academicresearchJournals

Vol. 3(2), pp. 108-118, February 2015
DOI: 10.14662/IJPSD2015.012

ISSN: 2360-784X
http://www.academicresearchjournals.org/IJPSD/Index.html

International Journal of Political Science and Development

Full Length Research

Going urban: marking cities, city networks and global commodity chains in the capitalist world-system

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Accepted 20 February 2015

The study of Global Politics has traditionally taken the nation-state, individual and international system as its units of analysis. This piece asserts that a glaringly missing unit – the city – is a viable object of inquiry in the study of globalization and politico-economic processes. Utilizing the city as a unit of analysis facilitates a more thorough understanding of the neoliberal capitalist world-economy, which traditional units of study in international relations tangentially provide. I posit that actors in cities, from transnational companies to local officials, deploy power in the form of neoliberal urban policy and create new and uneven economic geographies, through the organization of global commodity chains, respectively. I conclude with two propositions: cities 1) offer a unique explanation and description of power, inequality, and structure that conventional units of analysis miss out on, and 2) vivify the reality that capitalism and neoliberal governance are unquestionably tied to space.

Keywords: Cities, world cities, world systems, International Relations, capitalist world-economy, neoliberalism, uneven development, global commodity chains

Cite This Article As: Soler ACD (2015). Going urban: marking cities, city networks and global commodity chains in the capitalist world-system. Inter. J. Polit. Sci. Develop. 3(2): 108-118.

INTRODUCTION

The study of international politics has traditionally taken the international system of nation-states, the nation-state or the individual – heads of state or government – as units of analysis. Seminal texts have stressed the importance of consciously and responsibly choosing a "level of analysis" to establish a "stable point of focus", whether it be the system *or* the state (Singer, 1961: 78); the interaction of man, state and the international system in accounting for war and peace (Waltz, 2001: 1-15); and the distinctiveness of the system from its interacting units

(Waltz, 1979: 40-1). Arguably the most prominent unit of study is the state (Taylor, 2013). This is the case as the state has trumped other forms of social organization in history, from city-states and confederations to universalist empires and theocracies (Spruyt, 1994: 153-80), leading to the preponderance of the Westphalian state system and its historical record in "taming" cities (Flint and Taylor, 2011: 249-53).

Yet if history is to serve as one of the justifications for objects of analysis, cities must somehow occupy their place in intellectual discourse. However, since the pervasive view holds that international issues either fall within the purview of states as opposed to cities (Sassen, 2012: 6), or are coterminous with nation-states (Sassen, 2012: 59), the city as a unit of analysis in global politics has had the misfortune of being both neglected and underappreciated. The same is true in the study of the political economy of commodity chains. Overlooking the city comes at a cost: cities are critical nodes in 'Global Commodity Chains' as they connect advanced producer services that possess the means to deal with and control cross-border networks of production and distribution of commodities (Parnreiter, 2010: 36).

Broadly, this piece's central contribution to the fields of International Relations and the global political economy of commodity chains resides in the call to use cities as units of analysis. More specifically, the central research agendum driving this piece revolves around the role of cities in shaping the preponderant economic and political structures of global politics: the capitalist world-economy and neoliberalism, respectively. What can cities tell us about contemporary processes taking place in global politics? How do cities elucidate the distribution of commodities in ways that other units like the nation-state or regional trade blocs cannot? How does the integration of cities into the network of global commodity chains impact the contemporary neoliberal capitalist world-economy and core-periphery relations? This study explores some of the responses to these questions.

The piece proceeds in five parts. First, I justify the use of and operationalize my theoretical framework – world-systems analysis – and attempt to arrive at a working definition of the city. Included in this subsection is a discussion on the capitalist world-economy. Second, I demonstrate how cities articulate changes in the global economy, namely, the socio-spatial variegations created by neoliberalism and the so-called Washington Consensus. In the third section, I identify 1) specific city networks, and what constitutes these networks and 2) elucidate the concept of uneven geographies of growth and development, a direct result of contradictions inherent in capitalism, as well as the historical and recurrent structural conditions underpinning the capitalist world-economy. City networks, I argue, are loci of power and control that help create uneven geographies of development. The fourth section is devoted to a cursory introduction on global commodity chains. I postulate that cities are integral nodes in GCC that transcend the nation-state level. This proposition has consequences on core-periphery relations. In section V, I consolidate the preceding sections with a few propositions, namely, that cities1) offer a unique explanation and description of power, inequality, and structure that conventional units of analysis in IR tangentially do, and 2) vivify the reality that capitalism and neoliberal governance are unquestionably tied to space.

