

Paolo Perulli

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# THE ONTOLOGY OF GLOBAL CITY-REGIONS

Paolo Perulli

## 1. Introduction

In 1950 the German philosopher of law Carl Schmitt wrote that the Eurocentric ordering in international law was declining and the old *Der Nomos der Erde* (Law of the Earth) was at the end. A new global order was needed. It was based on the fact that beyond the interstate political order a new global space was created by the free (stateless) world economy. A general de-localization provoked the explosion of the Eurocentric world. In the economic field the old spatial ordering of the Earth was losing its structure. This was an astonishing early prediction of what we are currently experimenting with globalization.

In more recent years, literature in fields like economic geography and urban studies has coined the terms "global city" and "global city-region" to analyse contemporary urban world. It is an assemblage of economy and society looking for representation (Scott, 2001). Here we can find a nexus between the two different bodies of theories cited above. Both are based on the divergence between the old state space and the emergent global economic space.

The creation of global city-regions is a too recent phenomenon to evaluate its stability in terms of political and institutional response to the crisis of Nation-States. We have to be careful in this sense. An attempt made twenty years ago by sociologist Charles Tilly to suggest European macro regions as a possible substitute for Nation-States in the making of European Union has not been successful (Tilly, 1992). Long historical processes explain the State formation

as an alternative to Empires, city federations, city-states and other concurrent political forms and its current transition towards global assemblages (Sassen, 2006). Yet Tilly's (1991) theory of coercion and capital as key confliction forces in European state making is still crucial and can be expanded to our times. State as the place of "coercion" and global city-region as the accumulation of "capital" can be a valid conceptual tool to explain today's world. On one side the Nation-States, on the other the global economic forces concentrated in global city-regions. Therefore global city-regions in Europe are constantly involved in European strategies due to their primary economic role. Yet their role in European policy-making is limited if not irrelevant. This apparent paradox can be explained by the interest of Nation-States to be considered the representative bodies of "their" global city-regions.

The ontology (in the sense of Foucault's, 1984, ontology of the present, «the historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying») of the today emergent global city-regions is the matter of this paper. It will follow the Foucauldian idea that three axes and trajectories – knowledge, power and ethics – characterize the ontology of ourselves in modernity. In the current passage from Nation-States to global city-regions different aspects of knowledge, power and ethics are at stake. Power relations in the economy, demands of society or of population zones, technologies and capabilities are changing in size and scope. Essential conditions under which such changes

occur in the global world include a different substance and nature than the old centralized metropolis of Nation-States in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The substance of global city-region is functional and primarily economic: it is a “web of contracts” much wider and global than in the national epoch. New public-private partnerships emerge across and within cities not only in the economy but also in society, in fields like knowledge, technology, education, welfare, and culture. However such partnerships are selective and unable to include the multitude: the excluded, those who remain outside, in many cases encompass a wide plurality of social groups and interests. The reasons are structural, as explained in the following section.

## 2. The new economic base of the city

The economic base of contemporary cities is changing. One can start from two traits: the internationalization of economic systems and the flexible informalization of labour markets and relations connected to a strong growth of functional urban services. Hence the cities open to new geographies both of industrialisation and territorial development. The crossover between these two dimensions (Storper, Walzer, 1989) that used to occur in the urban environment, now extends over entirely new and broadened scales.

The economy is today largely diffused across territories and distributed in long value-chains, yet its base is within cities.

Hence the problem to start from is indeed the following: is the contemporary city still “installed” in a territory? Is it still as it certainly has been in city’s history, a point constituting a centre around which a world was built? A world that could be of different dimensions, but that certainly had a centre. Is the contemporary city still this? And, since we come from a world in which

the same word *demos* came to mean both *people* and *territory*, can we today live separating people and territory? On the one hand there is the city’s territory, on the other the flows (of activities made in the world and hence perennially on the move, of non resident, migrant population) that seem to be exponentially growing in all directions within and between territories. Migrants are 191 million all over the world, a small percentage of the world population (3%). But of these, 64 million are in Europe, 53 in Asia and 44 in America. In a country like Germany the workforce is 14% foreign, the figure is 17% in Spain, 12% in France, 16% in the us. The largest part of the flows is concentrated in cities: in Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Brussels between  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the population is foreign, in London the figure is 21.1%; a  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the population of New York is foreign; in Toronto and Vancouver foreigners make up more than 40% of the population (Therborn, 2011).

