American Exceptionalism Revisited:
What U.S. Planners Need to Know Now About Global Changes

To discuss what U.S. planners need to know about global changes now, it may be worthwhile to reflect on how U.S. planners approached this issue in the past, and whether there is a need to revise the basic assumptions underlying past thinking. Such a review would reveal at least three distinct phases. The first phase (1850 to 1910) was inward looking: planners defined the problems they faced as unique to the nation, requiring solutions particularly appropriate for the American system of governance. This sentiment is perplexing given that early American city planning practices were influenced significantly by European practices, with examples such as the Beaux Arts tradition in France, which influenced the design of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893; the British garden city movement; Italian influences on the planning of Washington, D.C.; and even German influences on zoning practices. These external influences on U.S. planning in the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries usually receive scant attention in U.S. “planning conversations,” which typically emphasize the particularities of the U.S. context—namely, a federal and decentralized system of governance with local control; a democracy without a feudal past; a market economy relatively free of state regulations of the kind common in Europe historically; and a polity comprising active and independent citizens engaged in numerous civic enterprises, which de Tocqueville described so vividly more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Though the U.S. had been connected to the outside world through slave trade and growing immigration, the planning focus was predominantly
inward: Americans were proud to be different from the rest of the world, and they were busy in nation and city building in their own particular way. This pride in the American way of planning is well expressed in the argument made by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., to counter the proposals of reformer Benjamin Marsh regarding how to house new immigrants in the early twentieth century. Olmsted held that American planners were not inclined to follow the European tradition of “socialist housing”; neither were U.S. cities eager to adopt strict land-use controls which would violate the freedom of American citizens to use private property in pursuit of prosperity and happiness.

With World War I, however, the focus of American planners began to widen, and by the end of World War II it had taken a sharp outward turn as U.S. planners ushered in the golden age of planning at home as well as abroad. The Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe and Japan, America’s leadership role in the design of new global institutions such as the World Bank, the Declaration of Universal Human Rights in which Eleanor Roosevelt played a key role, and also America’s role in developmental planning in newly decolonized nations, all created a new awareness of the world outside the United States. The dominant sentiment of the time was that the U.S. had a progressive mission to spread the benefits of democracy and capitalism in a world that was facing an increasingly polarized choice between communism and capitalism. Its astonishing rate of economic growth in that era made the U.S. a showpiece for the world. America proudly sent the message that it was not only different from other nations but also better able to foster continuous technological innovations that contributed to an improved quality of life. The U.S. served as a model for the rest of the world—at least for the
non-communist world — and U.S. planners cherished the moment, exporting ideas and technical know-how without any hint of worries about the possible pitfalls of global interconnectedness.ix

The first signs of worry about global interconnectedness emerged with the sharp rise in oil prices immediately after the Arab-Israeli War in 1967. One could mark that moment as the beginning of the third phase in the way American planners viewed the world. Domestically, it was a time of social turmoil. U.S. soldiers were returning from Vietnam, which by then had proved to be an unwinnable war; and the nation was beginning to experience an utterly new form of economic malaise for which the economists had to devise a new term, *stagflation*, meaning simultaneous increases in unemployment and inflation, which in the past were inversely linked. x Additional public consternation about the Watergate scandal created the conditions for a “perfect storm” that clouded the extroverted optimism of the 1950s.

Three other factors further darkened the American mood at the time. First, by the mid-1970s, many newly decolonized nations that initially adopted democratic systems of governance had since been taken over by authoritarian regimes, thereby undermining a key assumption of American foreign policy: that capitalism and democracy go hand-in-hand.xi Second, to the dismay of working-class Americans, many manufacturing plants started closing their operations at home and moving to the same developing nations, often under military rule.xii Third, in sharp contrast to the decline of the U.S. economy, there were signs of vigorous economic growth in Japan, a nation that the U.S. had defeated in a
devastating war only thirty odd years ago. The Cold War was still raging, however, with the then Soviet Union invading Afghanistan in 1977. Moreover, Iran, a former ally, had turned into a theocracy hostile to the U.S., thereby signifying a change in geopolitics whose repercussions are yet to be fully understood by average Americans.

