

The Civilization of Regionalism

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One of the most significant recent phenomena in U.S. metropolitan areas is the key role in regional governance and policymaking being played by the nongovernmental sectors. Private businesses, civic groups, nonprofit associations, universities, voluntary organizations, and other nongovernmental players, which are collectively referred to as civil society, are active participants and often de facto policymakers in metropolitan regions.

This paper explores nongovernmental involvement in regional affairs, a phenomenon I call the *civilization of regionalism* (hereafter, without italics, civilization of regionalism). The exploration focuses on U.S. metropolitan regions because strong market-oriented traditions and weak region-level public sectors make U.S. metropolitan areas especially conducive to the civilization of regionalism. Regionalism in this context encompasses three types: (1) delivery of services at the regional or subregional (but supramunicipal) scale, (2) development and implementation of strategies for regional systems, such as economic development, infrastructure planning, intergovernmental fiscal policy, regional promotion, and poverty alleviation, and (3) establishment and operation of processes for deliberation of issues of regionwide significance.

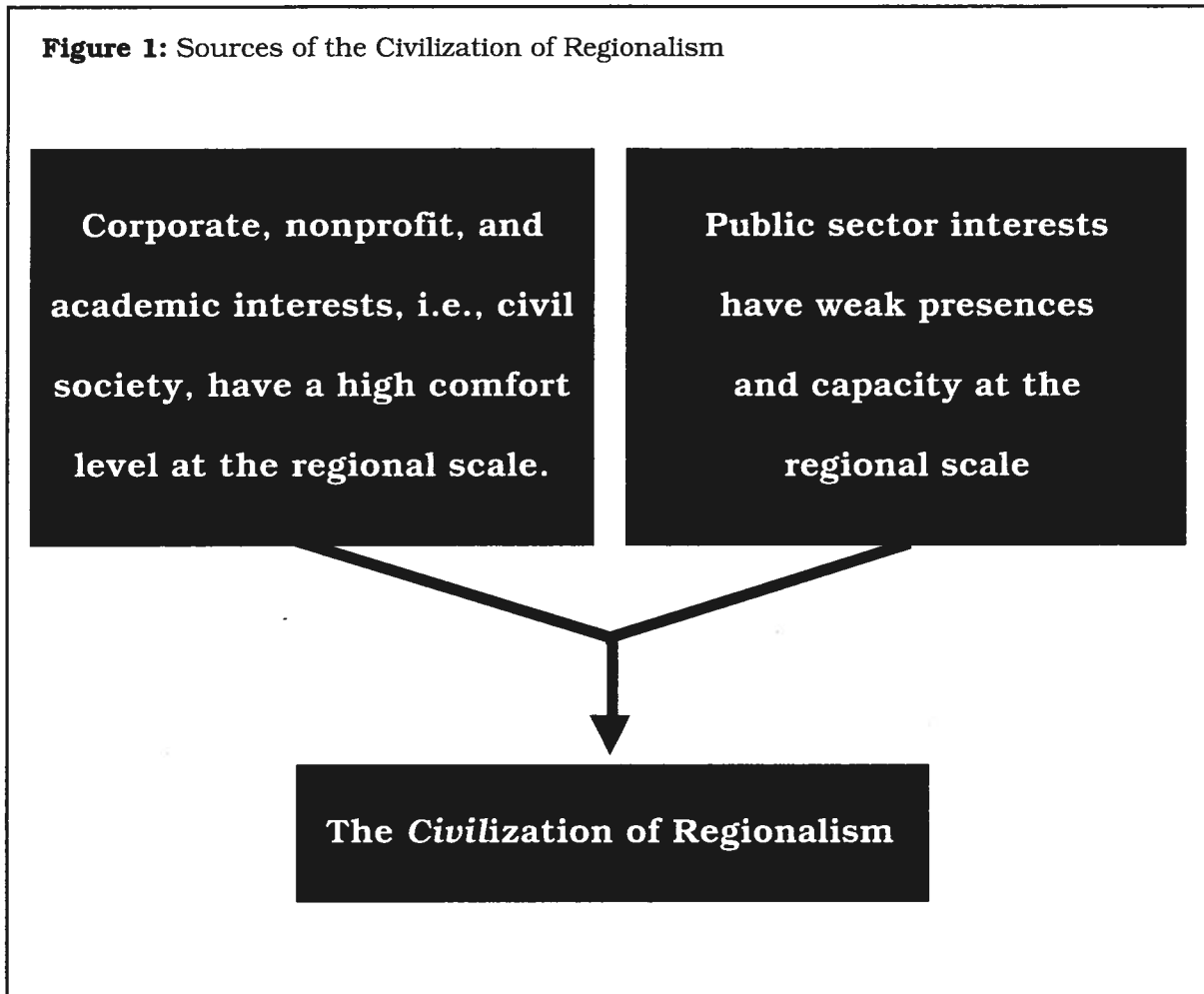
The Argument

The civilization of regionalism derives from two conditions common to most U.S.

metropolitan areas (Figure 1).

The first is that civil society, namely private corporations, nonprofit agencies, universities, civic organizations, the religious community, citizens groups, and other nongovernmental interests, tends to have a high level of comfort and activity at the regional scale. Private enterprises, including retailers, insurance companies, real estate developers, newspaper publishers, law firms, and entertainment corporations, typically buy and sell their goods and services throughout and beyond a metropolitan region. Nonprofit agencies likewise use the entire metropolis as a source of clients and donors and the site of program implementation. Metropolitan-based universities often take an active interest in their surrounding region, which serves as both a scholarly laboratory and home to students and community patrons of university activities. Although some citizen-based organizations confine their membership and efforts to the territory within municipal or submunicipal boundaries, many taxpayer groups, visioning committees, organized religious groups, and other civic interests cast a wide net around a metropolitan region. In short, the economic and social canvas of civil society extends far beyond local political borders.

