THE ENGLISH PROBLEM
PLANNING FOR A PERI-URBAN NATION

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Topic: Land-use relationships and the structure of the rural-urban system: European and regional models

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ONLY FRAGMENTS of England's landscape betray no signs of human intervention. Genuine wilderness is almost non-existent, and England's settlement patterns are part of what some have called a 'deeper continuity' that extends two millennia into the past [1; 2]. These settlement patterns are quite dispersed, so that although just nine per cent of England is actually developed land, there are few places where one is not near a settlement of one sort or another [3].

This puts England in an odd position, and it is this: the whole of England can reasonably be thought of as a contiguous peri-urban region, punctuated by numerous towns and cities where people live and work, and between which people travel. To be sure, some have argued that there is an 'urban-rural' divide, and this turns out to be more or less coterminous with the much better known 'north-south' divide between London and the south east, and the rest of the country [4-6]. The divide is mostly an economic one: the south east and pockets of the rest of the country are more wealthy than average, while the rest of the country is less wealthy than average. Sometimes the differences are extreme — ex-industrial areas have suffered badly, for example — and this is where policy comes in.

At present, the overarching planning policies that do exist are 'national' only insofar as they are intended to be applied by all planning authorities in the nation. There were until May 2010 regional policies, in the form of 'regional spatial strategies', but there was no formal mechanism by which adjacent regions' strategies can be made to relate to one another, and in any case, those strategies have been abolished. So too has the organisation set up to handle planning applications for large scale infrastructure projects. In short, the strategic overview is all but non-existent.

The question that we shall address in this essay, then, is how policy can handle what is in effect a very large, highly polycentric rural-urban region punctuated by a number of large city-regions [7]. The basic argument is that peri-urban regions, being both urban and rural at the same time (or maybe something in between), need policies that can address both urban and rural problems at the same time. In the case of England, it follows that there is a strong analytical case to be made for a national spatial strategy for England.

The paper has three parts: Past; Present; and Future. While it proffers some answers to the questions it poses, it does perhaps raise still more questions, not least about how much urban planning can actually achieve: But those must wait for another time.

PAST

The settlement patterns of England have long been established, a consequence of the 'deeper continuity' brought about by a long slow process of inexorable positive feedback [2]. In southern England, for

example, everyone lives within just four miles of a church constructed before 1500 [2]. Of the 56 cities in England with populations greater than 125,000 in 2001, 12 were founded by the Romans, 30 were established between 100 AD and 1086, when the Domesday Book was compiled, and 12 were established between 1086 and 1500 [8]. Just two, Bournemouth and Blackpool, were established after 1500, both constructs of the 18th century craze for seaside 'cures.' Long histories are not the sole prerogative of the larger cities: very many smaller towns and villages had been established by the time of the Domesday survey, too [9].

Even so, while the general pattern of physical settlement may not have changed, the relative importance of individual towns and cities, and indeed villages, has [10]. So too has the way those places are used. This is because English patterns of settlement, in the sense of where people live and work, are — and usually have been — a reflection of the way in which prevailing economic circumstances play themselves out geographically. The result has been an urban hierarchy that has gone through periodic upheavals as the economic basis shifted from one sort of industry to another.

As this hierarchy re-ordered itself, so different cities become pre-eminent (after London), or sank down the list, or stayed in more or less the same place; a direct reflection of what the primary economic sectors were at a given point in time. For example, until the 18th century Norwich was one of England's most prosperous provincial cities, having built its wealth from the 14th century on the wool trade. The industrial revolution refashioned this hierarchy. Places such as Manchester and Liverpool, which in the early 18th century warranted little more than a cursory mention in Defoe's tour of Britain [11], were in the 19th century shoved to the fore of an increasingly globalised industrial economy. London remained dominant throughout.

This makes England unusual, for its industrialisation, and consequent urbanisation came before the development of motorised transport, be it train or motor car [12]. Early industrial towns in England were therefore dense and quite compact, so that people could walk to work. In early 19th century Preston, for example, it would have been possible for mill workers to walk to work within about ten minutes, and to get to open countryside in less than half an hour [13]. But such convenience came at an appalling price for a city's poorer inhabitants, who found themselves stuck in overcrowded slums.

