

PERIPHERAL REGIONS AND POLICY FORMATION

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KEYNOTE ESSAY 03/05

PERIPHERAL

POPULATION DENSITY

TACIT EXCHANGE OF KNOWLEDGE

CITY SIZE

NETWORK CITIES

Political discourse in many countries is significantly impacted by the existence of populations that live in urban centers and other populations that live in rural or peripheral places. Due to factors such as population density, economic activity, proximity to schools, retail and health facilities, attachment to religion, and access to diverse political opinions, people living in the peripheral areas tend to be relatively conservative and those in urban areas are relatively liberal. Thus we have two elements of the population that tend to live in silos, having little dialogue or even contact with the other. This results in a national political dialogue that is not at all productive or capable of generating policies that would benefit the population. In many countries of Europe and the Americas, the politically left and right parties or movements are, figuratively speaking, at war with each other.

In spite of this, an examination of the reality of many areas of public policy reveals that there are, in fact, many areas of public policy that are of benefit to both urban and periphery dwellers such as, education, access to health care, management of water and waterways, funding of small businesses and banks and local governments, and infrastructure. I have recently compiled a set of 40 such policies that could be adopted because they are of direct benefit to dwellers in both silos (Kresl, 2021). Recognition of this mutual benefit could advance the discussion of public policy and even lead to implementation of some of these policies. Those living on the periphery and in the inner city could engage in a dialogue that would be of benefit to both of these groups, and peripherality would no longer be identified with exclusion from a beneficial political discourse.

It is a rather general feature of public policy in democratic, or reasonably so, societies that the forces that articulate and implement policy with regard to virtually all aspects of society are developed by forces that are situated in, and responsive to the needs of, central places. These are the conurbations in which most of the nation's population and most of the other than resource-based economic activity is situated. Based on one or more very large cities, these are centers of wealth, power, influence, ambition and ideas that invariably dominate the surrounding area that is, in so many ways, subordinate to each of them. Large cities have been the dominant center of our societies for millennia. Some cities, such as Rome and Athens, were rather compact, while others, such as Angkor Wat and Chichen Itza, were very expansive cities that were relatively thinly populated but extended for tens of miles. These early cities were held together by a religious faith and structure, supported by sophisticated agriculture and other production; today's large cities are economic in their structure and function and it is this characteristic and its institutions—from banks to corporate offices to policy think tanks—that give them their key role, whether formal or informal, in policy formation. Many, of course, have histories of being imperial centers that have evolved into national political capitals. But others, such as Chicago, Barcelona, Frankfurt, Los Angeles and Sydney have been blessed with a locational or economic asset advantage that has given them prominence. Some, such as Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Dallas-Ft. Worth are part of more complex conurbations than that of a single city with smaller, secondary urban centers.

In opposition to these conurbations are the areas that are peripheral to them. We will have to resolve a set of questions if we are to understand them. First, what are these peripheral regions? What are their characteristics, their strengths and their weaknesses? Second, how do they relate to conurbations, and to other peripheral regions? Third, how are the peripheral region and its residents perceived by other peripheral regions and the conurbations? How does the peripheral

region, or rather its residents, perceive the others? Fourth, how can a peripheral region insinuate itself into the area of power and decision-making? Fifth, what does a peripheral region have to offer to central areas? Finally, are alliances important? What alliances can be formed, and how?

REPRESENTATION THROUGH IMAGES

Before we examine these important issues, it would be useful to consider some images of the relation between peripheral regions and their people and the centers of power. First, we will consider the perception of a center of power and authority in the mind of a resident of a peripheral region. Second, we will then propose images that depict the relationship between residents of the various constituencies of a political society such as the US, and then an image of a structure that comports to the relationships that exist in the urban area. The peripheral region exists both as an entity unto itself with its own objective characteristics, and as a human society that is defined in its relationship to the conurbation.