The second condition fueling the civilization of regionalism is that regions, especially those in the United States, have notoriously weak public sectors. Regional councils of governments struggle to weather local political feuds and federal funding



cutbacks, both of which can erode councils' significance beyond nominal advisory capacity (Atkins and Wilson-Gentry 1992). Regionwide special-purpose governments have increased in number over the past few decades, but only a relative handful of these are multifunctional (Foster 1997, 13). Even David Rusk's (1993, 89, 95) generous definition of a metropolitan government as a jurisdiction that contains 60 percent or more of an area's population yields only 48 out of 320 U.S. metropolitan areas with claim to a metropolitan government and, thus, to a potentially stronger regional public sector presence.

The combination of region-oriented non-governmental interests and weak or absent

regional polities increases the impact of the nonpublic sector in metropolitan areas. Whether by default or design, nongovernmental interests are often at center stage when significant decisions about economic, cultural, and policy affairs in metropolitan regions get made. The impact and potential long-term influences of these groups, while largely unclear, have not gone unnoticed. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1995, 174) noted recently about private coalitions in metropolitan areas:

These groups can have greater organizational continuity than political regimes, their leaders can have greater longevity in their positions than elected officials, they can mobilize substantial resources or talent, and their activities are not confined to city limits.

The civilization of regionalism might garner relatively little attention were it not for the renewed salience of regions themselves. Observers increasingly tout regions as the most logical, viable, and competitive economic and political units in a globalized, nation-stateless world (Ohmae 1995; Gardner 1992). Although what constitutes a region varies (referring to transnational, subnational, and substate territories, for example), a common thread is that a region transcends political borders to encompass less precisely defined territories of social and economic interdependence. Newly conceived and packaged regions like the European Meso, the Appalachian Piedmont, and the Pacific Northwest's Cascadia, to name several, represent themselves to tourists, potential investors, and residents as a single common market and sociocultural unit.

