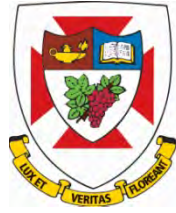


The New Autonomy and the Urban Environment: The Political and Societal Implications of Globalization for Cities

**by Mark Piel
1998**

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THE NEW AUTONOMY AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT: THE POLITICAL AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS OF GLOBALIZATION FOR CITIES

Mark Piel*

When political scientists discuss the modern development of globalization, quite often the approach is rooted in theories of political economy. With the massive economic restructuring that has proceeded at break neck speed since the end of the 1970s and the beginnings of the 1980s, most attention has been paid to the mounting job displacements that are attributed to the communications revolution and the mobility of capital. Depending on one's political stripes, the positions on the issue are numerous, but can be broadly placed into two camps. They run as follows: (1) either the free market will solve all economic ills and to interfere means financial disaster; or (2) there has to be a strong state presence in the global economy in order to ensure that there remains a social conscience amidst all this economic uncertainty. These two arguments briefly summarize the positions in the political spectrum, but they neglect to address a fundamental issue that is at the core of globalization. What characterises the economic/social/political formation that has been termed globalization, is the degree to which the liberal ideological premise of individual autonomy has been adopted, often to extreme lengths. More than ever before, people are able to manipulate such variables as time and space to degrees that have never before been attempted. It is unlikely that people will construct social realities that do not incorporate ideas that represent time and space. An even more far-fetched proposition is the development of technology which would render the meaning of such variables as obsolete. However, what characterises globalization, is the degree to which individuals are able to define themselves apart from such external variables.

This paper will argue that this rapid progression of autonomy has a major impact on how societies function and how they are able to confront emerging social problems through political action. However, I wish to stop short of condemning liberalism and the paradigm of autonomy through the individual will. To do so, to coin a phrase, would be throwing out the baby with the bath water. What I wish to focus on is how globalization can be seen through the lens of political and social autonomy. In doing so, this paper will examine individualism and individual autonomy and its impacts on community structure in the new global paradigm, and what this means for political action. It is not my assumption that every individual or social class is affected in the same way by globalization. Instead, I wish to offer a viewpoint on globalization that sees at its base liberal individualism. While not an invalid political theory, those that adhere to liberalism must keep an egalitarian foundation in the new global reality if they wish to avoid social difficulties that appear beyond legitimate political solutions.

*Mark Piel is the winner of the Institute of Urban Studies Student Paper Award, 1998.

AN INTRODUCTION TO GLOBALIZATION AS A PHENOMENON OF AUTONOMY

In order to understand the social impacts and political consequences of globalization, it is necessary to have a grasp of changing theories of space and time. As global networks of finance, people, media, ideology and technology continue to grow, it is important that those who study politics understand the new paradigm of these two fundamental elements of social structure. What is most striking about globalization is the compression of both time and space, to the point where spatial territories no longer play the same role in constructing personal and group identities that they once did. This poses serious problems for both the spatial units known as cities and territorial regions in their capability of solving urban problems. At a time where urbanisation is one of the components of modernity, the other variables, such as individual autonomy and the capacity in which it manifests itself through mobility, are eroding any attachment to physical space.

The issue of individual autonomy provides a much different perspective on globalization than normal political economy studies. Some have chosen to address the issue under the title of individuation, instead of individual autonomy, because the former term addresses both individual actors and collective actors in their capability in exercising their distinctiveness.¹ Either way, notions of autonomy and its expression must be credited to the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant theorized that to be autonomous meant expressing one's pure will, without relying on external factors such as community traditions, emotional impulses, *etc.*, in making moral judgments. In this way, Kant provided the basis of modern liberal thought and individualism. However, Kant was criticised because of his complete lack of incorporating political and social communities in his construction of autonomy, most notably by G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel charged that Kant's theory suggests that one can live in a vacuum, completely independent of cultural norms, and other social paradigms. The same criticisms are made today toward liberals by Marxists and communitarians to differing degrees. What is it about communities that critics have concluded are so important, and that mainstream liberals have not managed to grasp in the global age? Is there a direct correlation between community constructs and social dimensions such as time and space, and if there is, is the current composition of these social constructs under globalization hampering the ability of urban areas in achieving community cohesiveness?