'City limits:' Working definitions

There is no single, overarching definition of urban or the city. Difficulties arise as a result of the breadth of the subject area, which renders the task of delimiting the parameters of studying the urban a complex task (Paddison, 2001: 1). But this does not imply that 'city-ness' is nebulous. A survey of conceptualizations from various scholars offers a refined understanding of the city, one that is both attribute-based and relational.

Conceptualizing the city in the context of an urbanizing word is a prerequisite to grasping its significance as a unit of analysis. Mid-2007 marked the first time in human history that the majority of the world's population lived in cities (Hall and Barnett, 2012: 3). Notions of the city are inconsistent since they differ across political boundaries, sometimes based on administrative and functional boundaries, and other times on ecological variables such as density and population size (Frey and Zimmer, 2001: 14). Cities are "many things: a spatial location, a political entity, an administrative unit, a place of work and play, a collection of dreams and nightmares, a mesh of social relations, an agglomeration of economic activity, and so forth" (Hubbard, 2006: 1). But their defining feature is human density and the correlated features of political incorporation and some shared sense of interdependency (Latham et al., 2009: 2), for "cities are civilization," and therefore "economic, social and political creatures" (Pierre, 2011: 13).

Moreover, a city is a "permanent and densely settled place with boundaries that are administratively defined…[which is] the accomplishment of a population whose members work on non-agricultural tasks" (Monti Jr., 2005: 99). The term 'accomplishment' has at least three implications. First, the city can be deduced from its physical infrastructure and sheer population size. Second, a pervasive distinct urban culture is deducible. Third, it maintains relationships with settlements dispersed over a much larger territory (ibid.). Pacione extends this line of thought by identifying four characteristics of the urban as entity: its population size, which may vary in relation to a given national population; its economic base, or, as echoed above, engagement by the populace in non-agricultural activity; its legal or administrative criteria such

as boundaries; and its functional definitions, in place to prevent both under- and over bounding (2009: 20), while invoking the city as quality, a way of life inhabitants attach meanings to (2009: 21-2).

Cities, therefore, are not simply empty vessels where people live, companies so happened to be in, and events take place. Rather, they are political entities with formal governance structures, public-private partnerships, and fluid administrative boundaries. Likewise, cities are geographical agglomerations of a transnational class of capitalists shaping the production and distribution of commodities through advanced service producers and global logistics firms. Cities are likewise situated in a broader system they affect through the networks and interdependencies they establish with one another – the world-system.

The world-system

A world-system is a politico-economic structure with a dominant mode of production that determines the positionality or degree of economic integration of actors. It is "[a] historical social system where the division of labour [sic] is larger than any one production area" (Flint and Taylor, 2011: 315). A term used interchangeably with the contemporary world-system is the capitalist world-economy because of the preponderance of the capitalist mode of production (Flint and Taylor, 2011: 14) on a global scale, acted upon by "people and firms…accumulating capital in order to accumulate still more capital" (Wallerstein, 2004: 24).

The world-system, however, is not just economic in character. Scholarly work on the constitution of the world-system stresses that its attendant division of labor "brings in its train systemic political, social, ideological, cultural, and even religious rhythms as well" (Frank and Gills, 2000: 18). In an attempt to shun criticisms of economic determinism due to its structuralist proclivities, world-system analysis' proponents posit that "economic and political power are inseparable" because a crucial element of a world-system's development hinges on its "hegemonic rhythm," or "political pattern" (ibid.). The maintenance of the capitalist world-economy necessitates "a very special relationship between economic producers and the holders of political power" (Wallerstein, 2004: 24). Resultantly, the world-system is not a static configuration; it is susceptible to both consolidation and anti-systemic movements.

