

The Myth of the Metropolis: The Role of the City in Canadian Regionalism

L. D. McCann

Volume 9, numéro 3, february 1981

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019299ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019299ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

McCann, L. D. (1981). The Myth of the Metropolis: The Role of the City in Canadian Regionalism. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 9(3), 52–58. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019299ar>

Résumé de l'article

La notion de métropole, tenue pour acquise depuis longtemps dans la population et la littérature canadiennes, est devenue un mythe national. Le Canada n'est plus un pays avec, d'un côté, une métropole et, de l'autre, le reste du pays. Les richesses naturelles ont engendré une mise en valeur soutenue à travers plusieurs arrières-pays et ont engendré aussi la création de capitales régionales qui ont une influence directe sur la vie économique, sociale et politique du Canada. De nos jours, la puissance des villes régionales se traduit par une réorientation de la vie du pays et par la recrudescence du régionalisme qui caractérise le Canada d'aujourd'hui.

THE MYTH OF THE METROPOLIS:
THE ROLE OF THE CITY IN CANADIAN REGIONALISM*

- - - - -
L.D. McCann

Résumé/Abstract

La notion de métropole, tenue pour acquise depuis longtemps dans la population et la littérature canadiennes, est devenue un mythe national. Le Canada n'est plus un pays avec, d'un côté, une métropole et, de l'autre, le reste du pays. Les richesses naturelles ont engendré une mise en valeur soutenue à travers plusieurs arrières-pays et ont engendré aussi la création de capitales régionales qui ont une influence directe sur la vie économique, sociale et politique du Canada. De nos jours, la puissance des villes régionales se traduit par une réorientation de la vie du pays et par la recrudescence du régionalisme qui caractérise le Canada d'aujourd'hui.

The concept of metropolitanism, long an accepted fact in Canadian life and letters, has assumed the status of a national myth. Canada is no longer a country structured simply as metropolis and hinterland. Resource wealth has fostered sustained hinterland development and created regional metropolitan centres which directly influence the nation's economic, social, and political life. The strength of regional cities today affects both the redirection of national life and the renewed expression of regionalism which currently characterizes Canada.

* * *

Metropolitanism is at root a socio-economic concept.... Briefly it implies the emergence of a city of outstanding size to dominate not only its surrounding countryside but other cities and their countrysides, the whole area being organized by the metropolis, through control of communications, trade, and finance, into one economic and social unit that is focussed on the metropolitan 'centre of dominance' and through it trades with the world. Political activity, too, may often become centred on the metropolis.¹

Canada is an urban nation. Nearly four out of every five Canadians live in urban places. In fact, approximately one of every four Canadians lives either in Toronto or in Montreal. Yet, Canada is also a nation of regions, each of which has a distinct metropolitan focus. People in Ontario perceive Toronto as their metropolis; Quebecers view Montreal as a primate city. Outside of central Canada, people in British Columbia cast an eye to the dominance of Vancouver, while Albertans search for leadership in the rising influence of Edmonton and Calgary. Only in Atlantic Canada and in the Canadian Northlands does there exist an

*This article is a summary of an invited lecture presented at the Canadian Studies Centre, Duke University, February 12, 1980.

aggrieved acceptance of external metropolitan control.

But have these urban perceptions always been shared in the regions of Canada? Down to the eve of World War I, the settlers of western Canada were all too painfully aware of the power of an external metropolis; if control was not based in Europe, then it was certainly located in central Canada. In a similar way, the sting of the metropolis has been felt in the early development of all other Canadian regions. All too often, when the contemporary character of Canada is assessed, it is assumed that the central Canadian metropolis continues to hold sway over the hinterland. This is the myth of the metropolis. What might have been true of the past is not necessarily true of the present. The hinterland in Canada is no longer rural in character; there is a strong urban presence in the social and economic fabric of the hinterland which itself gives expression to the process of regionalism. Canada cannot be classified simply as metropolis and hinterland. The gradient is more complex than that. The emerging strength of hinterland cities is an important shaping force of increasing Canadian regionalism.

