# Editor's Overview

BRUCE KATZ

Regionalism is hardly a new idea in American government and politics. Arguably, it has been around for more than 100 years, ever since the union of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx made New York City a regional metropolis. In the 1960s and 1970s, regionalism was the subject of much academic discussion, research, and on-the-ground policy innovation. But after a burst of city-county consolidations in those decades, interest in regionalism, especially as a practical political matter, waned.

Now, many people—from academics to corporate leaders to political activists—are arguing that regionalism is still relevant. They insist that regions are critical functional units in a worldwide economy. Perhaps as important, they say, regions are critical functional units in individual American lives. More and more of us travel across city, county, even state borders every morning on our way to work. Our broadcast and print media rely on a regional marketplace. Our businesses, large and small, depend on suppliers, workers, and customers who rarely reside in a single jurisdiction. The parks, riverfronts, stadiums, and museums we visit serve and provide an identity to an area much larger than a single city. The fumes, gases, chemicals, and runoff that pollute our air and water have no regard for municipal boundaries.

The essays in this monograph do not comprise a debate, pro and con, about regionalism. Rather, the authors give their own perspectives on this phenomenon, based on their own backgrounds and

experience. Some contributors have written close academic studies of how regional action occurs, while others give a historical account of a particular region. Some of these authors are ardent supporters of regionalism and lay out detailed political plans for achieving regional governance. Each brings a particular analytical lens to his or her chapter and highlights what he or she thinks are some of the salient characteristics of regionalism, past or present.

Taken as a whole, these essays address a series of questions: If regionalism is, as regionalists believe, a compelling idea and an inescapable reality, why did past efforts at regional collaboration fall apart? Given that the United States has almost no examples of regional or metropolitan governments, at what level of government does regional action take place? What did regionalist efforts of decades ago leave undone, and what new goals should regionalists set? How can regionalism work now?

## The Argument for Regionalism

Robert Fishman's contribution to this monograph begins with Jane Jacobs's comment, "A Region, someone has wryly observed, is an area safely larger than the last one to whose problems we found no solution." The term *region* is certainly ill-defined in popular usage. It is sometimes used to describe a large city, the surrounding suburbs, and perhaps the farms, forests, or open space just beyond the suburban fringe. According to this description, region and metropolitan area are synonymous, and regionalist and metropolitanist are also interchangeable labels.

But this has not always been the case, as Fishman points out in his chapter. In a discussion of urban and regional planners of the 1920s, he defines metropolitanists as those who were committed to central-city dominance, even as the metropolitan area gained millions in population and stretched dozens of miles from its old center. They foresaw the continued development of suburbs, but as places clearly subordinate to the mighty downtown. Regionalists, by contrast, disparaged the concentrated power of the central city and sought dispersed settlements that "could combine all the economic benefits of living in a technologically advanced society with the human scale, local identity, and community of small-town America." They envisioned a series of towns nestled in rings of greenery, linked by highways and technology.

But what these views had in common was the recognition that cities, suburbs, and green space cannot be considered in isolation. The fundamental premise of regionalism is that places have relationships and connections to other places that should not be ignored. Contemporary regionalists object to the fact that these connections have had precious little effect on the way in which domestic policies have been designed and implemented. America has a fragmented maze of local governments and special districts that prefer fierce competition or splendid isolation to regional cooperation. As several of the chapters in this monograph note, Americans like the idea of small, accessible, responsive local governments and have not been quick to embrace larger governing bodies.

Regionalists (or metropolitanists—the terms are interchangeable in current use) argue that many pressing environmental, social, and governance problems cannot be solved by independent jurisdictions acting alone. As an example, they point to problems that accompany our current growth and development patterns.

On the one hand, many cities and older suburbs are either not growing or are in decline. Cities, particularly those in the Northeast and Midwest, have lost millions of residents, along with businesses and tax dollars. They are now home to increasing concentrations of poor people and lack the resources to deal with the problems of concentrated poverty: joblessness, family fragmentation, failing schools, and decrepit commercial districts. Older suburbs have found that so-called urban problems easily cross urban borders, and these communities are often even less able to cope than cities. Meanwhile, newly developing suburbs find that they are growing too fast. Traffic congestion increases, schools become overcrowded, and the open space that residents prize disappears under an onslaught of new construction.

Regionalists see all of these problems as related: urban decline increases development pressure on the suburban fringe; and government policies that facilitate fringe development and keep poor people concentrated in urban neighborhoods make it more difficult for cities to maintain their social and economic health. Their conclusion is that cross-jurisdictional problems demand cross-jurisdictional solutions.

