

# Preface

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The present moment is one in which the relatively stable economic and social arrangements of the post-War decades are now only a dim memory but in which the outlines of an alternative order remain strikingly in flux. The last couple of decades have been marked by great economic and political turbulence all around the world. On the one hand, a dynamic capitalism has been insistently globalizing, bringing more and more territory and people into its scope of operations. On the other hand, this same process has been attended by enormous and continuing instabilities. Many efforts and experiments to deal politically with the threats and opportunities offered by these instabilities are under way at every spatial level from the local to the global. The First, Second, and Third Worlds, as such, have gone. Nor can we even talk any longer about the contemporary world as though it were marked by a binary split between a core group of developed nations and a periphery of underdeveloped nations doomed to permanent economic stagnation. Rather, a continuum of national (but rapidly integrating) capitalisms at diverse levels of average income and political transparency is now in play. This is also a world in which two main ideologies, namely neoliberalism and one version or another of social democracy, contend with each other as sources of regulatory prescription for the capitalism of the 21st century. Capitalism itself has changed dramatically since the demise of high fordism in the 1970s, for while it is still greatly dependent on the electro-mechanical technologies and manual labor that characterized that era, it is now more and more characterized by computerized production processes and by an associated proliferation of highly qualified human capital. Hence, the capitalist system today is dependent more than it ever has been in the past on a labor force endowed with finely honed cognitive and cultural skills. In addition, it is an arena within which increasing numbers of workers in low-wage, precarious forms of employment struggle to eke out a living. All of these changes are exerting potent effects on geographical outcomes across the entire surface of the earth.

These are some of the elements of the world that is in emergence as we move more deeply into the 21st century. In this book, my goal is above all to try to work out how these elements are constituted and how they shape the formation of the contemporary economic landscape. My chief concern

here is with the enormous resurgence of urbanization all over the world in the last few decades, in large degree as a function of the revivification and spread of capitalism since the 1980s. This resurgence and the new regionalism that accompanies it will almost certainly come to be one of the defining features of the geography of global capitalism in the 21st century. It is manifest above all in a still-unfolding system of global cities, or better yet, a cosmopolitan network of city-regions representing the main economic engines of world capitalism, each enchained with the others in intensifying relations of competition and cooperation. At the same time, there is a real sense in which terms like “urban” or “city” themselves are rather inadequate for the purposes at hand. Especially in today’s world, cities do not represent finite bounded tracts of territory, even though municipal boundaries may give the impression of closure. To the contrary, while cities indeed represent relatively dense inflections of economic, social, and political activity, they are also protracted indefinitely outward in extensive systems of relationships that in the final analysis encircle the globe. Yes, there are definite and localized emergent effects that we equate with urban phenomena at specific geographic locations where these inflections reach a level of maximum intensity, but they are also in every sense continuous with what we might call the wider space-economy of contemporary capitalism. A corollary of this remark is that while any sharp distinction between the urban and the rural has long been questionable, it is especially problematic at this moment in history. The latter point is all the more forceful because, as I shall show at a later stage, the new capitalism of the 21st century is producing restructuring effects in many of the interstitial spaces between large cities that significantly redefine what it means to be rural.

In spite of the above strictures about the city as a finite territorial entity, it still assumes substantive if nebulous form as a system of spatial and other relationships that take on a special kind of social significance by reason of their extreme density, both in terms of land use and interaction, and the multiple emergent effects that flow from this state of affairs. By the same token, I take it as axiomatic that any viable theory of the urban must at the outset be able to answer the fundamental question as to why it is in the first instance that large numbers of people come to live clustered together in this way. Of course, a viable urban theory must also be able to answer very many more questions than this. For example: How is the internal spatial structure of any given cluster likely to be arranged? What is the nature of urban social stratification? What is the impact of urbanization on the formation of human mentalities and vice versa? How are cities governed? How are they distributed over geographical space? And many more. Indeed, any inquiry into the genesis of cities can only be fully dealt

with in the light of the answers we give to these other questions and their implications for the ways in which cities evolve. But the first question has a special privilege because it goes to the heart of the urban process, as such; and moreover carries with it the implication that we need to look at the wider system of social and economic relationships in order to construct a meaningful answer. By the same token, it is open to the possibility that radically different combinations of these relationships may give rise to generically different kinds of cities, as in the contrasting cases of, say, feudal Kyoto, traditional Yogyakarta, precolonial Ifè, or modern Los Angeles. I am using the notion of genesis here not only in a historical sense but also in an analytical or process-oriented sense, and it is in the same sense that we can think of cities as being continually regenerated on top of and articulated with older structures as social context changes.