AN URBAN PERSPECTIVE ON REGIONALISM

Regionalism is the expression, by the people or institutions of an area, of the values, interests, and concerns which are shared by the region's population. From an urban perspective, regionalism can equally be, on the one hand, a behavioral response to forces emanating from an external metropolis and, on the other hand, the use of internal metropolitan power to express regional character outside of the region.

The metropolis of course, is an innovator, not only of economic leadership, but also of social, political, and cultural traits. From this position of power, it controls the flow of capital, entrepreneurship, technology, and labour - the factors of production - that are used in regional development. In return, it receives raw materials and profit, as well as people who migrate to it in search of greater well-being. This process can evoke regional expressions which denounce those situations of external control, domination, or underdevelopment created by the metropolis, even though, it can be argued, the basic factors of production are being employed by the metropolis in a natural and fair manner. Thus, an urban dimension of regionalism is the expression of protest against the metropolis. But this same pattern can be turned on its head to favour even a peripheral region. As a region grows and develops socially and economically, the focus of regional power, which ultimately becomes urban based, gains an internal momentum, and can itself exert an external force or presence beyond regional boundaries. This usually takes place only after a considerable passage of time, and in the case of Canada, only if the resource base of a region has generated sufficient internally-based wealth to create an entrepreneurial class capable of propelling the regional city towards a position of innovation.

THE ROLE OF THE METROPOLIS IN CANADA

The appearance of the metropolis in Canada coincides generally with the federation of its provinces after 1867.² The staple entrepôts, garrison centres, and commercial towns of

pre-Confederation Canada were essentially colonial outposts of a European core centred on London. These settlements were the intermediaries of a staple economy, because through them flowed the imports of people, products, and services sent in exchange for commodities of the sea, forest, land, and mine. Communities were scattered along ocean shores, lake fronts, and river valleys wherever a profit could be turned. From this fragmented base, Montreal rose to command the "Empire of the St. Lawrence." But the impact of colonial Montreal, although strong in the old Northwest, was initially weak in Atlantic Canada; even its presence in Upper Canada became much reduced with the emergence of Toronto. Throughout pre-Confederation Canada, then, rural-oriented localism, rather than regionalism, let alone urban-centred regionalism, was the more characteristic pattern.

With Confederation came increased social and economic interaction among regions which fostered integration. With integration, in turn, came the centring force of metropolitan evolution. The localism of communities tied to a trans-Atlantic hearth was undone and replaced by linkages to central Canadian leadership and innovation. As new and successive staple frontiers were developed across Canada - the mining and forest thrust into both British Columbia and the Canadian Shield or agricultural expansion throughout the western interior - the hinterland became attached primarily to Montreal and Toronto. Over time, this pattern intensified. For example, the National Policy of economic development, introduced in the late 1870s, reinforced the growing

control of the centre in the spheres of manufacturing, transportation, and finance. The lines of ultimate control, however, extended beyond Canada to reach an international metropolis, such as New York or London.

As Canada entered the twentieth century, factors of geographic position, large local markets, the nexus of transportation routes, and political strength continued to reinforce the initial advantage of metropolitanism placed at the disposal of central Canada. Indeed, the maturing urban places of southern Ontario and southern Quebec emerged to act in unison as a core system to wield substantial control over an expanding resource hinterland. This pattern continued little changed during years of war and depression and down through the expansionary era of the 1950s and 1960s. True, the external and internal features of the pattern became more complex. Canada's links to the United States were stronger and more diverse than ever before, and new ties with Japan and other nations had been forged. And internally, as the limits of settlement were expanded, cities of the heartland and hinterland intensified their characteristic economic functions. But there were nevertheless portents of change in the evolving pattern of regional metropolitan development. As before, the precursor of new regional wealth and regional urban development was staple production. Increased world demand for lumber and pulp and paper and new calls for metallic ores and hydroelectric power have greatly enriched British Columbia's economy. Fossil fuels, and most particularly oil and natural gas, have parlayed Alberta into a new position of strength. Even Saskatchewan, whose

entrepreneurs included a socialist government, can now claim an improved status as a result of potash development. These substantially expanded regional economies have fostered urban development that has created new roles for the hinterland's rising metropolitan centres.