The choice of a world-systems approach to highlight the relationality of cities is deliberate. A world-systems approach highlights the interaction of units within the system, which provides both a structure and incentives to actors or units (Denemark, 1999: 51). World-systems analysis likewise provides a historical, long-view perspective that helps contextualize what cities are and how city networks of commodity chains take shape. Also, it is not blind to hierarchies and inequalities, as expressed by core-semi-periphery-periphery relations (Simon, 1995; Smith, 2003: 125-26; Taylor, 2008; Wilkinson, 1993: 229-33).

Neoliberalism and socio-spatial variegations

Viewing international politico-economic phenomena from the prism of cities reveals the means by which they have uniquely articulated the power exerted by neoliberalism. The accession into power of Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and Robert Reagan across the pond a year later signaled a radical doctrinal U-turn that preached private property rights, free markets and free trade under the watch of a state whose function was to institutionally preserve and protect these practices (Harvey, 2005: 1-2). States would take a backseat, limit intervention, and allow the market to reign (Harvey, 2005: 2) via market discipline, competition, and commodification (Theodore et al., 2011: 15). The "new world order" that had come about with the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its attendant socialist vision seemed to have secured the victory of the neoliberal agenda, which also included the coercion of underdeveloped states by institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to dismantle barriers to free market access and trade, syphoning government expenditures on health, education, welfare, and environmental protection in the process (Routledge, 2003: 239) in exchange for servicing their debts through restructuring policies (Bridge and Watson, 2011: 7-8).

Cities in both developed and less developed countries reappropriate this transnational/national ideology, in the process reflecting historically contingent urban conditions and creating governance structures. North American and Western European cities have embraced market-oriented policies, enabling firms and individuals in these cities to maximize profits and 'utility,' respectively (Gough, 2002: 58). Meanwhile, a "discontinuous geography of neoliberalization" in Third and Fourth World cities points to distinct social and governmental processes that travel differently along circuits of neoliberalism in the world's poorer cities (Robinson and Parnell, 2011: 525). Neoliberal globalization and its visions of reduced state power, open domestic markets to free movements of commodities, capital, and patents, have triggered pressures on Southern cities to conform to yet contest it "in and beyond, but often through cities" (Sheppard, 2014: 144). For instance, Vientiane, one of the last remaining seats of political power in the dwindling world of nominally Communist states, has lured Chinese and Malaysian investors and labor to develop transportation networks and tourist resorts, large-scale projects that barely trickle down to the Laotian populace (Walsh and

Southiseng, 2009). Managua, the capital city of Central America's most urbanized country, Nicaragua, has undergone a post-revolutionary, hacienda-style neoliberal restructuring involving the construction of gated communities, tax breaks for businesses in the tourism industry, repair of roads that connect locations associated with the urban elite, and the luring of global franchises like Pizza Hut and McDonald's, all of which cater to a minute proportion of an impoverished urban population that is enmeshed in meager incomes, household overcrowding, and slums (Rodgers, 2012).

The trajectories of neoliberalism *within* the Global South itself are likewise starkly diverse. On one end, residents of Cape Town (Parnell, 2008: 599-606) and Kuala Lumpur (McNeill, 2008: 295-96) have benefited from 1) redistributive, welfarist policies geared at poverty relief, and 2) massive infrastructure projects spearheaded and funded by the Malaysian state under the leadership of then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad. In the formal political arena, devolution and local autonomy – hallmark features of most developed cities – are non-existent in Chinese and Vietnamese cities, where local decision-making and administration are conducted by central state authorities (Bae, 2012: 101).

