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New Forms of Urbanisation: Beyond the Urban-Rural Dichotomy

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It is difficult to begin this review without first stating that *New Forms of Urbanization* is nothing less than an **opus magnum!** This is not simply because of its scope: it is also because of the complexity of the urbanisation phenomenon that it attempts to illuminate. The current process of “Urbanisation” taking place, as the authors portray, is hardly based on the traditional dichotomies that normally define the concept as (e.g., rural versus urban, agriculture versus manufacturing, illiterate versus educated, conservative versus outward looking, simple versus complex). A major difficulty with the urbanization concept is the ever-changing complexity of both rural and urban locations, thus rendering a generally acceptable definition virtually impossible. As Larry Bourne and Jim Simmons (authors of one section of the book) observe (p. 253): “Urban systems have continued to evolve in complex and often in unpredictable ways, and this in turn poses challenges for both urban researchers and for those agencies with the responsibility to monitor and regulate settlement patterns.”

A constant difficulty that runs through almost all the chapters is the impossibility of distinguishing rural from urban. For example administratively or census categorised rural locations on e.g. urban fringes (‘rururban’) are nothing but urban; rural residents but working in cities having urban behaviour and the converse; etc. If what the Princeton ‘school of demography’ used to characterise migration, a prodigal son of demography, for *inter alia* the relative impossibility of enumeration of all migrants of a given period versus e.g. what a TFR is, it is child’s play compared to current urbanisation challenges this book presents. It is like hell let loose! The underlying source of this difficulty is basically the ‘hi-tech’ revolution that has made life easier (?) as to make one virtually be at any place of one’s wish as one pleases, through sophisticated but easy transport, communications etc (globalisation in general), making the world one village!

New Forms of Urbanisation is the work of the Working Group on Urbanisation set up by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) to study and improve the understanding of contemporary patterns of human settlements by development of their better conceptualisation and definition. It gives a vivid, therefore informative picture of not only the evolution of the urbanisation complex, but the related measurement difficulties it has brought and the need for not just updating but new conceptualisation of urbanisation. Suggestions are made on how to go about it. But as I summarise at the end the implementers, specifically most governments, may only help effectively by publishing details of locations and leave it to

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researchers.

The organisation of the book itself, in six parts, consists a total of 19 chapters covering 409 substantive pages including a list of references. It articulates the problem issue, traverses the evolution of urban systems, looks at case studies of all world regions and a number of countries; it makes fresh attempts, first by conception, in view of complex changes, then operationalisation, subsequently the way forward.

After an 'attracting to read the book' preface, the editors present in Part I the problem facing us all: what settlement to categorise as urban, rural or any other form that the authors actually show, it is no longer an urban-rural dichotomy. This is because of blurring by globalisation, so to speak. In the further 3 chapters, each by a different group of author(s) review of attempts at definitions by a number of groups, and the UN's experience is made.

Part II gives first 'regional perspectives along continental practices, followed by chapters of case studies, showing wide-ranging practices even within a country. For Africa however, apparently due to low non-complex nature of its urbanisation, it is dealt with only as a whole, and its urbanisation seems to be assumed to originate from colonial and modern trading posts. But traditional urban residence is on record: for example the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria. It demonstrates how difficult it is going to be to have global standards. Still the editors and authors do not give up. A fresh attempt is made to bring some order into and methodology to settlement classification.

Therefore first conceptualisation is done in Part IV, then operationalisation in Part V, and lastly, the way forward in Part VI. Two suggested aspects of settlement classification, which I note, though highly recommended, are still bringing the main difficulty at hand: (a) the multidimensionality of settlements (b) argument for the persistency of rurality of some locations, though pointing to a need for a dynamic definition of it.

My general criticism of the work, not that it is weak, but on the basis of conceptualisation/philosophy of life, is that the authors seem to over-worry! People/communities/governments live their lives, whether with positive or negative outcomes. We academics, whether sub-consciously or not, largely (re)search for some regularity/order in a phenomenon. In the book one can constantly feel a disappointment that the 'baptisers' of localities as urban are not following some consistent criteria. Aren't we slaves of that (expecting regularity)! And now, by recommendations forcing others into that bondage! This is not belittling the work: what one is trying to say here is that we can, indeed should only study of what is taking place, unless we are commissioned to identify problems and suggest solutions.

The complex phenomenon of settlements is real and should be studied. The book therefore is welcome, not just for academics (studying phenomena or production of knowledge, regardless of immediate need), but more importantly for urban planners/practitioners, and even a layperson.