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Flying High (In The Competitive Sky): Conceptualizing the Role of Airports in Global City-Regions Through "Aero-Regionalism"

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Airports and the challenge of global city-regional urbanization
Air transportation holds a privileged position in studies of global city formation, development, and connectivity. Airports function as key interfaces through which global networks are moored in place and access to advanced air transportation plays a fundamental role in determining the relative centrality of cities within multiscalar urban systems (Witlox and Derudder, 2007). Efficient, cost-effective transportation connections are a prerequisite for companies to employ advanced logistical techniques and for localities to market themselves as global business hubs (Erie, 2004; Jones, 2009). A generalized shift towards the deregulation and privatization of commercial air transportation over the past four decades has only served to deepen the centrality of air infrastructure within a competitive, increasingly urbanized, global economy (Freestone, 2011; Yang et al., 2008).

Against this backdrop, an influential policy consensus (employed varying degrees of effectiveness from Amsterdam and Phoenix to Singapore and Belo Horizonte) has crystallized around the growth potential of the 'airport city' or 'aerotropolis' (Güller and Güller, 2003). City leaders around the world, under mounting pressure to expand air capacity to ensure their position in the world city network, are advised to embrace their airports. Developing advanced, modally integrated facilities, so the argument goes, can maximize locational advantages for New Economy industries "with the ultimate aim of bolstering the city's competiveness, job creation, and quality of life" (Kasarda and Lindsay, 2011, p. 174).

Investment in airport-enabling urban development, though, is neither a simple nor sustainable panacea for the challenges of economic globalization (Charles et al., 2007). Globalizing airport facilities require extensive and extended capital investment alongside the place-based accumulation of technological knowledge and organizational and geopolitical power. Aviation connectivity exposes urban centers to the threats of terrorism (Graham, 2006) and enhances vulnerability to global pandemics (Budd et al., 2011). Uneven economic development, in addition to localized environment impacts, invoke a complex and contested politics of scale surrounding airport infrastructure. As territorial gateways, airports are spaces of regulation, securitization, and Othering as much as interfaces expediting global flows and economic activity (Adey 2010).

Despite a resurgence of interest in the mobilities, territoriality, and cultural economy of air transport, relations between air infrastructure, globalization, and local economic development remain under-theorized. Much global cities and global city networks literature tends to treat the politics and economics of air transport uncritically and often deploys weak scalar theorizing. Normative assumptions regarding airports' economic, social, and political impacts are substantially codified through quantitative metrics. Air traffic data are regularly used to demonstrate the relational connectivity of global city networks (Mahutga et al., 2010). However, the use of airline flows as a gauge for globalization presents significant methodological and analytical limitations, for instance the need to distinguish between destination and stopover airports (Derudder et al., 2009). Moreover, unquestioned tropes of global competitiveness underpin much political discourse on airport-oriented urban development with little consideration given to how global flows are actually grounded in, and conditioned by, local sociospatial structures (Adey et al., 2007).

Neither airports, nor their developmental logics or urban settings, can be considered as singular, homogenous, or uncontested entities in isolation (McNeill, 2014). The spatiality of airports emerge as "the product of numerous interlocking geopolitical, economic, environmental, social, technical and commercial practices that operate at a variety of spatial scales and manifest themselves in different ways in different places through time" (Budd, 2009, p. 132). Global airports foster distinct governance modalities that interrelate with the production of city-regional space in

contingent ways. Global airport infrastructures have therefore emerged as a key tool for strategic state interventions, but one that reflects the complexity of urban territoriality and political power in an era of competitive city-regionalism. The airport extends beyond its built form by drawing together a myriad of sociotechnical systems and relations "as an organism of the urban economy" (McNeill, 2010, p. 2861). They are an interface between the *territorial* (as immobile built environments embodying vast sums of fixed capital) and *topological* (channeling and regulating the movement of people and commodities) factors supporting the development of global urban centers. Consequently, the challenges of infrastructural integration and scaling governance place airports at the heart of global city formation and city-regional politics.

