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Megalopolis

The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States

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C H A P T E R 15

Conclusion: *Novus Ordo Seclorum*

The growth of Megalopolis is an extremely complex phenomenon. Many factors have combined to bring about its present degree of urbanization and its spectacular concentration of people, industries, and wealth. The geographical location was quite an important asset in the earlier stages of the region's development; and the foundations inherited from the past advantageously support to this day the lofty modern structure that has in recent years dominated the economics and politics of our globe. And yet no combination of material forces alone can be credited with having determined the rise of Megalopolis to its present eminence. The spirit of the people who used the material opportunity within their reach must be recognized as the decisive element in the region's history; such is the lesson of the past, and such is the warning for the future.

The Promethean Momentum

The first towns established on the Northeastern American seaboard from Massachusetts Bay to the Potomac River formed a daring frontier

whose people were concerned with solving the problems of human woes at least as much as with developing a continent and controlling an ocean. If these settlements of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are thought of as forming a hinge on the continent's edge, it must be recognized as a "three-dimensional" hinge, the third component being the spiritual aspirations that inspired the various experiments: Puritan Massachusetts, Providence, then Connecticut, Quaker Philadelphia, Mennonite and Amish Lancaster in Pennsylvania, Roman Catholic Maryland, and many others. Each of these groups was led by a faith that burned strong and long and that seemed more capable of achievements in the virgin land of a New World.

New York's origins were somewhat different, and in many ways more materialistic. But New York early became a very tolerant place, open to many faiths, and a great hub of cooperation between people of most diverse origins. All the great seaports, located on this stretch of the continent's façade, were rivals, and therefore they influenced one another. They were all children of the age of the great geographical discoveries, from which they inherited a Promethean disposition soon spurred on by religious fervor and by competition among neighbors.

As one reviews the history of Megalopolis¹ one finds a close association between the spirit of the frontier and the momentum of the great religious experiments. Frederick Jackson Turner's theory of the frontier in American history blends here with Perry Miller's "errand into the wilderness" to produce an endless endeavor toward the betterment of man's destiny through the development of new and unlimited resources.² The Promethean ardor flares up brilliantly after independence, as is attested by such writings as Nicholas Collin's statement prominently displayed in the publications of the American Philosophical Society.³

Many historians have pointed out that the programs drawn up and the policies followed in this region arose as the daily products of the pressures of the times, which offered opportunity along with obstacles and difficulties. People rose to meet these successive challenges, doing the best they could, without any grand design or conscious planning.

¹ See above, Chapters 1 and 3, especially pp. 67-79.

² See especially Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1920, Chapter 9, "The West and American Ideals," and Chapter 11, "Social Forces in American History," in which Turner states in fact that the massing of population in the cities, accompanied by urban and industrial growth, is providing the American nation with a new frontier for the twentieth century.

³ See above, pp. 71-77.

However, there are several ways to face any particular challenge or to take advantage of a given opportunity. The pre-Columbian Indians did it one way, the New England settlers another way, while the planters in Virginia chose still a third system. The mass of the people in a community are seldom fully conscious of the forces that drive them, and they are usually too busy to spend time investigating them, leaving this to an elite that is more leisurely and intellectual. There can be little doubt that the leadership of the great cities on the Northeastern seaboard paid some attention to the abstract foundations of American strength.

It is significant that the committees that debated and chose the allegoric design of the Great Seal of the United States, shortly after independence, inscribed on one of the seal's faces the Latin phrase, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, a phrase that appears also on every greenback, printed under the unfinished pyramid the base of which bears the date 1776. The leaders of the young Republic believed that the United States and its way of life ought to be and would be a "New Order of the Ages," a great turning point of history. There were few more striking ways of claiming such a role than by inscribing such a motto on the Great Seal of the federation, and later on its bank notes. An inscription is not worth much in practice unless it expresses a deep feeling alive in the hearts of many people, and such a feeling was characteristic of the leadership of Megalopolitan cities in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Much of this same spirit is still alive in American minds and still inspires American action. The early Boston mariner's policy to "trye all ports" and the more recent formula of the great planners to "make no little plans" represent a Megalopolitan tradition, full of vigor and determination, based on bold experimentation and expressing confidence in the ultimate success of human endeavor.

In terms of ancient Greek mythology such a tradition was indeed titanic; it has proved to be Promethean. An era of great discoveries around the earth and of fervent religious debates lay behind the development of this region, and it achieved its present supremacy at the time when mankind, satisfying an ancient dream, once more opened the gates of discovery and exploration, this time of still newer worlds on other planets. We are constantly reminded today that ideas precede and shape the appearance of new "facts." The ancient philosopher of Alexandria, Philo Judaeus, taught that there is a great *city of ideas* that predetermines and commands the material world in which we live, and this greater city of ideas Philo called *Megalopolis*. It seems, then, especially fitting to apply the same name to this extraordinary region, the present shape and style of which arose

from the beliefs and searchings of those who settled there to bring a new order to their brethren on earth.

