Middle East city networks and the "new urbanism"

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Contemporary analysts of Middle East cities have been slow to take up new urbanism's challenge to perceive the region's cities via a social network lens. Yet a tenuous body of work does exist, most of it employing the network-as-metaphor, with some authors delving more deeply in exciting and promising ways to examine city networks, their implications, and the resultant regional system of cities. This essay highlights a number of the major network concepts available, including connectivity, centrality, black holes, brokers, levels of analysis, city system and density. Contributions by a range of regional specialists are presented in the context of the ongoing search for understanding of the evolving nature of city networks in the Middle East. The essay concludes with a discussion of insights network analysis might contribute to questions of the distribution of power, community, hierarchy and change across the *longue durée*. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

As opposed to more traditional approaches to cities, "the new urbanism" (Amin and Thrift, 2002) draws heavily on the terminology of networks. From Sassen (2002) to Short (2004b), the discussion of world cities in globalization borrows its narrative on transnational urbanism (Friedmann, 2002) or of the "networked city" (Castells, 1996) from a perspective of the city as embedded. This creeping terminological shift draws much of its representation and feel from the image of cities as nodes connected by flows across space: "If the city is to survive, process must have the final word. In the end the urban truth is in the flow" (Kostof, 1992).

However, this literature has tended to employ a limited set of concepts, with terms left undefined or clarified.[1] Only a few authors specifically draw on the ideas of the well-established social network

analysis (SNA) literature.[2] Recent literature has discovered the limits in this use of network-as-metaphor (Berkowitz, 1982), and is pushing towards more concrete understandings of city networks.[3]

Within the study of Middle East cities, similar trends and processes are also emerging. During the last thirty years, scattered undeveloped references to city networks appeared in the Middle East urban literature, while many urban studies made consistent but un-explained references to significant "connections", exchanges and flows of goods among the region's cities. Spurred by the work of the new urbanism, however, the network-as-metaphor

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[1] Despite the use of the terminology, a low degree of network specificity is the norm. For example, in his most recent book, John Rennie Short (2004b, p. 16) makes significant reference to the "global urban network of flows", and suggests that "global urban networks have existed in the past." There is, however, no definition of an urban network, and no network concept employed other than the *degree of connectivity*.

[2] Even Peter J. Taylor, when employing the ideas of SNA in his work, limited his research to only a few of the options which might be utilized for conceptualising cities in networks. See any number of articles by P.J. Taylor contained on the Global and World Cities site at Loughborough University at www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc.

[3] Disagreements arise, as expected, on exactly how this should be done. Some are pursing the post-structuralist track, employing actor-network theory to make their case (Smith, 2003a). Taylor (2004a,b) and others are refining the world city-network concept using service-sector data. Other authors are concretising the concept of city networks by looking at the physical/telecommunications networks that bind cities together (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Townsend, 2001); looking at the *longue durée* in order to study "world-city networks" at the core of the world system (Bosworth, 2000; Modelski, 1999; Rennstich, 2003); or evaluating interurban networks in the policy discourse (Leitner and Sheppard, 2002).

terminology has recently become more noticeable, and the application of world systems analysis to the region is also encouraging more careful consideration of city networks (Keyder, 1999). Around the edges, authors are borrowing more robust network approaches and applying them to the study of cities in Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Unfortunately, few of the diverse concepts available have yet been utilized; the general application to the region lags far behind the study of city networks in other world regions; and the insights into Middle East urbanism tantalizingly offered by a city network approach remain unexplored. Increasingly, authors are "talking the talk", but as a community of regional scholars we are not yet "walking the walk".

This paper is an attempt to contribute to a deeper conceptualization and utilization of network concepts in the analysis of Middle East cities, stressing the general benefits of a more conscious and systematic approach. Within this short commentary, I discuss a range of network possibilities, and suggest various benefits that might accrue from their application to the region.

Moving networks into the core of the new urbanism

The most consistent body of scholarship examining networks is to be found in social network analysis (SNA), which evolved during the 1950s and 60s as an alternative approach to understanding actors in groups. Today it is a well-established subfield exploring the nature and implications of networks.[4] Four key concepts together craft an organising principle on city networks: cities are embedded within a system of cities that can be evaluated across multiple scales for both their relational characteristics and their positional implications.

Cities are embedded

Cities have both existence in Cartesian space (bounded territoriality) and as an imagined construct of flows.[5] Both should be considered. However, most analysts stress a city's geographical groundedness and walled boundedness, to the exclu-

sion of the flows through which it is articulated. At the extreme, this "autonomous" view ignores, downplays or backgrounds the flows, networks and exchange aspect of cities (Amin and Thrift, 2002). On the other extreme, authors such as Castells (1996) or Smith (2003) privilege the constructivist nature of the city, repressing the geographical referent in order to highlight the city as "a space of flows". Mitchell (2000, p. 3) goes so far as to celebrate *e-topia*, the "new, network-mediated metropolis of the digital electronic era".

A third set of authors is finding that it needs to articulate a mix of both views, stressing a city's groundedness as well as contextualizing it within a space of flows (Knox and Taylor, 1995). Fernand Braudel (1979, p. 481), often cited as the father of the city-networks perspective, put it this way:

> "a town is always a town, wherever it is located, in time as well as in space. I do not mean that all towns are alike. But over and above their distinctive and original features, they all necessarily speak the same basic language... For a town never exists unaccompanied by other towns: some dominant, others subordinate or even enslaved, all are tied to each other forming a hierarchy, in Europe, in China, or anywhere else."

Social network analysis shares this image, contrasting its paradigm with the alternative atomistic view that dominates the social sciences (Berkowitz, 1982). A network approach, by requiring, at a minimum, the specification of the actors (nodes), flows (paths or exchanges) and relationships among them, turns most of social science on its head (Frey, 1978). By shifting the focus in this way, social network analysis seeks to "reconnect the study of individuals to the *relationships* and *structures of relationships* in which they are embedded" (Wellman, 1999, p. xiv).

Most urban studies approach cities as autonomous entities, bounded by walls or municipal authority, space to be planned or acted upon, limited in power and agency, knowable primarily as a geographic point in space.[6] The MENA city literature is no exception. During the 20th century, this bounded perspective predominated, primarily addressing a particular city, its history and its evolution as geographically bounded: Beirut as a projected city (Rowe and Sarkis, 1998); the history of Tyre (Fleming, 1966); or *The Middle East City* (Saqqaf, 1987).

Significantly, flows of people (pilgrims into Aleppo), products (dates shipped out of Basra) and services (hawali) have long been central topics in regional urban analysis. Yet despite such sensitivity,

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[4] For an introduction to SNA and its concerns, see Wasserman and Faust (1994), Wellman and Berkowitz (1988), Knoke (1990), Berkowitz (1982), or Scott (1991).
[5] Smith (2001) contrasts the material existence of cities with their meaning, which is socially constructed. I would argue that when we experience "the city" today, most of us link that material existence with geography and thus ground the city in physical space, but that how we make that link and what its implications are can differ due to changing meaning-making practices. Those who set out to talk about the history or chronological development of a particular city are thus stressing the space/physical grounding, and then building their meaning-making analysis on that foundation. Those who stress a constructivist approach to the city, and utilize the network motif, however, are backgrounding the material existence and privileging one particular conceptual metaphor.

[6] Mitchell (1969, p. 8) addresses these issues in the opening chapter of his seminal edited volume where he contrasts his social network approach with the conventional wisdom which saw "the behaviour of persons ...largely in terms of their membership in 'bounded' groups and their involvement in social institutions." See also Laumann et al. (1983).