



# The Megalopolis

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## Abstract

This paper examines the term “megalopolis,” and presents an overview of the theoretical framework examining the phenomenon, while also expanding on definitional constructs, meaning, and the term’s use in theory and as applied to situations. This paper compares Gottmann’s view with those of other theorists and their interpretations of the term and its use. In addition to examining the phenomenon, issues are identified that examines the megalopolis in California and Israel, presenting both a short overview of applicability in both national and international

realms. Lastly, the conclusion of this paper suggests additional research in terms of definitional application and potentiality for use of the term in other areas.

## Overview

The term Megalopolis was first used by Jean Gottmann (1961) to describe the urbanized area of the northeast region of the United States. He first described this region as “an almost continuous stretch of urban and suburban areas from southern New Hampshire to northern Virginia and from the Atlantic shore to the Appalachian foothills,” (p. 3) which consisted in 1960 of a total population of 37 million people. Johnston and Sidaway (2004) described Gottmann’s work as “lying outside the project of post-war Anglo-American human geography” (cited in Pawson, 2008, p. 441). In 1957, Gottmann first used the term in English, and in order to construct the term, Gottmann utilized a government survey that categorized different economic regions of the U.S. The survey classified key “metropolitan state economic areas” in which “the nonagricultural economy of such areas is a closely integrated unit and is distinctly different from the economy of the areas which lie outside the orbit or close contact with the metropolis” (Bogue, 1951, p. 2).

Moreover, Gottmann (1957) indicated that based on Bogues’ 1951 report, the Megalopolis “showed clearly the continuity of an area of metropolitan economy from a little north of a Boston to a little south of Washington” (p. 1890). Vance (1963) further described the Megalopolis as an “accepted truth” in academia (p. 1984). Additionally, Nelson (1962) indicated that the term broke “new ground by closely examining a major region whose distinguishing and delimiting feature is urbanization” (p. 307). According to Pawson (2008), the Megalopolis region comprised one-tenth of the global manufacturing and commercial activity (p. 441). It should be noted that theorists argued that Gottmann’s work was highly important, and the term Megalopolis was thus introduced into the urban studies glossary (Vicino, Hanlon, & Short, 2007).

### **One Great System**

In the regional area from Greater Boston to Greater Washington D.C., Gottmann envisioned “one great system” in which the “old distinctions between rural and urban do not apply... anymore” (1961, p. 5; 1987, 1). The father of the “Metropolias”

## Keywords

**Conurbation**

**Megalopolis**

**Megalopolitan**

**Postindustrialism**

**Postmodernity**

**Urbanization**

term, Gottmann also indicated that this region “may be considered the cradle of a new order in the organization of inhabited space” (1961, p. 9) and “an incubator of important socio-economic trends” (1987, p. 2). In Gottmann’s seminal works, he described the Eastern Seaboard cities as the continent’s “economic hinge” and the “main gate,” “Main Street,” “crossroads,” and as “the main debarkation wharf of crowds of immigrants” (1961, p. 695). Moreover, Gottmann stated: “Despite the relative lack of local natural riches, the seaboard has achieved a most remarkable concentration of labor force and of wealth” (p. 46). He attributed this phenomenon to the region’s “network of overseas relationships,” and from maintaining the “reins of direction of the national economy” (p. 161).

Years after his book appeared, Gottmann indicated that the pinnacle of his book was written in Chapter Eleven, which was entitled, “The White-Collar Revolution.” This chapter provided an emphasis on the “office industry” whose “essential raw material is information (1961, p. 597). Drawing attention to the 1960 Census, Gottmann indicated that “the Eighteenth Census of the United States will rank as a great landmark in history” (1961, p. 567). Morrill (2006) pointed out that Gottmann’s chapter on the white-collar revolution is “probably the most important and prophetic analysis in the book, already predicting the basic remaking of American society, with the Boston to Washington, D. C. Megalopolis leading the way” (p. 156). He also indicated that Gottmann seemed to acknowledge the “diversity and segregation of the population along ethnic, racial, religious, and class lines; the high level of inequality that characterizes creative cities; and, finally, the difficulty of coordinating planning across utter jurisdictional complexity” (p. 156).

