

Toward a 21st Century Regionalism

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The art and practice of regionalism—in America, across the globe—has developed with startling rapidity in the last decade of the 20th century.

Just 20 years ago regionalism was narrowly conceived, narrowly discussed, and minimally influential. It related almost exclusively to *governments*—how the various municipal and county units of a single region could better coordinate their efforts (especially their use of federal aid), or, in isolated cases, actually consolidate into a single metropolitan government on the model of a Nashville, Jacksonville, or Indianapolis.

Today, both the concept and practice of regionalism have escaped those narrow bonds. Today's regionalism is economic, organic, social, strategic. It reflects directly the pressures for increased efficiency, for cohesion and competitive excellence, that have been forced on us so sharply by the new global economy. What the old regionalism could not do for metropolitan politics—wield authority—the new regionalism promises to deliver through alliances and new forms of intraregional collaboration.

Indeed, this new regionalism could do for politics what the silicon chip did for electronic communications—provide a transformative impact. When people begin to grasp its breadth and power, a whole new landscape of possibilities emerges.

One example: The geopolitical model of recent centuries, most recently represented by the Cold War, described coalitions of sov-

ereign nation states in a military balance of power. That model was shattered, we believe irrevocably, by the fall of the Berlin Wall and disintegration of the Soviet Union. Across the world, nation states are less omnipotent; many are crumbling. From the hierarchical, governmental, industrial, military models of the 20th century, we are hurtling toward a world of globalized, interactive markets and the totally networked model represented by rapid telecommunications and the Internet.

This new order is tailor made for regions. But it also demands more of regions—or as we chose to call them in our 1993 book, *Citistates*—than anyone even imagined in times past. They are challenged to think and act strategically, very much on their own, in a world of weakened central governments, evaporating tariffs, and \$2 trillion-plus a day in world currency exchange. They have been freed to compete and cooperate with counterpart regions, across nation-state lines, across continents, indeed with counterpart regions anywhere on the globe. But if they ignore their challenges, their potentials, their needed reforms, they can slip and decline.

There remain huge barriers to governmental coordination within metropolitan regions—local municipal pride, parochialism, racism, city-suburban mistrust. Thus the need for creative minds to search out and invent myriad ways in which citistates can “get their act together” anyway.

This special issue of *The Regionalist* is intended to draw together examples of the

best regionalist thinking in America today. The charge to each respondent was to identify *one idea* or bold initiative he or she thought might drive forward the civic cohesion and overall success of America's metropolitan regions.

The short essays which follow are the responses we received.

If nothing else, they prove that regionalism in today's America is multi-faceted, exploratory, creative, cutting-edge stuff.

New Paradigm

Consider the lead essay in the group, from Dan Kemmis, former mayor of Missoula, the most sensitive thinker about community and human society writing in the Mountain West today. Kemmis makes it clear that we're past the old paradigm—the mechanistic model of Newtonian physics, the intellectual faith of the men who wrote our Constitution, a world of rational checks and balances and predictable effects, the progenitor idea of the Machine Age. Instead, Kemmis invites us to look at complexity theory, and how closely it ties to a conception of modern world regions as *organic*. This more biological model sees each level defined not by borders and rules but natural organic development—from the neighborhood to citistate to bioregion to continent to the entire globe.

In that spirit, incidentally, new and unconventional agglomerations—for example the Cascadia grouping of citistates and their allied territory, stretched along the Portland-Vancouver corridor—suddenly make sense.

And because regions *are* organic, material of the real world, what can or can't be accomplished by regions *matters* profoundly. Kemmis sets the discussion field for the essays which follow by arguing that “by paying attention to regions—by giving them authority, giving them ‘running room,’ we put our money where the greatest vitality,

the greatest inherent adaptive power exists.”

William Barnes and Larry Ledebur assert that the *real* economies of our time are not the nation states on which so many statistical tables and discussion rest, but rather the hundreds of local regions that operate as the basic, functional economic units of our time. If we can break from the “prevailing nationalist economic paradigm,” we can see what economic regions really look like—free-standing, contiguous, some crossing state or international boundaries, some based on single industrial clusters, others on varied bases, many ready to strike agreements among themselves.

