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The complexity of urban systems: Contrasts and similarities from different regions

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Introduction

This paper addresses questions concerning the way in which urban systems have been evolving in recent years in different parts of the world. The central question concerns the degree of similarity in urban system change across the world. One school of thought adheres to the 'transition' perspective, whereby all countries are expected at some time to go through a modernisation process accompanied by demographic, mobility and urban transitions. Various models have been developed in order to chart national progress through this transitional phase. Another school of thought, the political–economy approach, challenges these 'developmentalist' viewpoints by stressing the great contrast between the circumstances of countries in the world's 'periphery' today and those of 'core' countries at the time when they were modernising. The debate has been given added importance by recent discussions about whether the new forces of globalisation are leading to greater homogenisation of urban systems, or are reinforcing inherited differences.

The primary focus of the paper is on trends in population distribution and migration, together with a discussion of the underlying processes and an evaluation of the various models and perspectives which have been advanced in the literature. The paper proceeds through three levels of detail. First, at the international level, it compares changing levels of urbanisation in terms of the traditional measure of the proportion of people living in urban places. Second, it examines trends in the intensity of urbanisation, measured in terms of the degree of concentration in a small number of large urban centres and related to processes of polarisation and counter-urbanisation. Third, it investigates the nature and patterns of urban change at the more localised scale of the individual urban region. At each level, the paper highlights conceptual and methodological issues raised by the developments observed, not least what they mean for the definition of 'urban' and 'rural' places and for the monitoring of trends in urbanisation and urban system change.

An urbanising world

The *Global report on human settlements 1996*, prepared for the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996 (UNCHS 1996), provides very clear evidence of the apparently inexorable rise in the proportion of the world's population that is considered 'urban'. It documents the extent to which the various parts of the world have progressed through the transformation from a situation where the vast majority of their inhabitants were rural dwellers towards one in which a very high proportion are living in urban places. The picture is one of widening international differences in levels of urbanisation through the last century, but it is noted that in recent years the most rapid increases in urbanisation have taken place in some of the least urbanised regions, as they move into the steeper middle part of the logistic (S-shaped) curve of urbanisation. Taken together with the latest projections of national urbanisation rates (United Nations 1997), the overriding impression is that trends will be leading towards convergence as the twenty-first century unfolds. However, it is not necessary to look far beyond the data before such a sweeping statement needs to be qualified.

In the first place, there are at present very wide differences between countries within the individual major regions of the South. Latin America provides the best example of this. Lattes (1994) feels able to distinguish five clear subgroups of countries on the basis of their expected level of urbanisation in the year 2000, ranging from five countries with levels of over 80 per cent (Venezuela, Uruquay, Argentina, Chile and Brazil), to two countries averaging barely 40 per cent (Guatemala and Haiti). Even within these groups there is considerable diversity of experience. Taking the example of the most urbanised group, Lattes shows that during the 1990s the rate of urban population growth in Venezuela is likely to be running at twice the rate in Argentina, and over three times the rate in Uruguay.

Second, how inevitable are the projected trends for those countries which are still on the lower slopes of the S-shaped curve? There is now a large body of research indicating that, 'In general, there is a close relationship between the level of urbanisation and per capita income' (UNCHS 1996:28). This is perhaps more true of the relationship between the rates of change in each of these than levels cross-nationally at single points in time, but this only goes to emphasise the apparently strong dynamic links between the two. This therefore raises the question as to whether least urbanised countries are likely to achieve the levels of economic growth needed to allow them to adopt the trajectory of urbanisation experienced in the North, and already followed by a number of countries in the South.

This leads, third, to the question of whether the process of urbanisation experienced in the South is the same as that experienced in the past by the North and, beyond this, whether all countries in the South are following essentially the same trajectory. McGee and Griffiths (1994), for instance, have highlighted four major differences in the experiences of the South: their larger absolute population numbers involved, their different global context, their limited experience of urban management and the less employment-driven nature of their

urbanisation process. In demographic terms, they draw a broad distinction between Asia, where the main component of urban population growth is currently inward migration, and Latin America and Africa, where natural increase is the dominant component of growth. Even so, they stress that demography provides fewer North–South contrasts in experiences of urbanisation than do culture and political structures.

Purely in terms of demographic patterns, therefore, it would seem that countries in the South are generally following the trajectory mapped out by the North before them, as their level of urbanisation rises over time along an S-shaped curve. Moreover, where this transformation is already well developed, it would seem that it is generally accompanying economic growth, as it did in the North. The central issue now is whether the countries that are still at an early stage of the urbanisation process will achieve the economic development that will carry them forward through the urban transition.