On the other end, the prevalence of slums in larger segments of sub-Saharan localities such as Abidjan, Lusaka and Nairobi, shares a common, underlying theme: the absence of concrete urban development policy (UN-HABITAT, 2003: 195-228). While the provision of infrastructural public or quasi-public goods like water, sewage, power and communication was seen as universal in developed cities in the early twentieth century, it was deliberately intended to be a source of inclusion/exclusion in colonial cities, where access was limited to the colonial master (Pieterse, 2008: 25). As a consequence, many of these same postcolonial cities "were never intended or designed to service their populations" (ibid.). Characterized by rapid urban growth, inadequate shelter provision, the salience of unemployment, underemployment, and petty commodity activities, most Sub-Saharan African cities remain in the periphery of the world-economy (Simon, 1995: 137, 148). Empirical data reveal lower levels of integration into the world economy by Sub-Saharan African (Wall, 2011) and South Asian cities (Aranya et al., 2011) relative to their counterparts in Europe, North America and Pacific Asia.

Cities and city networks

Cities do not exist in isolation from global processes, let alone from one another. A city's *raison d'être* lies in its connections, or "external relations," for it never operates on its own (Taylor, 2004: 2-3). A rich, vast and transdisciplinary body of literatures on cities, city and world city networks, and cities in globalization validates this (Derudder et al., 2012; Knox, 1995; Sassen, 2001b; 2002; 2012; Taylor, 2003; 2004; 2005; 2007; Taylor et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2011; Timberlake, 1985; Timberlake and Smith, 2012). Because a majority of scholarly work on urban networks employs terms such as 'world' or 'global' cities, there is a common misconception that their sole focus is on cities in the Global North. Perhaps, this arises from the conflation and interchangeable use by academics of these two terms. In their original sense, world cities refer to integration into a "worldwide network of urban areas," and the varying degrees of their importance to the global economy, while global cities allude to a select number of urban localities able to control production by virtue of housing advanced producer service firms (Timberlake and Smith, 2012: 249).

Intensified flows of capital, information, and people assuredly identified with globalization have given the city a more prominent role in the workings of global politics (Sassen, 2001b: 256; Timberlake and Smith, 2012: 247), so much so that bold predictions about displacing the centrality of the state are no longer deemed ludicrous (Flint and Taylor, 2011: 244; Taylor, 2003: 130-31). While the latter is not the objective of this sub-section, it is a viable proposition that could be further scrutinized especially in light of the power and control – once monopolized by the homogenous unitary state – exerted by actors in cities (Knox, 1995: 6-8), whether they are "world" cities (Friedmann, 1986), "global" cities (Sassen, 2001a) and "ordinary" cities (Robinson, 2006) that are "off the map" (Robinson, 2002). The succeeding section discusses the power and authority exercised by 1) various actors in cities through city networks and the constitution of these networks, resulting in 2) uneven geographies of development, which, to an extent, emanate from the contradictions inherent in capitalism and the structural conditions giving rise to world city networks.

Constitutive parts of city networks

Expectedly, the most thoroughly analyzed city networks are those concomitant with the capitalist world-economy. Seminal pieces (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982; Friedmann, 1986; and Sassen, 2001a come to mind) on the relations between cities, and their bearing on the world economy, have triggered rigorous academic work that qualifies the observed networks between cities. The world city network, ontologically, has been termed an interlocking network that is triple-layered: at the net-level are "spaces of flows" (Castells, 2010) based on "productions of multiple flows in networks and chains" (Flint and Taylor, 2011: 314); the nodal level is composed of cities; and the sub-nodal level is made up of advanced producer service firms (Taylor, 2004; Taylor et al., 2011: 4). These firms – accountancy, advertising, banking/finance, insurance, law, and

management/consultancy – interlock the cities to produce spaces of flows (Taylor et al., 2011: 4-5).

These concepts are important as they help eschew the notion of 'anthropomorphic cities,' a reification that transforms cities into actors that 'do,' 'perform,' and 'create.' While cities are viable units of analysis and nodes, they are *not* actors. Agency is undertaken by the sub-nodes, whether in the form of law firms, consultancy services, or global logistics firms. These advanced producer services and financial service corporations coordinate economic activity and generate flows and exchanges of information and services (Amen et al., 2012: 23). While flows know no borders, they are nevertheless attracted by hubs and nodes, where they [re]emerge and touch ground in cities (Segbers, 2012: 37). Several cities in the Global North rose to prominence for their disproportionate share of firms that articulate these flows, elevating their status into world cities, the command and control centers of the capitalist world-economy. These command and control centers are populated by decision-makers who direct the where and *how* of capital flows, product design, and the manufacture of a commodity from start to finish.

