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Challenging the Urban/Rural Divide:
Implications for Contemporary Planning Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Defining the American urban form relies on a perceived division between 'urban' and 'rural' areas. I trace the idea of the urban/rural divide through the evolution of human settlement patterns in the United States from the nineteenth century onwards. I argue that while a superficial distinction between urban and rural land was once relevant to characterizing city forms and metropolitan growth trends, in contemporary contexts there no longer exists an actual separation of lands based on their 'natural' character around cities. Thus, continuing to plan for urban/rural areas ignores how pressing planning concerns arise from greater socio-ecological processes, and places that extend beyond designated settlement boundaries. I explore how new conceptualizations of urbanization, including urban sustainability, urban resilience, and planetary urbanization, can inform a post-urban/rural divide planning paradigm.

Keywords: Urban/Rural Divide, Planning Theory, Urban Sustainability, Urban Resilience, Planetary Urbanization

Introduction

Urbanization is a complex socio-spatial process characterized by the growth of cities, and a transformation in the spatial distribution of the human population from rural areas to urban areas ("World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision" 2019). Reports of increasingly rapid urbanization, and estimates that more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas, have led some authors to claim that we are living in an 'urban age' (Brenner and Schmid 2014). Known as the urban age thesis, this assertion is problematic, due not only to methodological critiques that we cannot properly measure urbanization but also to conceptual critiques regarding what is 'urban' and what is 'rural.'

In American history, urban areas have generally been defined in relation to what they are not, using dualisms like city/country, developed/natural, and urban/rural. I argue that while this approach may have been historically productive for urban planning and development, it has become less useful in contemporary contexts. In fact, planning around the urban/rural divide, and classifying land based on people's interactions (or lack thereof) with nature, may now be counterproductive to developing cities in a manner that recognizes the delicate interplay of coupled human and natural systems and global anthropogenic impacts on the environment.

Modern processes of industrialization and urbanization have increased the intensity and complexity with which humans have transformed wildlands into managed ecosystems (Ellis 2016). This has decreased the presence of wilderness across much of the globe, and especially in proximity to growing cities. In the absence of evident, bounded natural land around human settlements we are left to conceptualize cities without a clear non-city contrast. This destabilizes the traditional dualistic notions used to guide city planning and classify urban forms, including the urban/rural divide.

I argue that the urban/rural divide has lost its importance as a defining characteristic of the urban form of American cities, and that it should no longer serve as a guiding construct for conceptualizing and planning cities. Historically, the urban/rural divide was useful for designating rural land and wilderness areas apart from cities. These areas were reserved for interaction with nature for purposes of work, for those in the business of natural resource extraction, or leisure, for typically white, middle- to upper-class individuals seeking a temporary escape from life in built, densely populated urban cores. Presently, the relationship between humans and nature in cities has changed; most Americans no longer rely on local production for subsistence, global ecological concerns indiscriminately affect people everywhere, and it is widely accepted that a notion of nature, from which humans are entirely removed, represents a false construct (Cronon 1996; McKinney, Ingo, and Kendal 2018).

With this in mind, it is no longer relevant to debate the urban/rural dichotomy, for it relates to an old conceptualization of urbanization in which the growth of discrete urban areas disturbs proximate rural, natural surroundings (McIntyre, Knowles-Yánez, and Hope 2000). Modern urbanization impacts intertwined social, economic, and ecological processes at many scales. For this reason, Brenner and Schmid (2014) argue that the urban age thesis, as it constructs urbanization as a process characterized by rural-to-urban transition, ignores these common processes and "divides the indivisible" (747). These authors further critique the urban age thesis based on "chaotic conceptions" and "hegemonic understandings" of the urban and urbanization, which reproduce problematic notions like the urban/rural divide (Brenner and Schmid 2014).

In later sections of this essay, I explore how Brenner and Schmid's theory of 'planetary urbanization' and related ideas might inform emergent, post-urban/rural divide planning and development paradigms. For this discussion, I also draw from theories of urban sustainability and urban resilience. However, first, I present a history of city planning and development in the U.S., focusing on the role of urban/rural constructs. I conclude the essay with remarks about how current conceptualizations of urbanization might inform new planning and development approaches that recognize contemporary socio-ecological challenges and adopt a more dynamic view of cities.