THE POWER OF THE METROPOLIS

There can be little doubt that the metropolis operates from a position of strength. Through its political representation, it is able to influence society and economy. In Canada, federal immigration policies, which search aggressively for skilled labour, have served in part to reinforce the diversity of the core's already considerable workforce. Further, and more explicitly, the economic policy of national tariff protection has created an economic shadow of American branch plants over Canada's industrial heartland, and not across the nation's hinterland. Beyond these politically directed examples, it is evident that the sizable population of the metropolis transmits social values, business practices, and communication techniques which are readily adopted elsewhere. In Canada, the corporate operations of Hollis Street in Halifax differ little from those of Bay Street, Toronto. Even on the suburban landscape, there is little to differentiate the regional cities of Canada: ubiquitous bungalows everywhere conform to national housing standards. Notwithstanding Canada's ethnic pluralism, or the tensions between English and French, the cities of Canada have, in a sense, coalesced in their social character. There is little evidence of regional protest against the social standards of the

city. Regionalism based on these criteria tends to be rural in origin, not urban. And in these circumstances, the protest can be directed just as much against a regional city as it can against a national or international metropolis. The complaints of industrial Cape Breton usually reach Halifax before they are heard in Ottawa.

It is economic power, particularly that which is extended or supported by political decisions, that generates regional anger against the metropolis. By definition, a metropolis acquires power through the successive acquisition of trading, manufacturing, transportation, and financial roles.³ With these activities in place, it is able to create a self-perpetuating state of well-being to compete against, and defeat, most urban competitors. The de-industrialization of the Maritimes is a test of this statement. Through the late nineteenth century, the region was able to establish important industries of iron and steel, sugar, and textiles. The National Policy of government tariffs, bounties, and freight rate preferences complemented local resources to build an apparently impressive manufacturing sector.⁴ By the early 1920s, however, certain metropolitan concessions, particularly freight rate allowances, had been removed, and the fragile structure of the region's manufacturing stood revealed, virtually destroyed. But can other factors explain this failure? Would the collapse have taken place regardless of shifting metropolitan policy? Indeed, in some towns and cities, limited local markets, a weakened resource base, and even questionable entrepreneurial practices all

contributed substantially to the process of de-industrialization.⁵ Nevertheless, the ensuing regional outcry of "Maritime Rights" cast blame directly at the metropolis. Is this the myth of the metropolis?

THE MYTH OF THE METROPOLIS

If the purported force of the metropolis is all pervasive, it should be possible to measure the social and economic features of its power. In this way, the metropolis should reveal itself as a leader in such areas as population growth, earned incomes, and manufacturing and financial concentration. Moreover, it should continue to consolidate this leadership by acquiring, over time, an increasing national share of economic activity, if not of population.

It is true that economic strength remains in the domain of Canada's urban-industrial core; manufacturing and business concentration illustrate this point. In 1978, Toronto headquartered 183 of Canada's leading 500 companies (measured by total volume of sales); Montreal 101; Vancouver 43; and Calgary 38.⁶ Thus, there is a certain economic well-being in heartland cities such that Ottawa and Toronto are leaders in incomes attained. At the same time, though, some of the core's cities rank lower than hinterland cities in incomes earned. Indeed, Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver, all of the western periphery, rank in the top ten. Moreover, these same communities are now growing at ever faster rates, absorbing a larger share of Canada's urban population. They are functioning increasingly as metropolitan centres, drawing financial and corporate power away from central Canada. Calgary's growth rates in financial

