the role of the market, though here it is important to emphasize that there is not just one set of market conditions and institutions, a critical point that is all too often overlooked. A useful characterization in this regard can be found in historian Fernand Braudel’s tripartite schema of the economy that structures his analysis of the rise of capitalism (Braudel, 1981–84). Here, the important distinction is between the market economy as a historically long-standing set of practices, conventions and institutions which determine transactions between producers and consumers, and the capitalist economy, which derives from the market economy but is distinguished from it by the structure of ownership of the means of production and the seemingly inherent necessity of continuous economic growth in order to keep the system viable and functioning.<sup>5</sup> How the state, and in particular the local state of the periurban, interacts with non-state actors may

<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with the intellectual othering that divides the world into developed and developing components, a tendency by which, for example, those in the South must contend with the externally imposed “tyranny” of community participation while comparable group dynamics among those in the North are analyzed through the lens of social psychology (Cooke, 2001), or whereby cities in the North are studied and administered within a paradigm of “global and world cities” while those of the South are relegated to a discourse of developmentalism (Robinson, 2002). See Leaf (2011) for further elaboration.

<sup>5</sup> This distinction between market and capitalist economies bears more than just a passing resemblance to differences between what are now conventionally labeled as formal and informal sectors of the economy, though to confuse matters, Braudel’s third component of the economy, what he referred to as “material life” as a form of self-provisioning or subsistence economy, or even functioning as a type of “infra-economy,” tends to be casually lumped in with the non-capitalist market economy to comprise what is now conventionally labeled as the informal economy or the informal sector. The lines demarcating all of these categories, however, are indistinct and open to debate.

differ greatly between these two forms of market structure. Periurban development through the capitalist economy typically occurs through close interaction between capitalist developers and local state officials, as would be expected, though such interaction may spill over into cronyism or corruption, or in some instances with developers acting as “institutional entrepreneurs” by taking on the lead role in guiding local state agencies rather than being regulated by them (Dieleman, 2011).

It is the non-capitalist market economy in the periurban, however, about which we know the least. This has been a contentious and misunderstood area over the years, a field for normative and ideological positioning as much as for careful research and analysis. Periurban land occupation and self-help construction were once portrayed as forms of post-peasant urban pioneering, or promoted as an expression of a resilient communitarian ethic in resistance to urban market forces, or interpreted as a tendency toward increasing autonomy in contrast to the heteronomous practices of “formal” development (Turner, 1976). Further obscuring the issues here is the representation of the non-capitalist market economy as essentially a proto-capitalist or aspiring capitalist market (de Soto, 1989). Such confusion of categories is perhaps understandable, given the social embeddedness of the non-capitalist market economy in contrast to its lack in the capitalist economy (which is, after all, the form of the economy with which those who are doing the theorizing are most familiar, most normalized to, and for whom the capitalist economy therefore is taken as the default norm). Nor should this component of the burgeoning urban economy be seen as separable from the state, despite the understanding of the informal economy as the unregulated or even unenumerated economy. As I have argued elsewhere (Leaf, 1994, 2015), one should expect local authorities to be fully aware of the informal, even if it is in contravention of state regulatory norms and practices. This is just one indication of how the various components of the state itself do not necessarily function as a coherent whole, with some being repressive of informal practices even while others are tolerant or even supportive.

#### 4. Overview of articles

In convening the workshop<sup>6</sup> from which these papers are drawn, John Friedmann stated that he doubts the periurban can be theorized. The same could be said of many other aspects of societal endeavor. International migration, for example, cannot be theorized in the sense of being encompassed by a coherent and consistent body of theory. This does not mean, however, that there is no body of theory that can be brought to bear on such social phenomena. In the example of international migration, one finds a field that benefits from a range of theoretical lenses, which in some cases may be contradictory while in others mutually reinforcing (Massey et al., 1993). If the phenomenon itself cannot be theorized per se, we may nonetheless benefit from, in a sense, theorizing around it.