Some observers, notably Jane Jacobs (1984) and Neal Peirce (1993), assert that metropolitan-scale regions—modern-day city-states—are the essential unit of production for economic competitiveness. Metropolitan areas that adopt deliberate economic, infrastructure, and cultural strategies, as have Barcelona, Singapore, Lyons, and Seoul, are allegedly best-positioned to capitalize on emerging information technologies, sociopolitical shifts, fiscal realities, and the uncertain future of the 21st century (Peirce 1993). Recent analyses by Anthony Downs (1994) at The Brookings Institution and Robert D. Yaro and Tony Hiss (1996) at the Regional Plan Association conclude that regions that fail to establish policy and programs at the metropolitan scale are destined to suffer the land use, environmental, social, and fiscal impacts of uncoordinated planning and development decisions. Even analysts who argue that the presence of multiple local jurisdictions best positions regions for effective governance advocate a regionwide scale, if not a government, for certain services and actions (for

example, Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations 1987).

Reinforcing the significance of metropolitan regions in the United States are the competing pendula of federal and state program devolution, on the one hand, and local taxpayer pressure for streamlined government, on the other. Federal and state interests see metropolitan regionalism as a means for shedding services and program responsibility. Local interests, including some local public officials (Weissman 1994; Lemov 1993), see metropolitan regionalism as a means to a more globally competitive economy relatively free of service duplications, bureaucratic inefficiency, and gaps between resource-poor and resource-rich jurisdictions (Kresl and Gappert 1995). Local, state, and federal interests thus find common ground in the utility of the metropolitan region for planning, policy, and service delivery.

Despite large popular and scholarly literatures on private, and to a lesser extent nonprofit and university, involvement in metropolitan affairs, what we know about the nature, extent, and impact of civil society in regions is surprisingly modest. Important questions remain about the who, what, how, why, and, most critically, the "so what" of the civilization of regionalism.

Twelve Dimensions of the Civilization of Regionalism

Review of the historical and current experience of the civilization of regionalism suggests 12 dimensions with implications for today's metropolitan regions.

1. Civil society's longstanding interest. Most fundamental, history provides ample evidence of civil society's longstanding interest in and advocacy of strong metropolitan regions. Industrialists, entrepreneurs, civic boosters, editorial boards, academic researchers, and social elites have

carried the banner and weight of the regional government movement in the United States for well over a century (Teaford 1979).

2. Multiple voices among nongovernmental interests. Nonetheless, nongovernmental interests do not speak as one in promotion of regionalism, particularly regional government. The dividing line tends to be between those whose business or civic activities have a regional or larger orientation and those whose activities are primarily local (Olin 1991). These divisions sharpened with the accelerated decentralization of people and jobs from city to suburbs in the 1920s and 1930s.

Suburbanization created a class of “metropolitan schizophrenics” (Teaford 1979, 114), business and social elites who worked and shopped downtown, belonged to the city chamber of commerce, and frequented city clubs, but who lived, worshipped, and sent their children to schools in suburban areas. For metropolitan schizophrenics and others with property in both the city and suburbs, decentralization reinforced the wisdom of regionwide government to safeguard their interests. As decentralization proceeded and suburban jurisdictions became more diversified and self-sufficient in employment and services, however, antiregional sentiment increased, particularly for members of civil society whose work, residential, entertainment, government, and service needs were satisfied locally.

3. Multiple goals for regional governance. Third, nongovernmental champions of regionalism are driven by multiple, sometimes incompatible, goals. Progressive-era reformers sought regional government to achieve service economy and efficiency, streamline government, and professionalize administration, the hallmarks of reform (Anderson 1925). Ensuing generations of proregional civil advocates viewed regional government variously as a means to narrow interjurisdictional disparities, lower taxes,

strip power from local elected officials, dilute the voting and political power of geographically concentrated minority groups, better manage regional growth, and secure the prestige, funding capacity, and economic growth potential of a metropolitanwide polity.

As a consequence, civil backers of regionalism are often strange bedfellows: grassroots environmentalists, antitax lobbyists, and corporate elites; liberal good government proponents and politically motivated antiminority interests; and progrowth and antigrowth interests.

