

Los Angeles

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In the field of urban studies, Los Angeles is a key reference case for the analysis of contemporary urban restructuring. The followers of the Los Angeles School of Urban Studies ascribe to Los Angeles a paradigmatic status among post-modern urban regions. Los Angeles exemplifies a new model of urbanism which, in contrast to the teachings of the Chicago School of Urbanism of the 1920s, is no longer organized around a central urban core or a central business district (CBD). Instead, its polycentric settlement pattern is best characterized as “dense sprawl.” Fewer than one of ten jobs and even fewer of the housing units in the region are located downtown. But even without an equivalent to Midtown or downtown Manhattan, at 6,000 inhabitants per square mile, the Los Angeles urban area is the densest metropolitan region in the United States. The Greater Los Angeles Area, also called “the Southland,” extends over 400 square miles. Los Angeles is the second largest city in the United States and the largest city in the State of California, the city of Los Angeles is home to 3.8 million people, while Los Angeles County has about 10 million inhabitants. The surrounding five county region has 17.6 million inhabitants and is expected to grow to about 25-30 million people over the next decades.

Urban Development

Los Angeles' rapid ascent over the last century to an economic powerhouse and a leading world city is surprising given its unfavorable environmental conditions compared to its regional competitors. The Los Angeles river carries a trickle of water during the dry summer months, hampering agricultural development. The proximity to the San Andreas fault line makes the region prone to earthquakes. And, the San Gabriel and Santa Monica mountains provide natural barriers to freight shipping while the geography of the ports is less ideal than along other stretches of the coast. Also, due to its geographic location in a basin surrounded by water and mountains, Los Angeles is prone to smog, a situation further exacerbated by the region's excessive reliance on automobiles as the main means of transportation. So early on, all signs pointed to San Francisco, Seattle or San Diego as more likely candidates for the leading West Coast trade hub.

Working in favor of Los Angeles, however, was the unrelenting boosterism of its political and civic elites during the early 20th century. This included such key figures as the water baron Walter Mulholland (prominently featured in the classic film "Chinatown"), the *Los Angeles Times* publisher and investor Harry Chandler, and the railroad and real estate tycoon Henry Huntington. The pleasant climatic conditions in the Land of Sunshine further encouraged the re-location of the entertainment industry, particularly the motion picture industry, from the East Coast in the 1920s. But Los Angeles was a late bloomer compared to other leading American cities. Founded in 1777 in the viceroy-ruled territory of the Spanish Empire under the name of "El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles del Río de Porciúncula," the area had 650 residents in 1820. The economic development of the region rapidly accelerated only with the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1876, the discovery of oil in 1892 and the completion of a much needed water aqueduct in 1913. Between 1890 and 1930, Los Angeles' increasingly diverse population grew from 50,400 to 1,200,000. The old Mexican ranchos were quickly replaced by citrus groves and endless subdivisions of single-family detached homes.

In contrast to classical industrial cities whose explosive growth during the mid- and late 19th century translated into extremely high inner-city population densities, urban growth in Los Angeles took a horizontal pattern right from the start. As early as 1930, population densities in downtown Los Angeles were less than three times higher than in surrounding suburbs, compared to a ratio of 30:1 in San Francisco and 26:1 in New York. Yet contrary to common belief, the most crucial factor for this spread-out pattern was not the advent of the private automobile, but rather the development of an extensive interurban passenger railway system. By the early 1910s, Henry Huntington's famous Pacific Electric Red Car Line spanned over 1,000 miles of track and extended far into the surrounding counties. Even during their heyday, though, these passenger railway operations were never profitable by themselves. Rather, Huntington and others used them as loss leaders to encourage the real estate development of outlying suburban and exurban land. When the bulk of these parcels had been developed in the 1920s, the first Red Car lines were converted to cheaper buses.