I refer to the processes of urban territorialization unfurling at the nexus of globalization, city-regionalism, and air transport as 'aero-regionalism'. This concept acknowledges airports as contested and contradictory urban spaces by paying close attention to how global air hubs': (1) *evolving material infrastructure* (i.e. terminal development, runway and flight path alignments, physical footprint and local transport connections); (2) *dynamic governance regimes* (e.g. national air regulations, airport and airline management, and transportation and land use planning); and (3) *multifaceted political and symbolic functions* mediate the territorial and relational production of global city-regions. As I demonstrate in the case of Chicago, aero-regionalism discloses both the context for strategic state selectivity and key mechanisms for scaling state action global city-regions through a mosaic of sociotechnical and political networks.[1]

Aero-regionalism, Chicago-style

The Chicago Department of Aviation (CDA) administers all aspects of airport operations at Chicago O'Hare International Airport and Chicago Midway International Airport. As a municipal cabinet position, CDA's Commissioner reports directly to the Mayor's Office, rendering the Chicago's chief executive the region's de facto airport manager. Municipal ownership has two central advantages for the City of Chicago. First, the City controls the economy of the region's major aviation infrastructure from everyday operations to economic development strategies and long range planning. Given the airports' importance as economic drivers, this arrangement places significant power over the regional economy in the City's hands. Second, by overseeing airports as a municipal concern, the operation and development of O'Hare and Midway are buffered from the conflicting interests of other regional actors. Projects can be developed with limited intra-governmental disruption. As a result, the planning and governance of Chicago's major globalizing infrastructure have been significantly distanced from other bodies shaping regional development, including the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP): the Metropolitan Planning Organization coordinating regional transportation and land-use planning across seven counties in northeastern Illinois. Planning expediency limits direct democratic involvement by many (mainly suburban) actors in the region while elevating politically mobilized technical knowledge of airport space over that of communities impacted by the negative externalities of airport operations.

The regional impact of Chicago's airports and persistent purported need to expand air capacity, however, suggest the City's airport governance regime is increasingly under pressure. As Chicago's air infrastructure undergoes its latest round of restructuring, suburban actors are looking to enhance their influence at O'Hare through regionalizing (or suburbanizing) the Airport's physical infrastructure and economic flows.

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[1] Chicago is a continental and global air hub and a highly integrated region centered on a major global city core. The dynamics of aero-regionalism at play here will diverge, for example, from those of newly constructed airport cities in Asia and the Gulf States.

The O'Hare Modernization Program

The 1978 deregulation of domestic air transport in the United States exacerbated calls to expand Chicago's air capacity. Despite several terminal improvements, congestion remained an issue at O'Hare into the 1990s. Moreover, rapid growth at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport threatened Chicago's established position as America's preeminent global air hub. Contrary to regionalizing strategies being pursued elsewhere in the United States that sought to 'spread the burden' of metropolitan air traffic across multiple airports (Cidell, 2006), Mayor Richard M. Daley refused to allow funds generated at O'Hare and Midway to finance the development of a third Chicago airport beyond the city limits in south suburban Peotone. Rather, he turned his attention to constructing new runways at O'Hare (with the purported capacity to reduce overall delays by 79%) and opening a new passenger terminal on the western side of the Airport (City of Chicago, 2001). The O'Hare Modernization Program (OMP) presented Daley with an opportunity to cement his legacy on Chicago's landscape, as his father, Mayor Richard J. Daley, had done in opening O'Hare nearly five decades earlier.

While the 9/11 attacks shook the airline industry, both traffic levels and economic activity at Chicago's airports were showing signs of recovery by 2003. Popular and political opinion too was moving in favor of O'Hare expansion. Although the City maintained its tendency to operate unilaterally and guarded the details of airport development, key members of Chicago's growth machine, including the Commercial Club of Chicago, Business Leaders for Transportation, the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce and Global Chicago, backed OMP. In the State capital, Springfield, the downfall of Governor George Ryan (who had backed Peotone Airport) and the 2003 election of Rod Blagojevich, a Democratic with strong Chicago connections, brought State backing to Daley's agenda. Blagojevich signed the O'Hare Modernization Act on August 6, 2003, removing State interference from OMP and granting the City of Chicago eminent domain powers beyond its borders for the project. Springfield thus acknowledged O'Hare's "essential role" in the national air transportation system and OMP's capacity to "enhance the economic welfare of the State" (Illinois General Assembly, 2003). CDA (2012), too, adopted a regional rhetoric when estimating estimated OMP would create 195,000 job and $18 billion in regional economic activity while realizing c.$370 million in savings for air carriers and c.$380 million for passengers.