The second question concerns the region that, at the beginning, is the result of a king’s act that traces out borders that are sacred and impassable. Can this now be a borderless region? When we speak today of regions, we define territories that have no precise borders, whose production activities are a lot more dislocated than in the past. Safe to say, there are the region’s administrative borders, but these are now perforated and crossed by flows of all types and all directions. All regions, and in particular those bordering other countries, are affected by these trans-frontier dynamics. The regions of Northern Italy are an example: ports and corridors are points of transit towards the North of Italy, a platform attracting resources, people and goods on the move across regions and firms. But the same goes for other European city-regions like Ile de France, Catalonia, the Dutch Randstad, and the German Laenders like Bavaria. Hence from an administrative point of view, the region has only limited effects on the socio-economic dynamics that traverse the territories.

The coordination of spatial, functional and sectoral dimensions is the reason for impressive institutional change (Salet, Thornley, Kreukels, 2003). And it is not by chance that urban scholars have coined the term "global city-region".

What is the world made up of? It is made up of global city-regions that are no longer cities or traditional regions. They are an amalgam, new mixtures of economy and society (the theme of mixing as the place of opposites is typical of our contemporary time). They don't have a precise political or institutional representation: perhaps they are in search of it. And tendentially they are global city-regions in the sense that the flows that traverse them are not territorially located, neither can they be confined in a city or regional dimension, but they are global in nature. Technology drives the world, immaterial and a-territorial as it is. Hence, has this process of loss of places and centres, this deployment, reached the point of impeding any margin, edge or limit to the global world? Have *urbs* and *orbis* come to mean "everywhere and no matter where", as J.-L. Nancy (2002) writes? These are the questions we must ask, since, wherever we are positioned or deployed, we inevitably belong to this dimension. A dimension that certainly presents different characteristics according to the contexts, the continents. Without a doubt the European city preserves historic-political peculiarities (Le Galés, 2002), but this is the global challenge that lies before us. Not only the Asian and South American megalopolises, seen in their 'catastrophic' physical and demographic expansion, are at stake, but also the Western and European cities.

### 3. The global city-region

In the text inaugurating the global city-region debate (Scott, 2001), a table listed the first thirty in the world. Tokyo leads the way with 28 million inhabitants

calculated in 2015, followed by many Third world and few Western cities (New York, London, Paris, Chicago). If we consider Northern Italy as a global city-region it would be up among the first places.

In Castells' terms, one speaks of "spaces of flow". The possibility of defining a city appears strongly undermined once the world can only be read as a world of flows that belong to types of relations that escape control at a given point. That is to say the city can be a point, a node or junction, but these flows can in no way be identified with spatial governance. And perhaps here lies the strongest impediment. Because throughout the twentieth century this spatial control was still possible in the metropolitan form. It was said that the governance and the control were entrusted to the city and its metropolitan forms: even in a highly articulated way (like the "thousand governments" of the American city), but all the same identifiable as units. It is in this point that the Simmelian metropolitan intellect as the force capable of ordering the space is most undermined. Today we see ever less spatial governance. Rather what we perceive before us is anomia, loss of capacity of governance, the traversal of flows of a physical, immaterial and virtual type in all directions. These flows do not follow an organized pattern, or a form capable of being governed. They are the product of market forces, of anonymous matrixes, of complex interdependencies. In some cases like that of the telematics networks or mobility infrastructures the most we can do is identify actors or decision-makers who decide to invest in building a network. But the way in which myriads of actors behave, deploy, receive signals and use these networks defies any pattern or governance.

The ontology of global city-region as a "web of contracts" fits well into the assemblage theory. The scale and territory are not given but constructed in a non-uniform way, depending on the different scale, scope and functional entities taken into account.



The global city-region is certainly a theme on which to reflect in the fluid, extended dimension today imposed by the economy and society. It is hardly a politico-institutional dimension already known. Does the global city-region of Northern Italy in the Mediterranean context (see Figure 1) have a connotation that we can define?

Is it a "city-region"? Probably this is an interesting approach: more than a city-region in the sense used by Californian geographers to formulate this idea, it is a "region of cities". A particular polynuclear fabric that thickens into networks that are ever less locally, evermore macro regionally and globally defined (towards France and Germany, Eastern Europe and increasingly Asia).

