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## Urbanization and Counterurbanization in the United States

By BRIAN J. L. BERRY

**ABSTRACT:** Urbanization, the process of population concentration, has been succeeded in the United States by counterurbanization, a process of population deconcentration characterized by smaller sizes, decreasing densities, and increasing local homogeneity, set within widening radii of national interdependence. This article reviews this shift, the means by which a national society is producing a national settlement system.

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LOOKING backward in 1899, Adna Weber concluded that

the most remarkable social phenomenon of the present century is the concentration of population in cities. . . . The tendency toward concentration or agglomeration is all but universal in the Western World.<sup>1</sup>

Looking forward in 1902, H. G. Wells believed he could sense something quite different about to unfold, however:

These giant cities will reach their maximum in the coming century . . . in all probability they are destined to such a process of dissection and diffusion as to amount almost to obliteration within a measurable further space of years. These coming cities will not be, in the old sense, cities at all; they will present a new and entirely different phase of human distribution. . . . The city will diffuse itself until it has taken up considerable areas and many of the characteristics of what is now country. . . . The country will take itself many of the qualities of the city. The old antithesis will cease, the boundary lines will altogether disappear.<sup>2</sup>

It has taken a full three-quarters of a century for Wells's predictions to come true, but they are now a reality. Counterurbanization has replaced urbanization as the dominant process shaping the nation's settlement patterns, and a new and different tempo of change has emerged.<sup>3</sup>

1. Adna Weber, *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1899), p. 1.

2. H. G. Wells, *Anticipations. The Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress on Human Life and Thought* (London: Harper & Row, 1902), p. 203. For an extended discussion of Weber and Wells, see Brian J. L. Berry, *The Human Consequences of Urbanisation* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

3. "Urbanisation," wrote Hope Tisdale, "is a process of population concentration. It proceeds in two ways: the multiplication of the points of concentration and the increasing

One rough but useful indicator of the tempo of urbanization is the difference between the average annual growth rates of the urban and the total population,  $R(u) - R(t)$ .<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 shows how this tempo has changed during 200 years of U.S. settlement history. Both a long-term trend and cyclical disturbances may be discerned.

During the early period of national expansion and of town formation, the tempo of urbanization accelerated to a mid-nineteenth century peak, but since then the long-term trend has been unremittingly toward an equalization of urban, rural, and national growth rates. Cyclical downturns reduced the tempo to zero in the decades 1810–20 and 1930–40 and halved it in the period 1870–80, but in each case these perturbations were followed by postrecession recoveries under still-urbanizing conditions. Today, the situation appears to be different, however. The nation's rural population has stabilized. The urban growth rate continues to fall, metropolitan growth has slackened, and nonmetropolitan areas are growing more rapidly than metropolitan regions. To the extent that urban areas are growing, they are smaller

in size of individual concentrations. . . . It implies a movement from a state of less concentration to a state of more concentration," Hope Tisdale, "The Process of Urbanisation," *Social Forces* 20:311–16 (1942). *Counterurbanization*, then, "is a process of population deconcentration; it implies a movement from a state of more concentration to a state of less concentration," Brian J. L. Berry, *Urbanization and Counter-Urbanization* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1976), p. 17.

4. E. Arriaga, "Selected Measures of Urbanization," in *The Measurement of Urbanization and Projection of Urban Population*, eds. S. Goldstein and D. Sly (Liege, Belgium: IUSSP, 1975), cited in Jacques Ledent and Andrei Rogers, *Migration and Urbanization in the Asian Pacific* (Laxenburg, Austria: IIASA, 1979), p. 5.