In the next decades, buses and, above all, private cars began to dominate the regional transportation system. Despite a temporary boost in ridership during WWII, when gasoline shortages hampered further motorization, what was once the world's most extensive interurban rail system increasingly fell into disrepair -- the last Red Car ran in 1961. However, contrary to a popular urban myth, the fate of electric rail in Los Angeles (and elsewhere) was not determined by General

Motors, Firestone, Standard Oil and other auto industry giants who bought up trolley lines across the nation and replaced them with buses. The so-called GM scandal merely accelerated a decline already in progress due to financial and structural problems of the trolley industry. Also, influential urban planners advocated for "Magic Motorways" as the modern solution to Southern California's urban congestion problems. Following the successful completion of the Arroyo Seco Parkway from downtown Los Angeles to Pasadena in 1940, the California Department of Public Works (now Caltrans) constructed a dense network of freeways in the coming decades, thus establishing the public image of Los Angeles as a sprawling, center-less sea of single-family homes, big-box stores and low-rise office complexes connected by an endless number of fast-moving freeways.

After another half century of almost continuous population and economic growth in the region, this image has all but reversed itself. Motorization has increased to an astonishing rate of 1 car for every 1.8 people -- the highest in the world, and traffic on the "magic motorways" is now crawling along at an average speed of 13 miles per hour for much of the day (which, ironically, is equal to the average speed of the Red Cars during their heyday). Due to growing political and neighborhood opposition, fewer than two thirds of the freeway miles originally proposed in the 1954 master plan have been built, with particularly gaps in affluent communities such as Beverly Hills and South Pasadena. Meanwhile, Los Angeles continues to grow and densify at the same time, with new multi-story and even high-rise living, working and entertainment complexes going up all across the region. The mounting negative consequences of the region's sprawled, settlement pattern have made Los Angeles, and Southern California more generally, a hotbed for New Urbanism ideas and practices such as transit-oriented, mixed-use development and smart growth.

Economic Development

Despite its strong and famous service sector industries, such as movie production, Los Angeles is by no means a post-industrial city. In fact, Los Angeles is still the largest manufacturing center in the United States, with manufacturing accounting for almost 12 percent of all employment in the region (down from about 18 percent in 1990). From the 1920s onward, the motion picture and aerospace industries have provided important economic boosts to the region, complemented by other entertainment and media industries, oil, technology, fashion and tourism as well as banking and finance. World War II concentrated military industries in the

region and thus brought an enormous economic and employment boon and a near doubling of the regional population. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the defense industry threw the region into recession in the early 1990s, but the military-industrial-complex still plays an important role in the regional economy. Meanwhile, the world-famous Los Angeles district of Hollywood is synonymous with the world of movies and stars, leading to a unique clustering of film-related businesses and creative industries.

Los Angeles is also one of the world's most important trade gateways. The Long Beach/Los Angeles port complex ranks fifth in the world in container traffic and accounts for one third of all waterborne container traffic in the United States. By 2020 this already impressive volume is expected to double. Meanwhile, the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) handles more "origin and destination" (as opposed to through-transit) passengers than any other airport in the world and is the world's sixth busiest in cargo traffic.

Politics and Governance

Local public life and politics in the immigrant city of Los Angeles have been fraught with class and racial tensions. Los Angeles has always been a stronghold of progressive, social and labor movements, where artists frequently joined political radicals and working class communities in reform struggles against big business. Progressives won important victories in the 1920s and 1930s, but in the 1940s, the political landscape became dominated by anti-left, racist, and anti-Semitic sentiments. In 1947, foreshadowing what became known as McCarthyism in the 1950s, U.S. Congressman J. Parnell Thomas held secret hearings on the alleged Communist infiltration of the Hollywood entertainment industry. The tides turned again with the advent of the civil rights movement, but deep racial and economic divides continued to strain the city's socio-economic fabric as new groups of immigrants sought a place in Los Angeles' hodge-podge of cultures and ethnicities.

In the 1960s, Los Angeles was the most segregated city in the United States. The African American neighborhood of Watts experienced five days of race rioting in 1965, primarily triggered by years of police brutality and harassment. In 1992, riots were sparked across the city after the acquittal of four white police officers who had been caught on videotape beating Rodney King, an African-American, subsequent to a high-speed pursuit. The underlying racial animosities fueling the Rodney King uprising were different than during the Watts riots, however, as many historically black neighborhoods in South Central L.A. were turning in-

creasingly Latino. Economic prospects for African Americans grew dimmer throughout the 1980s as unionized black workers in downtown Los Angeles lost their jobs to Latino immigrants ready to work for substandard wages and African American-owned liquor and grocery stores were taken over by Asian immigrants.