To counteract deepening pessimism about the state of both the nation and the rest of the world, President Reagan promised “a new morning in America,” when it would fulfill its former role as “a glistening city atop a hill,” serving as a model for the rest of the world. In this view, America was not to turn inward and become isolationist; quite the opposite: it would lead the expansion of a globally integrated market of ideas, technological innovations, and increased flows of capital and commodities. In this quest for the revival of a global market, America was not alone. Great Britain and, surprisingly, Communist China (under a new leadership after Mao Zedong) joined with the U.S. to create a new momentum for economic growth. The new initiative required a role for government in planning cities, regions, and nations. The dominant themes of this new moment of optimism are well known to planners—deregulation; public-private partnerships; entrepreneurial planning which courted private investment. All these ideas gained currency not only in the U.S., but also at the global level, and these ideas were further legitimized by the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1988. Francis Fukuyama wrote about the “end of history,” triumphantly predicting that eventually the whole world was to become one market, democratically managed by nation-states, but led by the U.S., which would continue to nurture technological progress and economic growth.
Out of the celebration of the victory of capitalism and democracy emerged two sharply different views among U.S. planners, who by then were using the terms “globalization” and “global cities,” even though there was no consensus about what these terms meant. On one end of the spectrum of opinions were “neoliberals” who cheered the expansion of the market and blamed earlier regulatory planning for the slowdown of the global as well as U.S. economies in the 1970s. The neoliberals advocated further expansion and integration of the global economy, pointing to its benefits in developing poor nations and decaying areas within rich nations. On the other end were planners who saw increased globalization as exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities of the kind which had surfaced with the first wave of U.S. deindustrialization in the 1970s. The critics of globalization backed their arguments with evidence of rising inequalities even within prosperous “global cities,” such as New York, London, and Tokyo. What’s more, they argued that footloose capital and new telecommunication technologies had reduced governments’ ability to plan, thereby increasing the vulnerability of cities, regions and even nations, including the U.S., to unpredictable fluctuations in the global economy. The Seattle riots of 1999 confirmed that anti-globalization was not a fringe movement without persuasive power. On the contrary, it had served as a mobilizing force to subject global capitalism to new scrutiny in the wake of its triumph at the end of the Cold War.

Another strand of critical inquiry which drew conceptual inspiration from both the pro- and anti-globalization factions was the awareness of environmental issues. From the publication of Silent Spring in 1969, environmental concerns have steadily gained
momentum, including the attention of planners, despite successive attempts to weaken environmental regulations. The awareness that to address environmental issues one needs to consider the ecological system of the whole earth is relatively recent, however, starting with the publication of the Brandt Commission report in 1983,xx and culminating in the Kyoto Protocol treaty, which is yet to be signed by the United States. Environmentalism has drawn attention to both the costs of global industrial expansion and the benefits of a globally unified approach to halt environmental degradation. At the moment, the main arguments are between the advocates of environmental regulations who helped draft the Kyoto Protocol and the advocates of technological solutions, mostly in the U.S., who draw on historical evidence to demonstrate how technology—not state regulations—can continuously redefine what we usually consider the limits of existing resources.xxxi

What Now?

Faced with these debates, what do U.S. planners need to know about global change? First, broad terms, such as globalization, need to be unpacked and scrutinized to better understand the varying impacts of the multiple influences of finance, trade, production activities, immigration, and cultural symbols, to name a few.xxxii These flows of influence each have distinctively different features, which need to be better explained for crafting appropriate public policies. For example, capital flows have a very different impact than international migration, even though both are part of the globalization process. Also, though none of these flows are new, their intensities have increased, and the interconnections between them have become more complex, making it more difficult to influence the outcomes.xxxiii
Second, planners need to appreciate that increasing global interconnections have both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, there have been significant gains from international trade, spreading of scientific knowledge and technical know-how, and better international understanding of diverse human practices. On the negative side, neither the fruits nor the costs of globalization have been equally shared so far. While globalization has opened the flow of investment capital to the U.S. as well as to distant parts of the world, it has also increased uncertainty and vulnerability among those people who are least able to protect themselves against fluctuating markets and unforeseen changes.