## Regionalism and Coalitions

Cross-jurisdictional solutions, in turn, demand strong, cross-jurisdictional coalitions. As urban scholar Ethan Seltzer puts it: “In general,

coalition building is critical to regionalism because of the nature of a region. In most cases, the region is nobody's community. This means that getting any action at the regional scale requires creating new collaborative alignments among interests who previously either didn't believe that they shared issues in common, or who knew it but felt no compelling reason to act on it. In the end, the story of effective metropolitan regionalism is always going to be the search for cross-cutting issues, a never-ending saga that is the meat and potatoes of those efforts."[1]

Sprawl currently appears to be such a cross-cutting issue. In many regions across the country it is the catalyst for coalitions that include elected officials from cities, inner suburbs, and new suburbs that are finding it difficult to provide infrastructure to accommodate rapid growth; downtown corporate, philanthropic, and civic interests; minority and low-income community representatives; environmentalists; smart-growth advocates in the new developing suburbs; farmers and rural activists; and religious leaders. National politicians, such as Vice President Al Gore, are developing policies against sprawl and for smarter growth under the heading of a "livability" agenda.

Some of the chapters in this monograph directly address regional coalitions. But all of the chapters, whether they talk explicitly about coalitions or not, can be read as part of a larger conversation about how coalitions do or do not work and how they shape decisions about economic and spatial growth. For example, Fishman, Robert Yaro, Henry Richmond, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, and Margaret Weir all address some aspects of coalitions and regional growth, whether to outline the possibilities for new groups or to evaluate the successes and failures of previous efforts. The essays by john a. powell and Kenneth Jackson show how race has shaped space, something that new coalitions cannot afford to ignore. Finally, David Rusk and Paul Dimond present two very different arguments about the policies that regional coalitions should pursue.

## The Essays

Henry Richmond's opening essay is a thorough primer on this issue, its many permutations and guises, and the missed opportunities of the past. Richmond explains the political history of land-use reform, focusing especially—and quite usefully—on why many previous

attempts to change development patterns have failed. He concludes that their focus was mainly the environment, and therefore their base of support was too narrow. He goes on to explain the connection between current land-use patterns and "systemic problems" and thereby shows how broad a coalition for change might be.

Next, a trio of essays gives an overview of regional growth and governance. Robert Yaro uses New York City as a case study, noting that many of the challenges of other regions are exemplified, and amplified, in New York. The city's metropolitan area, spreading across three states and thirty-one counties, has consistently presented some of the most extreme challenges to efforts to supersede local boundaries and create metropolitan solutions. Yaro argues that new regional governing entities will never come into being, so regionalists should focus on practical, achievable goals, such as service districts and regional amenities, while keeping in mind that even these can take decades to create.

David Rusk focuses on land-use and growth management laws as "the pivotal issue" for regionalism. This means that regionalists have to act at the state level, since states control land-use laws and regulations. Rusk discusses recent growth management legislation and new coalitions in Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Ohio that are determined to win new land-use laws in their states. Finally, he explains how transportation investments are a critical land-use question, despite decades in which transportation planners focused only on highways and not on the fields, suburbs, or cities that surround them. Rusk predicts that, as a result of action on land use and transportation, America will see more directly elected metropolitan governments.

Robert Fishman's chapter considers the history and possible future of regional planning. He begins by explaining the two different strands of urban and regional planning that have been present (and often at odds) since at least the 1920s. They can be summed up in this question: should a region have one center or many? Fishman then notes that whatever planners thought the answer should be, whether urban renewal or new towns, they did not succeed in implementing their vision. Part of the problem was that there was no way for separate governments to make binding regional decisions, whether on tax-base sharing or land-use decisions.

There is no question that cities have grown in a way that is more in line with what Fishman describes as the old regionalist idea than the old metropolitanist vision. Rather than a single central city serving

as the commercial, industrial, political, and cultural center and dominating its surroundings, urban areas have many centers in many different jurisdictions: central business districts, "edge cities," industrial areas, services clusters, and high-tech or commercial corridors. So, is the purpose of modern regionalist (or metropolitanist) efforts to restore the dominance of the central city, to establish a balance of power and prosperity throughout a region, or to keep weakened cities from collapsing utterly? What is the role of each element of a region—old central city, inner-ring suburb, new developing suburb, secondary city or town? Fishman does not provide a direct answer but insists that regional plans—and the coalitions that will form to implement those plans—must take both urban and environmental concerns into account.

