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The Urban West and the Twenty-First Century

by Carl Abbott

In 1964 Oregon novelist Ken Kesey published Sometimes a Great Notion, the impassioned story of a fiercely (even pathologically) independent family of loggers on the southern Oregon coast. The novel is much admired by Oregonians, who read it as a tribute to the vanishing American pioneer. The urban West appears only by implication in the form of a fumbling labor organizer who longs to return to the civilized cities of California.

In 1990 Thomas Pynchon's frantic and fantastic Vineland fictionalized the same territory. The story starts and ends in the environs of Eureka, California, in a complex landscape inhabited by timber workers, aging hippies, and pot farmers. In between, it stretches easily and instantly to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Tokyo, and Washington, D.C. Like it or not, Pynchon's Vinelanders are firmly connected to the rationalized, bureaucratic society that radiates from the office towers of the contemporary city. The redwood country may still bear some superficial resemblance to a nineteenth-century frontier, but Pynchon knows that the region is a full participant in the new worlds of the 1990s.

The difference between Kesey's West and Pynchon's reflects the impacts of the "third urban revolution."

To explain my terminology, the "first urban revolution" involved the independent creation of cities in the Middle East, India, China, and Middle America between 5,000 and 2,500 years ago. Preindustrial cities differed from rural villages by their concentration of non-agricultural occupations and their roles in organizing large-scale social and political systems.1 A handful of such communities appeared in the future American West during the...
Although built near the midpoint of the twentieth century, the Space Needle still provides Seattle a futuristic look.

San Antonio, St. Louis, and Sitka represented the efforts of European officials to incorporate western North America into a system of mercantile capitalism centered on the North Atlantic.

If the era of preindustrial cities is measured in millennia, the effects of the "second urban revolution" were concentrated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The industrial city was "invented" in Manchester and London, imitated in France and Germany, and exported to the United States. Industrializing nations shifted from largely rural to substantially urban societies in the course of two generations. The rate of change peaked in Britain between 1800 and 1850, in Germany and the United States between 1850 and 1890, and in Japan between 1870 and 1920. The climax products of this second urban revolution were the manufacturing and commercial cities that crowded northern Europe, Japan, and parts of eastern North America at the opening of the twentieth century—Glasgow, Essen, Osaka, and Pittsburgh as well as London, Berlin, Paris, and New York. Industrial cities enlisted new territories and populations as suppliers of resources and markets for manufactured goods. The result was a global geography that Immanuel Wallerstein has termed the second world-system. The Atlantic core nations controlled the periphery through a greatly expanded network of colonial cities in Africa and Asia and quasi-colonial cities in the Americas. Bombay, Melbourne, Denver, and San Francisco all facilitated the entrance of European capital, organized access to regional markets, and funneled regional products to factory cities on both sides of the North Atlantic.

As Rodman Paul and Donald Meinig have pointed out, western settlement and organization spread outward from the key cities of San Francisco and Denver and their ancillary centers of Portland, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, and Santa Fe between the 1840s and 1870s. As railroad builders added more links to the western transportation system in the 1880s and 1890s, isolated metropolitan regions merged into the national hierarchy of cities focused on New York and Chicago. At the climax of the industrial era in the 1920s, economist N. S. B. Gras and sociologist Robert Park could both summarize the West as a collection of a dozen metropolitan regions that connected farming market centers and mining towns to the national capitals of commerce.

The last half century has brought a third global restructuring of urban form and functions, with Mexico City and Los Angeles replacing Manchester and Chicago as the symbols of the era. New technologies and institutions of communication have brought people into a single marketplace for ideas as well as goods, driving a further integration and elaboration of the global system of cities. One obvious consequence has been the explosive urbanization of the southern two-thirds of the globe, whose urban population will quadruple between 1960 and the end of the century.

