Beyond City and Suburb: Thinking Regionally

Richard Briffault
Columbia Law School, brfflt@law.columbia.edu

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“City” and “suburb” as they were known and debated in the twentieth century are no more. Increasingly, the key urban unit in metropolitan America is the region. Robert Bruegmann’s Sprawl: A Compact History, a chronicle of the melding of city and suburban land use patterns, illustrates this development. Joel Kotkin’s The City: A Global History, which expresses concern about the loss of traditional urban distinctiveness, also reflects this. In her review of both books, Nicole Stelle Garnett appropriately raises issues of interlocal competition and equity, and the quality of urban life in metropolitan America, but she errs in framing them in terms of the fading differences between city and suburb. With the ongoing regionalization of urban life, we need regional strategies to check the fierce interlocal struggles for tax base; to provide for more equitable financing of local services; and to promote the intraregional cooperation necessary for regional growth.

We must begin by changing our images of city and suburb. As Kotkin and especially Bruegmann suggest, and other studies confirm, the longstanding model of a densely packed commercial and industrial center with a ghettoized minority population, surrounded by a low-density, residential periphery populated by affluent white commuters, no longer describes much of early twenty-first century metropolitan America. With the proliferation of suburban shopping malls, industrial parks, entertainment centers, condominiums, and apartment complexes, suburbia has taken on many of the economic features and land uses characteristic of cities. “Suburbs now contain more nonfamily households (largely young singles and elderly people living alone) than married couples with children.” Suburbs are no longer white: people of color constitute one-quarter of the residents of large metropolitan areas, and a majority of the Asian-Americans, half of the Hispanics, and three-eighths of the African-Americans who live in large metropolitan areas live in the suburbs. And suburbs are no longer — or not only — affluent. Many older suburbs — with poorer populations, aging housing stock, and obsolescent strip malls-face the same economic, fiscal, and social challenges traditionally associated with central cities. Cities have been changing, too. Many have relatively low densities, and some are relatively affluent. Due in part to gentrification and, more significantly, to immigration, there has been a return of married couples with children to the cities.

Emblematic of the blurring of city and suburb has been the emergence of “large, rapidly growing suburban cities” sometimes called “boomburbs.” These communities — like Mesa, Arizona, which in the 2000 census had more people than Minneapolis or St. Louis — are “urban in fact but not in feel.” More generally, in many metropolitan areas, particularly in the South and West,
the “sharp city-suburb differences in social class, housing attributes, and race” of the traditional
city-suburb model are gone.

Of course, urban regions are not homogenous — far from it. Class, demographic, and land use
differences among communities persist, particularly in older metropolitan areas. Affluence and
poverty, racial groups, business districts, retail activity, and arts, cultural, and entertainment
centers are not spread evenly across regions. There are richer and poorer places; crowded and
decentralized communities; all-residential and mixed-use localities. But these differences no
longer map onto the older division between the city and its suburbs. As a result, efforts to deal
with interlocal inequality and interlocal conflicts must break out of the city-suburb dichotomy.

Beyond the blurring of the city/suburb distinction, the regionalization of metropolitan life also
reflects the increasing mobility of people, businesses, and economic activity within metropolitan
areas. Typically, the people who live in a metropolitan area do not confine their daily lives to
their home locality, which, after all, takes up only a small fraction of the area. A person is likely
to live in one locality, work in another, shop in a third, seek entertainment in a fourth, and move
through a large number of others in the course of a day. Regions, not the cities within them,
function as labor and housing markets, and businesses look to the region, rather than to the
particular localities in which they are located, for employees, suppliers, and customers.

In the global economy, metropolitan regions are “the units of economic competition,” and the
prosperity of the component localities therefore rises and falls according to the economic health
of the region. Cultural, educational, and health institutions — museums, orchestras, universities,
and hospitals—serve their regions and play an important role in interregional competition.
Infrastructure, environmental, and natural resource issues such as airports, transit systems, air
and water quality, water supply, waste removal, and open space transcend local boundaries and
affect interregional competition as well. As David Rusk once put it, “[t]he real city is the total
metropolitan area-city and suburb.”

The regionalization of urban life has significant, albeit mixed, implications for legal analysis. On
the one hand, the blurring of the city-suburb difference eliminates one tension between socio-
economic reality and legal categories. The terms “city” and “suburb” are of limited use to
lawyers because all but the smallest suburbs are cities in a legal sense, that is, municipal
corporations with a range of legal and governmental powers and responsibilities. As
municipalities, both cities and suburbs can exercise police powers, regulate land, impose taxes,
borrow money, and provide services. With the city “as a legal concept” including both “cities”
and “suburbs,” it is useful that cities and suburbs as demographic entities are becoming more
alike.

