

2.0 World City Discourse

The current dominant world-view and the normative understanding of the way in which cities are interrelated in a world system has had a major impact on urban studies and urban planning around the world. This discourse can be seen as a direct by-product of the political and economic climate of globalisation that has come to dominate conventional wisdom over the last twenty years. Prior to the 1970's the dominant discourse in regards to describing and examining cities was based on the use of models. Early Modernist thinkers such as Le Corbusier tried to imagine ideal cities that were based on idealised physical layouts that were thought to lead to certain desired behaviours and outcomes. Le Corbusier's concepts relating to cities, as laid out in his work, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* (1947), envisioned an ordered model of a city where planning could in fact influence behaviour within the urban environment. According to him, cities were machines, arranged around mathematics and reason. Le Corbusier was passionate about order and his views in some ways can be seen to summarise the West's fundamental beliefs around the absolute rightness of reason and order:

The house, the street, the town, are points to which human energy is directed: they should be ordered, otherwise they counteract the fundamental principles round which we revolve: if they are not ordered, they oppose themselves to us, they thwart us. (Le Corbusier, 1947: p.21)

Or, as he goes onto state, "I repeat that man, by reason of his very nature, practices order."(Le Corbusier, 1947: p. 23)

These types of views were highly influential on decades of city planning and thinking. However, this type of thinking was quite static, relying on a typically Modernist use of models which failed to take into account the interrelationships between cities or to account for change within cities. Therefore, a new line of thinking began to emerge that explained cities as more fluid, and took relations and networks into account both within cities and between cities.

Radical thinkers such as Manuel Castells and David Harvey “revolutionized the study of urbanization” (Friedmann, 1986: p. 151) and paved the way for a new way of thinking about cities in that they “linked city processes to the larger historical movement of industrial capitalism” (Friedmann, 1986: p. 151) In this move, they changed the discourse of urban studies from one based on static models to one based on dynamic processes, relationships, and linkages. Texts such as Castells’ *City Class & Power* (1978), deconstructed the Modernist model of cities and urban planning by exploring the influences of social movements and class conflicts in urban planning.

More recently, with the advent of globalization, “the study of cities [has become] directly connected to the world economy.” (Friedmann, 1986: p. 151) Before investigating what has become world city discourse however, it is necessary to look historically to the global and economic shifts that have taken place over the past few decades. During the late twentieth century, the economies of the developed Western world were moving away from Fordism to “post-Fordism, involving the multiplication and fragmentation of markets.” (O’Conner and Wynne, 1996: p. 6) Fordism, defined as the industrial mass-production of commodities based on mass-consumption (O’Connor and Wynne, 1996: p. 7), was waning. In its place was emerging an economy based on knowledge, flexibility and “the production and distribution of symbolic goods – the cultural industries.” (O’Connor & Wynne, 1996: p. 7). A new information economy changed the rules in terms of relationships within and between cities. This new information economy did not respect physical borders as before, and the start of a global economy or globalisation was imminent. According to Bianchini and Parkinson, during this time,

The crisis of the Fordist regime accumulation which is characterised by large scale production and relatively homogeneous commodities for mass market consumption.

Technological change gradually made it possible for transnational corporations to shift unskilled parts of the production process to the newly industrialising countries.

(Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993: p. 13)

Or, as Sassen put it, “economic globalization and the ascendance of information technologies are reconfiguring the spatial organization of the economy.” (Sassen, 1996: p. 382) Cities and communities that were able to compete in this new information economy were in most cases Western, formerly industrialised cities. The power base of the Western economies enabled

these cities to lead the transformation into this new economic arena and therefore to dominate not only the system, but also the discourse that described it. The dominant discourse has imagined a specific reality of how cities around the world are encouraged to develop.

From within this context, completely new ways of talking about cities emerged and in turn led to the creation of economic and political realities for cities attempting to compete within the new world system. Cities were now described in terms of their internal and global spatiality, both literally and symbolically within the world economy. Urban studies and planning became focused on viewing cities as embedded in processes, networks, and physicality. Thinkers like Friedmann explained this new relationship of cities as “nodes within a global economy... [where] the intersection of the global and the local becomes crucial in local economic development.” (O’Conner & Wynne, 1996: p. 7) This new way of organising and understanding cities is firmly embedded within the neo-liberal world-view: specifically “about the spatial organisation of the new international division of labour.” (Friedmann, 1986: p. 151) This discourse does not explain cities “as mere objects of global forces, [but] also theorises about their importance as lynchpins in the spatial organisation of the world economy.” (Smith, & Timberlake, 1995: p. 164). World city discourse then was based on an understanding that the old system (Fordism) had been replaced by a new global information economy.