It can also be evidenced that the Megalopolitan map has changed since its inception. For example, in 1970 Wilmington, Philadelphia and Trenton merged, as well as Boston, Lowell, and Lawrence. However, at this time, no other urban areas seemed to merge, but suburbanization seemed to be occurring, especially around New York and Washington, D. C. with new urbanized areas. By the year 2000, an urban settlement structure for the Megalopolitan areas, which included a smaller Washington, Baltimore, Aberdeen areas, as well as a larger Wilmington area encompassing Springfield and Norwich with additional links to areas such as Atlantic City, Allentown, Lancaster, York, Harris-

burg, and Poughkeepsie were well established (Morrill, 2006, p. 158). With additional research needed in this area, it is interesting to consider the fluidity of the maps seemingly indicative of the potential transience attributed to urban environments, and linked to suburban environments. This seems to support the claim by researchers that there is an ongoing mutability in racial ethnic segregation and diversity in given geographic areas and cities (Massey & Denton, 1993; Katz & Lang, 2003).

According to Morrill, the “second half of the twentieth century was an era of continuing metropolitan expansion in the United States,” signifying changes in the Megalopolitan map. Factors that may have created expansion and settlement include:

- Demographic and economic growth;
- Suburbanization due to physical decentralization;
- Expanded community fields between physically separated areas;
- Restructuring formerly distant satellites, and
- Revitalized and restructured metropolitan cores (Morrill, 2006, p. 158).

These factors have interplayed with three specific time domains, which Morrill (2006) indicated was pivotal in urban and suburban expansion and minimization. First, Morrill (2006) pointed out that “1950 to 1970 was characterized by rapid growth and even more rapid suburbanization.” Second, he indicated that “1970 to 1990 was one of some inner metropolitan decline and racial conflict.” The third pivotal timeframe could be argued that “since 1990, [many areas] saw metropolitan core resurgence and gentrification, inner suburban maturing, and far-suburban and exurban and satellite city growth” (p. 158).

## Post World War II Expansion

High fertility rates and the post World War II baby boom, as well as significant migration from rural to urban areas, and suburban growth increases can all be considered as relevant factors in the Metropolitan expansion. As a result of increases in urban areas, industry expanded, cities grew with postwar recovery efforts, and new products and services were developed and available to the masses. All of these issues were consistently underscored by government interventions such as the Federal Housing Administration and GI Bill. Lastly, the expansion of the Interstate Highway System increased opportunities and availability to new and different types of goods and services, as well as a period of African American migration from regionally discriminatory areas and simultaneous flight of Caucasians the suburbs, including around Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York (Morrill, 2006). Morrill writes:

The attractive pull of suburbs, both for families and jobs, dominated throughout the baby boom period until 1965; then by the late 1960s the partly perceived and partly real problems of inner city decline and disinvestment became very strong motivators for suburbanization (2006, p. 159).

Morrill (2006) concluded that the idea of Gottmann's (1961) Megalopolis can now be described as the "Main Street of America." He pointed out that as the Megalopolis expands, California might be the "trend setter of the nation in many ways," but the Megalopolitan areas continue to be the nerve center of information, economy, urban settlement and change, and preeminence. In the year 2000, the map identified a population of approximately 42,400,000 people, with many of those individuals commuting to jobs and shopping. He stated: "This amazing conurbation remains the most spectacular and powerful settlement complex and human imprint on the landscape" (p. 160). In concluding this overview, many applications of the Megalopolis can be made in various ways to depict postmodernist phenomena and post-industrialism with the main contrast driven by regional issues.

## Further Insights

The Megalopolis was an idea that originated by Gottmann (1961) and was described by his seminal work of the same name, *Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*. Megalopolis was a physical city in ancient Greece, which was founded in 371 to 368 B.C. by Epaminondas of Thebes and was the seat of the Arcadian league. Originally planned on a "grandiose scale, its design included walls that were 9 km in circumference designed to be populated by the wholesale transfer of humans from over 40 local villages" (Baigent, 2004, p. 688). The term "megalopolitan" has been used to describe inhabitants of the city. The application of megalopolitan theory rests in an overview of the theories of Geddes (1915) and Mumford (1946; 1961).