Smart local governments will let the other chief stakeholders in the door to form a regional economic commons, able to plan and act strategically. States and the federal government, instead of ignoring or combating regionalism, should endorse it, work with the *de facto* economic regions, for the benefit of all.

All of this is pretty heady stuff, suggesting quite radical transformation in approaches—especially for governments, which usually seem more apt than anyone to be caught in the old paradigm.

But it is only the start of fresh thinking to be found in these essays.

Democratize Development

Take the suggestion of Camille Cates Barnett (in a piece written shortly before she became chief management officer of Washington, D.C.) to use computerized virtual reality tools to help make today's popular cause of sustainable development a reality for metropolitan regions. With graphic depiction covering broad and targeted areas, modeling that lets viewers play “what if” games, the capacity to track the impact of major roads or other infrastructure projects, this technology could change the name of development in citistate regions.

Barnett focuses in her piece also on the issue of civic engagement. One can easily imagine, as leaders in regions across America learn the virtual reality tools, that citizens and other stakeholders can indeed be, for the first time, engaged in broad discussions of urban design and planning choices. Physical development decisions no longer need be left to "them." The potential is there to *democratize development* in America.

And how exquisite the timing. David Rusk argues, in his essay, that growth management is rapidly emerging as the lead regional issue for the next decade. No longer are advocates confined to a few environmentalists and their allies. In a growing number of regions, some of the most prominent local leaders have discerned and are warning that classic American suburban development, each *outward* ring of growth feeding on the ones before it, condemns great areas of regions, from inner cities out, to stagnation and decline.

Even the fast-growing affluent suburbs lose in the long run. New coalitions are emerging to fight the trend: church groups, enlightened business leaders, mayors of inner-ring suburbs, farmland preservationists. Fighting the old trends will require great political will—but also the kind of ingenious new tools outlined in Barnett's essay.

The new global, information-based economy has a strong regional aspect that most people have ignored, argue Doug Henton, John Melville, and Kim Walesh of the Silicon Valley firm of Collaborative Economics. All the talk about cyberspace, they note, misses the point that creative work still occurs primarily in teams of people who live and work together in close proximity. High value enterprises are drawn to a "milieu of innovation." And they are drawn to areas with high quality of life, which means that areas like Silicon Valley itself must now

strive for growth management, for compact and attractive urban centers, on the model of Portland, Oregon.

A bit to our disappointment, none of the authors took up the issue of how our newest technology—the Internet—can be used to define the virtual region—the citistate—that politics doesn't recognize. With this new technology, there's the opportunity to show, across a whole metro region, critical indicators of population, economic activity, education, wealth and poverty, and the environment. The entire region—from corporate headquarters to local governments, universities, schools, the media—could be invited to follow the indicators, see where the region stands.

Can-do Image

But Seth Fearey, author of the following essay, has earlier made the point that despite the global aspects of Internet access: "Geography is still vital. Most of our interactions are with people in a 20- to 50-mile radius." Cities, as Fearey has noted, are too small to suffice as full-purpose electronic platforms. States are too large, too distant from the focus of local needs. Regions or citistates are the right size.

In his article here, Fearey shows how his region—Silicon Valley—has been able, notwithstanding high costs, to streamline the process of permitting and building code approvals for industries. Processing times have been reduced from months to weeks or from weeks to as little as a few hours. Multiple governments have been persuaded to make the streamlining changes, once they could see that no major public interest was imperiled, and how significant the potential economic development gains. Fearey notes too how the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) is helping spread word of the smart permitting processes to the remainder of the 100 cities and nine counties of the

San Francisco Bay Area. (ABAG has in fact helped dozens of local communities establish their own Internet presence, in some cases with real sophistication.)

Strong moves—like Silicon Valley’s victory over permitting red tape—help to establish a can-do image that undergirds a region’s capacity to hold or attract firms. But there are other initiatives regions can undertake to strengthen their competitive position in the new global economy. None is more critical, writes Theodore Hershberg, than human development—assuring a labor force with the problem-solving skills to cope in the demanding 21st century economy. The New Standards in Education project, sponsored by Hershberg’s Center for Greater Philadelphia at the University of Pennsylvania, is persuading a growing number of Philadelphia-area school districts to introduce rigorous standards-based school reforms. (The effort ingeniously walks around the political arguments of whether there should be federal- or state-imposed standards, by building consensus for standards from the bottom up.)