In the years before the second world war, the usual way of dealing with this chronic overcrowding was a process of slum clearance and then redistribution of the population. This brought its own problems, not least in terms of a longer journey to work and the fragmentation of communities for, as George Orwell put it in *The Road to Wigan Pier* 'When you rebuild on a large scale, what you do in effect is to scoop out the centre of the town and re-distribute it on the outskirts' [14 p.64]. Peter Hall and colleagues noted some decades later that the provision of decent public transport combined with decent housing outside of the city centre will inevitably result in a certain amount of sprawl as new homes are built along the tentacles of the new transit systems [15]. More recently still, Joel Garreau brought decentralisation up to date with his study of *Edge Cities* in the United States [16]. At a time when 'urban sprawl' is generally seen as a 'bad thing' [17] it is worth revisiting briefly what those slums were like; Orwell again:

> Take the question of overcrowding, for instance. Quite often you have eight or even ten people living in a three-roomed house. One of these rooms is a living-room, and as it probably measures about a dozen feet square and contains, besides the kitchen range and the sink, a table, some chairs and a dresser, there is no room in it for a bed. So there are eight or ten people sleeping in two small rooms, probably in at most four beds. If some of these people are adults and have to go to work, so much the worse.
>
> …Then there is the misery of leaking roofs and oozing walls, which in winter makes some rooms almost uninhabitable. Then there are bugs. …There is no way of exterminating them [14 p.53].

The appalling conditions described by Orwell had come about because of the meteoric growth in these new industrial centres, which rapidly transformed England from a rural to an urban nation, both in the sense of where people lived and in the sense of how people made their living. In 1801, about 17% of the population of England and Wales lived in cities of 20,000 or more. That proportion had more than doubled by 1851, to 35%, and by 1891 was almost 54%; and these figures exclude the many smaller towns and cities [15]. If the entire urban population of England and Wales is considered, then by 1851, half of that population was urban, and this proportion grew steadily over the following century or so, peaking in the mid-20th century and following a steady decline since then as population has dispersed out of the cities.

The cities that grew the fastest in the 19th and early 20th centuries were mostly the northern ones: Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds; Sheffield, Bradford, Birmingham; but also Bristol in the South West. Yet by 1940 it had become clear that the centre of gravity was shifting yet again: industry was now concentrating around the London region rather than in the traditional northern industrial areas of Lancashire, the Midlands and Yorkshire. Crucially, it was the underlying structure of the industrial base itself that drove this southward shift. The plain fact of the matter, as identified by the Barlow Commission in 1940, and since reinforced by more recent analysis [18], was that the newer growth industries were locating in the South-East, while those in decline stayed in their original more northern locations [13].

It was not so much that all of the northern cities shrank dramatically; some stayed stable. It was that the southern cities grew in both size and importance, leaving the northern ones behind, so that the eight decades or so from 1913 to 1998 saw a general swing to the south of the relative importance of the major towns and cities. Measured against a whole raft of indicators, including numbers of accountancy firms; bank HQs and branches; newspapers; hotels; theatres; universities; hospitals; railway station, the northern cities either declined or remained stable, while the southern cities gained steadily in importance [10].

This economic shift was not the only significant transformation, though: employment and population were not just moving southwards. Across the entire country both were also dispersing. This first shift is most evidence in what is commonly referred to as the ‘north-south divide’ which is part cultural, part economic. Definitions

vary in their sophistication, but they are mostly in agreement about the basic points [4; 19; 20]. In essence, the areas of the country north of a line that, roughly speaking, separates the greater south east from the rest of the country have lower rates of economic growth, higher rates of unemployment, poorer health and lower levels of educational attainment than are found in the areas of the country south of this line [21]. The second shift, perhaps the more interesting one for the purposes of an essay on the peri-urban, and the shift that brings us up to to date, is the divide between the urban and the rural.

PRESENT

It is hardly news that the English like the idea of living in rural areas, are generally happy to live in the suburbs, and prefer to steer clear of living in the city [15; 21; 22]. Some may seek the 'rural idyll,' but for most, it is a search for more space; whether for living or for working. It is a search, furthermore, that drives a tendency to dispersal which itself appears to be an underlying dynamic in the large scale physical evolution of settlement patterns. Various commentators over the last forty years or so have suggested that there is a general model, supported by evidence, of population dispersal preceding that of jobs and employment [15; 23; 24].

There is theoretical work which suggests that polycentric settlement patterns might be expected to arise spontaneously, given enough time [2], and evidence from living and working patterns in general, and commuting patterns in particular, suggests that England is indeed becoming increasingly polycentric, and will continue to do so [7; 8; 25; 26]. These changes serve to confuse the boundaries between urban, suburban and rural, so one corollary of increasing polycentricity has been this: the division between a mercantile urban economy and an agricultural rural economy, once clear, is now so blurred as to be all but indiscernible [5; 6; 27].