Before the Urban Age: Industrial Urbanization
and the "Back to Nature" Movement

Industrialization prompted the first great wave of American urbanization in the late 1800s. As people migrated to urban centers for factory work, cities became increasingly congested, polluted, and crime-ridden (Jackson 1985; Hall 1998). While these cities were celebrated as modern arenas of prosperity and representations of progress, industrial urban growth also provoked a reactionary nostalgia for supposed virtuous, clean country living, particularly among elites (Boyer 1983; Jackson 1985). Early planners in the U.S., drawing on the ideas of European theorists, accordingly sought to design new settlements that would bring city dwellers "back to nature" by combining the social and ecological virtues of country living with the economic promise of industrial urbanism (Boyer 1983).

Ebenezer Howard's 'garden city' design, first published in 1898, promised to integrate the best elements of 'town' and 'country.' Howard envisioned a polycentric agglomeration of small cities with fixed population and area, surrounded by greenbelts supporting agricultural and industrial activities and connected by modern transit systems (Hall 1998). Rexford Tugwell's 'greenbelt cities' initiative, part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Resettlement Administration New Deal program, drew heavily from this vision. Tugwell, specifically, proposed that the government buy inexpensive land at the periphery of cities to relocate the urban poor. Inner-city areas that formerly housed impoverished communities were to be rebuilt as parks (Hall 1998). While these projects were not ultimately implemented, planning initiatives with interrelated economic, social, and environmental goals continued to gain momentum with support from the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), and its champion, Lewis Mumford. Mumford and the RPAA demanded conservation of "human values," including community, liberty, happiness, and reliable access to services "hand in hand with natural resources" (Hall 1998, 153).

Critically examining the "back to nature" movement reveals that 'nature' has always represented a human construct in the American psyche. It should not come as a surprise, then, that genuine interest in ecological concerns is not evident in urban forms preceding the twentieth century 'urban age,' as natural and rural areas were designed to serve cities.

Cronon (1996) argued that people's physical and social construction of 'nature' gives rise to "the trouble with wilderness." The trouble being that by conceptualizing and designing wilderness as apart from human settlements, we abdicate responsibility for environments and ecosystems that sustain human life. He claimed that we require a new conceptualization of nature, so that in pursuing the goals of environmentalism people do not seek to get "back to the wrong nature," or strive to recreate conditions of a removed, nonhuman wilderness that likely never existed (Cronon 1996). Instead, he called on readers to "embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper

place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating the others" (Cronon 1996, 24).

Cronon's proposition that we consider land, presently settled by humans or otherwise, on a "continuum of a natural landscape" stands in contrast to traditional dualisms, like urban/rural, used to plan and define American urban development patterns and sets the stage for a paradigm shift in planning and development thinking. An urban development model based on a natural continuum, rather than on categories of human-nature interaction or lack thereof, would not allow us to decouple human and natural systems in theory or practice. The remainder of this essay is devoted to exploring how modern theories of urbanization might help clarify a post-urban/rural divide planning paradigm based on this premise.

Planning in the Urban Age

Cities worldwide are confronting complex problems and great uncertainty in the face of global ecological concerns, including climate change and environmental degradation. These ecological problems both motivate and respond to social and economic challenges of urbanization, including growing unemployment, inequality, and violence, among others (Spaans and Waterhout 2017). It is clear that in practice cities operate as systems, driven by interrelated underlying processes that are often agnostic to political boundaries or landscape designations, like urban/rural.

Planning in the urban age demands a more holistic vision of the city and requires that we reconceptualize which (and, ultimately, whether) boundaries are useful for designing and managing places as well as addressing urban problems. I subsequently explore two paradigms that might inform the goals and methods of emergent planning, respectively: urban sustainability and urban resilience, and planetary urbanization.

