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Secondary Cities and the Global Economy

By Xiangming Chen and Ahmed Kanna

Cities operate today in a more complex, indeed, global world. Cities help shape the global economy and culture, and are affected by it as they grow or decline. Cities change in varying ways in response to local and extra-local conditions. In this article, we address the understudied but distinctive conditions and roles of so-called secondary cities in the global economy. The critical importance of many secondary cities stems from and sustains their historical path of development and their shifting positions in national and global urban systems.

The 21st century is the “Century of Cities,” when and where cities have become more critical to the global connection and organization of economic activities and everyday life. But we often do not look at the importance of cities beyond a short list—New York, London, Paris—to which we have correctly and, in a timely fashion, added the dynamic megacities of Shanghai and Mumbai from the rising economic powers of China and India.¹ This is a narrow-minded and short-sighted gaze at the interconnected world of cities. Although much less known, many secondary cities are playing increasingly stronger roles in the global economy than expected of their size and status, and thus deserve a focused understanding of why and how this is so.

In a new edited book, *Rethinking Global Urbanism: Comparative Insights from Secondary Cities* (Routledge, 2012), we have brought together a set of less familiar cities that are

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not usually part of conversations about globalization or global cities (see Map 1). This will at first appear to be a counter-intuitive approach. Hardly any of the cities examined in our volume approach the physical scope, demographic size or economic power of such world metropolises as New York and London. In some cases, the volume’s contributors write about urban areas caught up in trajectories radically different from that of globalization’s winners: cities and urban regions, as Brent Ryan did with regard to Detroit, that inexorably spiraled toward a condition of “de-globalization.” Our unconventional choice of cities, however, is directly connected to our argument in this book: “secondary,” that is, less well-examined cities bring better to light global processes that have been marginalized or neglected in research on global cities. Such processes include: 1) alternative and new cartographies of globalization; 2) the role of local, regional, and “deep” histories in contemporary urban globalization; and 3) the complex role of culture in urban experience and global urban circuits.

New Cartographies of the Global Urban

A few years ago, John Short pointed out that globalization “act(s) in and through” all cities: “almost all cities can act as a gateway for the transmission of economic, political and

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cultural globalization.”² We agree but also caution against what still appear to be the vestiges of a reifying language which opposes “globalization” and “the city,” such that the former, like an external object, acts upon or through the latter. One of the contributions we seek to make to the discussion of global urbanism is to point to what such new, alternative cartographies of the global³ look like in the emerging 21st century. Using their familiarity with a number of somewhat unfamiliar cities, the contributors collectively reveal multiple layers of the global urban landscape that have tended to be hidden and latent.

Strongly evident in Zukin’s opening chapter is such an appreciation of how an “aesthetic mode of production” services the remaking of many cities. Museums, artists’ enclaves, and iconic “starchitecture” have become central to urban entrepreneurialism and redevelopment. Major world cities such as New York and Shanghai become linked with aspiring, or “secondary,” world cities, some discussed in our book. As the model of the industrial city anchoring a modernizing national economy recedes further into the past, a global circuit of ideas and symbolic capital

emerges in which all cities strive toward a single ideal: the city of consumption and spectacular urban landscapes.

In discussing Harare, Zimbabwe and Johannesburg, South Africa, Tyanai Masiya (Chapter 8) like Zukin engages processes of localization, if from a slightly different angle. His study of participatory budgeting examines, like Zukin, the outcomes of the circulation of urban expertise. Participatory budgeting, pioneered by Brazil in the late 1980s, has been more recently adapted in Africa, more successfully in Johannesburg, much less so in Harare. If the transnational transfer and imitation of cultural strategies and renewal projects end up, as Zukin argues, homogenizing cities, the application of participatory budgeting to unfavorable national political and local contexts can largely fail, as in Harare.

Sarah Moser’s study of Putrajaya-Malaysia and Dompak-Indonesia (Chapter 9) is another striking illustration of such less well-examined or emerging alternative cartographies of the global. Moser’s analysis of these new administrative capitals demonstrates a process she terms “serial seduction,” which questions the assumption that cities are stratified in a Western-

dominated urban hierarchy. Both administrative capitals generally eschew an orientation to the West, opting instead for a Singapore-influenced model. For example, both of the new administrative capitals seek to emulate the synthesis of neoliberalism, public hygiene, and greenery of their well-established Southeast Asian cousin. Both cities, moreover, attempt to embody a vision of the “progressive Muslim city” of the 21st century, an alignment of neoliberal “best practices” and Muslim values. In turn, they are influencing other urban areas in the Muslim world, cities such as Astana, Kazakhstan and Abuja, Nigeria, an emerging globality of “hi-tech cities with Muslim values.”