transactions - for example, cheques cleared, stocks sold, business offices attained - out-stripped those of Toronto and Montreal during the 1970s. As seats of national corporate power, Vancouver headquarters a majority of the country's largest forestry companies, and Calgary in 1979 housed fully 526 of the 612 Canadian-based exploration and production companies in the oil sector. In this national context, it is Edmonton's political role which has enhanced its prominence. Today, as Peter Smith argues, "government decisions are as crucial to regional development as the decisions taken by financiers and industry executives."⁷ Smith further points out that if there is validity to the popular notion that Canada's "centre of gravity" is shifting westward, the shift is bipolar - economic power towards Calgary, political power towards Edmonton. As before, therefore, resource production has altered the metropolitan pattern in Canada, and heightened awareness of the force of Canadian regionalism. If the expressed regionalism of Alberta prevails, no longer will the industrialists of central Canada have access to cheap energy. Is this not a direct challenge, an expression of urban-based regionalism, against the centripetal policies of the metropolis so long imposed on the western interior? Is there not a sense of regional justice here? The myth of the metropolis is clearly under attack.

CONCLUSION

The traditional metropolitan interpretation, with its connotations of tributary status, economic dependency, and a steep cultural gradient, has surely become, especially since World War

II, a national myth. Certainly this is true in Canada's western regions. Here, urban residents express themselves in innovative ways as leaders of national and even international circumstance. As the 1980s are entered, the capital, technology, and corporate strategies of Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver are being implemented well beyond their immediate regions. This behavior has heightened the regional consciousness of these people, and their increasing regionalism has intensified the uniqueness and fragility of Canada's regional fabric.

But all of Canada's regions cannot claim this advance. The urban centres of the Maritimes, Newfoundland, the Northlands, and even of Quebec, still protest against the centralizing force of the Canadian metropolitan areas. Their urban-based regionalism is still marked by a sense of frustration, if not, at times, of anger. The tone of regional grievances has been tempered in the Maritimes, at least, by the well-meaning efforts of the federal government to halt the slide of the region's falling economic position. Still, metropolitan control will remain always in place, as will regional protest, when the stimulus for economic development is assigned in the political market place.

Canada is a nation of regions in which the metropolis has exerted a considerable presence, not only in the political arena, but also in economic and cultural spheres. The role of the city in Canadian regionalism has been profound. As a symbol of increasing regionalism, the rise of the western cities has created a challenge to the myth of metropolitan domination by Toronto

and by Montreal. The gradient of metropolitanism has been altered. The simple dichotomy in Canada of metropolis and hinterland is no longer valid. The role of recent city growth has been to increase the identity and diversity of Canada's regional fabric.

* * *

NOTES

- 1 J.M.S. Careless, "Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1954), p. 17.
- 2 Useful summaries of urban development in Canada are contained in: J.M.S. Careless, *The Rise of Cities in Canada Before 1914*, Canadian Historical Association Booklet No. 32 (Ottawa, 1978); and R.E. Preston, "The Evolution of Urban Canada: The Post-1867 Period," in R.M. Irving, ed., *Readings in Canadian Geography*, 3rd ed. (Toronto, 1978), pp. 19-46.
- 3 N.S.B. Gras, *An Introduction to Economic History* (New York, 1922), pp. 186-340. For both a theoretical and empirical discussion of the acquisition of these functional roles see my "Urban Growth in a Staple Economy: The Emergence of Vancouver as a Regional Metropolis, 1886-1914," in L.J. Evenden, ed., *Vancouver: Western Metropolis* (Victoria, 1978), pp. 17-41.
- 4 T.W. Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910," *Acadiensis*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring, 1972), pp. 3-28.
- 5 I have explored the growth and decline of the Maritime

city in two papers: "Staples and the New Industrialism in the Growth of Post-Confederation Halifax," *Acadiensis*, Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979), pp. 47-79; and "In Accordance with this Law of City Growth: The Metals Industry and Urban Growth in Pictou County, 1858-1929," *Acadiensis* (forthcoming, 1981).

- 6 "Canada's Top 500 Companies," *Canadian Business*, Vol. 52, No. 7 (July, 1979), pp. 53-117.
- 7 P.J. Smith, "Alberta Since 1945: The Maturing Settlement System," in L.D. McCann, ed., *Heartland and Hinterland: A Geography of Canada* (forthcoming, 1981).