

The Next California: Invisible City-state

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Thesis

Application of the principles and vision of Lewis Mumford suggests the direction of California evolution: from a state containing a set of strongly linked megalopolises into a regional city-state (a single "hyperopolis")--a positive mutation in the logical process of the life and death of cities, leading toward a new regional "conurban" framework. The epochs of California are mapped in an attempt to discern what we may expect for our state in the 21st Century.

Outline

- I. *California is a complex adaptive system*
- II. *The logical stages of the city*
- III. *Fresh mutation contra blind process*
- IV. *A new regional framework*
- V. *Epochs of the California region*
- VI. *"Any point may become..."*

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A city and its contado (Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*, pp xxv) can evolve to become a megalopolis (Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp. 285-292). We observe that California is a quasi-autonomous isolated regional complex of cities and their contados: the state is a bounded collection of megalopolises. We hypothesize that a mutation based on the violation of the third of three "qualities of a regional complex" (Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp. 312-315) of the life cycle of cities will lead California to evolve into a regional "conurban" (Mumford, *The City in History*, pp.565) framework: an invisible city-state.

In his preface to his book *Imperial San Francisco*, Gray Brechin observed that Lewis Mumford "well understood that there exists a critical *ecological* relationship between the city and countryside."¹ Brechin used this observation to create his powerful insight of the city and its contado.² Again drawing on Lewis Mumford, the "Pyramid of Mining" thesis of *Imperial San Francisco* is founded on Mumford's concept of "the Megamachine," the proposal that "a constellation of ... activities has operated from the appearance of the first cities ... to give humanity its growing dominion over nature ... [The Megamachine] is largely invisible ... since its working parts are human bodies driven by ... belief systems."³ Brechin's journalistic approach to history succeeded admirably as it characterized the development of San Francisco as "driven by a small cadre ... who sought imperial hegemony within the Pacific Basin,"⁴ but Brechin's focus on a very colorful cast of characters tends to draw attention away from the operation of the "invisible Megamachine." Studies of the role of complexity in natural processes have begun to "observe the kaleidoscopic nature of large cities." The life of a city is seen as a natural system, so that "a city's coherence is ... imposed on a perpetual flux of people and structures ... a city is a pattern in time."⁵ The active elements that compose a city, individuals ("human bodies"), businesses, government, municipal services such as police and fire, special interest groups, community organizations, behave in a way that somehow keeps the city running over very long periods of time. These intelligent elements adapt to their environment, they live and learn, act and react, plan and do: they all act as adaptive agents in the system. The operation of a city and its contado can therefore be considered a "complex adaptive system."⁶ Complexity theory has given us a way to see some of the working parts of the invisible Megamachine and to "reduce again to human dimensions the vast impersonal network" of the "functional grid" that serves as "framework of the invisible city."⁷

The state of California is a region composed of several cities and their contados. Mumford prescribed how to conceive a region: "take an area large enough to embrace a sufficient range of interests, and small enough to keep these interests in focus and to

¹ Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*, pp. xxii. Brechin's italics.

² Brechin, pp. xxv.

³ Brechin, pp.19.

⁴ Brechin, pp.19.

⁵ John H. Holland, *Hidden Order*, pp.1.

⁶ Holland, pp.4.

⁷ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, pp.563-564.

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make them a subject of direct collective concern." ⁸ Mumford listed three special qualities that mark the regional complex. The first quality is its geographic character. California is a vast landscape that contains virtually every type of natural feature, and it is relatively isolated from the rest of North America and the United States by these features, surrounded as it is by mountains, desert, and ocean. The second quality is "balance, a state of dynamic equilibrium, between its various parts."⁹ California's natural resources and intellectual wealth combined with its distinctive economic and political autonomy encourage us to infer that the second quality exists here. Mumford confirms us in this inference when he wrote,

