New geographies of hinterland

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Hinterland

Pronunciation: /ˈhintəland/

1. The remote areas of a country away from the coast or the banks of major rivers:
   the hinterland of southern Italy

2. The area around or beyond a major town or port:
   a market town serving its rich agricultural hinterland

3. An area lying beyond what is visible or known:
   the strange hinterland where life begins and ends

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, it was common practice for international development organisations such as the UN, the World Bank, USAID and the Ford Foundation to commission studies into what were then perceived as problems of the cities of the developing world. Western scholars participated actively in the preparation of reports by these institutions as well as producing academic publications on what came to be broadly considered Third World urbanisation. It mostly comprised enquiries into the challenges of a rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation, often presented as over-urbanisation and emphasised through population growth rates, rural-to-urban migration, and pressures on land, housing, transport, water and sanitation, leading to exacerbated conditions of urban poverty and unemployment. Driven by a strong development-studies bias based on a narrow (economic) theory of growth, an ethos of development followed decolonisation, modelled on Western guidelines of modernisation, and set loose by a burgeoning international industry of bilateral, multilateral, private and academic agencies. Here, despite the alleged urban bias of the development, cities were treated uncritically
as sites of developmental action. Stressing sectoral issues such as housing, health, education, and gender that were largely, but not exclusively, urban issues, the place of the urban question in global policy making, as a result, became a poorly understood vein of historical enquiry. The ensuing development logic, moreover, hinged on a clunkily and rigidly reinforced idea of a rural–urban dichotomy which was, in fact, based on anti-urban sentiments, where urban problems in the developing world might have gained some prominence in the international imaginary in the early 1970s but were short-changed by an understanding of ‘development in cities’ rather than the role of ‘cities in development’. Against an awkwardly and axiomatically defined urbanisation–development nexus, scholars were thus slow to question the neatness of such categories as the rural–urban binary imposed by the positivistic orthodoxy of a development rationale. Acknowledgement eventually came of the increasing spatial interdependencies and complex livelihood strategies between the urban and the rural, revealing more of a continuum with no discernible land-use pattern or development behaviour distinguishing the two. Amidst a realisation that this implies neither an urbanisation of the rural condition nor a ruralisation of the urban setting, there is a recognition that more sophisticated conceptual filters are required to understand this phenomenon, especially given the rise of a ‘global urban agenda’ calling for a paradigmatic refreshing of the idea of ‘the urban’ in global thinking.

Peri-urban: more than a periphery?

Initially, widely popular debates of metropolitanisation and regional urbanisation were considered sufficient to explain the new configuration of social, economic and political life, blurring the transition from urban to rural, as, after all, they had been successful in making sense of suburbanisation and sprawl in Western cities. Apart from the fact that diverse urban processes in different politico-economic and sociocultural realms make generalisations difficult, more specific lenses are needed to unpack the interplay between the urban and the rural, especially in the context of developing cities where the urban–rural interface continues to be calibrated from a developmental vantage point. In this context, a notion of peri-urbanisation emerged prominently to define not only spatially, but also socially, economically and politically, a geographical area in which an agriculture-dominated, labour-intensive, dispersed rural overlapped with a more concentrated form of capital-reliant, non-farming-oriented urban in the Global South.
Peri-urbanisation was, to begin with, largely interpreted as a process of peripheral urbanisation, with a focus on illustrating the urban periphery as a problematic condition, relying on reductivist portrayals of ‘degenerated peripheralization’ highlighting a dominant narrative of marginality, poverty and exclusion. This has been rectified somewhat through an enquiry of the peri-urban area as more of a heterogeneous mosaic of ‘natural’ ecosystems, ‘agro’ ecosystems and ‘urban’ ecosystems producing a varied social composition of small farmers, informal settlers and migrant workers, industrial entrepreneurs and urban middle-class commuters, and whose sociocultural overlap weaves an intricate condition of heterogeneity and segmentation, creating new forms of segregation, polarisation and fragmentation.

But even before one can get a grip on the complexity of this condition, peri-urban interactions have been further complicated by their exposure to explicit globalising imperatives where the heterogeneity created by the presence of various social groupings including the ‘real-estate developers, global investors, liberalizing government officials, bourgeois urbanites, and peasants with de facto land rights’, not to mention the already existing as well as incoming rural migrants, has posed new challenges.

In spite of these clarifications, peripheries continue to be pitted in a dialectical relationship with the centrality of the city where it is seen as expanding primarily due to forces exerted by the city’s economic hegemony, even if it might reciprocally produce conditions that, in return, impact ebbs and flows emerging from the centre. There is a simplified assumption of centrifugal and centripetal forces at work here, one that belies the intricacy of these interactions. This is seen even in Holston and Caldeira’s well-developed sense of peripheral urbanisation emphasising the need for a dynamic apparatus to define urban peripheries. Interrelations between its various political, legal, social, economic and infrastructural components are constantly changing, yet Holston and Caldeira seem to think of centres and peripheries as being in a relationship of mutual dependence to each other, one that is difficult to uncouple. This is not for lack of trying, as seen in Simone’s description of a ‘negative potentiality’ between the periphery and the centre, as he finds that even though peripheries are imbued with a sense of insufficiency and incompletion that is remaining in need of the largesse and guidance of a centre, they are ‘never really brought fully under the auspices of the logic and development trajectories that characterise a centre, and therefore embodies an instability that is always potentially destabilising of that centre’.