This is partly as a consequence of the changing type of work being done, but it is also as a consequence of the rise of the private motor car as the primary means of personal transport. This takes place in the context of the not quite simultaneous rise of information and communications technology. Between them, these two technologies have been responsible for many of the changes in settlement patterns that we have seen, and that we are likely to continue to see in the coming decades.

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In many respects, the true 'rural lifestyle' — by which I mean one whose hours of working are defined by nature rather than the clock — is lived only by a very small minority; mostly, they are farmers. For the majority, the rural working day is all but indistinguishable from the suburban working day, or even the urban working day: get up; arrive at work by about 9; lunch at about one o'clock; leave for home between 5 and 6pm. The commute will probably be by car, but that is the case for most people anyway, even in the cities. Information technology makes it easier than ever before for people to work at home. The length of the commute may be slightly longer in more remote areas, since the patterns of settlement are more dispersed [5]. It would probably be accurate to say that the majority of England's villages are now, in effect, somewhat remote suburbs of a nearby town or city; a node in a wider network rather than a self-contained and largely self-sufficient farming community [7]. If the traditional

division between town and country has been eroded, then how do we analyse this new and mercurial urban form?

One recent analysis sought to delineate England and Wales in terms of its 'rural regions:' those areas containing no settlements with a population larger than 40,000 [5]. They dovetail neatly with the classic city-regions — Cardiff-South Wales; London; Birmingham; Manchester-Liverpool; Leeds-East Yorkshire; Newcastle — to provide a consistent and coherent urban and rural framework for analysis. Crucially, this new analysis points strongly to the emergence of the 'peri-urban' as an urban form in its own right.

Three categories of area are suggested, labelled simply Areas 1, 2 and 3, and derived from socio-economic divisions set out in the 2001 UK Census [5]. Area 1 lies immediately to the north and west of London, and is notable for its dependence on service sector employment. Activity rates for both the economy and employment tend to be relatively high, as are car use and travel to work distances. Cycling and walking were correspondingly low. Area 2, in effect an extension of Area 1, is roughly equivalent to the greater south-east. It has lower rates of economic activity, higher unemployment and lower educational attainment than Area 1. The rest of England except for Areas 1 and 2, and the major city-regions, comprises Area 3 [5]. These rural/peri-urban areas are highly variegated and need a closer look.

City, town and village dwellers may earn their livings doing similar kinds of work, but these similarities mask some important differences. But if it is indeed the case that the rural regions in England are, in effect, peri-urban, then these differences between the costs of living in the rural/peri-urban areas, and in the larger towns and cities are measurable ones.

For example the growth in knowledge intensive business between 1998 and 2005 was 21 percent in urban areas, but 46 percent in rural areas. In 2008, the average family home cost £8,000 more in a rural area than in an urban one; homes intended for first time buyers were £16,000 more expensive in rural areas than in urban ones [6]. The average wage was over £7,000 per year less in rural areas than urban areas. A home, and a first home especially, is clearly far less accessible in country than in town.

Poor communications and accessibility mean that those living in rural areas have far less ready access to services, be they public or private [20]. Job opportunities are literally fewer and farther between, and they pay less [6]. This becomes particularly apparent in the case of transport. The private car is the primary means of travel (generally over 60 percent), both for work and leisure, although over most of the southern rural region, travel to work by foot or bicycle is also quite common (from 14-32 percent). The average distance travelled to work, at 12 to 16 kilometres, is higher than the national average of 12 kilometres; in the North and West of England, average distance is higher still, at between 17 and 27 kilometres [5]. This is also the case for those areas immediately to the south and east of Greater London, although this probably reflects the large commuting flows to London itself.

Perhaps these disparities are just an especially harsh instance of the laws of supply and demand: 90 percent of country dwellers want to stay put and 50 percent of urban dwellers say they want to move to the countryside [6]; a collective vote perhaps for the 'rural idyll' long beloved of the English, whether in the academic literature or recent popular culture [8; 23; 28; 29]. More prosaically, but just as importantly,

the Office of National Statistics forecasts that by 2028, the urban population will have increased by nine percent, and the rural population by 16 percent [6]. In other words, the demand for some sort of rural, or at least non-urban lifestyle is set to continue for the foreseeable future.