Each region has its own configuration: its own special partnerships and associations, its own favored resources, and its own equally characteristic dearths or impoverishments. These resources vary with the culture of the community itself. As the cultural heritage increases, a larger part of the environment becomes useful and meaningful: *the natural conditions of a region, so far from being nullified by the increase of culture and technical skill, are actually magnified.* ¹⁰

The third quality of a regional complex is that it does not have "definite physical boundaries."¹¹ Mumford elaborated that when "human communities are considered, the region becomes ... a system of inter-relationships that overflow and become shadowy at the margins."¹² California so strongly exhibits the first and second qualities of a regional complex that it violates this third condition! Mumford permitted this violation, however, for he concluded his discussion of the criteria for a regional complex with the maxim, "To define human areas, one must seek, not the periphery alone but the center."¹³

The centers of the human areas in California are the cities. As a collection of complex adaptive systems, California itself can be regarded as an evolving complex adaptive system. Acknowledging the work of Oswald Spengler, Arnold J. Toynbee, and principally Patrick Geddes in his description of the stages of a city's development and deterioration, Mumford described in considerable detail his logical process of the stages of development and decadence of the human city. We can map the history of California to Mumford's stages in the cycle of growth and decay of the city. For brevity in this paper, our mapping of California period to city stage is presented in **Table 1**.¹⁴ This mapping can also be regarded as a layout of the "geological" strata of California history.¹⁵ One can trace with alarm the consequences of the complete trajectory of Mumford's stages, a familiar path over the course of human civilization. As Californians, we lack true objectivity, but a simple survey of conditions and events suggests we are well on our way beyond "megalopolis" to the fifth stage: we seem to be at a fork in the road. To select the better road, we need only consult our map more carefully. To clarify this point,

⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.314.

⁹ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.312.

¹⁰ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.313. Mumford's italics.

¹¹ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.315.

¹² *Op. cit.*

¹³ *Op. cit.*

¹⁴ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.285-297.

¹⁵ Professor R. Garcia in lecture, CSU Hayward, July 2003.

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Chart 1 illustrates the flow of human adaptive agent energy in each successive California epoch - the state of the complex adaptive system at that time - suggested by our mapping. One of the most recent developments in California history is the migration of families and firms inland from the coast. Beginning as suburban sprawl in the 1950's, the expansion eastward of San Francisco into the East Bay (along I-80 and I-580) and Los Angeles into the Inland Empire (along I-10 and I-15) has now marched even farther eastward to meet the I-5 corridor, where urban populations have coalesced to integrate with the vast agri-business community of the Central Valley.

The character of California as a regional complex provides an alternate framework for the evolution of each megalopolis: a larger invisible city has crystallized. The economic, political, and social challenges of the city have not disappeared, but they may now be considered in a reformatted context. "Periods of rapid social crystallization ... are periods when the community acquires, through critical inquiry and self-conscious re-orientation, a firm collective insight into its own purposes[.] While the rational definition of the ideal framework does not alone effect the necessary transition, it is an important element in changing the direction of the blind process."¹⁶ Because California violates Mumford's third characteristic of the regional complex, Californians know well the criticality¹⁷ of their constrained periphery, and accept as their own the identity of their region as well as the citizenship of their cities. Californians perceive "the full import of their relations with the earth."¹⁸ Referring to the advanced infrastructure of modern transportation, communication, and power distribution, Mumford points out that "special local advantages, once concentrated in a circumscribed center, a mere point, can be distributed throughout a whole region." The effect of these kinds of technology "is to ... *enlarge the sphere of activity at the same time they diminish the need for close settlement.*"¹⁹ "The important thing that has happened," Mumford declares, "is that the geographic region has become ... the *metropolis.*"²⁰

Must we take Mumford at his word? Will the evolutionary step to regional complex, if done correctly, readjust the city life cycle's clock? There can be the hope that if the fork away from Tyrannopolis is taken, in the mutation of the cycle from city to city-state and the return to Metropolis at a higher layer of community, "[a]ny point in the new region may be the locus of its maximum culture."²¹ We will let Mumford answer our question.