Urban concentration and counter-urbanisation

The geographical literature recognises that urbanisation involves not one but two basic forms of population redistribution, with two different sets of measures. So far this paper has focused on one form, the rising proportion of people living in urban places, known as the *level* of urbanisation. The second involves the increasing concentration of the urban population in the larger urban places, which I refer to as the *intensity* of urbanisation. There was a time when this process of redistribution up the settlement hierarchy was seen as natural and irreversible, occurring in the context of an industrial world in which agglomeration brought economies of scale, and operating as a self-reinforcing process. Over the past quarter of a century or so, however, a great deal of attention has been given in the North to apparent reversals of this form of urbanisation, based on a switch to net out-migration from large cities and metropolitan regions and the emergence of a negative relationship between size of urban settlement and its rate of migratory growth. Some commentators, particularly in the United States, first interpreted this development as a major departure from previous settlement trends and hailed it as the start of a new era. In a few well publicised cases, deconcentration proceeded so far down the settlement hierarchy that it was seen to produce a 'rural population turnaround', threatening to reverse the traditional trend of inexorably higher levels of urbanisation. The question is whether this phenomenon is part of a natural progression which all urban systems can be expected to undergo, or whether it is associated with particular circumstances operating in the North.

Some of the 'turnaround' experiences in the North were originally very impressive. In the United States, for instance, the dominant direction of migration between the 1960s and the early 1970s switched from strong metropolitan gains to equally strong non-metropolitan growth, with the emergence of a clear negative relationship between city size and growth, such that non-metropolitan areas on average grew faster than the smaller metros, and the latter outperformed the larger metros. In Europe, too, the 1970s saw a deceleration in the rate of growth of the regions with larger urban centres and higher population densities, with the US-type of migration reversal occurring in a number of countries, principally those in northwest Europe. Moreover, in most parts of the industrialised world, including New Zealand and Japan, this reduction in the migration pull of the main metropolitan centres was accompanied by the recovery of population growth in the more peripheral regions of national territory. Though this 'counter-urbanisation' trend had initially taken most experts by surprise, by the end of the 1980s a wide range of explanations had been put forward to account for it, including economic restructuring, agricultural and minerals booms, large city diseconomies, improved transport and rural infrastructure, the rise of retirement and resort areas, and changing residential preferences (see Champion 1989, for a review).

A new layer of complexity was added during the 1980s, when it was found that these new trends were perhaps not as durable as had been anticipated. In the United States, renewed concentration took place at this time, with a return to net out-migration from non-metropolitan areas, and with the larger metros outperforming the smaller ones (Frey 1993). Tokyo reverted to strong migration gains after a short period of balance with non-metropolitan Japan (Tsuya and Kuroda 1989). After 25 years of overall decline, London's population stabilised in the mid 1980s, though this had more to do with immigration from overseas and a recovery in natural increase than with trends in internal migration. Indeed, London's net loss to the rest of Britain, though it had slowed in the later 1970s, actually accelerated again through most of the 1980s (Champion 1996). In Europe, a rather mixed picture can be seen, with Scandinavia reverting to strong concentration, southern European countries generally seeing concentration slowing down and even switching to counter-urbanisation in some cases, and with a particularly varied pattern in northwest and central Europe (Champion 1995, Champion et al. 1996).

The failure of urban deconcentration to become more deeply entrenched during the 1980s in most of the countries where it became evident in the 1970s has led to much speculation about the nature and significance of the counter-urbanisation phenomenon (e.g. Champion and Illeris 1990). One view is that the 1970s constituted an anomaly, whereby a range of factors combined to produce a temporary interruption in the traditional forces of concentration. An alternative interpretation is that the countries in the North have indeed been moving into a new post-industrial era of settlement pattern evolution, with the 1980s being the anomalous period for various reasons, including a burst of growth in financial and information services and the passage of the 1960s 'baby boomers' through their city-loving years. Third, the double flexure of the 1970s and 1980s has prompted the idea that settlement systems may now be subject to alternate bouts of concentration and deconcentration that reflect cycles of economic investment, demographic structure, policy stances

and other factors. This latter approach would seem to be supported by the latest evidence from the United States (Nucci and Long 1996, Johnson and Beale 1994) and the UK (Champion 1996) that shows a further shift in favour of non-metropolitan areas.