Decisions influencing the direction of capital, production processes, and commodity chains are manifestations of power and control by non-state actors. Corporations operate through multi-office urban networks to more efficiently service clients and maintain brand integrity (Taylor et al., 2011: 4). Albeit an indirect measurement of flows, the interlocking network nevertheless places an emphasis on the sizes of offices in cities: the larger the office, the greater the flows of services it generates, which then leads to the postulate that cities with larger corporate offices would exchange greater amounts of information and knowledge than cities with smaller corporate headquarters (ibid.). For instance, law firms make available inter-jurisdictional contracts and advertising agencies devise global campaigns for individuals and groups patronizing their services, interlocking cities "through the flows of information, knowledge, and personnel between project-relevant cities," while non-economic interlocking transpires through foreign service offices, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations (Taylor, 2005: 707). These sub-nodes correspond to inter-state, supra-state, and trans-state actors, respectively. Interlocking networks of cities, then, do not only pertain to a deployment of economic power, but also political power through webs of country missions and diplomatic personnel and social movements and grassroots organizations. The deployment of political power is in the form of information and knowledge exchange facilitated by enhancements in telematics.

Scholarly work has also engaged with cities and airline networks (Grubesic and Matisziw, 2012), spatial Internet networks (Malecki, 2012), and media centers (Watson and Hoyler, 2011). This is demonstrative not just of the interest in this fledging research agenda, but also, and more importantly, on the empirical phenomena evinced by world city networks. No longer enlightened hypotheses, urban networks of varying forms abound, testifying on behalf of the relationality of cities in general and the empirics of their interactivity, more specifically.

Uneven geographies of growth and development

One of the enduring structural features of the modern world-system is uneven development. An admittedly broad concept encompassing the political, interpreted as the transition to liberal democracy, and social development, taken to mean modernization, development in this piece is equated to economic development as it is usually treated "as the critical process," expressed through the conversion from poor to rich (Taylor, 2008: 519). Along with the parallel concept of economic growth, which roughly refers to increased production of commodities, development is "inherently uneven" since it has historically clustered in "both time and space" (ibid.). The social evolution of this world-system reveals a patriarchic system where sub-systemic levels of countries, regions, and sectors have experienced "development" through their privileged position in the "inter'national' division of labor and power," which is temporary, cyclical, and subject to intense competition for leadership (Frank, 1996: 41).

Discussions of uneven growth and development usually take the nation-state as their point of departure; states "mature" into "fully developed political and economic entities" and took on an even more prominent role in development discourse during decolonization (Taylor, 2008: 519). However, this narrates only a part of the story as urban processes also form uneven and dependent geographies. In a seminal piece, Jacobs transposes Frank's development of underdevelopment thesis (c.f. Frank, 1996; Taylor, 2013: 82) onto the scale of cities to outline a process of peripheralization (Jacobs, 1984: 43-4). Five "great forces:" enlarged city markets, transplantation of city work out towards hinterlands, more and varied jobs in the city, technological advances leading to urban migration, and expansion of city capital (1984: 44; Taylor, 2013: 81-2), paradoxically supply the economies of city-regions because of the forces' fluidity and leave the cities themselves in poverty (Jacobs, 1984: 57-8).

Uneven spatial development is prefaced on a set of macro theoretical claims alluding to a series of contradictions inherent in capitalism. A pair of contradictory tendencies lays, first, in capital's expansionary tendencies towards greater accumulation and its production of relatively fixed, socio-spatial configurations such as roads, telecommunication grids,

and state regulatory institutions (Brenner, 2011: 137). Second is the tension between geographical differentiation and universalization, where the former is "a direct result of the need, inherent in capital, to immobilize capital," as exemplified by the fact that while "$500 million can be whizzed around the world at the push of a button…it must come from somewhere…en route to somewhere" (Smith, 2008: 120). This space, the somewhere, is in cities, where a continuous mobilization of capital yields factories, machinery, and other facilities simultaneously produces "differentiated geographical space" (ibid.) – or uneven geographies of space. The universalizing facet of capitalism is found in the "absolute geographic expansion of capital" (Smith, 2008: 121). In other words, the same, universal dynamic is translated unevenly because capital disperses unequally, as shown by the material variegations between 'alpha' world cities such as New York and London and their counterparts in the less developed world.