4. Government-nongovernment tensions. Fourth, because public officials tend to be reluctant regionalists, civil society’s support of regional government may imperil sound government-nongovernment relations. Government-nongovernment tensions play out through unfriendly business regulations, antigovernment editorials, and strained public-private-nonprofit partnerships. Government-nongovernment animosity may thwart serious intersectoral deliberation of issues of regional significance. Perhaps most damaging, civic leaders come to view government as an obstacle to progress, while public sector leaders come to view corporate and social elites as opponents of local autonomy and democracy.

5. Voter aversion to regional government. Fifth, for all their prominence, the large majority of civic-backed campaigns for regional government have been and continue to be defeated by voters (Dodge 1996). Voters’ often intense distaste for consolidations, annexations, metropolitan federations, service regionalization, and other forms of regionalism intensifies uneasy public-nonpublic relations. Popular hostility to regionalism has many origins, including resistance to racial and class integration, interjurisdictional rivalries, fear of higher taxes, preference for the local control that small, sovereign government permits, and,

for many suburban voters, anticity sentiment.

The much-celebrated regional consolidations of the 1950s through 1960s in Toronto, Nashville, Miami, Jacksonville, Lexington, and Indianapolis are judged by many commentators as idiosyncratic and ultimately not entirely regionalizing (for example, Blomquist and Parks 1995; Marando 1979). More the rule are the reform experiences of Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Cleveland, Tampa, and other metropolitan areas with repeated and unsuccessful attempts at regional restructuring (Teaford 1979; Lyons 1977, 7-8). In the end, the rarity of strong regional government means that civil society receives virtually no policy direction—nor competition—from the public sector on matters of regional significance.

6. Dynamics of multicultural regionalism. Sixth, black immigration into and white emigration out of central cities meant that issues of metropolitan regionalism inevitably raised issues of race. Historically, black political leaders with geographically concentrated constituencies were skeptical of regional reforms that erased jurisdiction boundaries, efforts viewed as attempts by white suburbanites to dilute growing city-based black political power (Piven and Cloward 1967). Regionalism, race, and ethnicity remain similarly intertwined today in many metropolitan regions, with sometimes stark dividing lines between proponents of integrationist regional strategies, on the one hand, and political leaders who see racially and ethnically concentrated communities as the key to developing minority leadership through elections, appointments, and hires, on the other (Orfield 1997, 81-83).

7. Linking regionalism to downtown revitalization. A seventh dimension of the civilization of regionalism is that corporate and civic interests tend to link regionalism with downtown revitalization. For many

nongovernmental leaders, a struggling central city is a regional concern. Regionalists have been inspired by Pittsburgh's stunningly successful, private-sector Allegheny Conference on Community Development, which pooled corporate wits and resources to stabilize that city's vital signs (Lubove 1996). Corporate elites in metropolitan areas nationwide have similarly organized themselves to respond to challenges of post-war urban development (Teaford 1990, 122-31).

Although the top priority of most corporate groups is often downtown renewal, the broader regional intentions and outlook of these groups were and remain revealed by their names: the Greater Baltimore Committee (described in pages 41-47 of this issue), New Boston Committee and Greater Boston Economic Study Committee, Greater Philadelphia Movement (later Partnership), and Greater Milwaukee Committee, to name several. In practice, the coupling of downtown renewal with regionalism has propelled corporate America into leadership roles in both causes.