This indeterminate picture of recent urban system trends in the North does not provide a very satisfactory basis for assuming that there has come into being some new post-transitional pattern of urban change that the South might expect to follow as countries move towards the completion of their urban transitions. For the moment, it is perhaps useful to examine the evidence on recent developments in the South separately before returning to a wider discussion of their dynamics and the extent of similarities and differences across the world. A strong theme running through recent work, as brought together in the *Global report* (UNCHS 1996), is that the growth rate of many of the largest cities in the South has slowed since the 1970s and has been overtaken by that of secondary cities within their national systems. While there is much speculation, as in the North, as to the nature and permanence of this tendency, it conforms to the ideas of spatial development in the Third World context put forward in the 1960s and 1970s – ideas that are now being re-examined in an attempt to integrate them into a single universal model of urban system evolution.

One of the characteristic features of the past half century of urbanisation in the South has been the very rapid growth of the largest cities, but the 1980s saw the slowing of growth rates for many of the larger cities. According to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (1996), between 1980 and 1990 hardly any of the 30 largest urban agglomerations in the world recorded annual average population growth of over five per cent, and most of the 'million cities' with the highest population growth rates were not among the world's largest cities. Lattes (1994) found that the average annual growth rate for Latin America's 22 largest cities in 1990 fell steadily from its 5.4 per cent level in the 1950s, moving to 4.4 in the 1960s, 3.5 in the 1970s and 3.1 in the 1980s, and is projected to be down to 2.3 per cent in 1990–2000.

Admittedly even quite low rates of growth, when applied to very large cities, can involve the continuation of substantial increases in absolute numbers and, moreover, some of this reduction can be attributed to lower rates of national population growth. Nevertheless, various studies reveal that secondary cities have been accounting for increasing proportions of urban population growth. In Lattes' (1994:152) view, 'The Latin American urban context is experiencing a complete reversal of the historical process of concentration in the largest cities', with over half the 22 countries studied experiencing a decline in the urban prodominance of the large city. According to Pernia (1994:125), there are also clear signs of 'primacy reversal' in Asia, notably with respect to Seoul in the Republic of Korea, Bangkok in Thailand, Jakarta in Indonesia, Metro Manila in the Philippines and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. In a number of African countries, too, 'The growth rate of the primate city has started to decline in recent years, while the growth rates of secondary urban centres have been exceeding that of the primate city' (Obudho 1994:106).

As in the North, various explanations have been put forward to account for this fairly recent shift in the focus of population growth within these national urban systems, and there is little agreement as to its significance and likely durability. Nevertheless, this development is consistent with ideas put forward previously by regional and urban economists. Richardson (1977, 1980) coined the term 'polarisation reversal' to denote the turning point when spatial polarisation trends in the national economy give way to a process of spatial dispersal out of the primate city into other parts of the urban and regional system.

The fact that primacy and polarisation reversals have now been documented for some countries in the South raises the question as to whether these are following processes of urban system development that are essentially the same as those experienced by the North. A body of migration theory gives the impression that this is the case. Zelinsky's (1971) 'mobility transition' hypothesis suggests that during urban transition, countries experience changes in the relative importance of different types of migration, as the emphasis alters from frontier-ward movement to rural–urban movement, and subsequently to movements between different types of urban place. Brown and Sanders (1981), in their 'development paradigm of migration', view place-to-place movements in the context of areal evolution, and argue that the factors influencing population redistribution alter according to the prevailing development milieu. Brown and Stetzer (1984) use a simulation of development-migration interrelationships to demonstrate how migration patterns show a good deal of differentiation by place size and location during the middle phases of the development cycle, including the stage of polarisation reversal which first leads to the stronger growth of intermediate-size places nearer to the primate city and then involves the wider spreading of this process across national space and the diffusion of rapid growth to smaller cities.

Combining these ideas with the counter-urbanisation interpretation of recent events in the North, Geyer and Kontuly (1993) have put forward the concept of 'differential urbanisation' as a basis for making sense of evolving patterns of population change in all parts of the world. This model lays out a sequence of three phases in which the net effect of migration flows between three size categories of settlements initially favour the primate city category, then the intermediate size city category and finally the small city category. The first of these phases, labelled the primate city phase and involving the operation of urbanisation patterns of net migration as population concentrates in the largest cities, gives way to the polarisation reversal phase, when the aggregate migration growth rate of the intermediate size cities overtakes that of the primate city category. This second phase gives way to the counter-urbanisation phase, when in its turn the small city category overtakes the intermediate size category. Incorporating the cyclic view of recent developments in the

North, Geyer and Kontuly go on to suggest that the counter-urbanisation phase ends as the urban system reaches saturation point, and that it is then followed by a second cycle which starts with a further round of urbanisation involving renewed concentration in the primate city category.

