

Commentary

The Shock Of The New: 100 concepts describing recent urban change **Shocking social science**

The phrase ‘the shock of the new’ is used as a descriptor of change in the visual arts and is particularly associated with the modernist movement (Hughes, 1991). However, the social sciences are no less vulnerable to rapid changes in their subject matter but here the preferred signifier has been to invoke ‘paradigm shifts’. This, of course, provides association with the natural sciences and their stable periods of ‘normal science’, periodically interrupted by ‘scientific revolutions’. This model is conservative in the sense that the process revolves between alternative paradigms and their scientific establishments. The effects of ‘the shock of the new’ can be rather less conservative: instead of creating a new stability the result may be continual dissolution. In this short note we explore the idea that this humanities model of change is actually much more relevant to the social sciences than has previously been admitted. After all, social sciences and humanities share a common “modern subject” that is “a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration” (Berman, 1988, page 15).

Detection of recent rapid change in the social sciences is easy: we have been awash with a plethora of post-this and post-that for the last couple of decades. These are descriptors of general overall intellectual changes based upon theoretical, epistemological, and ontological criticisms of the social science disciplines. Broadly speaking, the latter were largely institutionalised in the first half of the 20th century, flowered in the third quarter, and went into ‘crisis’ in the fourth quarter. This ‘high’ level of criticism and change is important but not more so than the struggles of everyday social science practice to grasp ever-changing subjects. At the coalface, social scientists have been forced to keep reconceptualising their particular subject matters in order to maintain credible descriptions. It is this empirical research that is our subject matter here. In particular, we review how Anglo-American descriptions of cities have coped with massive changes in the subject matter of urban studies.

In the mid-20th century urban studies was established as a vibrant field of research. The treatment of cities was relatively straightforward, with the subject matter divided into two parts: the internal structure of cities and the external relations of cities. Both were formally modelled—as land-use distance models and central place hierarchy models, respectively—but most research was of a concrete nature depicting empirical patterns for particular cities (for example, factorial ecologies and hinterland studies). Generalisations of these studies linked with the formal models to provide two basic conceptual givens. First, cities were organised around central business districts surrounded by various sectors and zones, the outer being a largely residential suburbia. Second, intercity relations were organised as national urban systems structured as national urban hierarchies. The two sides of this urbanism were famously brought together by Berry (1964) in his ‘cities as systems within systems of cities’. But no sooner had this neat arrangement been codified and widely disseminated through urban geography textbooks than both urban patterns began to alter: processes of economic decentralisation meant that suburbia as the residential ideal for family living was fundamentally changed into something else; and processes of economic globalisation meant that intercity relations fundamentally changed from national urban hierarchies into something else. We are interested in these ‘something elses’.

Table 1. 100 concepts describing recent urban change.

A. Names given to new metropolitan form

- 1 Anticity
- 2 Boomburb
- 3 Cities à la carte
- 4 Concentrated decentralization
- 5 Countrified city
- 6 Disurb
- 7 Edge city
- 8 Edge county
- 9 Edgeless city
- 10 Exit ramp economy
- 11 Exopolis
- 12 Galactic city
- 13 Limitless city
- 14 Major diversified center
- 15 Megacenter
- 16 Megacounty
- 17 Megalopolis unbound
- 18 Metropolitan-level core
- 19 Metropolitan suburb
- 20 Metrotown
- 21 Mini-city
- 22 Mini-downtown
- 23 Multicentered net
- 24 Net of mixed beads
- 25 New downtown
- 26 Outer city
- 27 Outtown
- 28 Penturbia
- 29 Regional city
- 30 Regional town center
- 31 Rururbia
- 32 Servurb
- 33 Slurbs

B. Names given to new intercity relations

- 1 Archipelago economy
- 2 Chain of metropolitan areas
- 3 Cities in global matrices
- 4 Cross-border network of global cities
- 5 Functional world city system
- 6 Global city network
- 7 Global city system
- 8 Global competition among cities
- 9 Global grid of cities
- 10 Global metropolitanism
- 11 Global network of cities
- 12 Global network of financial centers
- 13 Global network of major metropolitan management centers
- 14 Global network of nodes and hubs
- 15 Global system of cities
- 16 Global urban hierarchy
- 17 Global urban network
- 18 Global urban system
- 19 Global web of cities
- 20 Hierarchical global system of urban places
- 21 International global-local networks
- 22 International hierarchy of cities
- 23 International systems of interlinked cities
- 24 International urban system
- 25 Internationally networked urban spaces
- 26 Lynchpins in the spatial organization of the world economy
- 27 Metropolitan hierarchy exercised throughout the world
- 28 Neo-Marshallian nodes in global networks
- 29 Network of world cities
- 30 Nodal centres of the new global economy
- 31 Nodes in global networks of institutional arrangements
- 32 Planetary urban networks
- 33 System of major world cities

