Past, Present, and Future in the American Megalopolis

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I would like to:

i. present in person (with/without a written paper)

ii. present via skype (with/without a written paper)

Between 371 and 368 BCE, Epaminondas of Thebes established a city in the center of the Peloponnesian peninsula. He called this place Megalopolis, or “large city.” A little over 2,300 years later, in the early 1950s, the geographer Jean Gottmann became fascinated with the 600-mile belt of densely-settled, heavily-developed land between Greater Boston and Greater Washington D.C. The postwar urbanization of the American Eastern seaboard, he explained, had essentially transformed the region into a single giant city. He named it Megalopolis.

My paper, “Past, Present, and Future in the American Megalopolis,” discusses academic intrigue around the urbanization of the U.S. Eastern seaboard in the 1950s and early 1960s. It was during these decades that American social scientists began “discovering” mega-cities both at home and abroad. Like Gottmann, other scholars became fixated on the region Americans know now as the Northeast corridor. And though they differed in what they called it—the Atlantic Urban Region, BosWash, Urban Region No. 1, or Megalopolis—
they agreed that the region was unique. Gottmann, for one, argued that there was only one Megalopolis. Megalopolis was not a concept, or a category, or a phenomenon; it was a place. Moreover, it was the cradle of American civilization; midcentury America’s economic, political, and cultural center; and a forecast for future American development. Megalopolis was a site for excavation and experimentation; a place teeming with both historical significance and untapped potential.

My paper probes social scientists’ investment in Megalopolis as a place representing America’s past, present, and future. Moreover, it demonstrates how the profusion of research on the urbanized Eastern seaboard not only influenced American policy at the local, state, and federal level, but also informed paradigms of civilization, modernization, and development.

**• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**

Kristian is a PhD candidate in History at the University of Pennsylvania, where he studies on urban history, the history of planning, and post-1945 America. His dissertation is a history of the concept of the mega-region in city and regional planning and of the invention of the Northeast Corridor. He did his undergraduate work at Carleton College in Northfield, MN, graduating in 2011.