There would therefore seem to be substantial support for the idea that national urban systems in the South are evolving in essentially the same manner as those in the North. At the same time, this conclusion does not rule out the possibility of a differentiation of outcomes from this process, notably in response to differences in history and geography. Indeed, simulation work by Brown and Stetzer (1984) has shown how the eventual city size pattern and the geographical layout of the urban system across national territory is likely to vary according to the initial structure of the settlement system, among other things. This, of course, raises the question about exactly what constitutes an urban system. In a larger country, for example, particularly at an early stage of the urban transition, there may be more than one urban system, as shown in the pre-industrial stage of Friedmann's (1966) model. It is also likely that these other urban systems would not be at the same stage of development as the country's principal one.

What is perhaps more remarkable in terms of patterns of population change is the close coincidence in timing of polarisation reversal in the South with the counter-urbanisation process in the North. While this process took more than a century in the North, this point seems to have been reached in less than half a century in some of the larger Latin American countries, and even more quickly and at an earlier stage in the transition process in parts of Asia and Africa. Indeed, the onset of polarisation reversal in the South seems to have occurred at the same time as the shift into counter-urbanisation took place for some of the North's 'laggards', notably those in southern Europe. On this basis there may be evidence for challenging the developmentalist view that each country goes through a virtually identical process of settlement restructuring in response to its own internal dynamics. Instead, it could be argued that external forces exert a much greater influence, such as the effects of new technologies and contemporary developments in the world economy, notably the effects of current globalisation trends.

The extended metropolis and beyond

Ultimately the study of urbanisation and urban change is about trying to make sense of what is happening on the ground at the local level. This section focuses primarily on the internal structure of urban areas and addresses the question as to whether the individual units of urban systems around the world are becoming more similar or different. In so doing, it is necessary to view these places in the wider context of the urbanisation trends and urban system changes already covered above, with the result that the uncertainties over interpreting recent developments at those scales are combined with additional questions about changes in the form of individual settlements.

In the North much effort has gone into conceptualising the evolving nature of cities, beginning with the recognition of suburbanisation in nineteenth century England and including the 1920–30s Chicago school's models of urban structure and growth associated with Burgess and Hoyt. The acceleration of the lateral extension of cities in more recent decades has prompted the idea that a city has a life cycle which takes it from a youthful growing phase through to an older phase of stability in decline, which is reflected in the patterning of population change in the original urban nucleus ('core') and its surrounding area ('ring'). This approach was devised by Hall (1971) who suggested a four stage model, beginning with a period of centralisation whereby people become more concentrated in the core at the expense of the (at that stage essentially rural) ring, continuing with periods of relative and then absolute decentralisation, and ending up with a stage of 'decentralisation in decline', in which the metropolitan area as a whole moves into overall decline because the core's loss becomes greater than the ring's gain. Klaassen et al. (1981) put this approach on a more formal footing in their 'stages of urban development' model, involving four stages and a total of eight phases in the complete cycle, with the fourth stage of re-urbanisation setting the scene for the urban area to launch into a second cycle, beginning with renewed growth overall and centralisation within the core.

The earlier stages of the Hall/Klaassen type of model accord well with the patterns of development in North America and Western Europe, not surprisingly since they were devised on the basis of empirical studies of evolving urban population trends. Central-city decline and suburban growth have been characteristic features of the American city for decades, while the national urban systems in Europe appear to have been following the hypothesised progression pretty faithfully (see, for instance, Hall and Hay 1980, Cheshire and Hay 1989). Moreover, this is not merely a process of numerical shifts but also one involving an increasing socioeconomic and often ethno-cultural polarisation between inner and outer areas, as it is the higher income sections of the community that are better placed to make the transition to suburban and ex-urban lifestyles.