In the more densely populated parts of the country, and the south east in particular, these areas, and the way they work, confuse the boundaries between what it means to be peri-urban and what it means to be sub-urban. Such areas provide the space and fresh air of the countryside, and they are relatively distant from the perceived dangers of the city; but thanks to technologies such as the car and the internet, they are not isolated. It is small wonder that suburbs are popular places to live. But it is that very looseness of form that makes the problems outlined above so much harder to solve; and there is also the most obvious paradox that to grow, they must use the very land that makes such areas attractive in the first place.

In England, the usual way of handling this problem has been through a process of containment through a combination of restrictions on where development can take place, such as green belts, or national parks; and the nationalization of the right to develop, on which the England's current planning system is based.

It has been reasonably successful at both preventing development in the wrong places, and in encouraging new development in the right places, as demonstrated by the Greater South East. London has remained separate from the surrounding towns and cities because of its green belt [30]; and the new towns built in the post war years have absorbed a lot of the overspill resulting from the post-war reconstruction of London [31]. However, the planning system has been less successful in its attempts to steer the economic geography of the country: despite half a century of different policy initiatives that had the avowed intention of reinvigorating declining areas, economic growth has continued to concentrate in the greater south east, resulting in an increasingly polarised nation in which demand for housing and employment in the south outstrips that in the north [4; 12].

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The planning system has the basic aim of steering and mediating the development of places, based as it is in the notion of improving the well-being of society as a whole. Nonetheless, it does operate within a democratic framework, and that puts it in an increasingly difficult position. If half of all people who live in cities would actually rather not do so, then we can expect pressure on the peri-urban region and beyond to continue. The quintessential expression of such urban growth is the 'edge city,' most famously identified almost two decades by Joel Garreau [16]. It is in essence a new (in terms of urban history), low density form of development designed expressly for people who want to combine the convenience of the motor car with with the amenities of the city and the lifestyle of the suburbs. But the rise of the edge city should concern us, for it gives rise to an old and awkward question: how to contain urban England? [15].

The signs are that the socio-economic forces of today seem likely to encourage more polycentric and dispersed urban forms [32]. Since the early 1970s, people in the United Kingdom have been leaving the larger cities and heading for smaller towns and villages, rural areas and the coast. Even allowing for the urban renaissance that has undoubtedly benefitted cities such as Manchester and Leeds, or their

centres at least, the English retain a strong and deeply rooted preference for a suburban lifestyle; indeed, they have for decades [22; 26]. Even the optimist must take the pragmatic view that the tendency to dispersal of live-work patterns is sufficiently well-embedded that there is little option but to accept it, however grudgingly.

FUTURE

For the urban planner in search of policy-based solutions to the problem of sustainability, this all makes for bleak reading. As work patterns become increasingly dispersed, any form of public transport will be less viable; the socio-economic polarisation that already exists will probably continue, and may well be exacerbated by a resistance to the construction of new houses and new communities. Again, this is particularly the case in the densely populated South-East, where local people come increasingly to fear, whether rightly or wrongly, that the possibility that it will become one large built-up area is a very real one. In short, a prognosis based on 'business as usual' is rather a dismal one. Indeed, it takes little imagination to derive, for it is nothing more than a fairly straight extrapolation of current trends [21].

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All of which brings us back to the problem of planning for a peri-urban nation. That problem can summarised as follows. England is an increasingly polycentric nation, which by virtue of its relatively high population density is also largely peri-urban. Suburban living is more popular than urban living, has been for a long time, and looks set to continue being more popular. The population is increasing, and so too is the number of households; it follows, therefore, that demand for suburban housing is likely to continue to rise. This demand will be situated in a broader context of climate change and energy supply challenges, to name two.

The planner faces a dilemma, then, and it is this. On the one hand, suburban development exemplifies urban sprawl, using up valuable land, and encouraging a more car-oriented society. On the other hand, the suburbs are the preferred place to live for most of the population, and compared with dense urban environments or the farmland of large scale 'agri-business,' they are better adapted to climate change, and they are more likely to support biodiversity [33; 34].

This highly networked urban form is perhaps more complex than the urban forms that have preceded it. It is also the antithesis of the compact, public-transport oriented walkable urban form that has been posited as an ideal [35; 36].