#### 4. Against the "generic city": a three level model

In urban theory and practice, in different fields like urban anthropology, architecture and urban planning, the widely used concept of "generic city" highlights that the uniformity of contemporary city is more an ideology than an idea. The generic city is one that has at last freed itself of its "centre", of the slavery of the cultural fabric of the "city in history" (the Mumford legacy), and has accepted almost like liberation the advent of a uniform, indifferent space. This is the ideology that needs to be criticised. Even when faced with processes of transformation with prevalence of a space of flows compared to a space of places, we have to maintain the idea that the city is a plural phenomenon. A single

form of city does not exist; a uniform approach to the city does not exist. Even in the positions of scholars like Marc Augé and Rem Koolhaas there is the risk that many thoughts on the city converge towards the ideology of “non-places”. Or that is interpretable around the new vulgate of the “generic city” or the “endless city”. We can critically evaluate these theories of the city in the era of globalisation with a research programme. To this end, it is a matter of trying to reason on a model that proposes three levels of reflection.

A first level is one that we practice every day acting in the city, living the city, governing the city. It is the level of political action of contemporary political agents. This first key-concept is “local” development. We have a rather limited idea of local development, as we often think that it substantially means something small-scale that concerns the dimensions of our immediate quarter, our neighbourhood, at most the urban district involved. We have to move down to a model that considers the variety, multiplicity, plurality of which our world is very

**Table 1. Model of Analysis**

<i>Level of Analysis</i>	<i>Key-concept</i>	<i>Exemplary Field</i>
Political agency	Local development	Industrial districts
Epistemological reflection	Local	City Ideal types
Ontology	Contract	Connecting sites

rich. The models we have experimented, from industrial districts to enterprise networks, have gone all around the world. The local development of systems like the Californian ones is a field of observation that could produce some benchmark models where culture has a central role. These are processes of local development drawn by cultural systems, because California is only interpretable – as Castells and others have shown – via the gaining hold of cultural systems that have produced forms of innovative organization of the economy, that in turn have encouraged decentralized and reticular forms of society as seen in the Californian as well as in the Italian models.

What was true in the recent past (the 1980s) is still true today? In other words how to explain the path of development of the Californian model (its regional advantage, its openness to entrepreneurs and labour force from countries like China and India, its strong

networks of entrepreneurship etc.) compared to the poor performance of Italian industrial districts in the last 20 years?

A different dimension of local and global policies is at work here. A different urbanity too? The closeness of Silicon Valley to Los Angeles and San Francisco is a matter of fact, including the urban culture, population and services provided. Whereas in the Italian case, industrial districts and cities have only partially coalesced in a modern network system, and ‘anomic’ social behaviour is often the rule in a poorly governed institutional framework.

The second analytic level to be considered is an epistemological reflection on what is meant by “local”. That is the idea that the “local” is a structure that in itself contains elements of “globality”. In other terms that the local is not a small-scale structure, but it is something that in itself already

contains the global scale. The theme of the city under this point of view constitutes an extraordinary field of application. It has always been so: we should not forget that in Western culture, after the tower of Babel, the founding of cities and the multiplication of languages proceed hand in hand. Hence from the theme of local development we inevitably reach the theme of the city. Perhaps here we can redefine themes of policy, of political action, dig deeper to see what families of models can be found and fielded. What is in fact needed is a plural approach to the issue of the city that questions the idea of a uniform city towards which we are all heading in times of planetary urbanization.

Hence we should again strike up the theme of the plurality of urban models looking at models that we have behind, which we should examine and reflect upon. Starting from Max Weber's ideal types of cities: cities of production, of consumption, embodied in distinct social groups and ethics. This reflection is also born out of research, like that of L. Davezies (2008) on France, on the basis of income that sustains the cities. Alongside a type of "entrepreneurial" city oriented towards international competitiveness and that engenders a sizeable income in market activities, another type of city exists whose income is mainly based on the transfer of public funds, public expenditure and pensions (a new version of Weber's "pensionopoly").