Negotiation local politics in the global city-region

Chicago's aviation governance regime proved extremely effective for the City in marshaling the demands for the collective provision of regional air infrastructure. CDA developed OMP in house and away from potentially prolonged debates on regional air capacity. OMP moved ahead as a project of regional, statewide and national economic significance, but under the guidance, and chiefly serving the interests, of the City of Chicago. After receiving State backing in 2003 and federal approval in 2005, the City commenced work on OMP and attempted to foster the view that the project was a *fait accompli*.

OMP, however, faced considerable suburban opposition from two coalitions with political and geographically distinct interests in, and knowledge of, Chicago's air space. The first was constituted by south suburban interests including Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., Will County and the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. The mainly lower-income, Democratic and African-American base of the inner south suburbs favored developing Peotone Airport as a means to re-center the depressed industrial south within Chicago's regional economy. The second coalition, the Suburban O'Hare Commission (SOC), represented a shifting network of predominantly wealthy, white, Republican northwestern suburbs that had protested expansion at O'Hare since the 1980s. At its height, SOC brought together 17 municipalities concerned with the impacts of congestion, noise and air pollution on their communities. While the south suburban coalition's political connections

and desire to bring an airport to Peotone necessitated the maintenance of cordial relations with the City of Chicago, SOC had no such interest and adopted a bunker mentality. SOC's most vocal members were those threatened by annexation of 433 acres for runway extensions: Bensenville and Elk Grove Village to the west, and Des Plaines in the northeast.

As OMP took off and SOC ramped up its campaign, the City of Chicago effectively undermined opposition by exploiting political fractures within the anti-OMP movement. The highly fragmented nature of the region's political geography enabled the City to target the benefits of OMP to appeal to the parochial interests of individual communities. Having been hit by the downturn in the aviation economy following 9/11, Des Plaines broke from SOC and welcomed the potential benefits of OMP for its industrial base. The restructuring of prospective OMP flight paths proved instrumental in shifting Des Plaines's political allegiances. The Village embraced the freight and cargo development vision proffered for the O'Hare area, adding c. 1.5 million feet^2 of logistics space between 2003 and 2008. Other municipalities, including Itasca, Schaumburg, and Wood Dale, welcomed the potential to mirror the established conference and business center development in suburbs to the east of O'Hare. Faced with declining support and the apparent inevitability of OMP, SOC's last stalwarts, Elk Grove Village and Bensenville, dropped their resistance as the old guard of municipal leadership was swept from office in 2008-2009 elections.

Opening O'Hare to the region?
The issue of Western Access was a key factor in swaying suburban opinion on OMP, most pointedly in the case of DuPage County. Fearing the displacement of jobs and residences, DuPage spent millions of dollars fighting the City of Chicago in court to oppose O'Hare expansion and contributed $14,000 annually to SOC through the 1990s. The County reversed its stance on O'Hare following a change in leadership on the County Board in 2002. Incoming Board Chairman, Bob Schillerstrom, withdrew DuPage's opposition to OMP in January 2003, placing the burden of resistance on the dwindling number of municipalities in SOC.

The County's shift was, in part, a reaction to the election of the pro-OMP Blagojevich; as DuPage Board member Brien Sheahan argued, "[OMP] is a project that is going to occur… We're either going to have it imposed on us, or we can pull up a chair… and be a part of the shaping of the final plan" (cf. Meyer and Hilkevitch, 2003, p. 1). Yet as Sheahan indicated, it also reflected a change in philosophy as the County began to think in terms of competitive regionalism. The prospect of reorienting the physical space of O'Hare westward presented the opportunity to deepen DuPage's integration within an aviation-based economy (Figure 1). Western Access catalyzed a spatial reimagining of the Airport's position in the region that served to resolve the contradiction between local communities' interests and regional demands for globalizing infrastructure; "the old leadership saw [O'Hare] as an economic engine for Chicago and Cook County. The new leadership sees it as an economic engine for the greater region" (DuPage County, interview, 2008). After signing on to OMP, the County conducted a $370,000 economic development study – jointly financed with the City of Chicago – projecting the program would add $3 billion and 12,000 jobs to DuPage County's economy by 2015, increasing to $10 billion and 40,000 by 2030.