Yet in the midst of all this disintegration fresh nodules of growth have appeared and ... a new pattern of life has begun to emerge. ... If we can distinguish the main outlines of this multi-dimensional ... economy we should also be able to describe the nature ... of the emerging city and the future pattern of human settlement. Above all, we should anticipate the next act in the human drama,

¹⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.299.

¹⁷ I refer here to the criticality of self-organized systems. See Per Bak, *How Nature Works*, Springer Verlag, New York, 1996.

¹⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.322.

¹⁹ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.344. Mumford's italics.

²⁰ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.345. My italics.

²¹ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp.346.

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provided mankind escapes the deathtrap our blind commitment to a lopsided, power-oriented, anti-organic technology has set for it.²²

²² Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, pp.560.

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Period of California History	Stage of Cycle of City Growth	Essential Features
<i>Epoch 1a.</i> Spanish-Pastoral	Eopolis	Village life. Permanent habitation and stable agriculture. Differentiated communities based on topography and resources. Nucleus of culture.
<i>Epoch 1b.</i> Americanization and Statehood	Polis	Association of villages with a common site lending to defense, common deity, common meeting place. Mechanization and a rise in industrial production by division of labor: special instruments of power and precision. Dependence on local region for water, resources. Important buildings and architecture reflect collective sentiments.
<i>Epoch 2.</i> Gold Rush through the end of the Nineteenth Century, the rise of the "Big Four" and San Francisco.	Metropolis	Commanding strategic location, better land for agriculture, better supply of water and resources, safe harbor, better land or water routes. Specialized trade and industry, fresh invention, development of ideas, library and university. Agriculture subordinate to manufacture: rivalry of "patricians of the soil" and industrialists, migration of an elite within the polity. Religion and culture become self-conscious: new synthesis and fusion. Maximum release of cultural energy. Personalization of war, breach between owners and workers. Signs of weakness beneath the surface.
<i>Epoch 3.</i> Spanish-American War, development of water resources and the rise of Los Angeles, the entertainment industry, WWII, the Interstates, Immigration, collapse of the Dot-Coms at the end of the Twentieth Century	Megalopolis	Capitalist mythos of bigness and power dominates. Owners of production subordinate every other fact of life to achievement of riches and display of wealth. Belief in abstract quantity: biggest, most expensive, largest, greatest, highest, etc. Military conquest. Financial domination by means of trade and legal processes. Extended agricultural base. Callous moral sense. Standardization of cultural products. Failure of direct action. Scholarship and science by tabulation: sterile research, quantitative education. Knowledge divorced from life. Beginning of the decline.

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Period of California History	Stage of Cycle of City Growth	Essential Features
<i>Epoch 4.</i> Opening of the Twenty-First Century, Financial mis-management crimes of Enron etc, Global recession and State Governor Recall, worldwide Terror War, Multi-racial, multi-cultural California, rise of the Central Valley and the I-5 corridor	Tyrannopolis	Beginnings of the megalopolitan exodus. Exploitation of the exchequer. Economic and social parasitism, predatory means as a substitute for trade. Intensification of commercial cycles, depression following overexpansion and speculation, heightened by wars and war-preparations. Failure of the economic and political rulers to maintain bare decencies in government and business: widespread moral apathy and failure of civic responsibility. Overstress of mass sports. Domination of respectable people who behave like criminals and of criminals whose activities do not debar them from respectability. Imperialistic wars, epidemics of disease. Municipal and state bankruptcy. Drain of national taxes to support the military establishment. Recrudescence of superstition; repression and censorship. Cessation of productive work in the arts and sciences.
<i>Regional complex California City-state departs the "blind process" of this Cycle</i>	Nekropolis	War and famine and disease rack city and country. Towns become shells. The names persist; the reality vanishes.