Third, global integration is neither inevitable nor destined to create “a flat world.” Global interconnections are not borne out of a “natural” evolutionary mechanism; they result from socially constructed processes and hence, like other social processes, can be influenced by social interventions, such as planning. In this regard, national governments and international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organizations, and International Labor Organizations continue to be critical players despite the increasing mobility of finance capital. Also, neither has global interconnectedness reduced the autonomy of all governments to plan, nor has it led to the homogenization of planning styles around the globe, as some had predicted. These heterogeneous outcomes of global interconnectedness are only partly due to cultural differences among nations; partly they are the result of the specific but variable political powers of different constituencies, including planners, in each setting.
Implications for U.S. Planners

What are the specific implications of these trends for U.S. planners? First, in contradistinction to earlier periods, U.S. planners now need to acknowledge that in most instances problems resulting from global interconnections cannot be resolved unilaterally—or even bilaterally. Multilateral institutions, such as several that the U.S. helped create after World War II, are necessary to craft and enforce a new set of rules to spread the costs as well as benefits of globalization. The U.S. must not abandon all multilateral approaches for the fear of losing national sovereignty. Though many existing international institutions have become overly bureaucratic and need drastic reforms, the U.S. must play a role to influence such reforms.

Second, the American planning tradition, rooted in local control and distrust of central guidance from the federal government, needs to be revised in light of the changing circumstances. In the face of competition with the nationally planned economy of China and the supra-nationally planned economies of the European Economic Union, is it a good business strategy for the U.S. to continue to rely on a totally decentralized planning system built on numerous local authorities competing with each other to attract private investment? This is not to say that planning in the U.S. must be as centralized as planning in other nations. Changing circumstances necessitate a redefinition of what is to be considered “local” for which purpose; and the central government’s guidance on certain issues has to be crafted in recognition of not only U.S. traditions, but also global realities. This may sound utopian, but there is a growing acknowledgement in the U.S. of
the need for some form of metropolitan planning, a more active role of the federal
government in energy-related issues, and even in health care policy, all of which will
ultimately affect American competitiveness. Some have argued that global changes may
not be as important for traditional land-use planners, as, say, for planners working at the
international level. In reality, however, local planners are the ones who feel the
consequences of global interconnections most vividly. Inflows of immigrants, outflows
of industrial jobs, changing micro-climates, fluctuating housing prices, rising transport
costs, are all local manifestations of global interconnections. Add to them the current
concern for security against terrorism, and it will be apparent why U.S. planners must
evolve to a new mindset that no longer emphasizes how their nation is either different
from or better than others. It is time to appreciate the need to work with planners in other
nations to address shared problems.

Joint problem solving requires mutual trust among the planners of the world.
Establishing that trust is a huge challenge—particularly after September 11, 2001, and
amidst the raging wars in the Middle East. In difficult times such as these, it is expected
that some planners would prefer to look inward, to regain the sense of predictability of
the early years of the U.S. planning. Others may prefer to “stay the course” and wage a
long battle against external evil forces that threaten “the American way of life.” To me,
either of these two options is feasible any longer. The world is very different now than
it was after World War I, World War II, or even at the end of the Cold War. To be
effective, planners need to understand the multiple and intricate ways in which the U.S. is
now interconnected to the rest of the world through various flows of globalization, to
drop any vestiges of an us-versus-them mentality, and begin to cultivate a new mindset in
which the phrase “public interest” refers to a public larger than those living in the
U.S.

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This point is argued most pointedly by Klaus Kunzmann in the German context, and it was raised by Edward Blakely in his keynote address to the American Planning Associates in 2002. See K.R. Kunzmann, “Planning Education in a Globalized World,” *European Planning Studies*, Vol 7, No.5. (1999), 549-555.


**Additional Bibliography Relevant to the Topic:**