Urban Sustainability and Urban Resilience

The concept of urban sustainability has garnered significant attention since publication of the United Nations' *Our Common Future* in 1987, in which "sustainable development" was put forth as the guiding principle for "a global agenda for change" (WCED 1987). Notably, Cronon (1996) mentioned the notion, writing that a reconceptualization of wilderness and people's relationship with nature "means looking at the part of nature we intend to turn toward our own ends and asking whether we can use it again and again and again—sustainably—without its being diminished in the process" (25). Cronon's perspective on what constitutes sustainable (re)use is generally echoed by other authors that have written about this concept. Sustainability has been applied to urban planning and development in order to understand how and whether modern cities can grow in a manner that meets three major goals: environmental protection,

social and intergenerational equity, and economic development (Conroy and Berke 2004).

Foley et al. (2005) explored how land use, including land settlement and management, affects urban sustainability. The authors found that more intensive and extensive land use, resulting from contemporary urbanization, has engendered wide-ranging and troublesome effects on the health of natural and human systems. Some effects include a diminished capacity of ecosystems to sustain food production, maintain freshwater and forest resources, regulate climate and air quality, and mitigate the emergence and transmission of infectious diseases. The authors concluded, "Modern land-use practices, while increasing the short-term supplies of material goods, may undermine many ecosystem services in the long run, even on regional and global scales" (572). They argue that modifying these practices to mitigate their deleterious effects requires considering the trade-off between immediate, local social and economic benefits and long-term global decline in human welfare. After outlining a number of specific approaches for managing landscapes in a manner that balances these concerns, the authors generalize: "Many of these strategies involve management of landscape structure through the strategic placement of managed and natural ecosystems, so the services of natural ecosystems . . . are available across the landscape mosaic" (573).
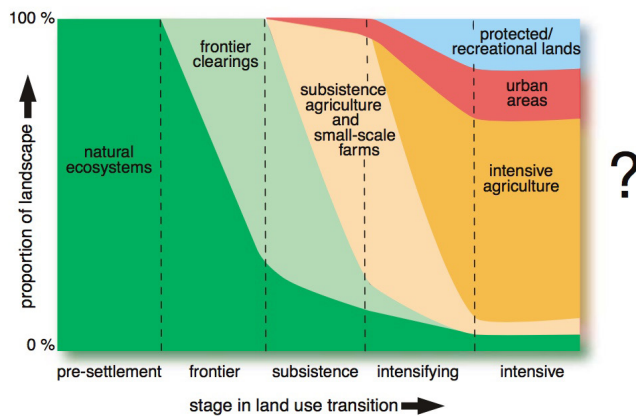

Figure 1   Land use transitions that urbanizing areas may experience over time (Foley et al. 2005).

Recognizing landscapes as existing in a "mosaic," as parts of an interconnected whole, represents a way of potentially operationalizing Cronon's theory of situating human settlements along a "continuum of a natural landscape." Foley et al. (2005) further acknowledged that local ecological challenges will change as landscapes and land uses transition alongside demographic and economic shifts, and that there is uncertainty in how landscapes will evolve as urbanization demands even more intensive and extensive land use (refer to Figure 1). This suggests that contemporary land use plan-

ning frameworks need not only consider how underlying socio-ecological structures connect landscapes, but also how socio-ecological processes change landscapes over time.

Urban resilience has emerged as a framework for theorizing about the ability of cities to respond to such changes, among other stresses and disruptions (Romero-Lankao et al. 2016). Resilience has become increasingly popular in recent discourses and literature about planning and urban development, particularly in the arena of disaster preparedness (refer to Fainstein 2015). Some have argued that ambiguity and overlap in the definitions of sustainability and resilience weaken these concepts (Romero-Lankao et al. 2016; Zhang and Li 2018). Thus, clarification of both urban resilience and urban sustainability is required for effectively conceptualizing and operationalizing these planning and development frameworks.