Unlimited Resourcefulness: A Philosophy of Abundance

What kind of new order was it? Every group certainly visualized it in its own way, but it was to be a *better* order, one of plenty and justice, one in which people would be happy, in which abundance would reign and would be fairly distributed. In their religious fervor the various communities were very much aware of the necessity of material success to demonstrate their truth to the world at large. The Lord's approval of their behavior would be manifested in their general prosperity. To achieve the latter they were all prepared to work hard but intelligently, saving their labor whenever possible, because the people were few and the continent immense, because also the task was enormous, and all devices to advance the community's welfare and its ability to produce would be helpful and would certainly please the Lord.

To these early ideas the nature of the times gave great momentum. The Northeastern seaboard was settled as the era of great discoveries widened horizons in all directions and fired a vast commercial expansion. The early settlements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries grew facing the western shores of Europe at a time when the people of the latter were opening in various directions new avenues of scientific and technical progress and were harboring the "enlightenment." The cities of Megalopolis started growing with the Industrial Revolution and with a great upheaval in mass migration and mass consumption.

Megalopolis hungrily absorbed every new device its people learned about, in order to foster its own growth. Commercial development, industrialization, mechanization, motorization, and automation all were put to work on a large scale. The new order to be developed could only be an *urban* order. The old rural economy, which predominated in the "old" countries whence most of the settlers or latter immigrants came, was obviously unfit to support the kind of plenty the Northeastern seaboard had undertaken to secure.

Unlimited resources cannot be found in any small plot of land but must be supplied from a vast radius around it. The Promethean tradition and the urban economy, early based on an active commerce, cooperated to develop the people's resourcefulness as the only possible limitless resource. The continent was settled and developed; but Megalopolis was not satisfied to serve only as the main base for this enormous task. The

economic *hinge* was at work both on the continent and overseas. Thirsty for more supplies and more markets, the traders of Megalopolis organized more and more production at home and far away. As surpluses were gathered, they too were marketed and often transformed into necessities through processes several times referred to in this volume. The redistribution of surpluses always has been the function of the market place, and of urban economies.

A certain wastefulness was involved in the accumulation of wealth and in the means of production. Mass consumption was pushed forward by the organization of large-scale advertising, large-scale credit, built-in obsolescence, and by the whole functioning of the mass-media market that remains centered in the main hubs of Megalopolis. It must be realized that such a philosophy of abundance founded on the unlimited resourcefulness of hard-working people with a Promethean drive could lead only to large-scale urban growth and expansion. It led also to a constant and rapidly shifting specialization of a large part of the Megalopolitan labor force into those occupations, those sectors of economic activity, that paid better and were expanding their demand for manpower. From a balanced agricultural-commercial economy Megalopolis shifted as soon as it could to an emphasis on manufacturing plus trade. In the twentieth century the tertiary industries have been taking over the region, and the majority of the labor force has gone into white-collar occupations. By 1960 the major hubs already specialized in what might be called the *quaternary* forms of economic activity: the managerial and artistic functions, government, education, research, and the brokerage of all kinds of goods, services, and securities.

Such activities have always been concentrated in the business districts, the downtowns, the market places that characterized the urban center, the city. For at least a century, and possibly longer, Megalopolis has been at the forefront of the progress and refinement of the urban economy. Its successful expansion suggests that its dynamics have thus rightly followed the basic principles of any urban growth. There is in the mechanics of the city the need for the production of surplus, for a great fluidity in the balance of needs and resources, as well as enough fluidity in the very nature of the revenue-procuring resources.

Abundance of goods and money is also an ancient specialty of the city. The confluence of many currents of supply and traffic is needed to obtain such abundance, which will not be limited to just a few commodities locally produced. However, cities have not always achieved a fair distribution of their abundant supplies. The United States may well claim

to be the first large nation to have achieved a high degree of general abundance well distributed among the population, and there can be little doubt that this abundance was due not so much to the extent and fecundity of the land as to the dynamism of the urban economy developed in Megalopolis and founded on the management of redistribution.