Two essays focus explicitly on regional coalitions—political and business oriented. In her chapter Margaret Weir breaks down the elements of the successful efforts to create regional governance in Minnesota and Oregon, two states that regionalists generally regard with reverence. She then describes the different experiences of Illinois and California. The key, she finds, is state-level coalition building, because states have the power to enact or block legislation that creates regional political authorities (rather than weaker regional collaborative agreements). Committed civic coalitions are needed to keep the regional authorities strong, even after state legislation has been enacted.

As Rosabeth Moss Kanter points out, business coalitions, too, create an impetus for regional action. Because the opinions of business leaders carry enormous weight in the political sphere, especially locally, corporate acknowledgment that regions matter can be a powerful spur toward policy coordination or at least recognition of common interests. However, business coalitions have limits, just like political coalitions do. So far, they have not taken on fiscal disparities issues, for example, and their interest in difficult problems that take years to solve (schools, for example) can wane because business leaders usually expect quick results.

Any discussion of regionalism must address racial politics, and the next pair of essays speaks to regionalism and race. Many regions developed the way that they did because white Americans did not want to live near African Americans. Kenneth Jackson's contribution to this monograph eloquently tells the story of how race shaped three communities: Newark, Darien–New Canaan, and White Plains. He con-

cludes that the sharp divisions between affluent and struggling communities within regions have to be breached, but doing so will take extraordinary policies that can gain the consent of a majority of a region's residents. The division that Jackson describes in the New York–Connecticut–New Jersey region is, of course, not unique, a fact that he duly notes.

What commentators have generally not pointed out is that this separation has in some cases been politically beneficial to African Americans, who have risen to the top of city governments. Even though regional action was never intended to rob local governments of all of their power, regionalism can look like a threat to African American political power and cultural identity, says john a. powell. Therefore, metropolitan coalitions, whether they originate in the corporate or government arena, must take race into account. Powell suggests combining regional action with maintenance of some local control to address the concerns of minorities. Failure to do so renders coalitions ineffective, he argues. Both Jackson and powell agree: policy fixes that do not confront the complexities of racial politics will either operate on the margin or fail to win majority support.

Finally, Paul Dimond, in his contrarian contribution, argues against a regionalist approach to policies, preferring instead a free-market model in which diverse local governments compete, much like firms, for businesses and residents (i.e., customers). While acknowledging that labor, housing, and finance markets are regional—not local—he insists that too often regional approaches hinder people's ability to "vote with their feet" and to choose which local government best suits their needs. The role of state and federal policies is not to override localities in the name of regional collaboration, but to enable all of them to compete on a level playing field. One way to do this—and in this suggestion Dimond ironically echoes many of the regionalists whose views he otherwise opposes—is to stop subsidizing development in some areas and instead require that all new houses, malls, office buildings, and other development projects pay for the roads, sewers, and utilities that serve them.

## Conclusion

The rebirth of interest in regionalism comes at a time of enormous change in American society. The aging of the population is changing

the mix of products and services that the marketplace provides and the patterns of life people pursue. The revolution in information technology is altering business imperatives and consumer choices. Devolution in governance is changing how we organize public investments in transportation, work force, and housing and how we respond to challenges from environmental pollution to concentrated poverty to continued economic competitiveness. All of these changes—in demography, markets, and governance—will have major effects on where people choose to live and where businesses choose to locate in the coming decades. There will be a different mix of forces supporting—or countering—regionalist efforts.

These essays have been written in the hope that reflections on past experiences will provide some kind of road map through this period of fast, far-reaching changes. Without an understanding of previous regional efforts and key issues, policymakers may find themselves "reinventing the region." These chapters explain how regionalism has played out in the past, how policies shape places, and the possibilities and limits of regional action. We hope that they will be a useful contribution to this round of regional debates.

The editor would like to thank Anthony Downs, senior fellow of the Brookings Institution; Jennifer Bradley, Amy Liu, and Stephan Rodiger of the Brookings Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy; Starr Belsky for editing, Inge Lockwood for proofreading, and Julia Petrakis for indexing the volume for the Brookings Institution Press; and the anonymous reviewers of these essays. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the George Gund Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation provided financial support for this project. Without their efforts, this monograph would not have been possible.

## Note

1. Memo from Ethan Seltzer, Portland State University, to Bruce Katz, September 21, 1998.