On the other hand, and far more importantly, local government law has failed to keep up with the
regionalization of metropolitan area life. Not one major metropolitan area is governed by a single
general-purpose local government. Instead, nearly all metropolitan areas are fragmented in
multiple, often overlapping local governments. Metropolitan areas have, on average, over one
hundred localities within them; one study found that in the Northeast the typical metropolitan
region has nearly 170 local governments, including more than two counties, seventy-five
municipalities, fifty-eight special districts, and thirty-three school districts. As the adherents of
the “public choice” school have contended, a multiplicity of local governments can provide people with a variety of governmental choices, hold down taxes, and create incentives to deliver service more efficiently. But fragmentation and overlap also impose costs.

Fragmented regions find it difficult to cooperate to address issues of regional concern, such as the creation or expansion of critical infrastructure. Because local governments are largely dependent on their own tax bases to finance the services they provide their residents, metropolitan localities “engage in competitive fiscal mercantilism.” They deploy zoning rules, eminent domain, low-interest loans, infrastructure investments, and tax incentives to attract net revenue-producing land users, without regard for the disamenities — such as noise, traffic, and congestion — or the negative competitive effects that these developments may impose on neighboring communities. Localities also try to exclude net service-consuming users, such as low-income residents, from within their municipal boundaries. With municipal finances heavily dependent on revenues generated within local boundaries, fragmentation leads to enormous disparities in tax bases, tax rates, and the quality and quantity of locally provided services. Generally, the more fragmented the region, the greater the intraregional differences in tax bases: the most affluent areas impose the lowest tax rates for the best services, while the poorest areas—which often include old, inner suburbs as well as fiscally strapped central cities—charge the highest tax rates for the worst services.

Professor Garnett is surely right to criticize Bruegmann’s failure to acknowledge the plight of the “urban poor, many of whom live in cities not by choice but because they have no choice.” She is also right to stress the role of smarter municipal policies, such as police practices and land use regulations, in promoting public safety and economic activity. But I suspect that for many poorer urban municipalities—especially the older, declining suburbs, which lack even the business districts, housing stock, and cultural amenities of the older cities—such an “inside game” of pull-up-your-own-bootstraps reform will not be enough. A regionalist strategy that recognizes the relationships and connections among localities in a metropolitan area is essential.

Regionalism has long been a dirty word for the localists who write about urban governance. Indeed, it is striking how little Kotkin, Bruegmann, and Garnett have to say about regionalist approaches, except to briefly dismiss them. For most localists, regionalism is little more than a “push by elite groups” to supplant grass-roots decision-making in small local units with a new layer of unaccountable bureaucracy. In the past half-century, regionalism has had little political traction, and apart from a handful of mostly small and mid-sized areas, there are relatively few regional governing bodies.

Although the idea of regional government is faded, new forms of regional governance — rules and arrangements that permit, encourage, or require regional approaches to issues of growth, quality of life, and inequality but that do not destroy local autonomy — are essential. States should amend the laws that govern local formation and boundary change to limit the incorporation of new municipalities while enabling older ones to expand by annexation. Such regionalist incorporation and annexation rules in some of the most rapidly growing areas in the South and West have produced much less fragmented and less internally unequal regions, with greater opportunities for cooperation and, perhaps not coincidentally, better economic performance.
Another regionalist reform would require localities to internalize some of the spillovers their land use decisions impose on the rest of the region. If local recruitment of a new industrial facility, shopping mall, big box store, or entertainment center imposes traffic, noise, or pollution on adjacent localities, then the locality could be required to compensate its neighbors for those costs.

Most importantly, states should promote fiscal regionalism to make localities less dependent on their own limited resources; the tax base of the entire metropolitan region should be used to address the needs of the region and of the poorer communities within it. There are multiple models for fiscal regionalism already in existence, although most have relatively limited uses. For instance, New York City and the seven New York counties surrounding it finance the region’s mass transit network with a region-wide sales tax surcharge. In the Denver area, a region-wide tax supports cultural facilities that are located in one locality but serve the broader metropolitan region. Even more ambitiously, Minnesota mandates tax base sharing in the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul region, so that some of the increased revenue from commercial and industrial growth is placed in a fund for redistribution to localities in the region, according to a formula based on need.

These and other fiscal regionalist measures can reduce tax and service disparities, support regional facilities and amenities, and help spread the benefits of development throughout the region. By making the precise location of new economic development less important, fiscal regionalist measures promote collaboration among localities and dampen the ferocity of interlocal fiscal competition. Fiscal regionalism advances both interlocal equality and regional development, and does so without impairing the local decision-making autonomy that is at the heart of localism.

These specific proposals are less important than the regionalist perspective that drives them. Our urban governance structures must become more attentive to the regional nature of urban life in metropolitan America. That does not require regional government. But we must begin to think regionally and to create political and legal arrangements that promote the well-being of the region and of all the diverse localities-and people-within it.

*Richard Briffault is the Joseph P. Chamberlain Professor of Legislation at Columbia Law School.*