Thus, even though peri-urbanisation has so far been useful in dissolving a sharply set rural–urban dichotomy, it is high time that we
rethought its conceptualisation, and allied notions such as the edge, fringe or transition zone, one that opens some productive new perspectives on the urban.\textsuperscript{17} For even though, in recent years, arguments have emerged for rethinking peripheral urbanisation in a processual manner, more as a mode of making cities and producing the urban than as a literal interpretation of outwards spatial expansion, its associated sense of centrality and marginality remains a rigid proposition. The starting point of the question here is not what is urban versus rural but what is urban and what is non-urban, as what lies beyond the urban is key to our understanding of the process of (capitalist) urbanisation.\textsuperscript{18}

**Hinterland: urban and non-urban**

It is in this context of a need for a better interpretive vocabulary to describe the urban without an outside that the hinterland emerges as a more suitable axiom than the periphery.\textsuperscript{19} Its differentiation and variegation, distinct from the elaborateness of the peri-urban which is still hinged to the urban, is one that is systemically connected to the urban as a process, and is mediated through a broad array of institutional, political, social and environmental factors.\textsuperscript{20} Organised at a range of spatial scales, hinterland involves an assortment of morphological forms and settlement typologies including the urban, the suburban, the peri-urban, the rural, and even the wilderness. As hinterland becomes central to our reconceptualisation of the urban, we need to understand that what we are undertaking is a simultaneous rereading of the hinterland, which as a lexicon itself has been around for a while.

In fact, during the very decades of development discourses that triggered our fascination with urbanisation in the developing world, the city and the hinterland were frequently invoked as a de facto binary, especially when an extended sense of the city as a region was being considered. For instance, when a prominent conference at the University of California, Berkeley, deliberating the nature of India’s urbanisation resulted in an edited volume, *India’s Urban Future*, a significant contribution proved to be Richard Ellefsen’s five cities survey (Bombay, Delhi, Madras, Hyderabad and Baroda), which provided specific observations on the nature of city–hinterland relationships as a way of understanding the unfolding nature of urbanisation.\textsuperscript{21} The intention of this exercise was, by using demographic and economic data, to delineate a regional transformation of cities using factors measuring the degree of urbanisation (such as density, sex ratio, literacy, non-agricultural
occupation, and the proportion of persons dependent on commerce). While Ellefsen’s postulation that the hinterland is more than an urban periphery is intriguing, it is not really unpacked or clarified, as his exercise concentrated on developing a methodological approach to hinterland studies in underdeveloped countries. If we are to open the hinterland to new analytical horizons, we need to focus on its hyper-reality, one that dissolves any static binary (centre–periphery or urban–rural) and goes beyond a modernist development agenda.

Hinterlands, in their current version, signify a territorial form of urbanisation whose new economic geography of extraction, production and circulation can no longer be seen through the idiom of twentieth-century agglomeration processes. What we are facing here is a strategic shift to a focus on the land question as an intrinsic aspect of the urban question, with land (and its embeddedness within the term hinterland) emerging as a key element outlining the emergent landscapes of a salient yet still indeterminate planetary form of urbanisation. This contemporary version of the hinterland is characterised by a land regime that, in a context of mostly informal set-ups of inhabitation, occupation and tenancy, employs property market logics and its contingent techniques of cadastralisation to make land available for private development. This is aided and abetted by a land reform routine which relies not just on aggressive modes of land acquisition, but on more brutal forms of land grab, whereby lands that were once subject to agrarian regulatory modes are now forced to make way unrelentingly for the urban. The ensuing land conversion is highly controversial, exacerbating inefficient land uses and creating a black market in land sales, corruption at the local state level and multiple scales of real-estate speculation. And the irony here is that through its own set of autonomous networks the ‘new’ hinterland rejects any sort of relationship with the city, choosing instead to subvert and circumvent the city. Instead, this hinterland implies a vantage point from elsewhere, a resource hinterland that is not contiguous with the metropole but is defined by its distance, measured in miles and otherness from both the centre and any kind of urban, thriving instead on the fact that the ‘new’ hinterlands are scattered and beyond in a new articulation of territories, landscapes and ecologies.