1. AUTONOMY AND SOCIAL/SPATIAL CONSTRUCTIONS: THE POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY MARGINALISED

Zdravko Mlinar addresses the issue of spatial territory and individual autonomy in globalization as follows: as the number of actors on whom the individual depends increases, her dependence on any one of them decreases. "It thus follows that with the extension of space for alternatives, there is a relative decrease in dependence and vulnerability in relation to those in the immediate environment."² He holds that his

conception is not only reserved for individuals, but applies to specific cultural groupings as well, such as communities of elites, groups based on ethnicity and geographical regions such as cities. One has to look no further than the emerging theories of world cities, in understanding that, in many ways, the functions that are carried out in these urban centres seem somewhat disconnected with the surrounding state. Studies such as the ones undertaken by Sakia Sassen have pointed in this direction, as the surrounding hinterland of large metropolitan areas are often marginalised in poverty because they exist out of the loop of the world market subsystem.³ The hinterland areas of such cities as Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Bombay, Calcutta, New Delhi and Jakarta are just some examples of this disconnectedness between the flow of global capital in the interior of urban forms and the marginalisation of millions of people who live on the fringes.

What is unlike past circumstances is that cities which are centres of poverty and hopelessness are not reserved for developing countries, as even the United States has the same problem, although somewhat reversed. Those in the most central or core areas of communities may not be spatially marginalised from the flow of capital and technology, but are socially marginalised because of their lower income. Areas of New York and Los Angeles prove the rule. European cities are not immune to the social and spatial formations that have characterised communities in the global context either. Although not as susceptible to the same social ills that plague the inner cities in the U.S., Manuel Castells documents that communities in European "world cities" are often just as socially segregated because of the traditional attachments to spatial areas and the prestige that one is bestowed with if they happen to live in these areas. Therefore, unlike the flight of the upper classes to the suburbs, as was the case on the North American continent, the upper classes in Europe reside close to their places of occupation in high technology industries in well-preserved core areas. While not as striking as the hinterland marginalisation in Latin America, the Indian subcontinent, South East Asia or the central ghettos in the U.S., European cities are becoming just as segregated in social and spatial realities.⁴

Although social fragmentation is a common feature in the cities of global importance, it is crucial not to forget that, while there are marginalised populations that are part of the new urban process, there is also a degree of prosperity and a population that is not characterised by political and social marginalisation. In discussing how the global city is no longer a place but a process of flows, Castells theorises about the new elite, and places them within a similar context concerning Mlinar's earlier hypothesis about the decreasing interdependence of people with the same geographical area. Castells' theory is rather complex and will not be dissected here. However, its third component is important in understanding the new autonomous paradigm: the spatial organization of the dominant managerial elites is a direct expression of unfettered individualism. By using an approach that allows for the investigation of social domination by elites and how this relates to spatial organization, Castells puts it best in *The Rise of the Network Society*:

. . . elites are cosmopolitan, people are local. The space of power and wealth is projected

marginalisation works the other way as well. The dangers of this increased capacity for selective expression of individual autonomy are abundantly clear in the realm of the media and its relation to politics. With the increase of "individualised" products in the marketplace, social and political rifts develop. One such example is the influx of cable television channels to suit individual viewers' tastes. Françoise Sabbah made the following observation while studying the viewing habits of U.S. television watchers: in households where there was more than one television, family members spent less time in forms of social exchange with one another, than watching their own specific programs. Television programs, along with other media, contain elements of information, wrapped in their own specific packaging. The consequence of this for Sabbah is clear: "As information becomes segmented and individualised, the basis for a common cultural framework is increasingly narrow, making social exchanges more difficult and more rare because of the lack of common codes of exchange."⁸ Without these common codes, it becomes doubtful that any society can function, and even more doubtful that political issues will serve to unite the citizenry in order to solve the social ills that plague cities, since the citizenry will no longer be characterized by a sense of common cause but by segregation and isolation. Even though autonomy is increased on a selective scale for those with the material resources, they are just as much isolated from marginalised communities as marginalised communities are from the new paradigm provided by increased autonomy through technology and the media.