Cities as loci of power and control

The preceding discussion highlighted the relationality of cities and the creation of uneven geographical spaces of development. In tandem, these dynamics do not surface automatically. This is because cities are loci of politico-economic power and control, exercised by various actors and units concentrated in these urban agglomerations.

First, the cultivation of 'spaces of neoliberalism' is a product of the power exercised by city and local officials. As signature cultural events, corporate investments, public resources, and good jobs become scarcer, local authorities vigorously resort to entrepreneurial city governance and effectuated through 'growth-first' urban development arrangements rendering issues of redistribution antithetical to economic development, a mimicking of competitive markets via a 'lock-in' of public sector austerity and growth-chasing, and compliance with economic potential and governance in lieu of social need, poverty, and social exclusion (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 47-8). Urban authorities, from this perspective, could be viewed as caving in to the structural pressures exerted by neoliberalism.

The contemporary urban space has been mobilized as a venue for neoliberal policies, and is part and parcel of a "dominant political project" municipal governments have embarked on (Theodore et al., 2011: 21). Cities are integral to the deployment of neoliberal policies because of their centrality in Fordist-Keynesian production processes, as loci of innovation and creativity, and zones of devolved governance and institutional experimentation (ibid.). Aside from a rollback in welfarist and redistributive policies, urban localities in the Global North have resorted to a host of policy formulations in keeping with the complex interplay of neoliberalism as "creative destruction" (Theodore et al., 2011: 16). Among the more prominent instances of creative destruction include the creation of new opportunities for speculative investment in real estate markets through the razing of public and low-rent housing, the installation of new regulatory mechanisms that encourage contingent employment by disposing of publicly funded programs aimed at skills promotion of disadvantaged workers, and the enhanced reliance on private finance and capital to sustain revenue collection to cover for the imposition of fiscal austerity measures on municipal governments (Theodore et al., 2011: 22-3). Cities have thus proven to be laboratories for testing neoliberal policy as well as spaces where the same neoliberal policies are deepened and consolidated by local authorities.

The intensified demand for services and the service industry by industries of all types – mining, manufacturing, finance, and consumer services – bares a second type of power and control exercised by actors in cities (Sassen, 1995: 65): the formation of new economic geographies. As loci of power, cities are key sites for the production of services for firms while housing their offices. Services like advertising, consulting, and financial transactions do not just flow seamlessly but also involve production processes, which have distinct locational characteristics (Sassen, 1995: 63). These production processes are directed and overseen by corporations, firms, and other actors. A focus on the production of services reveals the "*practice* of global control" and power essential to the organization of the neoliberal capitalist world-economy (Sassen, 1995: 63-4; emphasis original).

Uneven geographies of development are just one example of a specific economic geography. Another kind of geography implicating cities through the generation of global production services is the New International Division of Labor. Emerging in the 1970s due to reduced profitability in Europe, increased production costs, cheap production costs in less developed countries, encouragement given to urban-industrial growth by international financial institutions, developments in communications technology, and heightened mobility and flexibility of finance (Potter et al., 2008: 76), the NIDL reflects a hierarchical social division of labor within big firms that disaggregated control and operational activities (Knox et al., 2014: 78). The NIDL saw a deindustrialization of core countries, marked by global shifts of manufacturing to peripheral regions of the world that did help boost the economies of, among others, East Asian states (Smith, 2012: 240-41). Furthermore, it entailed the movement by firms of their industrial production processes to poorer areas of the world, primarily because of cheap labor (Pacione, 2005: 634; Taylor et al., 2011: 2), as well as encouragement by international organizations and state governments "anxious to bring employment to burgeoning Third World cities in order to forestall possible political instability"

(Pacione, 2005: 633-34). Transnational corporations benefited from low wage costs, governmental tax concessions, and, oftentimes, insulation from national labor regulations (Pacione, 2005: 389).

