

New Regionalism and Planning: A Conversation with Ethan Seltzer

Jeremy Nelson

We invited Associate Professor Ethan P. Seltzer of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University to talk with us about new regionalism and planning. Professor Seltzer is the founding director of the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies and vice-president of the Portland Planning Commission. His recent publications include “Regional Planning and Regional Governance in the United States 1979-1996” (*Journal of Planning Literature*, February 1998).

Nelson: As a prelude to our discussion of new regionalism, I wanted to first ask you about your background and how your professional training and personal interests led you to focus on regionalism and regional planning issues. For example, I found it interesting that your entry point into the planning profession was via biology and environmental science—fields that inevitably span jurisdictional or political boundaries. Does your background affect how you conceptualize other regional issues such as economic development, transportation and land use?

Seltzer: Because of my background, I have what you might call a landscape orientation when it comes to planning issues. I start by seeing the regional landscape and then the local jurisdictions. I’ve had the luxury of being able to do that conceptually, and also in terms of the work that I have done. When you think about it, people don’t really live within cities anymore. Even in the largest cities, residents sleep, shop, recreate, work and socialize in regions of their own devising. These territories rarely are confined within the boundaries of a single jurisdiction. In fact, people residing in the same neighborhoods often don’t live their daily lives within the same territory anymore, which is one of the greatest challenges that planners face: What is the community and who are we planning for? However, the political reality is that authority and resources reside within jurisdictions; so, it is important to make the match between the territory within which people live and the issues they are concerned about on the one hand, and, on the other hand, this territory for administrative purposes, which is where the power to resolve the issues resides.

Nelson: You have recently done some research on the history of regionalism and regionalist thought in the US. Can you outline the historical and intellectual precursors of the new regionalism in the US?

Seltzer: When it comes to metropolitan areas, the issues that we are dealing with today are not new issues; in fact, they were pretty well identified eighty years ago. The fragmentation of jurisdictional authority in metropolitan regions, as an impediment to developing effective responses to issues of metropolitan growth and change, was something that was being discussed in the 1920s. The impact of the automobile on communities, from simply the physical presence of autos in communities to the relationship between communities to the geographic spread of the metropolitan area, was something that was very well documented in the late 1920s and 1930s. And while the car accelerated things in some ways, if you look at the turn-of-the-century streetcar suburbs, the beginnings of regional residential development and commuting patterns were already there. So I think that a lot of the issues that we are contending with today are not new phenomena.

Regionalism in the 1920s, the regionalism that Benton McKaye and the RPAA [Regional Plan Association of America] were working on, was first and foremost very idealistic and very much about the evolution and perfection of society. This was not an instrumental, 'How-do-we-solve-traffic-congestion?' kind of perspective. It was very idealistic and very broad scale, and it wasn't just a narrow enterprise focused on the efficiency of urban systems.

In the 1930s, there were about a dozen people who were very active in the RPAA and who were very well connected to the Roosevelt administration. They were able to have a profound impact. Regionalism during this era remained tremendously idealistic, but because of the great Depression, the focus was really on economic restructuring. If you look at what was written in the mid-1930s by the New Deal agencies associated with planning and regional planning, regionalism was very much seen as a means for restructuring the economy. With the entry of the US into World War II, regionalism took a back seat, although ironically the War Production Board's work to manage resources represented a high degree of centralized planning that probably gave nightmares to the opponents of regional planning in the 1930s.

After World War II, in an era of peace and prosperity, regional planning really began to focus on efficiency, the rationalization of government services, and the development of infrastructure, like the interstate highway system. All of this was partially in response to the need for creating the links that made it possible for the post-war boom to happen. And so, starting in the 1950s, and continuing into the sixties and seventies, the argument was that regionalism made sense only when it could achieve efficiencies. There was a heavy focus on infrastructure and on efficiency in linking government institutions together. But regionalism in this era was not about sweeping ideological notions, as had typified the work of Benton McKaye and the RPAA. So I would say that World War II marks a distinct break in regionalist thinking.

The next distinct break in the history of regionalism was in the 1980s during the Reagan administration, when cities and their regions were nowhere on the federal agenda. That was also the period in which construction of the interstate highway system came to an end. There just wasn't much investment in metropolitan areas at all.

What has brought regionalism back to the forefront of the political agenda in the 1990s is the notion that metropolitan places weren't working very well, and a general sense that there was a need to seek new relationships and new solutions. For example, at the bioregional level, our knowledge of watersheds in environmental systems led us to believe that our management of those systems wasn't working very well. I think that that's backed up by the emergence of the broad landscape approaches to environmental management and habitat protection. Even the Endangered Species Act has promoted another burst in regionalism simply because that is the scale at which you have to address those issues.

At the level of the metropolitan area, you've seen the emergence of governmental approaches to regionalism because of the inability of individual jurisdictions to effectively act on the issues that people seem to care about most, like transportation, affordable housing and environmental protection.