The reaction of the socially marginalised (*i.e.*, the urban poor) to the same process of media exposure has quite different effects, but contributes to the same social/political dilemma. Due to their social status and their relative distance from the "action" that defines globalization (the flows of capital, technology and media), these groups often view the life of elites as something to aspire to, which creates a considerable inequality between expectations and actual circumstances. As social scientists know, these are often the psychological conditions that lead to civil unrest on the part of lesser advantaged groups. Further, some would argue that this aspiration to emulate the social elite neglects to acknowledge and confront the underlying social ills that plague communities, and the fragmentation that accompanies the social status which they aspire to.⁹

However, it has been argued that telecommunications technology, if put to the proper purpose, could actually increase inclusiveness based on the political involvement of persons through direct forms of democracy in smaller urban forums. Such has been the line of argument that has routinely come from the ecological Left and emancipatory postmodernists. The criticisms of this Rousseauian conception are too many to list, but the most fundamental criticisms are: (1) that political discourse is far too complex to be reduced to the simple "yes" and "no" responses that characterize direct democracy and referendum style decision making; and (2) this does not make politics an inherently meaningful source of interaction and engagement. While this would appeal to increased notions of autonomy in urban environments, it is difficult to see how this could actually lead to increased feelings of community, instead of simply amplifying the process of choice that

is present in the global city. Even though there is no direct democracy that uses technology to the extent that supporters claim there should be in order to achieve their conception of democracy, the degree of apathy that already exists in political life among normal citizens is already substantial, despite the counting of individual votes and the acknowledgement of individual political contribution in this respect.

3. AUTONOMY AND THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE: POLITICAL FALLOUT OF FLEXIBLE PRODUCTION

The same approach of autonomy can be used in analysing the collapse of Fordist economies and the rise of "disorganized capitalism." Scott Lash and John Urry documented the shift toward specialised production as the result of three interrelated concerns of global theorists, in both the political economy tradition and the emerging study of modernity and its post-modern mutation. Technological innovation, changing patterns of consumer taste toward "individually distinct" products, and the increasing competition directed toward developed countries from developing ones on the basis of labour costs, were the developments singled out by Lash and Urry.¹⁰ The three variables have one theme in common as they relate directly to active manipulation of external factors as acts of individual autonomy, based on identifications with consumption and production. The flexibility that is found in post-Fordist production methods allows for technology to be used by capital in order to meet the ever-changing needs of the consumer at the fastest possible rate. This increasing turnover of socially desirable products brings with it two factors that lead to social strife: (1) as the economy (specifically the North American economy) continues in its post-Fordist mode, corporate restructuring will find the Fordist organisational structure is full of labour redundancy, with middle class earners constituting the bulk of this redundancy in management positions; and (2) as companies seek to target the dynamic sectors of the economy which include the shifting changes in taste at a rate that the average income earner cannot keep up with, social stratification will occur. As the middle class is squeezed out of the jobs that they have traditionally held, they will not have the incomes that are necessary to participate in highly individualistic post-Fordist consumption practices. Consequently, they will be excluded from the new social status of emerging elites which is associated with such consumption practices.¹¹ The impact for cities in this regard is substantial. The new lifestyle that accompanies post-Fordist regimes of accumulation often results in spatial restructuring through gentrification and escalating property values of once affordable housing for the middle and lower classes, in order to make way for upwardly mobile elites who desire to live near the "hip" and trendy centres of social interaction that are dominating the "new" downtown districts.

There is also a concern that the drive toward individual autonomy at all costs, which is expressed through flexible forms of production, will erode historically significant political actors and forms of identification. The growing concern among those on the political left is, as the economy restructures to meet the desired

tastes of individual consumers, the penchant for class-based politics dwindles because of the fragmenting workforce that accompanies flexible specialisation. As the workforce fragments from what was considered to be a relatively homogeneous group under "organised" capitalism, there develops an increasing fragmentation of social and political groups based on individual lifestyle choices, and the spatial dispersal of the working class from regions of production leading to inner city decay found in former "industrial cities." Lash and Urry documented this decline in class-based politics in Britain, Sweden, the United States, the former West Germany and France, albeit to differing degrees with differing political groups filling the void left by traditional class-structured voting patterns.¹² What will pick up the slack in regard to political movements and actors remains to be seen, which leaves the Left at a crossroads. Is this the end of the working class as some have argued?¹³ Or is there a new individual-based politics that can reintegrate the socially marginalised?

4. DIFFERING POLITICAL RESPONSES AND THE POSSIBILITY OF RADICAL POLITICS BASED ON INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

Despite all of this, some still have hope in the political process now developing in response to globalization. Sabbah notes the irony that the marginalised will eventually be forced into maintaining social networks and levels of political participation that are not compatible with the new forms of media and technology, which will consume the wealthy into a paradigm whereby the spiral of individual autonomy engaged in by the powerful will keep them oblivious to their activities. The hope is that "real-life politics" would then characterize a new political revival in our urban centres.¹⁴ Even if this does seem optimistic, the role that cities can play as regions of political involvement should not be disregarded.

