10 Cities in the Internet Age

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10.1 Introduction

Recent literature in the social sciences suggests that a ‘new geography’ has emerged – one that marks a break from past geographies. Cities are central to the ‘new geography’, particularly global or world cities and their surrounding urban regions. This chapter attempts to synthesize the new realities of cities and the new urban geographies that have appeared during the past decade or two. Recent research at both the interurban scale of city systems and at the intra-urban scale of the individual metropolis makes claims that new trends, patterns, and processes are operating. Both scales of analysis are foci of this chapter, centred around aspects of technology and its effects on cities. In this way the presentation relates to problem formulations that are introduced in Chap. 2 of this book.

Far from diminishing the attraction of large cities, the combination of new technology and the need for face-to-face contact continue to favour large cities. Storper and Venables (2002) attribute this to ‘buzz’, or the advantage of face-to-face contact, which they assert is the mechanism at the heart of urban agglomeration. However, other forces pull to some degree toward new ‘edge cities’ or new clusters of economic activities outside the urban core but within the metropolitan region.

The chapter begins with a survey of the ‘new geography’ and the technological, social, and political forces that have created it. Next, the chapter turns to the urban hierarchy and the largest urban regions, or world cities, in particular. In both the new geography and the evolving world city hierarchy, there appear to be winners and losers, a pattern reinforced by the ‘new economy’ and its effects on cities. The chapter then focuses on the shape of the postmodern metropolis, with attention paid to ‘edge cities’ and the polynuclear urban form found increasingly throughout the world. The chapter ends with an assessment of challenges for urban planning in the context of ‘splintered urbanism’, the trend toward social, economic, and spatial bifurcation of urban spaces.
10.2 A New Geography?

We live in “an urbanized world of sprawling metropolises” Castells (2001, p. 224). Urban economies are “the information-switching centers of the global economy” (Graham and Marvin, 1996). These metropolises are also the locus of contradictions, where all do not benefit equally from the new economy. “The Internet allows segregated, affluent enclaves to remain in contact with each other, and with the world, while severing ties with their uncontrolled, surrounding environment” (Castells 2001, p. 240).

In his description of “the new geography”, Kotkin (2000) points out that geography has not diminished in importance, but its significance has changed in nature. If people, companies, or industries can locate anywhere, or choose from a multiplicity of places, the question of where they locate becomes increasingly contingent on the specific attributes of any given location. What have changed are the rules that govern geography, and the rules that make of successful and unsuccessful places. Perhaps the key rule is based on the realization that “where information-processing companies, related services, and skilled professionals choose to locate will increasingly shape the geographic importance of future cities and communities” (Kotkin 2000, pp. 6-7).

Companies, under constant pressure to create new products and services, and the skilled professionals, on whom they depend for creativity, gravitate toward large, amenity-rich urban regions. The amenities they seek are not merely pleasant physical environments; they include opportunities for consumption and interaction. As Castells (2001) summarizes, cities are agglomerations of economic and social life. Specifically, cities stand out in four ways:

- Cities are innovative milieux for high technology;
- Cities are key places for advanced services, including finance, insurance, legal services, accounting, advertising, marketing;
- Cities are centers of cultural industries, including media, entertainment, art, fashion, publishing, museums, and cultural creation of all kinds; and
- Cities attract knowledge creators – highly educated workers and entrepreneurs.

Camagni (2001) has put forward a similar set of roles for cities, but with emphasis on spatial roles. Camagni sees the city as ‘cluster’ (with increasing returns), as ‘interconnection’, as ‘milieu of innovation and creativity’, and as ‘symbol’. The symbolic roles include both ‘place’ and ‘node’, as symbol of territorial control, and as a place for creation of symbols. For both Castells and Camagni, cities are clusters and milieus of innovation and creativity but, significantly, Camagni adds the symbolic and nodal roles of cities. Storper and Venables (2002) also suggest that the economies of the larger and more globally-linked metropolitan areas dominate in five areas: (a) creative and cultural functions, including industries linked to this, such as fashion, design and the arts; (b) tourism; (c) finance and business services; (d) science, technology and high technology and research; and (e) power and influence, including government, headquarters, trade associations, and international agencies.