Table 1. Epochs of California and the Life Cycle of the City

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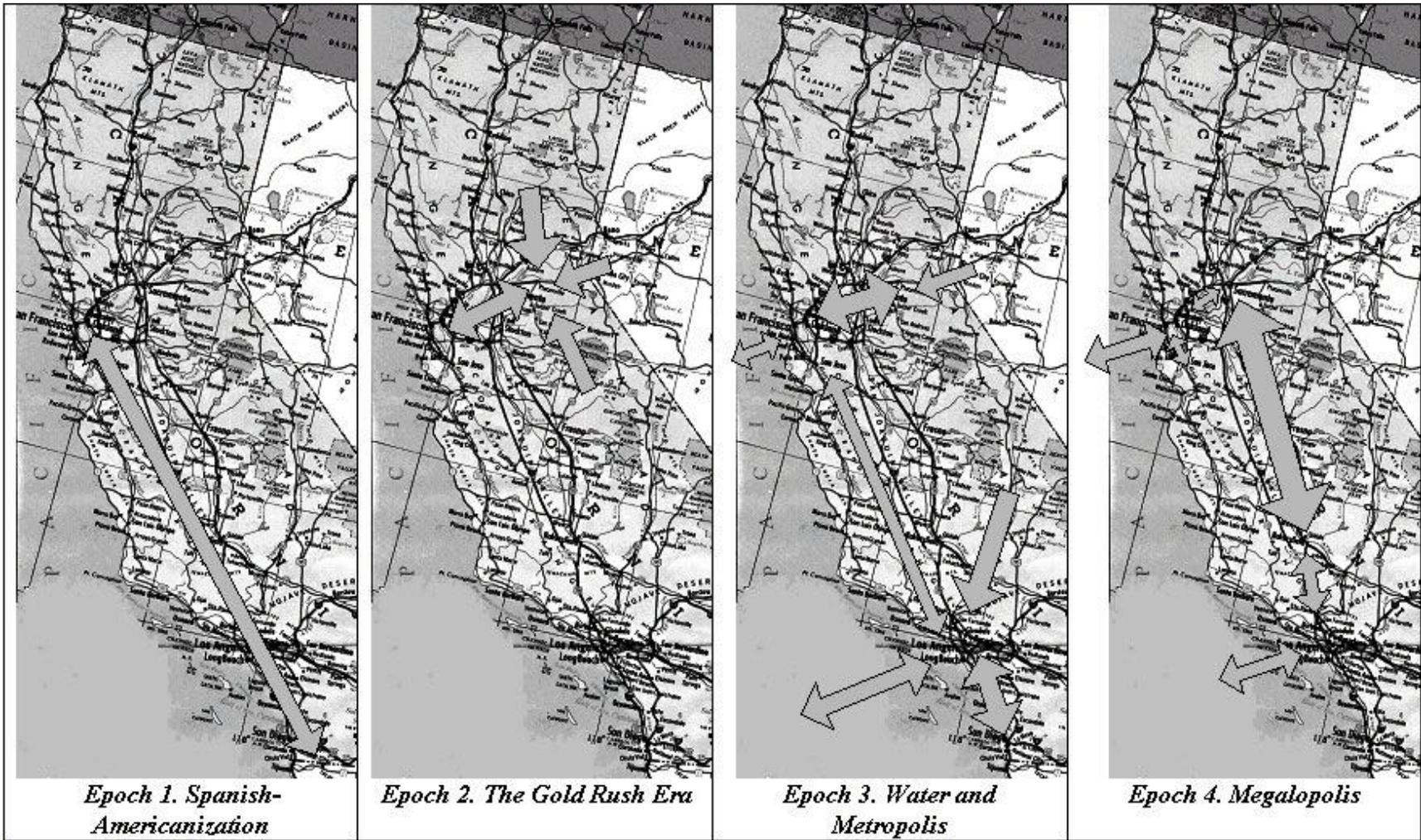


Chart 1. Epochs of California

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