One can imagine peasants who live in a peripheral region approaching a great cathedral city, such as Salisbury or Chartres. As they get closer they see the tall spire that points upward and seems to point to the heavens and the god they presumably worship. In the cathedral, is a bishop with his ecclesiastical and lay authority and powers, and a small cohort of clergy. The cathedral owns extensive lands that generate a substantial income and wealth for it. This is as close as a resident of a peripheral region will get to power and to the process of policy formation. The peasant is humbled by this representation of power and authority and only occasionally rises above this passivity to challenge it.

The contemporary counterpart of this would be a resident of the Central Valley or the Sierra Nevada in California, approaching Los Angeles, as in Figure 2. Through the smog of the urban area one would be able to see the extensive col-



Figure 1 Salisbury Cathedral, seen from a distance. Retrieved June 15, 2020 from <<http://www.newforestexplorersguide.co.uk/days-out/a-little-farther-away/salisbury.html>>

lection of high rise buildings that house the economic institutions and actors, the decision-makers, and the wealth that are as beyond comprehension the peripheral dweller as was Salisbury centuries earlier. The mechanisms and functioning of the decision making processes in this contemporary center of power and policy decision making are part of another world. Unless this gap is breached, the two components of society will remain foreign to each other and little fruitful interaction is likely to take place.

The several barriers of comprehension that exist between residents of the conurbation and the peripheral regions make it difficult for them to have a fruitful conversation on public policy. Today some political actors have worked to exacerbate these differences and this incomprehension. Ann Applebaum has shown clearly how this incomprehension has been developed by autocratic leaders such as Victor Orbán in Hungary; Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and the Brexiteers in the UK; and Donald Trump in the US. Each has followed the strategy of attacking the credibility of a free press, has eviscerated the legislature and has worked to make the court system into a house of lap-dogs (Applebaum, 2020).

In the United States, Trump has worked to create sharp divisions among the populace to the extent that the current depiction of the US electorate is that they are cossetted in separate, distinct and isolated groupings commonly referred to as silos. The image in Figure 3 depicts four such silos, each isolated from the others and completely unto itself. We can imagine the one on the left, isolated from the others, to represent the peripheral region; the other three could be three cities or perhaps three urban centers clustered in a single conurbation, but also isolated from, and probably competing with, each other. Or we could imagine the silo on the left is the electorate with the other three being Applebaum's press, legislature and judiciary, all tamed and incapable of independent action.

A contrasting image is afforded by the Petronas Towers, in Figure 4. These two towers located in one of the world's largest cities house individuals in separate companies, in



Figure 2 Los Angeles, from a distance. Retrieved June 10, 2020 from < <https://www.everypixel.com/image-3061468807607223793>>

separate occupations, and, of course, with separate lives. Nonetheless, in this urban structure there are two bridges that connect the two towers at floor 41, for visitors, and floor 42, for staff, and that facilitates contact, communication and even collaboration with individuals in the other tower. These towers function quite differently than do the four silos. On the third floor, connecting the two towers again, is an 850 seat concert hall below which is a 1.5 million square feet retail mall. On the ground level is a public garden with fountains. “These three facilities further emphasize that this is a public and cultural structure... the design, ornamentation and spaces linked this building explicitly to this city and to this country”. (Kresl & Ietri, 2017, p. 74) This is nothing at all like the silos that compartmentalize and isolate the conurbation and the periphery regions in the US.



Figure 3 Silos. Retrieved June 9, 2020 from < <https://www.cmswire.com/digital-marketing/how-silos-are-killing-your-omnichannel-strategy/>>