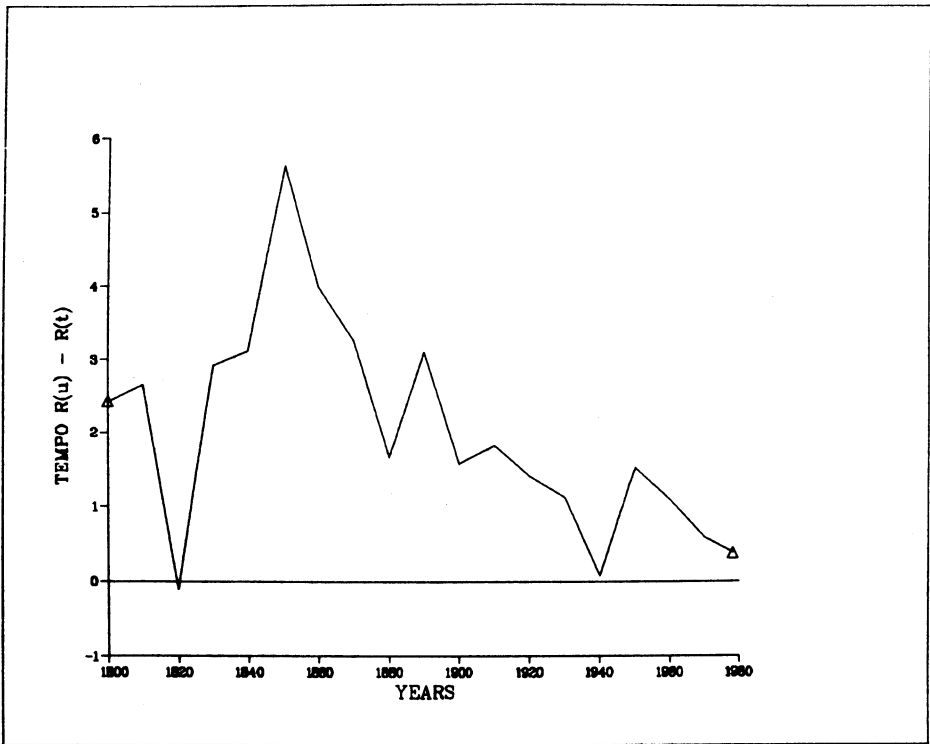


FIGURE 1. The Tempo of U.S. Urbanization. "Tempo" is defined as the difference between the average annual growth rate of the urban population,  $R(u)$ , and the average annual growth rate of the total population,  $R(t)$ . This illustration was produced using the Tellagraf Program at Harvard University's Laboratory for Computer Graphics.

places within nonmetropolitan regions (Fig. 2). Many investigators now argue that these demographic shifts since 1970 are profound enough to represent a clean break with the past.<sup>5</sup> What is the nature of this break?

There have, of course, been many simultaneous shifts unfolding, of which the following are a few of the more significant:

1. Declining fertility rates and

5. D. R. Vining, Jr., and A. Strauss, "A Demonstration that the Current Deconcentration of Population in the United States is a Clean Break with the Past," *Environment and Planning A* 9:751-8 (1977); Andrew J. Sofranko, "Motivations Underlying the 'Rural Renaissance' in the Midwest," *Planning and Public Policy* 6:1-4 (1980).

birth rates hard on the heels of the baby boom have produced a declining rate of national population increase, wide differences in the size of successive age cohorts, and increasing median age of the population.

2. Decreasing migration flows from the south and west to the north and east and increasing flows in the other direction have resulted in growing net migration from snowbelt to sunbelt. The receiving regions have a younger population, whereas those losing people have the progressive disabilities that characterize all places and people left behind.

3. Similar migration reversals in favor of nonmetropolitan areas, together with acceleration of sub-

urbanization and exurbanization within metropolitan regions, have produced (a) absolute population declines in the majority of the nation's largest central cities; (b) a slowing of the growth and the onset of decline in some of the metropolitan regions of the northeastern snowbelt; (c) continued growth of smaller and intermediate-sized sunbelt metropolitan regions; and (d) the onset of new growth in nonmetropolitan regions throughout the nation, approximately one-third due to urban overspill beyond metropolitan boundaries and two-thirds due to new development outside the daily commuting areas of metropolitan regions that currently have metropolitan recognition.

#### 4. Absolute industrial job losses in

the Northeast's former manufacturing belt—1.7 million between 1969 and 1977—have been matched by an equivalent magnitude of industrial employment growth in the former peripheral sunbelt.