In the developed world, the ongoing revolution in urban technology is bringing a new balance of centralization and decentralization. Commuting zones of individual cities may now reach more than a hundred miles from the city center. Changes in trade, financial systems, and travel have vastly extended multilateral ties within and across national systems of cities. Within the American West, urban-regional growth has responded to the re-internationalization of the


American economy, the global shift toward services (especially those involved in the leisure economy of recreation and retirement), and the expansion of the science-based garrison state. In the world under creation by the third urban revolution, prosperous cities are increasingly specialized players in a global economy, whether they are Brussels or Barcelona, Honolulu or Houston, San Diego or Seattle.

With this context, I want to project the urban West of the later twentieth century into the twenty-first century. In a ten-second sound bite, my argument is that what we see is what we're going to get. That is, the coming decades are likely to see the American West continue to work through the impacts of the third urban revolution. It will be no more possible to re-create the world of Hank Stamper and the loggers of the Wakonda Auga watershed than the worlds of William Bent or Juan de Oñate. In particular, I want to touch on four points:

1. The end of "urbanization" in the American West;
2. the consolidation of control functions in a handful of supercities;
3. the continued "urbanizing" of what used to be the western backcountry;
4. the policy-making environment of western cities.

(1) In the technical definition used by demographers, "urbanization" has essentially reached its end. In this usage, urbanization refers to the shift of national or regional population from rural to urban residence. As a measurable social indicator, urbanization theoretically ranges between 0 and 100 percent. Over the last two centuries, urbanization in every industrial nation has traced a logistic curve or "S" curve. A rapid upturn—the first bend or up-curve of the S—


reflects the impacts of the second urban revolution. A leveling off—the second bend or down-curve of the S—has led highly developed societies to a stable urbanization level of roughly 80 percent.

In the United States, demographers usually measure the level of urbanization by the proportion of population living within the boundaries of metropolitan areas. The West as a whole (nineteen states) has shifted from 43 percent metropolitan in 1940 to 64 percent in 1960, 78 percent in 1980, and 80 percent in 1990.

The case is even more extreme in the eight states of the Far West—California and its historic satellites of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, and Hawaii. The overall proportion of metropolitan population in these states has increased from 64 percent metropolitan in 1940 to 76 percent in 1960 and then to a plateau of 88 percent since 1970. This level of saturation urbanization equals that in the most developed nations of western Europe—the United Kingdom at 87 percent, the Netherlands at 89 percent, and Germany at 90 percent.

Absolute numbers of city and suburban residents, of course, can and will continue to grow, but the balance is unlikely to change. For every new resident of nonmetropolitan areas, there will be seven or eight new city people. Since 1970, in fact, the metropolitan population of the eight far western states has increased by nearly 12 million, while the nonmetropolitan population has increased by about 1.4 million for a ratio of 8.5 to 1.

(2) Within this profoundly urbanized West, we have every reason to expect the continued concentration of advanced services and nonroutine information industries in the handful of biggest metropolitan centers. Virtually every observer thinks that the rich get richer when it comes to headquarters activities, nonroutine finance, consulting, research, advanced education, and similar economic sectors. The advantages of agglomeration and propinquity attract the activities that produce and process nonroutine information, making a few favored locations even more attractive for more such activities. At the top of the global hierarchy are a handful of "world cities," perhaps including Los Angeles. Following are international gateways like San Francisco, Seattle, and Vancouver and specialized international cities like Honolulu.8

These advanced service cities will be increasingly detached from their region and tied into national and international networks. Examples of income sources that transcend or bypass the regional context are many—international tourism in Honolulu, overseas trade through Los Angeles and Long Beach, federal research grants to Seattle universities and think tanks, international contracts for Boise and Corvallis engineering firms, supervision of multinational corporate business from San Francisco office towers.

The unpredictable element in this scenario will be the character and location of the sunrise industries of the fifth long wave in the world capitalist economy. The fifth Kondratieff cycle should begin its takeoff sometime in the late 1990s, following the twenty-year slump that began in 1974.9 We cannot be certain, however, which industries will drive the new wave of economic expansion—bioengineering? communications industries? personal leisure and entertainment industries? Nor do we know whether the West will be the preferred location for the early twenty-first-century equivalent of the aerospace and electronics industries.