Third, labor, a primary factor in the production of services, has taken on a geographical identity determined by capitalist networks of firms. On one extreme, core or world cities, in Friedmann's seminal piece, "*'basing points' in the spatial organization and articulation of production and markets*" (Friedmann, 1986: 71; emphasis original), require more white-collar, highly skilled labor. World cities are the centerpiece of an international spatial division of labor reliant on a continuing supply of "highly skilled professional and managerial, technical and scientific, and creative labour [sic] to meet labour market demand and, ultimately create value for the firm" (Beaverstock, 2012: 241) On the other, peripheral cities are integrated into the world-economy in large part due to the abundance of cheap, less skilled labor. In splitting control from operational activities, firms have taken advantage of the creation of export-processing zones – labor-intensive manufacturing hubs that import raw materials and export factory products – as a cost-effective response to the NIDL, and to service debt (Pacione, 2005: 389). This does not imply the absence of low skilled labor in core metropolises, or a total dearth in highly skilled workers in Third World cities. Nevertheless, the overall picture the NIDL depicts is a geographically bifurcated global economy of laborers.

Global commodity chains, world cities and the world-economy

The interdependencies of cities are not just predicated on advanced service producers. The production of physical goods, or commodities, remains vital to the neoliberal capitalist world-economy. More importantly, the production of commodities is not confined to a single geographical area. Like services, they are interconnected through commodity chains, which are both linked through cities and nexuses of power and control.

The term 'commodity chain' was first introduced into the lexicon of the world-economy by Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986). In their seminal piece, they define a commodity chain as "a network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity" (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986: 159).In network terms, commodity chains could be conceived of as having a number of nodes making up 'pivot points' in commodity transformation sequences, from the extraction and supply of raw materials, stages of industrial processing, export of goods, and final marketing (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1990: 51-2). Each node is linked to other nodes of related activity, creating a web-like structure of GCC connecting local, regional, and world economies to form spatially bound structures (Smith and Mahutga, 2009: 67).

Brown et al.'s (2010: 30) meticulous illustration of the world city network in commodity chains elucidates, in concrete terms, the relationship between flows and nodes. Employing their example of the connectedness of Mexico City and Santiago de Chile in hypothetical terms, four types of flows [commodity chain, production inputs, service provision, and distribution] and nodes [cities in networks, final, middle, and initial production] are involved in a single commodity chain linking both cities. The commodity chain begins when a firm supplies raw materials and production inputs go into a good's initial production. At this point, city A is already involved in the commodity chain. It could conceptualize the product, for instance, or provide capital for its design. As the good moves into middle production, city B can provide risk management services and quality control measures alongside other production inputs supplied by the firm. When the good reaches final production, cities A and B both provide services, possibly through marketing or advertising. Subsequently, the finished product is distributed in both cities.

The intricate web of flows and nodes is wrought with power relations and asymmetries. In a more ubiquitous model involving more cities and commodity chains, corporations and service providers in cities compete for opportunities to service commodity chains. Setting off the chain is resource and raw material extraction. There are striking similarities between extractive economies and low-wage manufacturing sites, for instance, which rekindle a coercive core and dependent periphery (Smith and Mahutga, 2009: 68). Even before the actual commodity chain is linked to the world city network, cities vie for capital, financial, and corporate investments through neoliberal policies geared at competitiveness and profitability in a virtual marketplace of developed and less developed urban agglomerations. In buyer-driven commodity chains, large retailers and brand-name merchandisers play a "pivotal role" in configuring networks of decentralized production networks, usually in Third World export processing zones where production is carried out and finished goods are made (Gereffi, 1994: 97). In producer-driven commodity chains, Transnational companies and large industrial enterprises involved in the automobile, computer, aircraft, and electrical machinery industries control the production system of commodity chains, creating a more economically varied geography of services (ibid.). Cities compete for the offices of these TNCs and retail companies, and in the process compete for power and control.