Patrick Geddes was a Scottish social scientist who also used the term "megalopolis" in an application to biology and specifically, evolution. Moreover, Geddes was a student of Thomas Huxley (1825 – 1895), who was a famed proponent and writer of evolutionary theory. Geddes used the term "megalopolis" to describe a human phenomenon "governing the social development of humankind" (Baigent, 2004, p. 688).

Comparatively, this sociological framework might be applied to G.H. Mead's Symbolic Interactionist theory of "I" and "Me," as G. H. Mead "made the most ambitious and comprehensive attempt of the pragmatists to set forth a [Darwinian] theory of mind and behavior. Mead held the view that the social construct of human beings paralleled Darwin's view of human origins; however, Mead's "social psychological story of human origins was aimed specifically at accounting for the emergence of self-consciousness as a product of social and physical evolution, with particular emphasis on social factors" (Burke, 2005). Mead (1934) also recognized that institutions are the building blocks upon which society is constructed and understood that dominations impacts the polity (Athens, 2007, p. 138).

According to Athens (2007), "the six basic institutions" that Mead identified "as comprising society are:

- Language;
- The family;
- The economy;

- Religion;
- The polity; and
- Science" (p. 142).

Mead indicated that all institutions are grounded in social action, defining a social act as any act requires the work of more than one person to be carried out (Mead, 1932). While not identical to Geddes' view of evolution, this theory is mentioned because a common theme seemed to be woven through the tapestry of thought both theorists held.

However, while Gottmann held a positive view of the geographical megalopolis as progressive development, and Mead held a similarly positive view of human, social development, Geddes envisioned a negative view of human social development in terms of evolutionary digression through the lens of geographic growth. In 1915, Geddes wrote "Cities in Evolution." In this work, he anticipated and further stated:

The expectation is not absurd that the not very distant future will see practically one vast city-line along the Atlantic Coast for five hundred miles, and stretching back at many points; with a total of . . . many millions of population': but, unlike Gottmann, [Geddes] sees these vast cities as 'depressing life . . . [with] disease and folly . . . vice and apathy . . . indolence and crime . . . " "It is a relief to turn away [from these cities] in search of some smaller, simpler, and surely healthier and happier type of social development (Baigent, 2004, p. 688).

The term megalopolis is also utilized by Lewis Mumford. Lewis Mumford (1946) described Geddes as his master (p. 475). Over forthcoming years, Geddes (1938) utilized the term "megalopolis" repeatedly over the decades, in which he identified and described six stages of evolution. These evolutionary ideas included:

- "eopolis" described as village;
- "polis" described as the "association of villages;"
- "metropolis" described as the "capital city emerging;"
- "megalopolis" described as "the beginning of the decline;
- "tyrannopolis" described as "the overexpansion of the urban system based on economic exploitation; and, lastly;
- "necropolis" identified as "war and famine, or city abandoned" (Baigent, 2004, p. 689).

Mumford (1961) described an "oft-repeated urban cycle of growth, expansion, and disintegration" (p. 599). He philosophized that the phenomenon of the megalopolis characterized the final states of urban developments whose "profoundly disastrous success" would eventually "carry within itself the seeds of its own destruction, seeds which would germinate unless enough enlightened souls answered the call to radical action" (Baigent, 2004, p. 690).

## Issues

### Varying Definitions

Multiple issues exist in the theoretical overviews related to the term Megalopolis. One of the main issues is relative to the notion that the term itself might be dismissed as not important enough to create a new application of the term (Gottmann, 1961, p. 4). The term was not included in the Oxford English Dictionary until 1978 in its supplementary addition. In the 2001 edition of Webster's American Dictionary, megalopolis was defined as a "chief city; a metropolis" (OED Online). Gottmann and Harper (1990) argued that megalopolis can simply be described as a label used by several authors as a description of "very large regions," a bequeathal that offered Gottmann great satisfaction (p. 3). However, inconsistency of use and meaning are significant issues with the term. Based on unclear meaning, inconsistency of use, and the lack of theoretical underpinnings supporting the term, additional research should be considered in ways of more effective use and definition.