In this book, my focus is exclusively upon cities as they emerge in capitalism, and, in particular, as they materialize in relation to the peculiar form of capitalism that has been taking shape since the last quarter of the 20th century. My approach is based on the fundamental point of departure that the origins of the urban process in capitalism can be ascribed primarily to the dynamics of productive activity in the context of profitability criteria in capitalism, and the ways in which the social reproduction of capitalism is secured through the mediation of spatial agglomeration. From this point of departure, and making use of the idea that we are moving into a new capitalism that actively induces and thrives on definite forms of spatial and social differentiation, I attempt to explain how it is that the world that is in emergence all around us is not only preeminently urban but is also ushering in many new kinds of geographical division and variegation. In this respect, my argument goes sharply against the grain of those frequently-encountered statements to the effect that globalization involves a process of spatial homogenization.

I fully recognize that some of these preliminary remarks will be seen as controversial in a number of quarters. Some will object at the outset that they do not promise to make enough of cultural or political factors in the formation of modern cities (though as the discussion proceeds, I increasingly pick up on factors of these sorts). Others will feel that they are much too general or suspiciously Eurocentric and are liable to foreclose examination of important differences in contemporary forms of urbanization in different parts of the world, especially in “postcolonial” situations. Certain neoclassical economists and their fellow travelers can also be expected to object that I make too much of production as a key element in the genesis of cities and not enough of the role of individuals’ tastes and preferences in relation to the physical and social amenities of cities. I argue my own case at length in the chapters that follow, and those

who demur will have an opportunity then of dealing with the details of my approach. For the present, I simply want to advance the following main point. Whatever the specific historical and geographical circumstances that have attended the formation of cities at different locations around the world, all forms of urbanization today are being shaped and reshaped under the aegis of global capitalism. This is not the same as saying that cities are all converging toward some universal set of empirical specifications. As a matter of fact, the contrary is the case. In the first place, as already mentioned, capitalism itself produces significant forms of spatial differentiation, and most especially under current conditions of production, exchange, and consumption. In the second place, numerous hybrid urban forms appear as the logic and dynamics of capitalism encounter different local circumstances in different parts of the world. These hybrid forms are certainly well worthy of study in their own right, but my preeminent focus in this book is on basic and generalizable urban responses to capitalism, and especially to the new capitalism of the 21st century as it consolidates its hold on the global economy. A warning of *caveat emptor* is in order at this point. My theoretical ambitions in this book are fairly general, but in the chapters that follow, most of the detailed statistical work refers specifically to the United States. This bias of course reflects my own interests and experience as well as the availability of detailed data, but it is in no way intended to function as a surreptitious claim that the empirical complexities of American cities stand in, in any kind of direct substantive sense, for the complexities of non-American cities. Nevertheless, as I shall argue out more fully later, the theoretical framework on offer in this book is designed to cover a great though not unlimited diversity of possible empirical outcomes. Those that we observe in the United States are not only important and interesting in their own right, but also – and despite the preceding caveat – help us to cast enormous light back onto the wider theoretical question that is central to this book of the interrelations between capitalism and the configuration of geographic space.

Almost all of the presented textual material has been prepared explicitly for the present volume. All of it, of course, is infused with ideas and analytical conceits that I have laid out in journal articles on a number of prior occasions. From time to time, but in a very limited way, I have incorporated text directly from these articles into this book. This, however, is almost entirely an original compilation with a distinctly new narrative. I offer it as a description of some of the most important geographical shifts that are now taking shape before our eyes as the new capitalism runs its course, and as a general guide to some of the theoretical ideas that I consider to be essential for dealing politically with this world in emergence.