New transnational maps, in a more literal sense, have also been emerging more broadly across Asia during the past three decades. For example, the rise of the Tianjin Binhai New Area (TBNA), China, according to Chang Liu and Xiangming Chen (Chapter 7), represents a large global-city region that incorporated Saskia Sassen’s insights about the denationalized, autonomous character of the global city.⁴ One of the fastest growing local economies in China, TBNA has been dubbed “China’s third growth engine” (after Shenzhen, which is also covered in our book, and Pudong-Shanghai) by the Chinese media. However, “Tianjin is by no means a global city,” write Liu and Chen, due to its lack of financial service functions under the large shadow of nearby Beijing as a politically motivated powerful center of producer services.

Whereas the TBNA city-region reflects the potent policies of the post-Mao Chinese state, the rise of Dubai demonstrates urban-scale adaptations to wider regional political-economic shifts. In Chapter 2, Kanna shows how interconnected Dubai’s fortunes are to the wider Eurasian and African regions in which

Map 1: Locations of some secondary cities.



Source: The map was drawn by Nick Bacon

The deep economic history of regions such as Detroit-Windsor and the Connecticut River Valley has profoundly shaped the ways in which these regions have adapted to major shifts in the global economy over the past half century.

it is situated.⁵ Over the past forty years, Dubai has become an important node, if not one of the most important nodes, in a transnational region connecting the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, Africa, East Asia, and Russia. The factors at play—the rise of the UAE petro state, regional and world geopolitics—are many and complex. Among other things, the case of Dubai shows how a free-trade, politically semiautonomous city-state can act as an extraterritorial financial and export hub for other nation-states.⁶ Dubai further questions conventional notions of global urban hierarchy and the boundedness of global cities. If the notion of a hierarchical global urban network is sustainable, then this framing must account for maps of the global, which accommodate the globalization of non-Western types of symbolic capital and expertise, as well as new geographies of economic exchange and interconnections.

In considering the cases of two former motors of North American industrialism, Springfield, Massachusetts, and Detroit-Michigan–Windsor-Ontario, Robert Farrant (Chapter 4) and Brent Ryan (Chapter 5) both make the intriguing case that, although the capitals of global financial and services economy are still mainly located in the Global North, much of the remainder of the Global North is now dotted with dying cities. This is a condition that Ryan terms “de-globalization,” by which he means that these cities are no longer the economic engines that had benefited from the expanding global economy and market. The results for these former industrial capitals have been catastrophic. The solutions proposed by influential urban actors are predictably corporatist and neoliberal: the creation of consumption-oriented, “parasitic” megaprojects (as Ryan puts it) such as casinos, museums, and outdoor urban streets-cum-shopping malls. It is tempting to conclude that cities such as Springfield, Detroit, and Windsor, Canada, are now disconnected from the main action of globalization. In fact, these city-regions’ current struggles are exactly a direct result of the shifts in the global economy.

Deep Urban Economies and Histories

“The deep economic history of a place matters,” argues Saskia Sassen in a recent article, and is important in shaping how a city develops. Homogeneity is not desirable for globalizing institutions because “the global economy needs diverse specialized economic capabilities.”⁷ Globalization is multifarious, fractured, and plural. Different globalized circuits connect particular countries and cities: Mumbai to London and Bogotá via real-estate investment; New York to Brazil, Kenya, and Indonesia via circuits of trade in coffee futures; São Paulo, Johannesburg, and Sydney through metal wholesale circuits; and Mumbai and Dubai via retail circuits.⁸

This point can be extended to urban areas which have been adversely affected by global processes. The deep economic history of regions such as Detroit-Windsor and the Connecticut River Valley has profoundly shaped the ways in which these regions have adapted to major shifts in the global economy over the past half century. This often results in disconnection from the most profitable circuits of the global economy, but can bring with it other kinds of global interconnection, as can be seen, for example, in increasingly transnational, migrant demographics of deindustrializing cities such as Hartford and Springfield in the Connecticut River Valley. Writing about a totally different context, Liu and Chen in our book show how the national state is centrally involved in shaping China’s economic trajectory and structuring China’s urban articulations with the global economy. Urbanization and city-building are central to the position that China wants to assume as a leader in the 21st century manufacturing and transshipment economies, with another secondary city Shenzhen (and relative to Shanghai), and now Tianjin Binhai New Area (relative to Beijing) spearheading this process.