Before I proceed, it is important to restate an earlier sentiment expressed in Section I. It is not my belief that expressions of autonomy by individuals or groups are inherently wrong. As a moral philosophy, liberalism and its history of individualism is not something that I wish to denounce. What is of concern is the current attempts found in globalization to satisfy conceptions of autonomy, and the growing fragmentation and polarisation of society into those that are able to express this autonomy on a global scale and those that are not.

Individualism is a topic that has always made those on the left of the political spectrum uneasy. Too often, individualism has contributed to the breakdown of community through its winner take all attitude in the economic sphere. It has always been the argument of Marxists that capitalism breeds individualism, yet in the 1990s, it has become obvious to many on the Left that this is not the case in every instance. Unlike individualism in the past, newer forms of individualism have come to express other sentiments that are profoundly uneconomic or at the least are not predominantly driven by economic factors such as a specific mode of production like capitalism. This new form of individualism is expressed in many ways, from the

women's movement, the environmental movement, the gay and lesbian movement, to other movements rooted in identity such as Aboriginal movements and fundamentalist movements associated with religious beliefs and ethnic origins. Although these movements hold implications for capitalism, they are not fundamental reactions to it, but act as autonomous expressions in pursuit of the "good life."¹⁵ This political shift away from distribution politics toward identity politics is forming the basis of a political response to current manifestations of globalization.

What characterises these movements are the same features that characterize globalization: their degrees of mobility through communications and the lacking fixed "address" that accompanies an association with a specific territorial area. Further, the character of social movements embody the hallmarks of democracy. As Warren Magnusson has described them, social movements are pluralistic, impermanent, lack bureaucratic structures and organisations, and are seemingly unbounded in where they can move. Further, Magnusson argues that these are also the fundamental characteristics of modern cities in the global network. Urban life is "nomadic" in character, to the point where territorial places mean little as they are all connected in the space of flows.¹⁶ It is in this way that social movements and cities share a common characteristic in the global society: they act as places (one symbolically and the other literally) of inclusive democratic interaction, and the marginalised are provided with a voice associated with a certain plight and place.

However, there is still the problem of autonomy in the marketplace, with which social movements must compete. For many, autonomy in the marketplace still holds considerable sway over reconstructing some form of democratic citizenship that depends on this new individualism. The tension that exists between the two is something that has yet to be settled. What goes against the prospects of a new citizenship based on the democratic interaction found in social movements are the increasingly probing economic and trade agreements that are overruling national, regional and municipal laws in favour of sovereign consumers and autonomous producers.¹⁷ The scale of economic agreements has not been matched by political action symbolized by social movements. As Magnusson points out, consumer sovereignty and state sovereignty soon overwhelm the locality as a place where politics can be practised.¹⁸

This should not leave those who believe in social movements thinking that there is no solution. Globalization allows the practice of the politics of simultaneity.¹⁹ This phrase describes the interconnectedness of politics that might appear as "grassroots," but is directed at multiple institutions and multiple social problems because of the telecommunications network. For example, a protest in New York City against a large multinational promotional agency like NIKE can impact consumers outside of the city, nation or continent in which it was held because of instantaneous news coverage transmitted via satellite, which contributes to individual (and ultimately societal) awareness of human rights abuses, labour standards, and may possibly suggest solutions. Michael Smith provides other examples of human rights conferences that ultimately connect

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3. Sakia Sassen, "On Concentration and Centrality in the Global City," in Paul L. Knox and Peter J. Taylor, eds., *World Cities in a World System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 71.
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5. Ibid., pp. 415-16.
6. Mlinar, p. 16.
7. Ibid., p. 17.
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9. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in Mike Featherstone, ed., *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 299.
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12. Lash and Urry, pp. 6, 212-18. For a more theoretical discussion of the fragmented labour force under post-Fordist regimes of accumulation and its social consequences, see David Harvey, "From Fordism to Flexible Accumulation," in David Harvey, ed., *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 141-72.
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14. Sabbah, p. 223.
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16. Warren Magnusson, *The Search for Political Space* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp. 68, 283, 287.
17. See John Kincaid, "Cities and Citizens in Flux: Global Consumer Integration and Local Civic Fragmentation," in Peter Karl Kresl and Gary Gappert, eds., *North American Cities and the Global Economy* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).
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20. Smith, p. 264.
21. See Will Kymlicka, "Freedom and Culture," in *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
22. See Brian Walker, "Plural Cultures, Contested Territories: A Critique of Kymlicka," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 30:2 (June 1997): 211-34.

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