Structurally, developed and less developed cities mirror core-semi-periphery-periphery relations, which a world-systems analysis accentuates. 'Core activities' like advanced producer services firms [i.e. financial, legal, accounting, and consulting services, to name a few; see Sassen, 2001a; Taylor et al., 2011 for networks of cities

and producer services] almost invariably cluster around core or world cities. They do so because capital-intensive infrastructural entry barriers like roads, houses, factories, shops, etc., all under the purview and control of local authorities, are expensive to build and maintain (Parnreiter, 2012: 236). Entry barriers erected by city officials 1) limit the number of firms engaged in particular activities, thereby preserving capitalism's monopolistic tendencies by curbing competition, and 2) give certain cities an advantage over other cities and non-urban localities that cannot maintain capital intensive infrastructure that producers are in need of (ibid.). Hence, some cities are able to monopolize highly sought-after producer services that aid in the execution of neoliberal mechanisms. Furthermore, these cities are nodes of innovation, which generate greater profits and more capital (Parnreiter, 2012: 237).

Many cities in the Third and Fourth World do not possess either capital-intensive infrastructure or innovative capacity. But this does not exclude them from the structural processes that underpin neoliberalism. Products that tend towards standardization and uniformity give birth to "less technological rent" and are peripheralized to large portions of the urban South (ibid.). Moreover, these cities are connected to global commodity chains by way of their participation in peripheral labor processes (Parnreiter, 2012: 233-35; 237), which require less capital-intensive infrastructure and innovation.

Concluding remarks

It is an intellectual pity that the stress on informational flows, knowledge exchanges, decentering of the state, and the explosion of a plethora of actors in the global arena has come at the expense of space, place, the temporal, and the material. It is foolhardy to dissociate these phenomena from the spaces they *occur in*, *engage with*, and are *influenced by* spaces not limited to the nation-state. As made extant by cities, premature proclamations of a "borderless world" are nothing but that. Cities offer a novel prism to view the capitalist-neoliberal nexus, yielding two preliminary takeaways.

First, using cities to analyze global politics unveils exercises of power and control that are not coterminous with International Relations' most widely used and accepted unit of analysis: the state. Taylor (1995: 57) offers three explanations that foreground the city's increasing significance in global affairs: 1) states could no longer adequately address a series of key issues ranging from the environmental and economic to defense; 2) the rediscovery of the global as a crucial arena of activity accommodates other units of analysis and phenomena outside of the state; and 3), the local is a scale yet to be completely 'nationalized.' The resultant global network of states, Taylor adds, transcends states from above and reshapes states from below. The reconfiguration of the global division of labor propels international migrants towards cities, not states (ibid.). While the state as a political entity remains significant, it is no the sole purveyor of politico-economic power and control. Furthermore, the power and control cities exercise goes beyond national borders and creates new geographies based on labor, commodities, and advanced service producers.

Second, the neoliberal capitalist world-economy cannot be divorced from geography and space. While the deindustrialization of the world-economy is heralded as a sign of the 'borderless' times, the physical and temporal dimensions of the preponderant service economy, namely, the tangible headquarters of large TNCs and the production of services, are found in cities. The linkages between these TNCs and service producers, which facilitate flows of knowledge, information, and services, and are aided by neoliberal urban policies, constitute the world city network. Thus, these flows are still temporally grounded. In addition, cities are critical nodes in global commodity chains, linking production processes and the distribution of goods to other cities in intricate webs central to the consolidation of the capitalist world-economy.

At the very least, the city complements more conventional objects of study in global politics through the phenomena it reveals. If political science and its sub-fields, as well as more interdisciplinary social sciences, are serious in their quest to explain and describe contemporary politico-economic affairs with greater clarity and lucidity, the optic of the city offers an abundant wellspring of insight and acumen to accompany what other units of analysis offer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my mentors, Robert A. Denemark, Mark J. Miller, and Peter Rees for their priceless input and continued guidance. I am also grateful to the two external reviewers, whose comments helped smooth this piece's rough edges

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GCC: Global Commodity Chains
IR: International Relations
NIDL: New International Division of Labor
TNC: Transnational company

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