8. Innovation from nongovernmental players. Much current innovation in regional governance remains the province of nongovernmental players (Dodge 1996, 260-306). For example, strong corporate backing facilitated Portland's elected, multicounty, multipurpose Metro and its appointed counterpart in Seattle (Morrill 1990). Business leaders and progrowth groups in Cleveland (Shatten), Miami (Kanter 1995), and Pittsburgh (Lubove 1996), among others, play central roles in establishing and implementing regional economic development policy. In the St. Louis area, Confluence St. Louis, a 1,100-member, preregional civic group, spearheaded analysis and advocacy of local government consolidation (Elliott 1989). In the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut metropolitan area the private Regional Plan Association re-

cently released its third comprehensive regional plan for the area (Yaro and Hiss 1996). Although legislative proposals subsequently stalled in Sacramento, efforts to regionalize planning in the San Francisco Bay Area were sustained by business and nonprofit activists including the Bay Area Council, Santa Clara County Manufacturing Group, the League of Women Voters of the Bay Area, and the Greenbelt Alliance, an environmental organization (Jones and Rothblatt 1993, 414-21). Citizen-initiated regional organizations, notably citizens leagues in Cleveland, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Seattle-King County, are prime educators and activists for regional awareness and change (Dodge 1996, 270-74). (For information on the Minneapolis-St. Paul Citizens League see pages 13-20 in this issue.)

Academic institutions are often key providers of resources, analysis, and administrative legwork for regionalism. Regional reform in the Albany Metropolitan Area originated in a collaboration between the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government at the State University of New York at Albany and leaders of the *Albany Times Union*, the region's major newspaper (State Commission on the Capital Region 1996). A similar academic-media partnership exists in the eight-county, bistate Philadelphia region where the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Greater Philadelphia recently teamed with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to sponsor "The Year of the Region," a proregional public awareness campaign (Center for Greater Philadelphia 1994). Sponsorship of the Center's March 1996 conference for southeastern Pennsylvania's 239 municipalities, "Bridging Boundaries without Losing Local Control," came from two private corporations, PECO Energy and Bell Atlantic-Pennsylvania; the keynote address was given by the chief executive of suburban-based Unisys Corporation (Center for Greater Philadelphia 1996).

The final four dimensions relate to new or newly-revealed conditions for the civilization of regionalism in the 1990s.

9. Widening fiscal stress. Local governments in metropolitan regions increasingly face fiscal stress, a condition that has spread beyond long-suffering central cities to traditionally flush suburban jurisdictions (Orfield 1997). The implications of fiscal crisis for regionalism are ambiguous. On the one hand, fiscal pressure fosters development of intermunicipal service agreements and cost-cutting collaborations. On the other hand, fiscal stress may heighten interlocal competition for residents and businesses, which may be counterproductive on a regional level. High taxes have long been a rallying cry for nongovernmental interests who believe centralized service delivery and control of regional transportation, housing, land use, and other systems cost less than decentralized approaches. Although much empirical evidence challenges that belief (see, for example, Boyne 1992), if regionalization is *perceived* to yield cost savings, then civil sector support for it is likely to persist.

10. Growth of market-oriented solutions. The second dimension of contemporary regionalism is the resurgence of market-oriented solutions to policy problems. The decentralized federalism of the Reagan and Bush administrations, continued for the most part under the Clinton administration, has kindled antiregulatory, antigovernment sentiment. Market-oriented approaches, including user-fee-financing and vouchers, have gained credence as useful approaches to economic and social issues. At the local level, this shift means pressure on local governments to run themselves like businesses, with attendant calls for downsizing, privatization, mergers, and consolidations.

11. Global competitiveness and regionalism. More so than in the past, the

rhetoric of regionalism is that regionalism is critical to boosting an area's competitiveness in the global economy (for example, National League of Cities 1993; Peirce 1993; Hershberg 1994; but see Naisbitt 1994). Conventional wisdom holds that a region's ability to compete globally depends on assets such as a trained labor force, efficient systems of infrastructure and transportation, an attractive, healthy environment, and strong regional governance. To many, these needs imply establishment of formalized channels, if not a regional government, for deliberating policies of regional significance.

Of concern to some is that globalism may alter the nature of private sector involvement in civic affairs by reducing the interest and availability of corporate leaders to participate in local issues. For example, Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1995, 175) notes that globally focused managers may direct corporate support to national and international organizations, rather than to the local symphony or community chest. This may sharpen the division between locally focused and globally connected corporate and civic leaders on issues of regional governance.