Chennai’s hinterland: logics and logistics

This can be seen in the Indian city of Chennai, where efforts to officially expand its metropolitan area have foundered. In 2012, planners
at the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) reviewed proposals to expand the metropolitan area from 1,189 km$^2$ (first red-lined in 1975) to either a modest 4,400 km$^2$ or a more ambitious 8,800 km$^2$, but made little headway in this direction. Five years later, in July 2017, the state government finally announced that a mega urban region of 8,878 km$^2$ would be formed, comprising Chennai district and fully engulfing its adjoining Thiruvallur and Kancheepuram districts, as well as additional taluks in further-out Vellore district. A total of 1,709 villages were to be annexed to the region in this scheme, including the municipalities of Chengalpattu in the south and Tindivanam to the north. A Government Order to this effect was issued in January 2018, though it has been suspended following a hostile public consultation process and the filing of a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the High Court that challenges the expansion. While it is very likely that the outcome will be a scaled-down expansion, a major reason this mega enlargement was sought in the first instance is the simple fact that the hinterland has been experiencing (through deliberate as well as unanticipated policy decisions) higher economic growth rates than the city. Chennai metropolitan area currently comprises three districts, a core 176 km$^2$ of Chennai district, surrounded by 637 km$^2$ of Thiruvallur district to the north and west and 376 km$^2$ of Kanchipuram district to the south and west (Figure 15.1). While the gross district domestic product of Chennai grew at a compounded annual rate of 4 per cent from 2006 to 2012, Thiruvallur and Kancheepuram districts registered much higher rates, of 9 per cent and 14 per cent respectively. There is a rapidly emerging industrial landscape of global capital flows and foreign direct investments, located in the hinterland districts beyond the metropolitan area, that accounts for this phenomenal growth. Taking the shape of zones and corridors, nondescript places such as Sriperumbudur (in Kancheepuram District) have emerged as India’s Shenzhen and convey an investment fetish with the hinterland, one that requires it to remain not just outside the city but outside the region as well.25

The operational landscape of this ‘new’ hinterland is based on a megalogistical collective and its attendant ‘urbanism of logistics’:27

In contrast to historically inherited hinterlands, in which various ‘free gifts’ of nature embedded in the land (materials, energy, labour, food, water) are appropriated to produce primary commodities, operational landscapes involve the industrial redesign of agricultural, extractive and logistical activities to engineer the most optimal social, institutional, infrastructural, biological and ecological conditions for (generally export-oriented) capital accumulation.28
Characterised by new industrial forms based on global supply chains, and vast territories given over to the shipment, staging and delivery of goods, the resulting landscape is neither a concentrated nor an extended form of urbanisation, but a distributed model criss-crossed by indistinguishable generic forms that hardly constitute the urban.²⁹ (See Figure 15.2.) Such an overture relies on a good amount of extrastatecraft,
where persistent concretion, articulation and speculation of logistics takes precedence in a territorial neo-colonisation of the hinterland that results in what Roy has described as the dis/possessive collectivism.\(^{30}\)

There is an optimisation logic here around distribution and delivery, consumption and convenience, and accommodation disposal, where the hinterland is not just about abstract grids and networks, but also involves tangible efforts, mostly in the form of physical infrastructure to bypass the city.\(^{31}\) Most often, these are projects that are co-opted by the situatedness of the hinterland as seen in the case of the Outer Ring Road (ORR) in metropolitan Chennai. This 60-km road infrastructure project was originally proposed as part of the first master plan (1971–91) to decongest the city but remained a drawing-board exercise for several decades. It found renewed favour in the twenty-first century when public and private interests converged, and the ORR became a central feature of a ‘bypass urbanism’ in the hinterland’s new terrain of speculative politics (see Figures 15.3 and 15.4).\(^{32}\) The ORR involves connecting hinterland zones and corridors of capital accumulation from the south and the west as quickly and directly as possible to the port operations in the northern part, in an attempt to bypass large swathes of the city’s everyday, gritty reality. There are unforeseen, and serious, consequences.

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**Figure 15.2** Hinterland as the non-urban. Source: Christophe Delory.
Figure 15.3  Outer Ring Road, Chennai. Source: Christophe Delory.

Figure 15.4  Outer Ring Road, Chennai. Base: Google Maps.
to such an urbanism’s overt territorial focus, as witnessed during the 2015 floods, when the completed first phase of the ORR proved to be an unmitigated ecological disaster.\textsuperscript{33}

Amidst a temptation to use the hinterland as a conceptual filter, one that provides an overarching theorisation of the urban, we need to ensure that it is subjected equally to a rigorous empirical scrutiny.\textsuperscript{34} Embodying new forms of uneven capitalist development underpinning unprecedented forms of creative destruction, its pathways of urbanisation remain unpredictable where exclusive gated communities or high-end residential developments might fail to take off and are reduced to ghost towns while haphazard developments from low-end developers thrive (see Figure 15.5). Discerning a meaningful pattern within this vagary is a difficult task and risks being limited to crude forms of analysis. What might help at this point would be to find appropriate methodologies that go beyond current visualisation techniques involving aerial satellite imagery to develop a series of toolkits for the analysis of its ‘multiple sites of peripheralisation’ at various territorial scales.\textsuperscript{35}

Notes

5. Harriss and Moore, 1984; Champion and Hugo, 2016; McGranahan and Satterthwaite, 2014.
17. Parnell, 2016.

Bibliography


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