On the other hand, developments in the North since the early 1980s have raised questions about the adequacy of this approach. One line of criticism has concerned the inevitability of progression through all the stages of the cycle and into a new cycle, for despite numerous sightings of 'gentrification' and 'urban renaissance', the weight of demographic evidence seems to suggest the continuing dominance of centrifugal tendencies within urban regions rather than a clear shift into a re-urbanisation stage (Cheshire 1995, Champion 1997). This links into the current uncertainties about the nature and long term significance of counter-urbanisation, discussed above. A second line of argument concerns the universality of the model, with evidence indicating that there has been considerable variation in this process, notably with central decline going further in the United States than in Canada and being more marked in the United Kingdom than in most of

Continental Europe (see, for instance, Bourne 1994, Cheshire 1995). Third is the question of how satisfactorily past definitions of 'core' and 'ring' represent the present day reality of urban area structure, arising from the progressive disappearance of the 'sub' element of the suburbanisation process as the population exodus from the older core has been followed by the decentralisation of retail, industrial and commercial activities, and lately by the growth of office and high-tech sectors. The perceived importance of the latter in the United States is testified by the use of such terms as 'the third wave of suburbanisation', 'the new suburbanisation', 'suburban downtowns' and 'edge cities'.

Leading on from this last point is the debate over 'metropolitan area' and 'megalopolis', and what these concepts mean for the future structure of urban regions and for the relevance of the terms 'urban' and 'rural'. For some time now in the North, the use of a measure based on people living in physically separate settlements has not only been difficult to implement but also of much less value than a conceptualisation of settlement structure based on functional characteristics and linkages. Terminologies for the latter vary between academic studies and between government agencies, including 'metropolitan area', 'daily urban system', 'commutershed', 'local labour market' and 'functional region', but basically they denote a more heavily populated area and the surrounding zone of lower density settlement that looks to it for a significant proportion of its daily activities. Even in the case of free-standing metropolitan centres it is difficult to decide where to impose the cut-off point at the edge, but the challenge becomes much greater in situations where several metropolitan areas are crowded together in the same broad region and are linked to each other by a complex web of functional ties. This was one of the key features of the original *Megalopolis* (Gottmann 1961), and can be found to varying degrees in other heavily urbanised contexts such as southeast England, Randstad Holland and the Tokkaido corridor in Japan. In relation to the urban–rural distinction, the important point here is that not all the land in these broadly-defined areas – and often only a relatively small proportion of it – is actually built up, with much being farmed, forested or in an essentially idle and natural state.

As regards the South, the recent literature suggests that there are some parallels with the situation in the North, particularly in terms of the growth and outward spread of metropolitan areas and the tendency for initially separate urban centres to be drawn together in a wider metropolitan region. At the same time, within the Third World these developments are reckoned to have taken on a variety of forms that appear to be associated with differences in societal characteristics and, as yet at least, they are not so general a phenomenon as in the North. In the context of globalisation, however, there is some evidence that the emerging megacities may have more in common with each other, irrespective of their location on the globe, than they have with other parts of their own urban systems.

Within the Third World some of the clearest similarities with the North's experiences appear to be found in Latin America. The picture of metropolitan growth presented by Villa and Rodriguez (1996) bears a close resemblance to the trends in inner urban decline and social segregation documented for European and North American cities. They note that, as the cities have expanded outwards, population growth in the central areas has slowed down, very much in keeping with the first three stages of Klaassen et al.'s (1981) 'stages of urban development' model. Moreover, this decentralisation process has been accompanied by increased social polarisation, with Gilbert (1996:91) noting that, 'By the turn of the century [1900], the rich had begun to move out of the city centre into detached suburban homes'. In recent years, however, such have been the pressures of population growth that the numbers of the poor in the suburban zones have been growing faster than those of the rich, though the latter have striven to maintain their distance from the former, if only through erecting protective enclosures. In terms of the development of wider metropolitan regions, too, Latin America displays some incipient parallels with the North. Villa and Rodriguez (1996) observe that since the 1970s metropolitan expansion has taken on a very different form from that in the past, alluding to the shift of growth to towns and secondary cities within the wider metropolitan region but some distance from the main urban centre – part of the polarisation reversal phenomenon mentioned earlier in the paper. They see this as 'a first step in the creation of conurbations like those of Europe, the United States, and Japan' (Villa and Rodriguez 1996:39).