Zhang and Li (2018) reviewed a large sample of articles on these concepts and found that urban sustainability and urban resilience differ in both their theoretical basis and empirical work. These authors concluded that while resilience and sustainability are certainly, and importantly, related concepts, urban resilience differs from urban sustainability. Specifically, they define urban resilience as "the passive process of monitoring, facilitating, maintaining and recovering a virtual cycle between ecosystem services and human wellbeing through concerted effort under external influencing factors" (145). On the other hand, "Urban sustainability is the active process of synergetic integration and co-evolution between the subsystems making up a city without compromising the possibilities for development of surrounding areas and contributing by this means towards reducing the harmful effects of development on the biosphere" (Ibid.). It seems that these authors recognize resilience as a process that aims to ensure cities can maintain and protect vital socio-ecological systems, even if these systems are perturbed. In contrast, urban sustainability requires acting to ensure development does not disturb socio-ecological systems in a manner that compromises the ability of these systems to support future development.

Wilkinson (2012) argued that socio-ecological resilience has much to offer planning theory and practice in contemporary contexts of ecological crisis. She and coauthors further contested that resilience holds greater promise as a framing concept for ecologically-minded planning than does sustainability; for it is easier to communicate about resilience with urban stakeholders in terms of localized risk (Wilkinson, Porter, and Colding 2010).

The theoretical value of both urban sustainability and urban resilience ultimately lies in their direct confrontation with ecological issues. These frameworks situate ecological objectives at the center of decision-making about urban development. This represents a divergence from past paradigms that removed human systems from natural systems, and suggests new possibilities for more holistic planning and development practices.

Planetary Urbanization

The act of urban planning requires identifying an appropriate analytical unit for which to plan. As scholars have grappled with understanding cities in the age of contemporary urbanization, they have, accordingly, come to question whether modern urban processes require new conceptualizations of the appropriate units of analysis for urban planning. Brenner and Schmid (2014) primarily contest the idea of the 'urban age' from a methodological perspective, arguing that what is 'urban' cannot be accurately measured. This is attributed, in a physical sense, to rapid population growth and migration that have not been properly documented, and, in a theoretical sense, to the fact that the historical act of organizing territories locally does not adequately consider the contemporary influence of global forces (Brenner and Schmid 2014).

Brenner and Schmid's theory of planetary urbanization offers a reconceptualization of the urban condition that renders "settlement-based understandings" of urban landscapes obsolete (Brenner and Schmid 2014, 750). These authors echo earlier ideas presented by critical urban theorists who argued that a 'worlding' of cities, in which social, economic, and environmental structures and processes are increasingly connected on a global scale, has disrupted the conventional notion of a localized place (Brenner 2000; Robinson 2011; Soja 2010; Roy 2009). Roy (2009) argued that this change is apparent in a "fading of the city into the countryside, in the frontiers that trail into the horizon, and in the vast blotches of sprawl that defy census boundaries and categories" (820). She called for new analytical frameworks for defining and studying contemporary cities that reject "standard geographies of core and periphery" (828), and instead, characterize places using "'process' rather than 'trait' geographies" (821).

These authors, and others, have also suggested that emerging theories of planetary urbanization require new methods for studying and planning cities that rely on a process-based approach for designating boundaries (Roy 2009; Soja 2010; Satterthwaite 2010; Robinson 2011; Angelo and Wachsmuth 2014). This approach may reflect a more dynamic conceptualization of the city, but is methodologically complex. Some critique the value of planetary urbanism for this reason, arguing that the framework ignores the pragmatic need to identify and manage discrete, localized urban areas as empirical objects with distinct characteristics, including specialized land uses (Walker 2015; Scott and Storper 2015).

In the concluding remarks that follow, I discuss the value of using planetary urbanization to inform contemporary theories and practices of city planning, among other conceptual frameworks discussed in the previous sections, including urban sustainability and urban resilience.