34	Spillover city	34	System of world cities
35	Spread city	35	Transnational system of cities
36	Sprinkler city	36	Transnational urban system
37	Stealth city	37	Transnational urbanism
38	Subcenter	38	World city actor network
39	Suburban business center	39	World city hierarchy
40	Suburban downtown	40	World city network
41	Suburban employment center	41	World city system
42	Suburban freeway corridor	42	World hierarchy of financial centres
43	Suburban growth corridor	43	World relations of cities
44	Suburban nucleation	44	World system of cities
45	Technoburb	45	World system of metropolises
46	The new heartland	46	World urban hierarchy
47	Urban core	47	World urban system
48	Urban galaxy	48	World-systems city system
49	Urban realm	49	Worldwide grid of global cities
50	Urban village	50	Worldwide grid of strategic places

List A derived in part from Lang (2003, table 3-1). Sources for concepts are as follows.

A: 1—Louv (1985); 2—Lang and Simmons (2001; 2003); 3—Fishman (1990); 4—Daniels (1985); 5—Doherty (1984); 6—Baldassare and Katz (1987); 7—Garreau (1991); 8—Lang (2003); 9—Lang and Simmons (2003); 10—Katz (2001); 11—Soja (1997); 12—Lewis (1983); 13—Gillham (2002); 14—Baerwald (1983), Huth (1983); 15—Orski (1985), Cervero (1986); 16—Church (1987); 17—Fishman (1990); 18—Hartshorn and Muller (1986); 19—Baldassare (1986); 20—Romanos et al (1989); 21—Breckenfeld (1972), Muller (1976); 22—Cervero (1986); 23—Lynch (1961); 24—Pivo (1990); 25—Baerwald (1978); 26—Muller (1976), Stevens (1987); 27—Goldberger (1987); 28—Lessinger (1987); 29—Calthorpe and Fulton (2000); 30—Hutton and Davis (1985); 31—Sternlieb and Hughes (1988); 32—Malin (1988); 33—Huxtable (1973); 34—Packard (1972); 35—Regional Plan Association (1960); 36—Brooks (2002); 37—Knox (1992); 38—Gordon and Richardson (1996); 39—Hartshorn and Muller (1986); 40—Baerwald (1982), Hartshorn and Muller (1989); 41—Cervero (1989), Freestone and Murphy (1998); 42—Baerwald (1978); 43—Hughes and Sternlieb (1986); 44—Erickson and Gentry (1985); 45—Fishman (1987); 46—Herbers (1986); 47—Leinberger (1990); 48—Lynch (1961); 49—Vance (1964); 50—Leinberger (1984), Leinberger and Lockwood (1986).
 B: 1—Veltz (2000); 2—Amin and Thrift (2002); 3—Smith and Timberlake (1995); 4—Sassen (1999); 5—Lo and Yeung (1998); 6—Kunzmann (1998); 7—El-Shakhs and Shoshkes (1998); 8—Brotchie et al (1995); 9—Sassen (1998); 10—King (1990a); 11—Tolosa (1998), Smith and Feagin (1987); 12—Sassen (1991); 13—Harper (1990); 14—Castells (1996); 15—Hall (1995), Honjo (1998); 16—Sassen (1991); 17—Short and Kim (1999); 18—Short and Kim (1999), Simon (1995); 19—Sirat and Ghazali (1999); 20—Smith and Timberlake (1995); 21—Goddard (1995); 22—Blakely (1992); 23—Graham and Marvin (1996); 24—Lyons and Salmon (1995); 25—Graham and Marvin (1996); 26—Smith and Timberlake (1995); 27—Castells (1993); 28—Amin and Thrift (1992); 29—Camagni (1993); 30—Castells (1993); 31—Knight (1989); 32—Graham and Marvin (1996); 33—El-Shakhs and Shoshkes (1998); 34—Chase-Dunn (1985); 35—Gappert (1989); 36—Sassen (1994); 37—Smith (2001); 38—Smith (2003); 39—Friedmann (1986); 40—Taylor (2001); 41—Lo (1994); 42—Meyer (1998); 43—Alger (1990); 44—Meyer (1986); 45—Meyer (1991); 46—Clark (1996); 47—King (1990b); 48—Smith and Timberlake (1995); 49—Sassen (1998); 50—Sassen (1994).