Thus it is with the articles in this collection.<sup>7</sup> Ostensibly, these all deal with the politics of periurbanization in one or more locales in Asia; beyond this, all may be summarily described as addressing particular institutions or institutional issues in seeking to understand periurbanization and periurbanism, although there is a fair bit of diversity in attempting to articulate what constitutes the institutional underpinnings of a phenomenon as large and complex as the rise of the periurban in Asia. In his essay, which draws primarily upon Japan's historic experience with its now-completed urban transition, Andre Sorensen (2016) is explicit in his focus on institutions, specifically the

institutions of governance that evolved as Japan urbanized. He argues that the institutions that shape the processes are themselves outcomes of the transitional nature of periurbanization, a product of both past history, drawn forward through path dependency, and the innovations which can arise out of the liminal space created when the rural institutional order has been superseded yet the structure of urban institutions has not yet solidified. One clear implication is that the specificities of the case – the locality and its social, political and economic contexts – are of paramount importance for interpreting periurbanization, despite the effects of either the various exogenous factors or the basic requirements of urban existence that recur across the various cases of the region.

Gavin Shatkin (2016), in contrast, emphasizes the comparative dimensions of periurban analysis, in particular the rise of the private capitalist sector, or as he termed it, the “real estate turn,” as it appears in various forms across the region. In this respect, one particular institutional factor – the private sector development industry – can be seen to be highly consequential irrespective of local specificities, thus providing fertile soil for comparative research. As can be seen in the paper itself, my use of the word soil here is more than metaphorical, as it is the land itself, and its rapid shifts in market value, ownership and uses, that underpin periurban institutional changes thereby incentivizing private capital and local state agencies to engage in real estate development. Such patterns seem to recur with striking similarity across the region, despite the importance of local factors.

Danielle Labbé (2016) brings to bear both the specificities of state policies and local institutions and the implications of exogenous factors in her analysis of how Vietnam's ongoing periurbanization is linked to what she has termed the country's “third land reform.” In certain important respects, however, the boundary between internal and external factors can be seen to be increasingly problematic. This can be seen especially in what Labbé refers to as the “discourse of an imagined urban modernity” that draws together local and central officials with developers and investors both domestic and private in a common project under the rubric of national economic development. In this respect, periurbanization in Vietnam can be seen to be both deeply rooted in that country's institutional and social context yet simultaneously driven by universalistic aspirations and actions.

Daniel Abramson (2016) is even more explicit in his paper on China's periurbanization in linking state policies on urbanization and discourses of modernization, and in so doing, pushes the question of the teleology of the (peri)urban even further. Although China is a country whose then-paramount leader once advocated “crossing the river by feeling the stones” as a sort of pragmatism of governance and development, current leadership seems focused on specific visions of the future for both urban and rural, visions which intersect with and thus function to define the nature of China's official development discourse. Yet, even as strong and determined a state as that of China's will be challenged by the ecological and social realities of the periurban, a point illustrated here with reference to the case of Chengdu. The Chinese leadership's search for order and harmony in its ongoing (and officially accelerated) urban transition is likely to be undone by the disorder seemingly inherent in urban and periurban development.

This special section concludes with a commentary by John Friedmann (2016) in which he both provides his interpretation of these papers and contextualizes the ongoing developments they describe and analyze relative to the broader trajectory of urban development and change in the world today.

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<sup>6</sup> Workshop on: *The Politics of Periurbanization in Asia: Comparative Perspectives*, 7–8 June 2013, convened by John Friedmann and Rohit Mujumdar and supported by the University of British Columbia's Institute of Asian Research Asian Urbanisms Cluster, the Liu Institute for Global Initiative Comparative Urban Studies Network, the School of Community and Regional Planning and St. John's College.

<sup>7</sup> In taking an explicitly theoretical approach to questions of the periurban in Asia, the articles here may be seen as part of a new emphasis of this journal, of expanding beyond empirical research in an effort to engage the discourse of urban theory.

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