Moving from strict economics to the political-economic, Kanna focuses on how the imperial encounter shaped both Dubai’s and Singapore’s postcolonial and global development. The tradition of being a politically authoritarian, economically free market entrepôt is a continuous thread running through both cities’ deep economic histories. Between the early 19th and mid-21st century, Singapore became central to British expansion in the Malay Peninsula, a focal point of free trade in Southeast Asia, and a premier global free port; Dubai was far more isolated and impoverished (again, as a result of British colonial policy), but it too was operating as a free port as early as the first decade of the 20th century. Moreover, the governmental institutions in Dubai, as in other parts of the British-dominated Arab Gulf, still follow the mold crafted by the British in collaboration with local princes during the colonial period. In Singapore, the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) had an ironic effect: it both mobilized an anti-occupation movement and fatally delegitimized British rule in the Malay region, setting the scene for the rise of the People’s Action Party (PAP) with, again, profound consequences for contemporary Singaporean globalization and urbanism.

Culture Matters in Multiple Ways

Anthropologists and other students of culture generally look at cultural processes through one (or a combination) of at least three lenses: culture as a symbolic resource in political or economic agendas, culture as structure for experience, and culture as source of agency (i.e., cultural practices). The theme

of cultural experiences and practices as carriers and shapers of globalization has been underemphasized in research on global cities. Beth Notar (Chapter 10 in our edited book) is concerned with how cultural worldviews intersect with status and class in a rapidly globalizing provincial city in China. “China,” writes Notar, “is rebuilding cities on an arguably unprecedented scale: there has been no other country which has engaged in such radical ‘creative destruction’ of *all* of its cities in such a short span of time.” Kunming, the capital city of the Yunnan province, caught up in this process and, situated in the Greater Mekong Subregion, China’s hub and pathway to Southeast Asia, is becoming an “intensely global” city. Notar focuses in particular on the experiences of Kunming taxi drivers, whose ranks consist of people who have not benefited from China’s reform period: people who lost land or businesses as a result of the reforms. To impose some meaning on such an urban milieu, Kunming’s cabdrivers draw upon traditional Chinese urban symbolism, in which a liminal zone of vague unease separates the urban and the rural. “The cab drivers label as dangerous those places that are liminal ones between urban and rural space, where marginalized people enter the city.” Familiar categories of sociocultural outsider often date back to the 19th century. Notar suggests that these categories “represent an effort to try to assert an older conceptual order on the radically new physical and social landscapes of the city, to harness old scapegoats for new conditions.”

Rodney Collins (Chapter 11) discusses the intersection between cultural and social structures, the colonial legacy, and capitalism in his analysis of how everyday Tunis residents experience the city, as can be seen in attitudes toward and frequentation of the city’s varied coffeehouses. One of Collins’s interlocutors, a male government employee, produced an impromptu mental map of the city, simultaneously spatial, social, and gendered: “He pointed out that not only are there [mixed gender cafés] and [men’s cafés], but that these are also found in distinct neighborhoods.” The male-dominance of men’s cafés, usually unnoticed by men, contrasts with the cafés on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba, which since 2003 has been subjected to gentrification. Here, the cafés evidence gender mixing, as opposed to the mostly male-dominated cafés of the nearby *medina* (old city) and the popular neighborhoods. But this apparent embrace of diversity is not without irony. Freed from official pricing regulation (as stipulated by an elaborate state categorization of coffeehouses), the *mixte* cafés of the Avenue Bourguiba charge twice to ten times the *sha’by* price for a cup of coffee.

Chapter 12 is a reflection by Keisha-Khan Perry on the tyrannies, both subtle and not so subtle, of gentrification. A project by a Brazilian development firm in Gamboa de Baixo, a class- and racially mixed neighborhood of Salvador, brings with it an apparatus of segregating walls. Concrete walls, argues Perry, index racial boundaries, segregation, and the illegalization of life among the urban poor in Brazil. Black and poor urbanites become entangled in a state-neoliberal matrix of exclusion, racialization, and disposability, both of their bodies and

their dwelling spaces. Urban peripherization actually helps to produce awareness and resistance. Black women in Latin America and throughout the black diaspora, writes Perry, and in particular those who live in the poorest neighborhoods, have been regarded as *de facto* noncitizens, facing the constant threat of expulsion to the peripheries of cities such as Salvador. It is black women’s participation and grassroots organizing in this secondary city that creates new ways of understanding the meaning of citizenship and the deep legacies of race in Brazil.