<FIGURE 1 HERE>

DuPage leadership's strategic shift hinged on the post-political reasoning that Western Access made OMP a universal benefit to the County. Yet Western Access continues to pose a challenge for communities close to O'Hare who fear the imposition of a regional vision (particularly the concentration of globally-integrated cargo distribution facilities around O'Hare) will lock airport-adjacent municipalities into an overwhelming industrial development trajectory. Former SOC

members have asserted their voices in an attempt to shape the form and function of development around O'Hare. This move has been most evident in the Illinois Department of Transportation's (IDOT) planning process for the extension of the Western Bypass and Elgin-O'Hare expressway, and the development of new transit facilities proposed in CMAP's 2010 regional plan, *Go to 2040*.

Western Access would enable the westward flow of economic activity from the Airport, and with this, both DuPage County and municipal leaders have a renewed interest in gaining political influence over the future development of O'Hare. Regionalizing the orientation of O'Hare away from Chicago challenges the existing territorially defined basis of the City's global airport governance regime as other communities and organizations stake their claims to a seat at the table. Yet while IDOT has effectively brought together key interest groups and moved ahead with highway planning surrounding the Airport, the City of Chicago continues to set the agenda at O'Hare and resists the suburbanization of its global infrastructure. This position partially supports the view that the City was always primarily concerned with maintaining political and economic control over *its* airports, but it also draws attention to the volatile nature of the relationships through which the City governs regional aviation. Despite the CDA and State of Illinois both vocally asserting the importance of Western Access to the regional economic effectiveness of OMP, the City of Chicago had not guaranteed the construction of a new western terminal, nor opening western access to O'Hare. Through the terms of American and United Airlines' 1985 lease agreement at O'Hare (set to expire in 2018), the Airlines are obligated to finance capital improvements at the Airport in return for veto power over CDA plans. Although a tentative agreement had been reached in 2005, the impact of the 2008-2009 Financial Crisis led American and United to file a contract dispute with the City of Chicago in an attempt to scale back OMP. In late 2010, facing a global decline in air travel, CDA and the Airlines agreed to postpone the development of a new western terminal until demand recovered. The particular dynamics of aero-regionalism in Chicago therefore deprived suburban communities the central benefits promised in return for backing OMP. Instead, the City of Chicago appears likely to direct the political and economic orientation of the Airport towards the global core of the city-region for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Globalization may take off and land on the runways of major airports, but the complex dynamics of present-day state spatiality and global networked flows internalized within global airports resonate well beyond the taxiways and terminals of these territorial gateways. Global airports are generative of extra-local relations and flows and as such, are often characterized as sites of deterritorialization and points of assemblage within a relational space of flows. Yet, as they territorialize globalization in place, airports necessarily invoke "the production and continual reproduction of fixed socio-territorial infrastructures" (Brenner, 2004, p. 56). Propelled by industry deregulation and tropes of global competitiveness, Chicago's international air hub has become a locus for substantial expansion plans at the same time as its regional governance regimes and territoriality become markedly more intricate. The 'global', so often the abstract spatial imaginary appealed to in airport discourses, is now clearly embedded within a complex, on-going, locally-contingent negotiation of scale.

Aero-regionalism contributes to our understanding of the relationship between global urbanization and air transport by demonstrating how international air hubs are not only generative nodes of economic activity located in metropolitan areas, but are fundamentally conditioned by their regional context. As the case of Chicago exemplifies, the technical and social infrastructures of global airports regionalize in important material, political, and symbolic ways, but the numerous multiscalar relations and vast fixed capital brought together by air infrastructure make them difficult for territorially defined actors to operate, plan, and govern. By embedding the territoriality and modalities of urban politics engendered by airports within broader processes of city-regionalism,

aero-regionalism not only reveals the complexity of unstable and evolving regional governance processes, but discloses how the political and morphological dimensions of global city-regions are structured through a contested politics of mobility.

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Figures

Figure 1: Opening O'Hare to the region