In the decades since these changes were first observed, empirical researchers have wrestled with the problem of labelling the new emerging urban patterns. In the process the conceptual clarity of the old orthodox urban studies has been lost to history and no equivalent new clarity has taken its place. Thus there appears to be a conceptual disintegration.

100 ways to describe recent urban change

In table 1 we have compiled two lists of terminologies used to describe new metropolitan forms and new intercity relations. Finding fifty examples of each was not a particularly onerous task; the lists are most certainly not intended to be comprehensive. The main point of the table is simply its size. The fact that there are at least 100 ways of describing recent urban change in the literature is a remarkable finding. To be sure, some concepts have been more influential than the others—for list A we might identify ‘edge city’ and for list B ‘world city hierarchy’—and part of the proliferation of labels derives from debates surrounding these prominent concepts. But this is only a small part of the story. Creative imaginations are at work in using metaphors and analogies (galaxy/galactic, archipelago, lynchpin, etc) to try and capture what is going on spatially in the new urbanism.

In list A the main feature that the authors are trying to capture is a spatial dispersal of urban functions most notably in terms of the ‘suburbanisation of offices’. Thus the terms ‘suburb’ and ‘suburban’ continue to be used (8 times). But this process is much more complex than a simple dispersal, the decentralisation involves a degree of recentralisation. Hence ‘city’ appears 12 times, ‘downtown’ 3 times, and ‘core’ twice. The spread-out nature of the phenomenon is reflected in two uses of ‘regional’ plus an array of terms to indicate outward expansion, such as ‘spillover’, ‘spread’, and ‘stealth’ as well as the more prosaic ‘outer’. There are also indications that the new forms negate the traditional city as in ‘anticity’, ‘exopolis’, and ‘outtown’ as well as by bringing together features usually considered opposites as in ‘countrified city’ and ‘urban village’. This reminds us that these conceptualisations were not conceived in a political vacuum: the controversies are reflected in derogatory appellations such as ‘disturb’ and ‘slurbs’. For a more detailed discussion of an initial version of list A, see Lang (2003, pages 30–36).

In list B there are two key features being described: first, the new scale of activities and, second, the form that the intercity relations take. In terms of the former, ‘global’ is the most popular with 19 usages followed closely by ‘world’ with 17. In much of the literature these two terms are used interchangeably (for example, King, 1990a) despite Sassen’s (1991) careful justification of using ‘global’ to transcend ‘world’. As we might expect, ‘international’/‘internationally’ is not widely used (5 times) in this context where it is outnumbered by a ‘contra-international’ combination of ‘transnational’ (3 uses), ‘worldwide’ (2 uses), and ‘cross-border’ and ‘planetary’ (one use each). In terms of the relations exhibited, the ‘system’ and ‘hierarchy’ forms that dominated the national scale remain common labels at the new scale (‘system’ 15 mentions, ‘hierarchy’ 6) but ‘network’ joins ‘system’ in first place with its 15 uses. In addition, there are other terms that move beyond the traditional system/hierarchy consensus on how cities relate: ‘grid’ (mentioned 3 times), ‘web’, ‘chain’, and ‘matrices’ (one use each).

In both lists there is some recycling of old terms (for example, ‘suburban’ and ‘hierarchy’) plus some fresh innovative ways of describing the new circumstances. But why so many new concepts?

What can this proliferation of concepts mean?

Trying to understand this proliferation of terminology is not a straightforward matter. As well as the changing urban condition that the authors are trying to

convey, there are coincidental changes happening in social science itself. However, we can begin with a simple assertion: by and large, the variety of terms is not a trivial matter of semantics. In other words, for example, 'network of world cities' does mean something different from 'world city network', the placing of the adjective 'world' implies different theories relating to world city formation and world city network formation, respectively.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to view the abundance of terms in table 1. One is to celebrate the variety: the world, especially the urban world, is inherently 'messy' and therefore it is only to be expected that it should be described in multifarious ways. The other is to suspect that there is more than a little incoherent thinking abroad in contemporary urban studies. A degree of conceptual disintegration is to be expected, but this invention of concept after concept is hardly conducive to credible understanding of what is going on in and between our cities. Readers will have surmised that we are in the second camp of interpreters. We do not think we can return to the 'certainties' of a generation ago, nor would we wish to if it were possible, but we do think that we probably do not need more than a hundred new concepts to understand the spatiality of the new urbanism. Inventing new concepts is always interesting, but there must be a threshold when additional concepts obfuscate rather than illuminate.

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