This new discourse was a by-product of a specifically capitalist world view, a worldview based on economic competition which inevitably was based on hierarchical ways of thinking. Critics have pointed out that this hierarchical way of thinking is further perpetuated since the framework which within the discourse is framed is based on “human ecology theory in sociology [which] has understood communities to be situated in hierarchical relation to one another, both within metropolitan regions and within broader regions such as nations where systems of cities are organised, primarily on the basis of economic dominance.” (Smith & Timberlake, 1995: p. 167)

This assumption of the intrinsic economic competition between cities is what lies at the heart of this discourse. Out of this accepted discourse arose various discussions and explanations as to why certain cities were more developed, (read as more successful) than others. Western urban planners used this new relational way of understanding cities to place them

within a hierarchy based on certain criteria predicated on Western capitalist understandings of development, progress, and growth.

World city discourse is the language used to describe this set of criteria which have become accepted as the norms that enable certain cities to be perceived as sitting at the top of the global hierarchy. There is almost a circular logic of power within the development of this discourse in that the voices from the West that have held economic and political power over the world for centuries, are also the voices that are now empowered to define what cities “matter” within a world system that was created by the West for its own benefit. The criterion for a city to be considered a world city is based on the model of an ideal, industrialised, post-modern Western city.

According to Friedmann, there are a number of criteria that a city must meet in order to be defined as a world city. These include the following:

- 1) The Form and extent of a city's integration with the world economy, and the functions assigned to the city in the new spatial division of labour, will be decisive for any structural changes occurring within it.
- 2) Key cities throughout the world are used by global capital as ‘basing points’ in the spatial organization and articulation of production and markets, The resulting linkages make it possible to arrange world cities in a complex spatial hierarchy.
- 3) The global control functions of world cities are directly reflected in the structure and dynamics of their production sectors and employment.
- 4) World cities are major sites for the concentration and accumulation of international capital.
- 5) World cities are points of destination for large numbers of both domestic and /or international migrants.

6) World city formulation brings into focus the major contradictions of industrial capitalism -among them spatial and class polarization.

7) World city growth generates social costs that tend to exceed the fiscal capacity of the state. (Friedmann, 1986: pp. 152-158)

It is clear from these characteristics that world cities are those that have historically been hubs for advancing the neo-liberal globalisation agenda, and have then in-turn benefited from this same system. When describing these cities as hubs of capital accumulation, what is unspoken is the source of that capital and how it has been historically accumulated. When looking at it from this point of view, world cities can be described as the core in a global core-periphery relationship. This on-going core-periphery understanding makes further sense if one looks at Wallerstein's assessment of capitalism as a world system that "is (and always has been) characterised by a core-periphery division of labour." (Wallerstein quoted in Smith & Timberlake, 1995: p. 165) As these periphery states "are integrated into the capitalist world system, and to the extent that modernity becomes increasingly an elusive goal,....periphery countries become underdeveloped (relative to the core)." (Smith, & Timberlake, 1995: p. 165)

While Wallerstein's core-periphery analysis is quite simplistic, it is important to note that most world cities are located in former colonial powers which did historically operate in this core-periphery relationship. World cities are also described as "basing points in the spatial organization and articulation of production and markets," (Friedmann, 1986: p. 153) meaning they control the processes of globalisation and that in doing so they also are basing points of economic power over other sites.

In fact, when one analyses the criteria for world city status, it is clear that the economic and spatial power held by these cities can be seen as a legacy of their status as former colonial powers. While world city discourse would understand these relationships more symbiotically, it is clear that almost all the world cities were former hubs of colonial power and this is surely not a coincidence.

So, while world city theory does recognise the inter-connectedness of cities and that "global inter-city relationships help to shape the world system" (Smith& Timberlake, 1995: p. 168),

the system itself was designed and is perpetuated by dominant powers. So-called world cities have historically been part of the power base that created the system in the first place. This paper proceeds from this understanding of the global hierarchy of cities that is implicit in world city discourse.