(3) The uncertainties of industrial change aside, the West will continue to see metropolitan influence filter down the urban hierarchy and incorporate the sparsely settled West into the use zones of metropolitan areas.

Cost equilibrium factors will favor smaller cities over larger cities as locations for manufacturing assembly, back office data manipulation, and similar routine production activities. Within the Northwest, for example, Portland and the Willamette valley have proved an attractive location for electronics production and assembly plants.
Spokane has benefited economically from the transfer of credit card and data processing activities by Seattle banks.

Beyond Portland industrial parks and Spokane offices, the third urban revolution will continue to erode the isolation of the rural West. The western backcountry of the nineteenth century has been embraced within urban recreation, commuting, and amenity zones in the later twentieth century. This extraordinary penetration of the "empty" West by the urban West involves the appropriation of natural resources for new purposes—grazing land for garbage disposal and nuclear waste, forests for scenic preservation, farming districts for sources of water.

This process has been accelerating since the 1950s. It is likely to continue for at least two more decades as members of the "double-boomer" generation born between 1940 and 1965 reach their fifties and sixties. A few of the nonmetropolitan remnant of westerners will operate the remaining farms and ranches. Many more will tidy up motel rooms, tend ski lifts, build retirement dream homes for their metropolitan neighbors, and develop fax-based businesses serving metropolitan customers. In a sense, what I am describing is a double "insult" to the traditional western backcountry. It will be monopolized and subordinated to city uses through metropolitan political and economic influence, but it will be far less important than the wider world to the key cities of the West. The question is less how to preserve the fragments of the rural West than how to ease the transition from a resource economy.

(4) The last question is the possibility of leadership in public policy. In comparison with the urban East or South, the cities of the West are marked by institutional openness. In important ways, they still reflect the positive effects of the "frontier" as a challenge that demanded wide participation.

Farms and ranches like this one in Cascade County, Montana, will continue to be monopolized and subordinated by the urban West of the next century.

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Seattle, moderately populated, surrounded by water, hemmed in by mountains, favored by a mild climate and watched over by a citizenry that knows how lucky it is. Over the past generation that watchful citizenry has taxed itself to clean up Lake Washington, to create a regional park system, and to anticipate the impacts of rapid growth. Voters have responded passionately if not always effectively to preserve a human-scale downtown and to maintain affordable housing. In part because of such civic commitment, metropolitan Seattle earned first place in rankings of general quality of life among American cities by Arthur Louis in 1975 and Places Rated Almanac in 1989. In between it has placed first, fifth, twelfth, first, and second in various specialized and comprehensive ratings. An international comparison of one hundred large metropolitan areas showed Seattle-Tacoma in a tie with Melbourne and Montreal as the best cities for average residents.

Apart from obvious advantages of climate, setting, and prosperity, what underlies the high rankings for western cities is a shared commitment to the public interest. The health, education, and social components of Ben-Chieh Liu’s most thorough quality-of-life study (1976) measured such items as per capita investment in education and medical facilities, school enrollment, newspaper circulation, and the ratio of public library books to population. Overall, twenty-four of twenty-six far western metropolitan areas rated good or better on the health, education, and social components.

The civic culture of the West has also been receptive to women in positions of leadership. An obvious indicator has been the long list of women elected as mayors of major western cities in the last twenty years, including the chief executives of Phoenix, Santa Barbara, San Jose, San Francisco, Stockton, Modesto, Portland, and Spokane. Since western states took the lead in granting voting rights to women before the Nineteenth Amendment, it is also not surprising that women constituted at least 15 percent of state legislators in all but one far western state (California) at the end of the 1980s, compared with only fourteen of thirty-one eastern states.