Allies are vital in projects like the standards-based school reforms. Hershberg reports on how 18 chambers of commerce have joined the coalition, and on a major outreach being made to AARP chapters in Southeastern Pennsylvania to join a “legacy” project—a strong enough standards-based education system to assure today’s students the skills they need to enjoy the stable, middle-class life with which the AARP members grew up and prospered.

These are in fact just examples of how U.S. regions are fast inventing ways to undergird their competitiveness—and with a lot more sophistication than today’s much-publicized rush to build multi-hundred million dollar sports stadia. Another case in point: the intercity study missions sponsored by the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce and Trade Development Alliance

of Greater Seattle. William Stafford, impresario of the Seattle operations, tells the secret here. As we’d paraphrase him:

Pack a cross-section of a region’s government, business, non-profit leaders into a jet airplane and send them winging across the nation or the world to see how another region tackles *its* problems. Don’t just visit U.S. cities, instead look abroad as Seattle has, with trips in the 1990s to Rotterdam-Amsterdam, Japan’s Kansai region, London, Hong Kong, Singapore. Why? Local leadership gets to view the home region from thousands of miles away and through the eyes of other cultures. Parochial intraregional rivalries fade away. The common fate of the entire economic region comes into focus: “We sink or swim together.” Everyone gets to recognize that the critical brand name of the region is the central city. The trips lay the groundwork for regional cooperation and planning, and are seen as a subtle underpinning of the Seattle area’s overall economic success.

Home signals, to the region’s own population, are important too: witness the Atlanta region’s “211” dial-up system, a metrowide, first-in-the-nation effort to connect citizens, instantly, to community services. From specific human service referrals to volunteering opportunities, it’s all designed “to be there” at the 211 touch. The article by Mark O’Connell and Lori Warrens tells the story. Knowing such a system’s in place, all citizens are aware they’re surrounded by a caring society.

Fresh Insights

But citistate regions must also think and plan to create “win-win” scenarios for all their geographic areas, for all their class, racial, ethnic groups. The gospel of metropolitan interdependence needs to be told again and again, and with fresh new insights to penetrate varying audiences.

Henry Cisneros and Marc Weiss undertake just that job in their essay, underscoring how foolhardy it is to think—as we so

often have in America—that we can save the cities without their regions, or promote the regions without strong cities. Institutions ranging from universities to sports teams to charities to the media already think and act regionally. The secret clearly lies in finding ways to connect urban residents to metropolitan prosperity, and conversely showing how ongoing metropolitanwide prosperity demands strong urban centers that symbolize the region to the world and serve as centers of innovation and advanced services. The Cisneros-Weiss presentation alludes to the metropolitan economic initiative, centered on strong economic growth clusters shared by cities and suburbs, that Cisneros had begun to champion near the end of his tenure as secretary of the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The theme of mutual interdependence is defined in clear terms by Manuel Pastor, Jr., lead author of “Growing Together,” an analysis of the Los Angeles area’s social dynamics released last year. The central message: Regional economic leaders make a political error when they fail to reach out and engage community leaders in minority and low-income parts of the metropolis. They’re missing potentially valuable pools of labor. What’s more, an indifferent business or government attitude may trigger troublesome lawsuits brought by disadvantaged groups and neighborhoods that feel left out of “the plan.”

Conversely, Pastor argues, blacks, Latinos, and others concerned about urban poverty need to look to regions because that’s where the economic action has, and is, headed. They need to study and understand regionally-based business clusters, target them for job development and placement, demand a place at the regional decision-making tables.