5. Regional income convergence in nominal terms by the mid-1970s and significant reversals, in real terms, have led to former high-income regions', for example, New England, slipping beneath former poverty regions, for example, the South.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the salient migration flows and population shifts resulting from the forces that have transformed the scale and pace of American life. Most importantly, the traditional heartland-hinterland organization of the na-

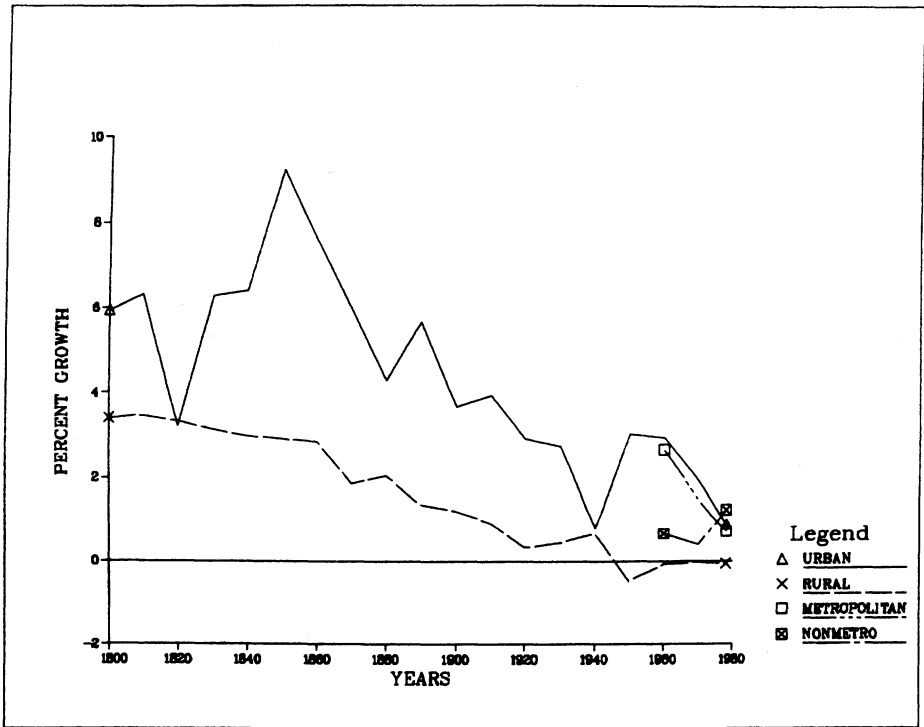


FIGURE 2. Long-Term Changes in the Rates of Urban and Rural Population Growth in the United States. This illustration was produced using the Tellagraf Program at Harvard University's Laboratory for Computer Graphics.