The recent experience of cities such as San Jose, Sacramento, and Portland tends to confirm several hypotheses about the political empowerment of women in western cities. First, the cities of the postwar West have been communities filled with newcomers who lack ties and obligations to extended families, churches, and other community institutions. Women who have satisfied their responsibilities to nuclear families have been relatively free to devote time and energy to political activity. Second, the spreading suburbs of western cities have been “frontiers” that require concerted action to solve immediate functional and service needs like adequate schools and decent parks. Since pursuit of the residential amenity package has often been viewed as “woman’s work” (in contrast to the “man’s work” of economic development), burgeoning suburbs have offered numerous opportunities for women to engage in volunteer civic work, to build capacity as political activists, and finally to run for local office. Third, western cities have had weak political machines and parties. The alternative of personalized, nonparty politics is far more open to the influence of energetic women.

Women’s participation in local politics has also drawn on their success in filling executive, professional, and managerial jobs. The relative hospitality of western cities can be measured by the high proportion of such jobs held by women. Among large metropolitan areas nationwide in 1980, the proportion ranged from 23 percent in Scranton to 38 percent in Washington, D.C. The West had only one metropolitan area under 30 percent, with especially strong opportunities in San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Sacramento, and Honolulu. Statewide census data show that the West is also receptive to women entrepreneurs as measured by the ratio of women-owned businesses to population.

One consequence of this openness to the full range of talents and ideas is that western cities as a group have strong records on issues of physical livability. Many of them have reinvested in mass transit systems. They also have begun to give serious if not always effective attention to land use planning. We can expect growth management and open space preservation to continue to dominate local political agendas into the new century.

To balance an optimistic evaluation of western cities as centers of policy innovation, however, it is necessary to remember that many of these well-governed cities have small minority populations. Large cities such as Portland and Seattle and smaller cities such as Billings and Boise have been at the far ends of northward migration tracks from the rural South, the Caribbean, and Latin America. As is also true in Minneapolis–St. Paul, it is relatively easy to generate civic consensus in homogeneous communities. During the war migrations of the 1940s, these cities were no better than any others at dealing fairly with African-American newcomers or Japanese-American exiles. Since


1980 many have had to face another rapid expansion of Hispanic, Asian, and black populations. It remains to be seen whether official welcomes for increased diversity manage to fend off the social divisions that threaten to paralyze many cities in all parts of the nation.

We can gain a clear idea of the spatial and demographic character of the metropolitan West in the early twenty-first century if we understand the trends of the last two decades. As the third urban revolution continues to work itself through in the Far West, perhaps the biggest challenge for westerners will be to "think urban."

Tensions between urban realities and rural imagery are reflected in western literature. Regional novelists choose their contemporary protagonists from ranchers, farmers, loggers, rodeo riders, and river rafters. Their topics are Native Americans, nature, and life in the land of wind and storm. Indeed, the importance of cities as inspiration for western writers is obscured by the tendency to recognize as "western" only those artists who deal with small towns and open landscapes. Wallace Stegner and Ivan Doig are "western" writers but Maxine Hong Kingston is an ethnic or feminist writer. Robert Stone, Joan Didion, and Thomas Pynchon are "mainstream."

Literary histories remember Walter Van Tilburg Clark's stories about nineteenth-century westerners far more often than his novel about twentieth-century Reno.15

The same contrast is summarized by the public response to two painters who came to the Southwest as outsiders and remained to be captivated by the clarity of southwestern light. Englishman David Hockney's reaction to Los Angeles in the 1960s was a series of stunning depictions of lawn sprinklers, high-rise buildings, and swimming pools. The surfaces glare and stare back at the viewer in the "Technicolor daylight" of California. The clear light of New Mexico similarly drew easterner Georgia O'Keeffe to paint and repaint the sun-bleached relics of the desert. The international art world has recognized and applauded Hockney's urban and suburban imagery. The middlebrow public in the United States has adopted O'Keeffe's traditionally regional subject as a national icon. As with literature, Americans prefer to neglect the urban West and to admire what they know to be comfortably western.

As these examples suggest, the myth of open spaces has proved extraordinarily persistent. One of our jobs as historians will be to interpret not only the facts but the feel of the West as an urbanized region that is about to enter a new century.

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