OBSERVATIONS *RE* PERIPHERAL REGIONS

Now we can turn to examination and analysis of the characteristics of peripheral regions, their relationship with conurbations, and their potentiality for economic actions that will work to their advantage.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of peripheral regions is their low population density and the greater distances that must be traveled for necessities such as schooling, health care, air travel and centers of retail that characterize them in comparison to conurbations. Health care is the most pressing issue and this has been exacerbated by the economics of the contemporary model of provision of care in which private equity and other models based on high returns to investors rather than service to clients are becoming the rule. Large urban hospitals have been buying smaller rural hospitals, which they then close after a short period of time, forcing residents in peripheral areas to travel great distances for care. This is also happening in urban areas, especially in low income minority parts of the city, urban zones that are so deprived of modern technology and assets that they can properly be considered as urban peripheries. A case in point is that of the Hahnemann University Hospital in Philadelphia. Private equity investors see structures, such as hospitals, as real estate that has a higher market return as apartment housing or a retail center than it does as a hospital. When Hahnemann was shuttered, residents of North Philadelphia lost their accessible hospital and their access to health care was greatly diminished. After destroying Hahnemann, the investor returned to California and a new seven million dollar, eight thousand square foot house (Pomorski, 2021, p. 37). Interestingly enough, this issue puts peripheral regions in the same bag, so to speak, as inner city residents with regard to adequacy of health care, and with regard to their relationship to the high tech urban space. A policy that would be beneficial to both constituencies and that would bring them out of their silos into a collaborative initiative, would be construc-



Figure 4 The Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Retrieved December 10, 2016 from: Andy Mitchell from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Petronas_Panorama_II.jpg>

tion of scores or hundreds of health care clinics staffed by 3-5 medical professionals, throughout peripheral regions such as Maine, Eastern Oregon, Appalachia and the Great Plains, as well as the city centers of large cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Dallas and Atlanta, who could provide basic care to ‘walk ins’ and could also manage a telemedicine linkage with a major hospital anywhere in the country. There are many other such policy initiatives that could unite peripheral region residents with their counterparts in urban areas that could diminish the power of the current silo model.

In a just published book, *Public Policy in Contentious Times* (Kresl, 2021), I have examined the relevance of an extensive number of public policy initiatives relating to the economy, the environment, schooling, infrastructure, urban-rural issues, and Case and Deaton’s “Deaths of Despair” – drugs, alcohol and suicide (Case & Deaton, 2020). In these six policy areas I discerned there are 40 specific policy recommendations that would be relevant to, and supported by, both peripheral and urban, especially inner city, populations. In addition to health care, policies that would be beneficial to both silos include: pre-K and K-12 education; drinkable water whether availability in the West or in lead-free pipes in older towns and cities; investments in skill developments of young people; access to high speed internet; support for small businesses and small banks; support for small and general purpose air ports/fields; upgrading rail and bus service; more intelligent forest management; and transfers of funds to local governments for infrastructure improvements. Of the policies I have identified, 22 of them have been included the three policy initiatives proposed this year by President Biden – the American Rescue Plant Act, the American Jobs Plan and the American Family Plan. In spite of resentment, lack of respect and indifference felt by those who populate the various silos of our society, I have shown these policies to be potentially supported by these various constituencies.

The spatial distribution of the US population has significant impacts on the formation and adoption of public policy

in the political structures of the country. Throughout the US, the median density for Democrat districts is 1,197 per square mile, while it is 738 for independents, and just 585 for Republicans. Urban areas are predominantly Democratic, and rural or peripheral regions tend to be Republican. Similar patterns are found for per capita income and educational attainment, with peripheral regions being less wealthy and less well educated. It is also interesting that the median distance from a city of 100,000 population or more is 12 miles Democrats, 17 miles for Independents and 20 miles for Republicans. Hardly peripheral but these are median figures and with many Republicans situated in some high income suburbs, the rest of the members of this party can indeed be located in the periphery, quite distant from a conurbation; the figures remain indicative of the relation of each group to an urban center (Marist Poll, 2021). In a study of 50 democracies, Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty found that “rural zones are always more favorable to Conservatives. To the extent that they tend to be less developed than the cities, this cleavage has contributed historically to inhibiting class division” (Gethin et al., 2021, p. 21). Piketty has shown that between the end of WWII and 1990 better educated voters opted for the Republicans but that since 1990 these voters shifted to the Democrats. In recent years this has become true for voters who are financially better off, they too have shifted noticeably from Republican to Democratic (Piketty, 2021, p. 119). Thus, whether the indicator is wealth, income, education attained, distance from a city or population density, there is a clear separation of the political values and voting between peripheral regions and urban centers. In the analysis of the 2020 US presidential election done by Dan Kopf, the Democrat Joe Biden got only 30 per cent of the vote in counties with less than 100 people per square mile, but 55 per cent in counties with 2,000 per square mile. Population density is clearly a causal factor in the creation of the silos in American society.