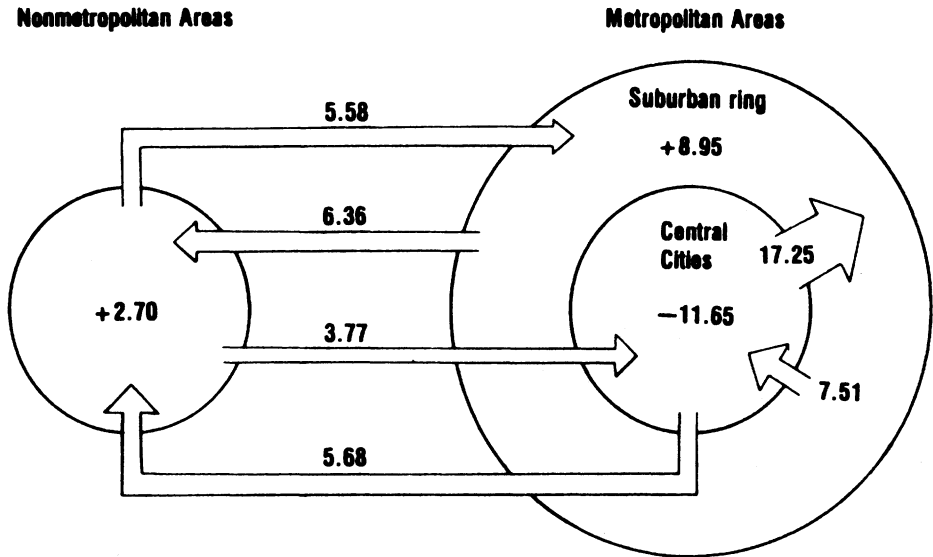


FIGURE 3. Migration in the United States, 1970-78 (in millions). This illustration was prepared for the 1979 Annual Report of The Council on Environmental Quality. Data refer only to individuals living in the United States in both 1970 and 1978, and thus do not include migration from outside the United States.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, CPR Series P-20, No. 285 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 2; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, CPR, Series P-20, No. 331 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), Table 1, p. 5.

tional economy has been eliminated by a combination of developments in transportation, communications, and industrial technologies. The classic regional organization of the national economy was one of the northeastern industrial belt, localized by the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century between the capital stocks and the entrepreneurial skills of the east coast and the coal and iron resources of the Midwest, linked to a constellation of resource-dependent hinterland regions by rail and water transportation routes radiating from gateway cities, and growing as a result of a process of circular and cumulative causation. Clustering of activities in the heartland's industrial cities promoted increasing returns, a result of the internal and external economies present in centers of agglomeration, and resulted in re-

gional income and opportunity differences that so swamped the cheaper factor prices of the periphery that they produced continuously disequilibrating flows of labor and capital from the poor hinterland regions to the rich and growing heartlands. Greater supplies of high-quality labor, entrepreneurial skills, and capital in their turn maintained the great cities of the manufacturing belt as the centers of innovation and growth. Peripheral regions could only grow at the demand of the heartland, as its requirements for their raw materials and foodstuffs expanded, or if standardized industries were "filtered" to cheap labor supplies elsewhere.

Today, this classic regionalization no longer exists. The glue of centrality that restricted innovative new developments to the core cities of

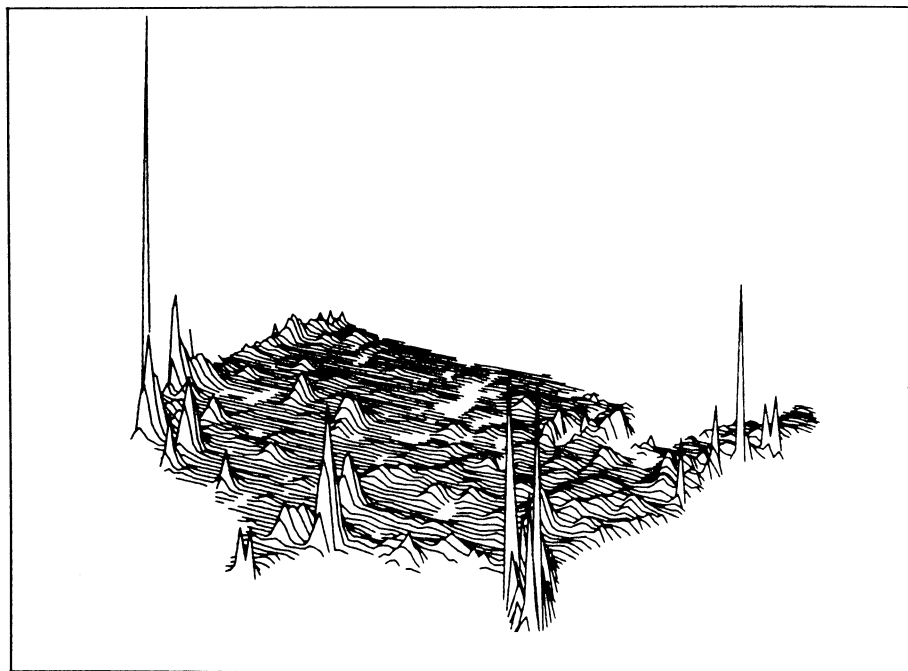


FIGURE 4. Where Population Growth took place in the United States, 1970–79. This visualization was produced by the “Aspex” Program of Harvard University’s Laboratory for Computer Graphics, using county data derived from the Current Population Reports of the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