Second to None

While the urban literature has become more comparative, diverse, and global over the last two decades or so, it has sustained a strong focus on scale and power, often in combination, as two salient features that draw most research attention to only certain cities. To redress the bias toward large scale and great power in choosing cities to study, we need to note the relative weights of different-sized cities in shaping the present and future urban world. According to UN-HABITAT,⁹ in 2000, 60.7 percent of the urban population in developing countries lived in either intermediate (500,000–1 million) or big (1–5 million) cities, while large (5–10 million) and mega- (more than 10 million) cities accounted for only 17.7 percent of the total. In addition, 47.2 percent of intermediate cities and 47.7 percent of big cities experienced high growth (2 to 4 percent per annum) or very high growth (above 4 percent per annum) during 1990–2000, compared to 42.1 percent for large and megacities, which also had a larger percentage of them in slow growth or decline. In all United Nations’ forecasts on urban growth to 2030 and beyond, intermediate and big cities (with less than 5 million people), not megacities, will account for the largest share of urban growth in developing countries. In both China and India, which will contribute the most people toward future urban growth in developing countries and the entire world, intermediate or midsized cities (a size designation by China for those cities with populations up to 5 million) will absorb almost half of their urban expansion. The economic importance of these cities “in the middle” will also rise. Midsized Chinese cities will account for 34 percent of the GDP in 2025, up from 29 percent in 2007.¹⁰

Besides their aggregate demographic and economic significance, each of the midsized cities, sometimes also called second-tier or secondary cities, in different ways face a similar set of challenges: sufficient economic growth, job creation for large numbers of in-migrants, balance between wealth and poverty, improving urban governance, social conflict, spatial segregation, and dealing with historical legacy and recent globalization. We

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simply do not know enough about how this large category of cities, their diverse communities and residents experience and respond to these varied challenges because we have not studied enough of them, and rarely through a comparative lens on the different facets of these issues. This empirical neglect has limited our ability to theorize the wide variations in global urban processes along and beyond the dominant vectors of scale and power.

What can secondary cities, or better, those in the middle range of the spectrum just mentioned, teach us that we would not otherwise learn from and about? First of all, their relative status not only makes them vertically connected to the first-tier cities that are often much larger and much more global but also maps them horizontally onto the global circuit of ideas and practices that flow and traverse across national boundaries and locate them deeply into the local cultural and economic milieus. The horizontal flow of urban governance ideas and practices among secondary cities manifests itself both in Johannesburg, South Africa, and Harare, Zimbabwe, adopting participatory budgeting from Porto Alegre (population 1.5 million), Brazil, albeit with differential success in their respective African local contexts.

The next lesson pertains to how the study of secondary cities can help us critique the dominant globalization and global city discourse that features hierarchical power and inter-city competition, in light of complicating historical and political forces operating at the subnational and regional levels. Whereas globalization or global competition has undoubtedly eroded manufacturing in old American cities of the Northeast and Midwest, local and regional responses to this grave erosion have varied considerably, reflecting the severe limits to, and the big failures of, urban regeneration strategies no matter how radical they may be. Despite their very different scales and industrial traditions, Springfield, Massachusetts, and Detroit, Michigan, have both experienced a protracted decline in machine tools and automobile manufacturing for the last several decades, respectively. The

two cities, however, diverged in the major strategies they have used to deal with the budgetary malaise of lost tax bases.

Other such cities covered in our edited book offer fresh empirical evidence on the spatial construction and manifestation of national identity, social imagination, and political exclusion that challenge our expectations. Whereas the increasingly open and 'borderless' world is supposed to weaken the nation-state, the national governments of Malaysia and Indonesia have devised new strategies to maintain and materialize the 'imagined community' of the nation by designing Muslim-style architecture for their new small cities of Putrajaya and Dompak, respectively. Having found taxi drivers in Yunnan, China, perceiving dangerous people, or those they don't want to carry such as the peasant or ethnic minority groups, as from outside the city, Beth Notar sees this as reinforcing the old urban-rural divide and category that should be in retreat under the more open and fluid conditions of China's economic reform.

The lessons we have identified above may or may not be sufficiently robust and representative of all secondary cities for advanced and systematic theorizing of the evolving global urban literature. Without the large-scale and dominant positions of top-tier cities in the global urban hierarchy, several secondary cities in this book are still strongly plugged into the global flows of cultural strategies, urban practices, and economic activities, but in different ways. More importantly, by turning to local histories and politics, some chapters in our book have successfully situated their cases in an alternative framework that favors looking at de-globalizing and resurgent national and local forces as mattering more directly to urban restructuring and practices. In all these regards, we have made secondary cities "second to none" for understanding the global economy and culture and its diverse and deep local impact. ■

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"A great collection that takes us to the next phase of global urbanism" - Saskia Sassen, Columbia University

"This volume is a departure because it takes seriously the idea that global processes are at work in cities of all sizes and in all regions of the world." - Dennis R. Judd, University of Illinois at Chicago

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