I think there has been a strong push from the business community to begin to look at regionalism again. Businesses are increasingly dependent not only on cities or suburbs working well, but on entire regions working well. They not only need to move

goods around these regions, but they must have access to labor—and the talent they need is residing everywhere within a metropolitan area. I think that there has been an acknowledgement by businesses that they are competing globally, albeit from a metropolitan base.

In essence, what you see in the 1990s is a resurgence of regionalism that is taking a step beyond the efficiency base which really dominated postwar regionalism. But it is still nowhere near the idealistic roots that characterized the regionalism of the RPAA of the 1920s and 1930s. In other words, the new regionalism is not yet a comprehensive vision of society. It's a vision of the physical arrangement of different pieces. It is more than just efficiency, because it is concerned with qualitative aspects and value judgments associated with what is good or smart versus what is bad or dumb.

The early regionalists were well-educated, elite folks, but their vision was extremely expansive and inclusive, and ventured into areas that planners in most places don't talk about much today. We don't have a well-developed professional vocabulary for talking about a broad vision of society like we do for talking about the setback for buildings or the workings of transportation systems. I'm not saying that as a criticism of the new regionalism, I'm just saying that it's a regionalism that reflects our current conditions rather than a regionalism that reflects historical roots.

Nelson: What are some potential opportunities and challenges of the new regionalism for contemporary planning practitioners, and what are some of the

shortcomings of the new regionalism? For example, new regionalist thought and practice seems to be relatively silent on equity issues.

Seltzer: I'd say that the work of Manuel Pastor and some of the folks in the Los Angeles area are some of the best examples of people seeking equity-based solutions through regional relationships, and there are some good examples in other places. But there are not that many regions, maybe not any at this time, where interest in equity issues has really driven the regional agenda.

Both historically and today, regionalism is largely a reform movement. People seek regional solutions when the more traditional pathways don't deliver. Regional initiatives typically stem from one of three roots. It will be mandated; for example, the federal MPO [Metropolitan Planning Organization] process gets a certain kind of buzz out of regionalism because people have to come to the table to make the money flow for transportation funding. Or, regionalism will occur for self-interested reasons. For example, jurisdiction A can cut down its policing costs by fifty percent if it contracts with jurisdiction B.

The third kind of regionalism is an organic regionalism, something that grows out of a recognition that folks share a common fate and that they have to come up with some new kind of relationship that enables them to act on that. They see that they have something in common and that it is important enough to them that taking a regional approach is the best strategy for moving to the next level. So mandated, self-interested or organic is where you're

going to find the roots for regionalism in this country. Consequently, what that means for equity issues is that, in the absence of a mandate from above, or a desire to become more efficient, advocates for equity must rely on becoming part of a political agenda for change, probably the hardest path for some of the least powerful people in a metropolitan area.

What are the opportunities? It seems like the opportunities really lie with being able to better understand when selecting a regional strategy is likely to be more productive than not. Regionalism is just a tool. In this era, it is not an ideological formulation. We're not promoting regionalism in America today because we think that it will lead to the perfection of society, to the next evolution. Rather, we are promoting regionalism because we think that it is going to enable people to be more effective or return a better result that the approach they are currently taking.

Nelson: Can you talk a little about the future of regionalism and the role of the federal and state governments in encouraging regional solutions?

Seltzer: I would say when you look at state and federal governments, the challenge is to convince them not to get in the way of regional approaches. In other words, the way in which state and federal governments use their authority and deploy their resources can have a lot to do with whether regional solutions are attractive or even possible. The real question is, will federal and state implementers get in the way of those locally generated, regional approaches to solving what are essentially local problems, and much less whether they will actually provide incen-

tives for local regional approaches to emerge. At this point, I would just settle for trying to get federal and state governments to agree not to get in the way. It would be a wonderful thing if they took the next step in recognizing that the way that they use our resources—all of them: monetary and non-monetary, administrative and non-administrative—will have a huge impact on whether those regional efforts result in something tangible. In some cases, if you take a look, for example, at TEA-21 [Transportation Equity Act for the Twenty-First Century], and before that, ISTEA [Intermodal Surface Transportation Equity Act], the federal government has recognized the role that its investments play in prompting interaction at the regional level, in different kinds of ways. But I don't think that is typical.

Nelson: Expanding on the subject of the future of regionalism and regional planning, could you talk a little about implementation issues in terms of the role of visioning in the regional planning process, and about marketing regionalism as a planning practitioner?

Seltzer: I think that regionalism is very place-based and that the regional planning task is therefore first and foremost a community organizing task. What you are trying to do is the same thing that community organizers are doing, which is to determine to what degree people will recognize a common set of interests strong enough to promote collective action of some sort. At the regional level, you have to start with the questions, what is the regional community, who cares about it, and can you get them all to the

table to take action? So, I think the first stage in the regional planning process is to bring to the table compelling, common interests that will enable people to look beyond the boundaries that they are used to in order to find partners in new and unexpected places.