the industrial heartland has been dissolved. Regions throughout the nation are sharing in the newer forms of employment growth. Transportation improvements and new forms of communication have virtually eliminated the classic localizing effects of transport inputs and the significance of proximity in speedy transmission of new ideas and practices. The economy’s rapid growth industries are dispersed throughout the former exurban, non-metropolitan, and sunbelt peripheries, and they are being followed by the postindustrial management and control functions of the private sector. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, these latter functions, together with finance, insurance, real estate, and the like, supported a downtown office boom in the na-

tion’s 20 or so international trading centers and regional capitals. But even for these activities, the exurbs and/or medium-sized sunbelt metropolitan areas now provide the greater pull. The problems of the older heartland centers are now compounded by the fact that what is left behind is slow- or no-growth heavy industry, extremely sensitive to cyclical upswings and downturns of the national economy.

In the new order of locational choice, decisions increasingly are being made by multifirm, multi-product, multinational conglomerates whose view of the relative merits of alternative locations is played out on an international map in which traditional locational advantages are compared with new arrays of variables, including en-

vironmental attributes and the dictates of international finance. The scale of decisions has changed and the radii of interdependence have increased, together with the relative importance in locational choice of traditional access factors, negative externalities perceived to be concentrated in high-density central cities, and new amenity variables.

To illustrate the latter point at a different level, that of the individual, let us consider the forces working upon mobility and migration. In all urban-industrial countries, a certain minimum amount of geographical mobility is a structured part of the life cycle, with the greatest rates occurring at the stage when young adults leave the parental home and establish an independent household soon after formal schooling is completed. Continuing occupational mobility produces further shifts as individuals follow their career trajectories, while life-cycle changes, such as marriage, child rearing, and retirement, produce home-related relocations. During the years that the baby-boom cohort moved into its most mobile period, the growing numbers employed by national and multinational corporations found themselves confronted by the formalization of career trajectories in corporate job-dictated transfers and the accompanying suggestion of the "appropriateness" of particular residential areas. To meet the needs of these relocatees, nationwide real estate companies developed, specialized in the art of moving families from one region to another without disturbing their life-styles or only changing them to the extent warranted by the transfer-related promotions.

Several results emerged from the real estate companies' specializations. There now are growing groups

of national citizens whose ties are to peer groups sharing common job experiences and life-styles located in particular kinds of communities within every region of the nation. Interests are shared in common across these communities, and linked by the interchange of migration, such life-style communities are closer to each other in perception and attitudes than they are to geographically contiguous neighborhoods offering alternative life-styles to different population subgroups, especially blue-collar "locals" who are far more place bound. Each region in the nation now offers a common and increasing array of life-style communities so that on the one hand, interregional differentiation has diminished, whereas on the other, intraregional segmentation has increased. In short, there is now a national system of settlement that mirrors the divisions in the national society.

The increase in the array of life-styles comes from opposing but interrelated trends. National interdependence, increasingly tightly woven by more potent forms of communication, has brought with it countervailing tendencies for particular subgroups to assert their independent identities or for new subcultures to try to invent one. The lesson that the new communications media could be instrumental in the process of social activation was first learned in civil rights and has been used most effectively by the environmentalists. The result is that there is now increasing pluralism based upon various forms of subcultural intensification: racial, ethnic, and life cycle—swingles, gentrifiers, the elderly "snow-birds," and so forth—and based upon a range of other types of preferences—hippie, homosexual, and so forth.



This subcultural intensification has only been possible because of the exposure afforded by nationwide communications: each group can exist because it can establish its separate identity not only by an internal process of self-definition, but also through comparative perceptions created via the communications media. Because of the potency of the medium, there is now a nationwide imagery that transcends locality and a speed and commonality of subgroup response that negates older

leads and lags of metropolis-centered dependency. No longer does a new idea, fashion, or fad appear in the big city and play itself out 20 years later in the rural periphery. Time-space convergence has produced a differentiated but highly interconnected national society and economy. Growth of the periphery and decline of the core—counterurbanization—is but a reflection of the emergence of an essential accompaniment of this convergence, a national settlement system.