12. Importance of social capital. Finally, Robert Putnam's (1993) multiyear analysis of regional government in Italy affirms the importance of social capital, which, like land, labor, and physical capital, is a factor of production essential to effective regional performance. Social capital refers to the stores of norms and trust, civic involvement, and sharing of information and resources that serve as sinews for cooperation and common vision within a region. As Swanstrom and Wright (1996) note, social capital may engender committed capital, that is, the long-term commitment to a place that is essential for building effective partnerships and regional alliances (see also Swanstrom 1996). This newly recognized potential for strengthening regional governance effectiveness by strengthening civic

culture encourages regional policymakers to develop citizen participation, leadership capacity, regional information networks, and intersectoral relations.

A Research Agenda

These twelve dimensions provide the broad outlines of the civilization of regionalism. Yet there are numerous questions about the phenomenon's status and implications still to be answered. In particular:

- What is the current nature and extent of private, nonprofit, university, and citizen involvement in regional service delivery and policy making in metropolitan areas? Which corporate, civic, and academic institutions participate in regional affairs and why? What factors influence why one entity intervenes in regional affairs and governance while another does not? How unified is the nongovernmental sector in purpose, priorities, and activities within regions?
- Do nongovernmental players make regional policy and, if so, how? How do nongovernmental interests collaborate with one another and with public entities on regional issues? What accounts for why some civil sectors are more successful in achieving regional outcomes than others? How does nongovernmental involvement differ in regions that differ in size, growth rates, and local government arrangements?
- Does the civilization of regionalism occur by default? By design? How do corporate, civic, and academic players view the opportunity to shape or intervene in regional policy? To what extent do civil interest groups view regional policy making as a goal? To what extent as a burden?
- What are the consequences of the civilization of regionalism? How do we measure and test the implications of nongov-

ernmental sector performance and policymaking in regions? What are the implications for public participation and democracy of regional policy making by nongovernmental players? How, if at all, do regions with varying degrees of nongovernmental involvement in regionalism differ in development capacity, growth rates, spending patterns, policy making effectiveness, and other barometers of regional performance?

I suggest that answering such questions requires three types of research: 1) incorporating new perspectives from four neglected but relevant bodies of work; 2) developing innovative and useful quantitative measures of civic regionalism; and 3) conducting comparative survey research and case studies of nongovernmental involvement in metropolitan regions.

Four Literatures

Bringing together four often overlooked but relevant bodies of work is a first step in broadening understanding of the civilization of regionalism.

1. Metropolitan ecology literature. The first literature is the remarkably perceptive, if dusty, work of metropolitan ecologists, the interdisciplinary group of scholars and public officials who analyzed metropolitan change in the 1950s and 1960s. Through close observation of the players and processes in metropolitan regions from San Francisco to Syracuse, metropolitan ecologists, whose ranks included Scott Greer, Robert C. Wood, Norton E. Long, York Willbern, and Paul Ylvisaker, analyzed the intricate interplay of people and factors influencing and being influenced by metropolitan political structure (for example, Wood 1959; Martin 1963; Willbern 1961; Williams et al. 1965; for a useful collection of excerpts, see Danielson 1966).

2. Contemporary metropolitan case studies. The second useful literature updates the metropolitan analyses of the 1950s and 1960s with contemporary case studies on regional governance and policy making. There are three types of relevant cases: (1) studies of governance in North American metropolitan areas (for example, Sancton 1994; Rothblatt and Sancton 1993; Savitch and Vogel 1996); (2) historical and contemporary studies of private and civic involvement in metropolitan regions, including Milwaukee (Orum 1995), Houston (Feagin 1988), Cleveland (Keating, Krumholz, and Perry 1995); Swanstrom 1996), and Atlanta (Stone 1989); and (3) studies of metropolitan regions outside North America, for example those found in volumes by L. J. Sharpe (1993, 1995) and I. M. Barlow (1991).