On the other side of the Pacific, by contrast, some commentators emphasise the contrasts more than the similarities. For Ginsburg (1991), for instance, this difference begins in the Japanese equivalent of Megalopolis, with the very high population densities in the interstitial areas between its main metropolitan centres contrasting strikingly with the very low level of land usage in comparable parts of the northeastern USA. McGee (1991:3) sees this feature as being characteristic of much of Asia, involving the emergence of 'what appear to be new regions of extended urban activity surrounding the core cities of many countries'. McGee (1991:7) has labelled these areas 'desakota', from the Bahasa Indonesian words for village and town and, along with the major cities of the urban hierarchy and the peri-urban regions within daily commuting reach around them, sees them as a key component of a new 'extended metropolitan region' phenomenon. Ginsburg (1991), in his review of this phenomenon across Asia, mentions a variety of other terms that also attempt to capture distinctive aspects of this phenomenon, including 'minimegalopolis', 'metrozonal development' and 'urbanisation of the countryside', with the central feature being the blurring of the distinction between the urban and the rural.

At the same time, however, questions can be raised about the durability and significance of these zones within the context of global urbanisation and metropolitan development. As McGee (1991:18–19) is the first to admit, it is not yet certain that they will remain as distinctive parts of the Asian space economy, or merely represent a transitional stage in the

development process from densely populated rural state to peri-urban and metropolitan. Even if the former is the case, there is the possibility that these areas will not turn out to be much different in function and perhaps also in form from the new forms of economic development and urbanisation in the North, such as in the 'third Italy'.

This brings us back to the question of whether the forces of globalisation are leading to greater similarities or differences across the world in terms of patterns of urbanisation and urban change. The literature contains many comments on similarities between North and South at this metropolitan scale. McGee and Griffiths (1994:71), for instance, find that Bangkok has a great deal in common with Los Angeles, with both being territorially vast, amorphous, multicentred and unbalanced urban regions, and both being affected by congestion, pollution and the occurrence of social problems linked to ethnicity, persistence of poverty and the growth of crime. They also observe that some cities in Latin America are progressing in a similar pattern to the cities of Europe and North America. In similar vein, Cohen (1996:25–26) refers to the similarity of Bangkok to New York and of Sao Paulo to Los Angeles. In terms of growth rate, too, the distinctions seemed to be narrowing during the 1980s, as the pace of megacity growth in Latin America and Asia slowed from their previously high levels, at the same time as several of the major cities in North America and Europe experienced substantial recovery from decline (UNCHS 1996).

Nevertheless, while the metropolitan explosion and the urbanisation of countryside corridors gives the impression that 'ecumenopolis' (Doxiadis 1979) is rapidly becoming reality, there remain powerful forces working towards divergence. These are seen at work in the distinction between those places which are apparently being forged into a single world city or 'global village', and those which are more peripheral to this phenomenon. McGee (1991), in his classification of Asian space economies, highlights how markedly the extended metropolitan regions contrast with the densely populated rural areas which lie beyond the influence of these regions and with the sparsely populated frontier regions found in many Asian countries. A quarter of a century ago in relation to China, Whitney (1970) gave the tag 'extra-ecumenical China' to the zones that were poorly linked to the rest of the country and operated as largely self-contained cells within the broader national system – a distinction that applies widely through the South and that has probably become more marked in recent years with the rapid growth of the metropolitan areas. At the same time, however, this type of distinction appears to have been growing in the North, too, exemplified notably by the select band of global financial centres known as 'world cities' which, in interacting more closely with one another, look as if they have been turning their backs on the rest of their national urban systems (Friedmann 1986). It seems that, as global scale integration and competition increases, places within 'ecumenopolis' may well be becoming more distinctive in their roles within the world economy, even if local metropolitan structures and forms are becoming more standardised and uniform.

Conclusion

The question of whether the various regions of the world are becoming more similar or different in terms of their urban systems clearly cannot be answered definitively. This is not just because of lack of information about recent trends and lack of understanding about what they portend for the future, but more fundamentally because the answer seems to vary according to the scale of analysis being used and to the aspect being studied. In terms of level of urbanisation, current trends and expectations clearly favour convergence of national settlement systems around high proportions of people living in urban places. In terms of intensity of urbanisation, too, there appear to be some strong similarities between North and South in the checks observed in the growth rates of the largest cities and in the relative, if not absolute, redistribution of population down the urban hierarchy. However, there would also appear to be differences between countries as to the spatial extent, durability and significance of this development, as well as uncertainty about whether a cyclic pattern is involved. As regards more detailed aspects of the form and characteristics of urban settlements, there are signs of convergence in the way in which the largest cities of both the North and South are taking on many of the characteristics of each other in terms of the spatial spread of development and the range of problems, but it seems that both within and between countries cities are becoming more distinctive in the functions which they perform in the world economy.

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