The great technological momentum of the period in which Megalopolis grew was a great factor, and the natural riches of the American continent were also instrumental. Still, many nations went through these same years in history without any comparable economic development, although they may have just as rich a natural endowment as the United States. Indeed, vast oilfields, immense ore deposits, and expanses of good land are just being found or surveyed in several continents, even in little old Europe. But the search for and development of all possible resources in the orbit of Megalopolis (which has often coincided, during the most recent 150 years, with part of London's orbit) was not typical of the rest of the world. If one were to ask "why" and dare an answer, the latter ought certainly to be related less to the desire of achieving greater production than to the faith in expanding consumption, even in a wasteful manner if need be, as a constructive factor in economic growth. In a century or two from now the economic historian looking at a detailed accounting of the past may conclude that the natural endowment of the United States, especially east of the Rockies, was nothing exceptional; it might even look then as below average. But the resourcefulness with which its people put it to use, under the direction of the Megalopolitan hubs, may even then appear exceptional.

What the future holds for people is a question to be answered elsewhere. We may, however, wonder how much of a lesson the past and present of Megalopolis may provide for its own people and for the population of other lands.

The New Order: How Exportable?

It would certainly have immensely pleased the Founding Fathers of the cities in Megalopolis to find that the way of life and the economic organization developed there serve as a model to many other parts of the world undergoing the process of urbanization. The actual trends, however, are not quite so simple. The process of urban growth is in our time a worldwide phenomenon and a source of concern for many communities and governments. In every region this growth develops along specific lines, most of which differ from place to place; every community has its own variety of the usual problems, and its own ways and means of tackling

them. These local characteristics must be respected. But to be informed of more or less similar problems in other places, and how they have been dealt with, is helpful; and what is learned in this way may be used to help solve one's own problems in one's own way.

Naturally countries faced with the questions of modern urbanization look first at the precedents set and the experiments tried in areas where leadership has been established. In our time Megalopolis is being thus studied and examined, for many of its various problems are or will be repeated, with some variance and on different scales, in most other countries. Whether the action taken concerning any of its urban and suburban problems warrants it or not, Megalopolis should know that it will be examined by many outsiders, some of whom will copy it just because of the prestige the region enjoys today, and some of whom may be inspired to improve on the techniques applied there. Whatever is done, whatever its real worth for the people involved, the example of Megalopolis will be followed more often than not. Observers travelling around the world nowadays report from most varied areas many instances of the obvious influence of American methods of coping with urban problems; and as Megalopolis remains the most impressive and largest urban system, as it is the main façade of the United States toward the outside world, it is mainly Megalopolitan examples that are impressed on so many cities and countries around the globe.

Recently this writer has travelled widely through North America, western Europe and some Mediterranean countries. Everywhere he found cities expanding. The larger metropolitan areas are attracting the larger part of population growth. Cities are expanding one toward the other. The nebulous structure of urbanized regions is becoming frequent and hints at a new redistribution of functions within such regions. Residential land use is gaining in all directions around the congested older nuclei. The more densely agglomerated nuclei no longer specialize in manufacturing and administration as they used to. Production industries often move out to the periphery of the city and beyond into spaces that were until recently considered rural or interurban. The functions that continue to gather in what may be called central districts or hubs of the urban nebulae are offices, laboratories, and all the activities related to the various forms of entertainment. As in Roman times, the arena and the forum, in their modern versions, occupy an increasing share of the hubs. Entertainment and offices are related one to another, thriving on proximity. They create a large market for white-collar labor. All these trends started at an earlier time and they have already developed on a great scale in Megalopolis.

The forces bringing about this evolution are rooted in a deep transformation of modern modes of life and habitat. They are not determined in other areas just by an imitation of Megalopolis, and yet the element of imitation spurs the evolution on.

These trends bestow a heavy responsibility upon the present inhabitants and leadership of Megalopolis. In many ways they may be rightly proud of serving as a model. They must, however, be mindful of the long-range consequences of these trends. People imitate those wealthier, more powerful, more successful than they are, in the hope of achieving through such imitation a better and perhaps an equal status. Mahatma Gandhi told how in his youth he tried to eat beef, despite deep repugnance, in the hope that it would make him intellectually and politically equal to the beef-eating British who then dominated India. He soon understood that that was not the way to solve his problem. Megalopolis may feel some concern at the thought that similarly unreasonable but instinctive imitation may and will develop; but in the field of urban and metropolitan problems one cannot prevent such undesirable imitations. Nevertheless, there remains some responsibility in the very fact of leadership, for the behavior of the followers is under the leader's influence.

The prime responsibility of the people in Megalopolis is, however, to themselves. Once they are satisfied they have done all they could, to the best of their ability, to manage their own region and its problems, then they may face boldly the judgment of the rest of the world, today and tomorrow. If they remain faithful to their traditions, if both community and individuals carry on, with the same enthusiasm and endeavor as in the past, the struggle to build in the wilderness of this hard, complicated, and changing world a better and brighter city, then the future of Megalopolis may well be looked upon with optimism. However, this confidence requires the constant doubts, self-examination, and self-criticism of everyone. If complacency and resignation were to set in, the great Megalopolitan experiment would be jeopardized and the balance of our world might shift.