Concluding Remarks: Planning Beyond the Urban Age

In this essay, I have reviewed how theoretical and practical frameworks for urban planning and development have evolved since the nineteenth century. I have traced the use

and importance of designation between 'urban' and 'rural' settled lands within these frameworks in the U.S., and questioned the role of this distinction, and conventional settlement boundaries more generally, in contemporary contexts. I have argued that modern urbanization, or transition into the 'urban age,' demands new frameworks for thinking about planning and developing land that abandon the urban/rural divide; for as human land use becomes more extensive and intensive we increasingly contribute to global ecological concerns like climate change and environmental degradation. It is widely recognized that human systems cannot be decoupled from natural systems, and thus, human settlements should not be considered apart from nature or wilderness. In light of global ecological challenges, people have more responsibility than ever to maintain high quality environments along with high quality of life in cities (Cronon 1996; McKinney, Ingo, and Kendal 2018).

With these goals in mind, we require new conceptual frameworks for thinking about planning and development in the U.S. and globally as urbanization accelerates worldwide. To inform these frameworks, I reviewed how concepts of urban sustainability and urban resilience might guide goal setting for more ecologically conscious planning and development. Urban sustainability promotes a development approach centered on efficient resource use, and aims to ensure present land use and consumption patterns do not diminish the capacity of the environment in a manner that disadvantages others in the present or future (Banister 1996). While urban sustainability provides a conceptual framework for actively setting holistic, socio-ecological planning and development goals in theory, in practice sustainability has proven difficult to clarify or measure. Sustainable urban development, thus, remains a rather elusive undertaking.

Urban resilience takes a more localized and presentist view than urban sustainability, and stresses that we prioritize ensuring the coupled human and natural systems that support cities are strong, and have the ability to recover from stresses and shocks (Romero-Lankao et al. 2016). A resilient city that is pertinacious in the face of ecological uncertainties should be somewhat sustainable, able to at least sustain present conditions for a near- to medium-term future. While urban sustainability represents a more encompassing framework for guiding socio-ecological development, urban resilience may be more easily translated into practice.

Neither urban sustainability nor urban resilience offers particularly clear directions for reconceptualizing physical planning or land use designations in a manner that recognizes the dynamism and entanglement of human-nature interactions. These frameworks are nevertheless useful for theorizing about a planning paradigm for cities that directly addresses global environmental concerns in development practice and prioritizes contemporary socio-ecological goals (Wilkinson 2012).

As the acts of planning and development require both setting goals and taking action to shape and manage human settlements, contemporary frameworks that reconceptualize the urban may inform the appropriate units of analysis for identifying and

solving urban problems. Planetary urbanization, a theory that reconceptualizes the urban condition and stresses process-based understandings of space rather than geographic trait- or boundary-based understandings, offers some perspective for thinking about planning interconnected places along more continuous dimensions. This framework rejects past categories, like 'urban' and 'rural,' used to identify and characterize the urban and processes of urbanization.

A common and important critique of planetary urbanization is that theorists who explicate the framework have not proposed specific new methods for analyzing and managing urban places and responding to urban problems. These critiques are salient insofar as a lack of methodological direction hinders planetary urbanization from translating into practice. Planetary urbanization, thus, presents comparable shortcomings to the urban sustainability framework in lacking clarified means for practical application.

While conventional approaches to understanding and planning cities are debated in theory, these approaches persist in practice. Traditional designations of urban areas and units of analyses therein, like specific land uses, remain useful because they are easily understood by most people. Accordingly, I argue that we require more accessible and inclusive means for thinking about and planning contemporary human settlements in a way that confronts global ecological challenges, and the inevitability (and uncertainty) of change in urbanizing cities. This might require incorporating more community-based, local understandings of place and priorities into land use planning (Glover, Stewart, and Gladdys 2008). In this way, contemporary planners might orient their actions towards achieving greater socio-ecological goals, such as those put forth in the urban sustainability and urban resilience frameworks, while remaining attuned to local needs and responsive to changing conditions.

Ultimately, a planning paradigm that transcends the urban/rural divide requires that theorists and practitioners push their own boundaries, and consider how we can, as Cronon suggested, celebrate the contemporary urbanizing city without denigrating the myriad of landscapes that support it. This framework demands that we remain flexible to recognizing and managing changing landscapes, and accordingly, reconceptualize effective boundaries for planning and development. Furthermore, it necessitates that we prioritize environmental quality as we do quality of life, for the condition of the city and that of nature are one in the same.

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