Regional breakthroughs, argues Peter Katz, the founding director of the Congress for the New Urbanism, will never come until the arguments for regional planning and

cohesion are translated into terms that reflect day-to-day existence in the neighborhoods where people actually live. Neighborhoods that are induced to draw up comprehensive plans, which feel honored and respected within their regions, where the principles of mixed use, compactness, and good design and pedestrian value are stressed, will more likely yield citizens who can comprehend and agree to regional planning. Without “real” connections, Katz suggests, citizens will resist any sacrifice for regional coherence and the planning concepts of a Portland area will remain, for most American citistates, a “mirage.”

A National Role

But positive change is needed from the top, too—from Uncle Sam. An idea with rich potential, a “Water ISTEA,” is proposed here by U.S. Representative Earl Blumenauer of Oregon (perhaps the most vocal regionalist the Congress has ever seen). The idea would be to vest regions, as ISTEA does on the transportation side, with authority to create water resource plans that make sense, fit *their* needs and priorities. Multiple federal water policies and regulations would be rewritten into attempts at coherent regional water approaches.

Would such an approach avoid conflicts? Of course not. But the discussions would presumably be over *real* issues, with enough authority vested by Congress to make the process viable. There would be a chance of economy, better quality water, ecological and wildlife protections. Regulations could be linked to outcome-based devices. And, with appropriate provision for all stakeholders, ordinary citizens included, to be included from the start, there would be a way for a region’s own people to have a critical say in a vital area of their lives.

The referee functions of conflict resolution—especially when approaches of neigh-

boring regions clash—would have to be left with the federal and state governments. But one can only think that if Blumenauer's water ISTEA were to be instituted and succeed, other environmental and resource questions could be turned over to the regions of America as well. "Home rule" in America could start to take on a radically-expanded meaning.

Regional Comparisons

Two of the essays ask the tough question: How does a citistate evaluate, measure, gauge where it stands on multiple measures of well being? How does it compare against other regions, against the "state of the art" on any measure from economic vitality to cultural amenities? Janis Purdy describes the "Rating the Region" process she and her staff devised, with the help of BP America's corporate benchmarkers, for the Citizens League of Greater Cleveland. A major goal was to counteract the superficial indicators in published surveys that declare cities "best" in anything from livability to days of sunshine. In its process, the Citizens League set up a steering committee, held a public conference, surveyed 350 Cuyahoga County residents by phone and considered some 300 factors before boiling its survey down to 89 verifiable, relevant measures. Whenever possible, *outcomes*—not just dollars spent—were measured for the entire seven-county Cleveland region, and each measure compared to the performance of about two dozen other citistate regions (among them Detroit, Charlotte, Seattle, and St. Louis).

Now, writes Purdy, it's time to consider a national program of consistent regional standards, administered perhaps by the National Association of Regional Councils.

Picking up on parallel themes, Lyle Wray suggests that the art of performance management—clearly defining government missions and outcomes, linking budget to per-

formance, reporting results—be applied to governments across our regions. The goal setting *does* need to be shared with citizens, not left to government itself. Citizens, with appropriate training, can learn themselves how to evaluate the quality of a wide range of services, thus reinforcing an ethic of citizenship. And/or regions can go the direction set by Oregon Benchmarks or Minnesota Milestones, including thousands of citizens in identifying goals on every measure from teenage pregnancies to air quality.

One cannot read these papers without wondering, too, whether citizen or taxpayer leagues, or perhaps university departments, couldn't evaluate far more systematically the performance of individual governments within metropolitan regions—and then go beyond that with careful estimates of the potential savings if service consolidations were effected across the municipal lines.

Civic Entrepreneurs

But who—what kind of organization, institution, constellation of groups—can be counted on to mind the store, provide the civic energy for reform and innovation in our 21st century citistates? One candidate: the traditional citizens leagues, like Cleveland's or the Twin Cities'. In fact, the mid-1990s have witnessed the birth and rebirth of regional citizens leagues in communities as disparate as Oklahoma City and St. Louis, Charlotte and Indianapolis, Mobile (Alabama) and Cincinnati.

But there's a warning note about traditional approaches in Mary Walshok's essay. She reminds us that traditional economic power centers, the old "establishments," have faded in most city regions. *Governing* magazine publisher Peter Harkness has referred to communities' dilemma of the "absentocracy"—local firms bought out by national banks or retail or publishing

chains, leaving many communities adrift with a revolving door of in-and-out leadership.