Furthermore, I found that with many people living in close proximity the number of people one meets will be greater the more densely people are concentrated. There are more

acquaintanceships, subcultures develop and thrive, and progressive ideologies are given freer rein to develop and to flourish. This counters the traditionalism that is common in less dense populations in which religiosity and conservatism (and gun ownership) are stronger (Kresl, 2017).

According to Reeves,

In rural, less populated areas, residents are more likely to know one another and to talk with their neighbors. Those interpersonal relationships are highly influential and can create a social pressure to conform. There also is a lot of resentment on the part of rural residents toward urban communities. (Savat, 2020)

Conformity may work well in agricultural, that is peripheral, regions where technology and practice advance only slowly, but it inhibits the free interchange of ideas and the ‘tacit exchange of knowledge’ that sustains sectors of the economy in which technology and practice, by competitive necessity, advance rapidly.

Given the low population density in peripheral regions, settlements and their economies are necessarily rather small. Does this inhibit firms and communities in these regions from taking advantage of features that one finds in conurbations? That is, is there an advantage of size that these regions cannot achieve? Kotkin wrote that: “Increasingly, the key formula is not about achieving size, but efficiency” (Kotkin, 2014, p. 4). One way to achieve the equivalency of size in through, what Alonso, referred to as “borrowing size” (Alonso, 1974, p. 200). Borrowing size can enable the small peripheral economy to gain the advantages of being in a large conurbation: 1) by linking itself to an international airport by means of a small regional airport, 2) by offsetting lack of economies of agglomeration with lack of diseconomies such as congestion or crowding, 3) by using lower costs in the smaller economy to offset the cost of transporting components or raw materials of production from the larger location and 4) by using the virtual revolution in production that has been brought by telecommunication advances to enable workers hundreds of

miles distant to work together collaboratively. Many workers have discovered during the pandemic period that they like working from home, no matter how distant from the office it may be, and employers are discovering that workers can be as fully effective when work is being done in the worker's home. This is bringing a small revolution to the economic efficiency and competitiveness of producers in peripheral regions.

Much has been written about the movement of workers out of the high tech coastal cities, presumably into the interior of the country and even into the periphery. However, a report published by Brookings calls this into question. While it is true that 4.7 million workers have moved out of eight major coastal cities during the past year, less than 200,000 have moved into the Heartland and Mountain states – the periphery, and many of them moved to existing tech centers such as Madison, Wisconsin, Denver, Colorado, Nashville, Tennessee, and Boise, Idaho. The majority of moves were just to suburbs and other towns in close proximity to the pleasures of the big city (Muro et al., 2021).

This advance in technology means that producers and towns in the peripheral region can establish collaborative relationships with counterparts in other locations in the periphery, or elsewhere. Effective linkages between workers in many high technology areas of the economy are being established whether the workers are on the 10th and 20th floors of the same building or on different continents. The person on one end of the connection may not be aware of, or care about, the population or the population density where the person on the other end of the connection is working – it is simply irrelevant. The future economy will very likely bring exciting new opportunities for active engagement in the larger economy for producers in peripheral areas. Allen Scott speaks of a new state of affairs “where the city and the country seem to be set on a path of reconvergence toward one another”. He focuses on “non-metropolitan areas comprising rural expanses and associated networks of small towns that participate in the new cognitive-cultural economy” (Scott, 2012, pp. 15, 149). Creation

of “associated networks of small towns”, presumably in the peripheral regions, will enable them to form collaborative relationships that enable them to achieve efficient linkages and structures of production that make it possible for them to form production entities that are competitive in national and in international markets. This is clearly one way in which peripheral regions can become actors on the greater stage.