In 1973, the Democrat Tom Bradley was the first black mayor to be elected in a large U.S. city with a white majority. He governed Los Angeles for twenty years, contributing to the city's transformation into a multicultural world city. After Bradley's retirement, the businessman Richard Riordan became the city's first Republican mayor in over thirty years. His administration was overshadowed by the public controversy over the massive cost overruns and construction mismanagement related to the construction of Los Angeles' first modern day heavy rail subway line, the Red Line.

In Los Angeles, transit politics have always been closely linked to complex ethnic and class struggles. Whereas in most other cities of the world, a federally subsidized rail project would have been hailed by a majority of residents as a much-needed project, both the pre-dominantly white residents on the affluent West Side and the poorer African-American and Hispanic residents in South, Central and East Los Angeles strongly objected to the Red Line. While the former largely preferred car-oriented to transit-oriented solutions, the latter argued that a diversion of scarce funds from the overcrowded and underfinanced buses, which carried the vast majority of transit passengers and almost exclusively served transit-dependent people of color, to expensive new rail projects targeted at more affluent residents was racially and spatially discriminatory. In 1996, the Bus Riders Union (BRU), a civil rights advocacy group organized by the L.A. Labor/Community Strategy Center, brought a class action law suit against the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA/Metro) and successfully forced the authority into a ten-year consent decree designed to support bus operations and reduce bus overcrowding. The BRU consent decree has received nationwide attention as a key success story of the environmental justice movement.

In 2001, Riordan was succeeded by James Hahn, the son of the late Kenneth Hahn, who served on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors for forty years from 1952-1992. Then, in a closely watched race, incumbent Hahn lost the 2005 mayoral race to Antonio Villaraigosa who became the city's first Latino mayor since 1872. At the time Villaraigosa took office, Los Angeles was 48 percent Hispanic, 31 percent white, 11 percent Asian and 10 percent black. Villaraigosa arrived in office with strong credentials as a labor and community advocate, and he stepped onto the national political scene as a charismatic and progressive

urban leader who vowed to put environmental and working-class community issues at the forefront of his local agenda.

However, many of the most pressing problems beseeching Los Angeles, such as environmental degradation, traffic congestion, unaffordable land and housing prices, and substandard public services, including poor educational and medical facilities, can only be effectively addressed at the regional or even at the state level. Unfortunately, regional governance in the Greater Los Angeles area has always been extremely fragmented. Los Angeles County is a hodge-podge of 88 incorporated cities and many additional unincorporated areas, and the larger region comprises over 180 individual municipalities.

Los Angeles' Urban Renaissance

Los Angeles is currently well on its way to defying most of its historical stereotypes. Downtown L.A. is undergoing a major urban renaissance. Apart from new museums, entertainment and sports centers, thousands of new residential loft and condominium apartments have been created since the city council passed an adaptive reuse ordinance in 1999 encouraging the conversion of vacant office and commercial buildings. Several spectacular mixed-used urban redevelopment mega-projects are in the advanced planning and early construction stages. The future of the large industrial district around downtown is uncertain. Between 2005 and 2007, the downtown residential population jumped over 20% to almost forty thousand residents. Most of the new development is taking place around the Staples entertainment center and in the Bunker Hill central business district core.

Bunker Hill has been an urban renewal area since the 1950s when a massive slum clearance project replaced run-down historic Victorian residences with modern office towers. However, due to the city's high taxes, congestion and economic recession, the vacancy rate for downtown commercial real estate was over 20% by the 1990s. Commonly known by the name of Skid Row, the district immediately to the east of Bunker Hill is still home to several thousand homeless people living in cardboard boxes and tents. The gentrification of downtown Los Angeles now threatens the transient and low-income populations in this area with displacement, once again demonstrating how the politics and economics of urban growth divide Los Angeles into winners and losers.

Cross-References:

Mike Davis, Los Angeles School of Urban Studies, Postmodern Urbanism, Allen Scott, Edward Soja, Urban Theory

Further Reading:

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