So what's to come next? Walshok suggests regions need leadership groups which, unlike their historic predecessors, are permeable, flexible, and nonexclusive. Her example is the San Diego Dialogue. Founded in 1991, its organizational home is in the University of California-San Diego. University, community, and media "influentials" formed it. It focuses on cross-border issues of the emerging San Diego-Tijuana citistate, indeed serves as a cross-border forum for business, academia, and government and has even published a cross-border atlas. Check the San Diego Dialogue's list of study/research areas—from welfare-to-work to administering the border to assessing the binational region-state's ties to Asia—and you get some idea of the broad, exciting frontier opening up.

Traditional citizens leagues may succeed in the new environment, but only, one guesses, by developing more dynamic constituency bases.

John Parr's essay approaches the leadership question a bit differently, based in large part on his work with the Citizen Leadership in the 21st Century Project in 1997—a search, inspired and led by John W. Gardner, to identify the characteristics of progressive and innovative metropolitan areas. Parr's conclusion, drawn from communities spread from Chattanooga to Detroit to Portland, is that breakthroughs spring from "strategies that are more complex, more connective, and broader than ever."

On pages 73-75 the reader will find a summary of the aphorisms serving as guidelines for regional civic success—which emerged from the project, *Boundary Crossers: Community Leadership in a Global Age*, published by the Academy of Leadership Press at the University of Maryland.¹

The reader will find in Parr's essay a reference to the complexity and chaos theories introduced in Dan Kemmis' lead essay in this group. It's almost scary to hear that the complex systems of our world—America's metropolitan regions, for example—operate by necessity at the edge of chaos, constantly undergoing spontaneous self-organization. But we're also told there's a secret to succeeding at the edge of chaos: seeking potential connections, making them click. We can see it: civic success is occurring in communities where all manner of individuals, organizations, governments are collaborating in manifold ways.

A New Possibility

Thus John Parr's rather startling recommendation: that we create regional councils of everybody to bring the regional players together in an ongoing way. They'd check on what's happening, align fiscal and volunteer and civic forces, create the synergies we need to create the collaborations which are needed to make our wondrously complex regions work for us in our time.

It's not a cure-all solution, but not to be dismissed either. One gets the feeling that we have just begun to learn the complexities—and the possibilities—of regionalism in our time.

If these articles were to be repeated in another year (and we hope *The Regionalist* editors will make that decision) we'd include many more possibilities:

- the role of philanthropy and community foundations in making regions viable;
- regionwide parklands and trails as a new connective tissue;
- top-level religious leadership to urge compact, community-friendly development and discourage wasteful sprawl across our citistate regions;
- new and varied ways the federal government can foster regional coherence, and

more rational use of its own resources in the field;

- unusual partnerships—newspapers and Councils of Governments, for example—to create regional web pages, along the model now being tried in Oklahoma City.

The list could go on. And it will. Because regionalism, touching so many aspects of life in our communities, is and will be at the heart of how our society wrestles with the new century dawning around us. ■

Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson are co-founders of the Citistates Group, a network of journalists, speakers, and consultants who believe that successful metropolitan regions are today's key to economic competitiveness and sustainable communities. They have authored 14 "Peirce Reports" on metropolitan futures for newspapers across the U. S. Peirce, since 1975, has authored the United States' first-ever nationally syndicated column on

state, regional, and local affairs (distribution by the Washington Post Writers Group).

Curtis Johnson, during the 1980s, directed the Citizens League in Minneapolis-St. Paul. He then became senior policy adviser, and subsequently chief of staff to Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson. In 1995, he was appointed chairman of the Twin Cities' Metropolitan Council. In 1993, Peirce and Johnson co-authored, with John Hall, Citistates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World. In 1997, they co-authored Boundary Crossers: Community Leadership for a Global Age.

Note

1. The entire report is available online at <http://civicsource.org/KLFP/boundary.htm>. For printed copies of the report, send \$7.50 to the Academy of Leadership Press, University of Maryland, College Park, MD. 20742. The full case studies have also been put online; printed copies are \$15.