Secondly, regarding the visioning process, there needs to be a strong sense of what it is that folks are trying to achieve. It may be relatively simple or narrow or it may be expansive. But there is an element of vision that is extremely important, and again, because we don't have a lot of institutional infrastructure at the regional level, in many cases those regional visions have never been articulated. So I think that the visioning aspect is very important.

The third part is a much more instrumental plan-making step. Once you have created a sense of common fate, once you have identified a set of common objectives, then you have to devise a plan or strategy for actually achieving them. I think that essentially leads you into the planning process that planning practitioners and scholars are familiar with. To collect the data, assemble a set of reasonable alternatives, figure out a way that the alternatives will sort themselves out, to choose one and implement it, and then keep the plan going. I think one of the really critical issues for planning is, how do we keep plans alive? More and more, I am finding that keeping plans alive means that you need to regularly revisit the issues. You can only implement a plan for so long before you need to loop back and go through

another planning process, because no shared vision will last for fifty years in the public's mind.

Nelson: In recognition of the diversity of US society and the size of some regions, how do planners come up with a regional visioning process in terms of marketing, community participation and outreach methods that can actually attract a majority of residents and decisionmakers to a shared vision?

Seltzer: First of all, I think that it is one thing to deal with a relatively small community and it is another to deal with millions of people. It is a very different task to run citizen participation for a well-defined set of nested institutional units and quite another to run a citizen participation program in a territory that hasn't necessarily identified itself as a territory. I would also say that the state of the art is evolving before our eyes. We have not been doing this long enough or well enough to say that there is a recipe book for rolling this stuff out. And if you take a look at the regional planning efforts in the nation today, they are very idiosyncratic. Yes, they have some similarities, but they are so strongly shaped by place-based characteristics that I think you almost need to say that we are in a period of experimentation. It is action research. At this point, we are figuring out how to do this stuff by doing it. If you look for literature, for example, on community building at the regional scale, there is none. If you look at literature about how to do regional planning, there is very little that actually talks about what it means to do a regional plan. There is a lot of stuff on rationales for regionalism, or rationales for regional approaches, or the reasons why regions are the

correct unit for analysis. But there is hardly anything out there for the practitioner who is asking, What is step one? What do you do on Monday?

I think that there is a whole series of practical questions to be worked out as we go along, such as how regional planning is different from local planning, how developing a regional plan is different from developing a local comprehensive plan, and how implementing a regional plan is the same or different than rolling out a zoning code to implement the comprehensive plan. All of those questions, I think, are still up for grabs, and I think that it is going to be the practice of regional planning in the next decade that will give us some insights into what new regionalism is.

Nelson: The Portland metropolitan area has been very active on many of the issues we have been talking about and has been held up as a national model of good regional planning. What is your take on the transferability to other regions of the approaches that have been taken here in Portland—or are regional planning strategies so place-based as to be almost non-transferable? Does every region need to create its own brand of regionalism from the ground up?

Seltzer: Let me just start out by saying that Portland did not set out to create a model for Los Angeles, Houston, Cincinnati, Boston, Curitiba, Rome or Mogadishu. We did not do what we did here because we wanted to create a national and international model. We did what we did as a response to the landscape that we are in. It was done for local purposes. Ironically, the critics of what we have done

here like to criticize Portland by saying it is not a model for the rest of the world. Well, we would be the first to say that what has been done here is not a model for the world—we did what we did because of the particular conditions that we encountered here and what we felt needed to happen.

Is it transferable? Well, take a look at what is transferable. Basically, what I think that people from other regions can learn from Portland is, first that you can change the existing pattern in your region. If you don't like the pattern in Los Angeles, you can change it if you want to. Now exactly what the nature of that change should be is up to you. There are some other things that can be learned from Portland's experience, like good things take time to come to fruition. We have been at this for over forty years. If it is a good idea, it has a good chance to realize itself but it takes time. Leadership is also important; these things don't just happen because one day all of the molecules rearrange themselves. Change happens because people commit to a vision and they do things every day to make that vision happen.

Is what we have done in Portland an exact prescription for anyone but us? No. And I think that it is really important not to look at the solutions developed in one region as software that can be installed in the hardware of another region. It's more important to ask what have other regions learned by trying to change who they are? And based on those observations of other regions, ask, what can we do to take who we are and change it, if that is what we want to do?

Nelson: I'd like to conclude our discussion by asking you if you think that the new regionalism needs to be activist in order to succeed?

Seltzer: Yes, absolutely, because in the end you cannot take a growth-neutral approach to change. When you know what you want, you have to actively seek it. And planners have to envision themselves as activists if they are going to succeed at the regional level. It is not an enterprise for the weak of heart because it is hard work—the rewards come only when you are willing to put yourself out there.

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