A third and final level of analysis of the city concerns its ontology. In the approach followed here the classic dimension of "being" a city is declined in that of "having" the nature of connecting sites. If we pass from the nature of place (as in classic urban/rural divide) to one of flows (as in new urban theory) the essential nature of the city is now contractual. Contracts are texts, objects, products written or tacitly produced by interlinked actors. In the reticular world

of today, the essence of society is to be a network where nodes are intertwined and many elements are not (yet) connected. As Latour (2005) puts it, a network is made first of all of void spaces. The power of connection in all its constitutive forms (technical, functional, expressive, political etc.) is the essential nature of the city.

## 5. The city by projects

"City by projects" means that urban representation is redefined by contractual interactions taking place in the city, following a path based on the idea of the project. We are emerging from a crisis in the planning models of modern rationality, by which we thought that we would have been able to launch a network in the future and then turn back from there to see what needs to be done today. This planning dimension has been dilapidated over the last decades as far as urbanization processes have spread around the globe. However a dimension for city projects can still be conceived, but of what type? This is the theme of strategic planning. It is about cities which appear to be able to withstand the impact of standardization or homologation of the "generic city" that seeks to trivialize any form of construction, any form of urban thought. Strategic is basically the city that manages to become a reflexive and self-reflexive cognitive structure. During the last twenty years in Europe, many city-regions have attempted to adopt strategic plans. An attempt at creating strategies and structures and installing deliberative democracy, where groups and interests who normally do not participate in public decision-making or who are submitted to the decisions of technocratic élites may be involved in attempts and experiments to attain new horizons in terms of planning capability.

## 6. The relational-contract city

The new direction of research proposed here concerns the connectivity of cities and of social systems they represent. We have been looking too long at cities as stocks of resources comparing the relative importance of them in terms of endowment of economic, social and cultural capital. We must now look at cities as connectivity nodes within networks of tendentially global relations. Following this approach, which is inspired by the lesson of Jane Jacobs, the world is represented as a “blizzard of transactions” and this representation of flows allows us to go beyond the old image of the world as a mosaic of local systems.

This approach is based on a three-level network (Taylor, 2004): a net level of interacting cities in the world economy; a nodal level of cities through which the network is produced; and a sub-nodal level of advanced producer service firms who are the network-makers.

The contractual networks to be investigated are represented by governments, businesses, groups, associations, supply chains, institutions, specialized centers, universities etc. The flows that feed these contractual networks are measurable flows of people, knowledge, material and immaterial resources and services. Contractual relationships between firms, shared research projects, industrial co-design, contracts that feed the knowledge flows, contractual flows of goods and services through transport and logistics corridors etc. can be analysed and represented in a meta-geography of current world urbanization.

City networks in this perspective are networks of nodes that have different roles and variable importance. Only a few centralized nodes have sufficient critical mass and endowment of territorial capital (understood as a set of tangible and intangible assets) that would allow them to maintain global relations or develop extensive networks. Other nodes are undersized or

shrinking. These latter nodes however can refer to the former exchanging resources with them on a more limited scale, but going further thanks to the main node represented by the “hub-city”. The contracts between hubs and nodes are worth studying.

## 7. Conclusions

According to Brenner (2004) the new State spaces are not filled, in the form of a previously empty territorial container, but produced and transformed through regulatory projects. The static view of the Westphalian State, a confined and self-contained arena, should be replaced by a dynamic and procedural State in which spaces are continuously reproduced under the pressure of capitalist creative destruction. From this viewpoint, the city is a socio-spatial battlefield where different forces meet and confront each other, each one interested in its own prevalence or hegemony. The fragmented and widespread interests of concerns hide distributive games: in the image by Lefebvre (2009) quoted by Brenner and Elden, «is it not the secret of the State, hidden because it is so obvious, to be found in the space?».

A possible limit of Brenner’s analysis is his attributing the rescaling to Statehood. It is the State that articulates, uses and spaces the territories according to its power, its possibilities for manoeuvre in the face of global capitalism. Hence, a State-centric analysis, typical of the structuralism of the twentieth century, is here re-proposed. In Brenner’s view the State presents itself as a unity at the basis of the differences, while we can see unity as the product of the differences in long-lasting State conflictual representation processes. The current crisis of Statehood, global polycentrism, multiplication of levels and arenas of territorial governance and global

disorder demand an overcoming of the State-centric view. What we see is a *polyarchic* global world in which *arché* (which means both “beginning” and “command”) no longer pertains to the Nation-State.

These are signs of the post-national prospect that has opened, in which the role of “larger spaces” in formation like global city-regions could even be more important than that of the old Nation-States.

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