Another significant issue involving the term megalopolis is that the term only seems to be limited to one geographical area in the United States. It can be argued that if the term is going to be used in the mainstream, then the term should be used to describe additional areas within the geographical framework. For example, California might be described as a Pacific Coast Megalopolis. While some theorists may argue that California can be regarded "as a comparative tale of two metropolitan regions," this definition seems to overlook long-term population trends in other regions and fails to offer an encompassing view of tendencies toward increased populations and is incomprehensive in terms of transportation and land development (Sherlock & Bergesen, 2004, p. 7).

### The Case of California

In order to fully understand urbanization in California, it should be viewed from a statewide perspective in a longitudinal overview (Sherlock & Bergesen, 2004, p. 7). Statistically, California has increased in population by approximately five million inhabitants every decade since 1940. "But even this high level of increase will pale next to a projected twelve million increase in the decade from 2030 to 2040. By this time, California is projected to have an additional twenty four million added to the thirty four million already there in 2000" (p. 10). According to statistical analysis, much of this growth can be expected to add an additional twenty four million to the thirty four million already there in 2000. This growth is expected to occur in Southern California despite "insufficient water resources, seismic instability, urban sprawl, and surges of unemployment [which] raise a question about continuing immigration to California" (p. 10). Additional research should be done in this area to best understand current trends toward urbanization and "megalopolization."

### Israel

The third issue related to the "megalopolis" is in terms of global community. For example, Megalopolitan growth in Israel since

the early 1980s has gained momentum since the 1990s "as a result of Israel's entry into the post-industrial age and its expanding links with the global economy" (Kipnis, 1997, p. 489). In this region, urban conglomerates create networks with other regional, national, and international networks. In this way, the Megalopolis might also be envisioned as a stimulus to the overall environment with the metropolitan regions serving as the centerpiece of the region's post-industrial and post-modern activities and life styles. Theorists conjecture that if the megalopolitan growth continues to diffuse "into the coastal regions of neighbouring countries in peacetime, they might create, in the long run, an extended megalopolitan region along the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea to evolve as the 'backbone' of a peaceful 'New' Middle East" (p. 489). This diffusion, accompanied by an accelerated integration into the global economy, has been linked with an expanded infrastructure promoting structural changes in employment, increased production services, and higher status occupations (Bank Hapoalim, 1994).

## Conclusion

Megalopolis is a term that "was coined for the urban complex in the north-eastern U.S., has emerged as one of the leading forms of urbanization for the 21st century" (Kipnis, 1997, p. 489). It is also a term that has been used to describe postmodernity, post-industrialization, and urbanization, which is a term that might be used for growth in urban areas (Hall, 1973, p. 296). One of the main differences between these three terms is that megalopolis is connected directly to a geographical underpinning as opposed to a sociological or economic phenomenon. A significant issue attributed to the use of the term megalopolis is that it is not used consistently in framing specific events. For it to be integrated more successfully in use and functionality, the term megalopolis must be more widely understood and identified in the mainstream rather than in theory only.

## Terms & Concepts

**Conurbation:** A cluster of cities and towns forming a continuous network.

**Megalopolis:** Megalopolis was coined for the urban complex in the north-eastern U.S., and has emerged as one of the leading forms of urbanization for the 21st century.

**Megalopolitan:** Megalopolitan is a term that is used to describe the phenomenon related to the functionality of the Megalopolis state.

**Postindustrialism:** Postindustrialism can be described as a radical transformation of economic and political structures promoting a dramatic shift in societies.

**Post-modernity:** Beyond Modernity; postmodernity might also be known as post-industrialism.

**Urbanization:** Expansive growth of urban areas into previously non-urban areas.

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## Essay by Sharon Link, Ph.D.

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