City size has always been a criterion of a successful city, but this has been under reconsideration in recent years. The question posed by one of the first writers on the subject of the “creative city”, Charles Landry, is

whether smaller places, especially those with industrial traditions such as producing coal, steel, manufactured goods or beer can be creative. In relative terms the answer is yes. While they cannot compete with global hubs there is a vast range of global niches and strengths to be captured. And indeed very large places often become dysfunctional and so reduce their creativity potential. (Landry, 2011, p. 524)

David Batten has studied “network cities”, and finds that key factors in the success of this structure include “conflicting forces of agglomeration and dispersion; geographical proximity and commuting time: local transport costs; diversity and complementarity of function; land prices; and access to quality green space” (Batten, 2011). That this structure can exist successfully in a peripheral region is indicated by one of his successful “functional cohesive web(s) of not-too-distant settlements” is that of New Mexico’s Technology Triangle, consisting of Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Los Alamos (Batten, 2011, p. 303). The Technology Triangle is about 500 miles from major cities – Phoenix and Denver, but has a history of research in aerospace and nuclear power. High speed internet and air travel have greatly reduced the isolation of city networks in peripheral regions.

Half of college/university graduates leave their birth state by the age of 30, whereas this is true for only 27 per cent of high school graduates and less than 17 per cent of high school

dropouts do (Moretly, 2012, p. 157). Thus, the peripheral city or town has the challenge of retaining its educated youth, perhaps more than attracting talented workers from cities. Anderson, et al. suggest that a greater challenge for peripheral regions is that of creating a beneficial business climate. They should work to “strengthen their originality and authenticity rather than trying to become more global in their people climate, as they cannot compete in that playground with larger city regions”. They can make themselves attractive to skilled workers by focusing on their social relations and their local identity. But they do believe that peripheral regions can carve out a place for themselves in the competitive environment (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 133).

CONCLUSIONS

My objective in this paper was presentation of an analysis as to how peripheral regions in the US relate to the rest of the polity and the economy, and to then propose a model of analysis that will enable us to bridge the gap that separates relatively conservative residents in peripheral regions with the more liberal counterparts in conurbations. Each has been portrayed as being cossetted in a silo that provides an effective barrier to interaction with dwellers of the other silo or silos. In the context of the US, the division can also be seen as that of rural and urban, town and city, and Red state and Blue state, or as periphery and conurbation. In the current political condition of the US, bi-partisanship in Congress has broken down and the public has no mechanisms for imposing a rational resolution of political differences. One of the key factors has been the deterioration of news media, as more citizens retreat from newspapers that brought both liberal and conservative columnists and consensus views of current events. Private capital investors have purchased major city newspapers such as the Chicago Tribune and the Denver Post, among others, dismissed much of the editorial and reportorial staff in stra-

tegies that have brought the demise of historically important sources of balanced news and editorial comment. Individuals have retreated to their silos, of left and right, with little interaction, relying on their favored site to use algorithms to select for them what they should read and that shield them from news that would challenge their cossetted opinions.

We have noted that peripheral regions have tended in the US to be relatively, if not aggressively, conservative. Other features such as low population density and the resulting distances to schooling, health, retail and other features of modern life contribute to the shaping the identity and the economic potential of peripheral regions. Nonetheless, the analysis of this paper indicates that there are many areas of policy in which residents of peripheral regions and those of, among others, inner city districts have commonality in objective and in impact that will allow for development of inter-silo communication and the formation of policies that will benefit both communities. These include: health care, schooling, infrastructure, funding for small business/banks and local governments, and management of forests and waterways, among other things.

Much of the attachment to an individual silo is based on misinformation and ignorance. Peripheral regions have the most to benefit from a rational, dispassionate discussion of public policy. They deserve to be serviced by objective presentation and discussion of the major political issues of the day, as well as analysis of the costs and benefits of individual policies.

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