3. Nongovernmental literature. The third relevant literature examines the perceptions, roles, and behaviors of the corporate, nonprofit, and higher education sectors in metropolitan regions. Of special interest are corporate views of concepts with parallels to public sector governance arrangements, such as competition, mergers, civilization, downsizing, and models of private-sector organization. Good starting points for these topics are popular business periodicals, such as *Harvard Business Review*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, and *Business Week*, and works on corporate involvement in regional policy making (for example, Kanter 1995).

Also useful are works on nonprofits that shed light on nonprofit involvement in and attitudes toward local government, the institutional arrangement of nonprofits in metropolitan regions, and nonprofit decision making (Marsh 1995; Reiner and Wolpert 1981; Salamon 1987; Jenkins 1987). Analyses of higher education institutions in metropolitan regions can reveal the motivations for regional involvement, the nature of uni-

versity intervention in regional policy, and case studies of town-gown and corporate-gown relations, such as those found in the journal *Metropolitan Universities* and in works by Cisneros (1995), the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (1982), and Nash, Waldorf, and Price (1973).

4. International literature on civil society. The final key literature sheds light on the emergence and activities of civil society in nations outside the United States. Much of this literature examines nations with traditionally strong central states and weak nonstate involvement in public affairs, many of which are trying on democracy and actively developing a middle layer of private and nonprofit organizations between individuals and the central government. Useful starting points are the collection of papers edited by Hall (1995) and volumes by Norton (1996), Harbeson, Rothchild, and Chazan (1994); and Fish (1995).

Measures of Civic Regionalism

The second research thrust focuses on the methodology of the civilization of regionalism. One of the hallmarks of U.S. metropolitan regions is the wide variation they exhibit in political structure. Unfortunately, commonly used measures of political structure, for example the number of governments per capita, are inadequate for assessing the more complex concepts of civic regionalism and regional governance.

Functional, innovative, and sophisticated measures of the civilization of regionalism and regional governance performance are essential to progress in metropolitan analysis. Particularly needed are measures that gauge civic culture, the structure of within-sector and between-sector ties, social capital, and the capacity of a region to respond to opportunities and crises (Wallis 1994). Such measures provide a quantitative basis for describing, comparing and

evaluating different systems of regional governance. Development of these measures can draw upon Putnam's (1993) work on the performance of regional governments in Italy and analyses by the National Civic League (1993) to gauge civic culture and regional capacity. Quantitative measures of civic regionalism are useful as both a phenomenon to be explained—for example, what accounts for why one region has greater civic regionalism than another?—and as an explanatory factor in explaining other phenomena—for example, do places with greater civic regionalism have greater economic performance?

Empirical Investigations: Comparative Survey Analysis and Case Studies

The third research direction is comparative survey analysis of nongovernmental institutions and case studies of selected metropolitan regions. Large-scale surveys of nongovernmental institutions in various categories (small businesses, law firms, financial institutions, real estate-property development firms, corporate retailers, manufacturing-industrial firms, four-year colleges and universities, Leagues of Women Voters, citizen taxpayer groups, and United Way Agencies, for example), would yield data on the scope of operations, the nature of involvement in regional policy making, the nature of collaborations with government and nongovernment groups in the area, and beliefs and attitudes about issues of regional governance.

Supplementing comparative survey research would be detailed case studies of the civilization of regionalism in U.S. metropolitan areas. Case studies would investigate the attitudes and behaviors of private, nonprofit, civic, and academic institutions in regional governance. The range of cases would cover metropolitan regions with var-

ied characters of civic regionalism, population size, growth rates, and levels of degree of political integration.

A Final Word

In the absence of a region-scale, public-sector entity in many U.S. metropolitan areas, nongovernmental groups are often in a position to guide deliberations and decisions on issues of regionwide significance. We know too little to judge the processes and outcomes of this phenomenon. As regions become the units of analysis for political, fiscal, and social phenomena, the need increases to better understand the nature, nuances, and implications of the civilization of regionalism. ■

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