Furthermore, it may be that the polycentric urban landscape is inescapable. Theoretical work by Batty has shown how polycentric settlement patterns might be expected to emerge spontaneously as a consequence of positive feedback mechanisms that reinforce existing patterns of development over time, and thus lock them in place [2]. The settlement patterns that emerge are similar in general form to the real pattern of development, at least in England, where towns and cities are linked together in a fine network of commuting patterns [7].

We have seen that empirical work by Breheny has shown that settlement patterns in England are becoming more dispersed over time as living and working patterns change [25; 26] so that people both live and work in suburban locations on the peripheries of towns and cities. In effect, they are now commuting between the edges of

different settlements. This is the 'edge city' phenomenon identified by Garreau in the early 1990s [16], and as Batty points out, this is indicative of a deep-seated dynamic that policy may struggle with [2].

Basically, it seems that the polycentric development patterns that the ESDP is promoting for the European territory might be expected to arise spontaneously in any case. The question then becomes one not of promoting polycentrism as such, but of steering the way in which it develops, perhaps to some sort of 'concentrated deconcentration,' whereby rather than put new development on the edges of existing settlements in a process of continued car-dependent urban sprawl, it is concentrated in nodes that are more able to service public transport [37]. The implication of this is that new settlements may be required, and the recent 'eco-towns' initiative was one attempt to put such a policy in place.

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Since May 2010, however, and the election of a new coalition government which is focused on dealing with the economic crisis, such large scale strategic approaches to planning policy have slid down the government's list of priorities. At present, the overarching planning policies that do exist are 'national' only insofar as they are intended to be applied by all planning authorities in the nation. There were until recently regional policies, in the form of 'regional spatial strategies', but those have been abolished by the new government. In their place are 'multi-area agreements', by which adjacent districts (which may be urban, rural or both) can co-operate with one another, but the long term strategic policy mechanisms are largely absent. And yet in many matters of planning policy, we are, in essence, trying to handle a 'region without edges.' This is what makes England interesting: most of the country is bounded by coastline, and so is, for the most part, a large region *with* edges, but one that contains several 'regions without edges.' Most obviously, the regions are the city-regions, but as we saw above, the rural regions have their own particular *modus operandi*. England could perhaps be described as a finite system of city-regions situated in a seamless peri-urban matrix which, in the south east, comes close in places to being examples of the 'edge city' phenomenon.

In the case of England, there is a strong analytical case to be made for a national spatial strategy. To be effective, such a strategy needs to be long term; at least thirty years, and possibly forty or sixty years. Such long-term 'future-gazing' is an ambitious undertaking, but it is also necessary, if only as a means of thinking about how certain scenarios might be dealt with. It is here that developments of Batty's agent-based modeling approach, described above, can provide the sort of analytical basis that can underpin the development of a large scale, highly strategic plan. Such models are useful thinking aids for they pose the awkward 'what if?' questions that any long term strategy must be equipped to deal with if it is to be effective.

This long term strategy would act as a context for smaller scale medium term plans that are designed to fit the prevailing dynamic and context. These would have to take the form of the 'multi-area agreements' mentioned above.

But there is a political question too, and that is how such an overview should be implemented. Multi-area agreements have the advantage that at some pragmatic level they make sense: a coalition that aims to build on the strengths of its members. They are

voluntary, and not imposed by central government, which has its advantages; but each multi area agreement exists in isolation from the others. Multi area agreements, then, may be part of the solution, but on there own they seem likely to result in a small scale version of the archipelago economy, with successful 'MAA regions' and a spatial in-between that falls between the gaps [7]. This is where the large scale overview comes in to the picture: by providing a strategic context for the the multi area agreements, it can provide some measure of broader certainty with regard to what other MAA regions are doing. To do so, it would have to be implemented by a body that could ride above day-to-day party politics.

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The answer to how do we plan for a peri-urban nation is both obvious and unwelcome. Obvious because, perhaps without realising it, we have been planning for a peri-urban nation anyway; unwelcome because our experience from doing it tells us that it is a terribly difficult thing to do, since we must work against what appear to be some very deep-seated forces. In England at least, the plan needs to be a national one.

The peri-urban region is a natural and inevitable part of every human settlement: human beings have always wanted to expand their territories, and there is little reason to expect that to change. If a continuing process of dispersal is an inherent part of urban evolution, then we will need to find a way of dealing with it. For while growth may be a natural part of urban evolution, untrammeled, it contains the seeds of its own destruction; in other words there are limits to urban growth. It is probably a fair assumption that where exactly those limits should lie is something that few planners know. It is doubtless an equally fair assumption that they would very much like to be told.

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