

Global flows, local conflicts and the challenge of urban governance: Managing the city-airport interface in London, UK

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Abstract: *This paper explores urban governance and spatial planning of the city-airport interface, focusing on the contested issues of noise pollution and uneven regional urbanisation, and the operation and expansion of airport infrastructure in the London city-region, which presents a paradox – a conflict between connectivity and growth, and alternatively, advocating for urban sustainability. This perspective highlights the contrast in scales and priorities of urban governance at London’s Heathrow and Gatwick Airports, critically analysing the contested, under-theorised and unresolved rationalities, plans and politics that co-constitute the city-airport interface.*

Keywords: urban and regional planning, airports, urban governance, urbanisation, global city-regions

1. Introduction

In global city-regions around the world, the imperatives of connectivity are internalised in the form of normative planning frameworks that value ‘connected infrastructure’ such as airports (Floater et al., 2014). Airport expansion is often valued as “a powerful economic development tool” (Brueckner, p. 1455, 2003), and ‘failing’ to predict-and-provide sufficient airport capacity is said to, with regards to the current London airport expansion debate, cost the wider economy £30-45 billion (Airports Commission, p. 12, 2013). Despite the significance of the airport to the global city-region network, and the wealth of literature on global cities, megaprojects, and the importance of airports for regional economic growth, significant questions remain regarding “the limits of the “urbanism of flows” [which are] closely bound up with globalization” (Roseau, 2012, p. 33). Using the London city-region as a case study, this paper examines airport-influenced urbanisation, conflicts over noise pollution, and the tension between and international connectivity and sustainable urban development.

Managing the city-airport interface – conceived here as both the physical space between airport-oriented development and broader urban land use, as well a social and political realm constituted and occasionally negotiated by various actors on many different scales – presents a theoretical dilemma for urban studies and a challenge for urban governance and spatial planning. In London this involves heated debates in the realm of politics and planning struggling to balance the often spatially concentrated externalities (such as aircraft noise and uneven urbanisation) with the perception of economic benefits (Cidell, 2014). Influenced by actors at both the urban-regional and global scales, urban governance of the city-airport interface presents problems for both urban theory and practice. My research connects urban planning and governance of the urban-airport nexus to the narratives, normative frameworks or assumptions that are engaged in debates over these sites, which I suggest is an unsettled issue for urban studies and transport research.

2. Research at the city-airport interface

Quantitative research regarding the connections between globalisation and aeromobility suggests that “the most important cities harbour the most important airports” (Derudder et al., 2014, p. 78), and, just as most global cities today are also port cities – which presents “a

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uniquely challenging, high-stakes paradox in sustainability” between global flows, economic development and coastal ecology (Boschken, 2013, p. 1776), the major airports of Western Europe present a similar quandary of economic growth, connectivity and competition on one hand, and sustainable urban development on the other hand. Likewise, within city-regions with multiple airports (such as London), it is the airports which are most centrally located that are the most popular the traveller. This has problematic implications in terms of social sustainability and urban environmental capacity (Upham, et al., 2003), as well as the operation of the airport itself (Bréchet and Picard, 2010). Along with airport-oriented urbanisation, noise pollution, is one of the most conspicuous external effects of the aviation industry (Bréchet and Picard, 2010; Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010), and an extremely polarising characteristic of this interface.

Recent research of the urban context of global freight distribution and port-city spatial dynamics suggests a useful template for understanding international airports and globalised urbanisation, providing an instructive conception of the **port-city interface**, exploring how the integration of the port and the city is negotiated in urban governance (Daamen and Vries, 2013; Hoyle, 2000). Analysis of the spatial strategies emerging from this process (such as providing a greater degree of public access and urban integration with port functions), offers a useful template for research of the **city-airport interface**, and an exploration of how various actors and scales are managed through political conflicts and spatial planning, and the challenges of planning in this multi-dimensional context (Witte et al., 2014). Hoyle suggests that, due to the “sensitive and often controversial” nature of the port-city interface, geographers in particular can offer a helpful perspective and solutions to the challenge of the port cities through an awareness of space, scale, place and integration (2000, p. 414). The city-airport interface is perhaps even more sensitive, and almost always contentious, due to the nature of both urban flight paths and airport-influenced urbanisation. Airport conflicts, then, present an important, unresolved challenge for urban governance in democratic, capitalist societies: integrating intensifying global transport flows within the local built environment (Hesse, 2013).

3. Case studies: London Heathrow and Gatwick Airports

3.1 Proposals for airport expansion in London

The current debate surrounding the perceived need to expand the capacity of London’s airport system provides an especially compelling and timely case study of a powerful, growing global city-region and its infrastructure. London’s growing system of six commercial airports (Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted, City, Luton and Southend) can be attributed to the powerful political-economic dynamics of the city and the region (Smith and Timberlake, 1995, p. 297). London’s prominence as a global city and subsequent population growth has clearly reinforced its position as a node and destination in flows of passengers and cargo. Research at the urban-airport nexus in London also draws parallels with literature on polycentric regions and questions of sustainability (Burger, et al., 2014; Cirilli and Veneri, 2014). The broadening of anti-airport activism in London, from local opposition to expansion of specific airports to a coalition of ‘airport communities’ across the South West (Griggs and Howarth, 2004) suggests that the city-airport interface in London has consequences across the region, and across the realms of urban governance, national politics, spatial planning, and far beyond the pending Heathrow versus Gatwick decision by the Airports Commission in 2015. For example, while many local activists and most borough and county councils surrounding both Heathrow and Gatwick oppose these runway proposals, as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project requiring parliamentary approval (Tewdwr-Jones, 2012, p. 118), the approaching decision on the Commission’s recommendation will be made at the UK level. Deferring the decision on expanding runway capacity in the South East to the new Airports Commission to “balance local considerations with national interest” (Airports Commission, p.

8, 2013), and manage this issue adds an added degree of complexity to London's airport planning debates. London's metropolitan spatial structure and its relationship with its airports is also especially interesting not only because of the current debates and looming decisions on airport expansion proposals, but also because it does not conform to the normative 'aerotropolis', or 'airport-city' growth models which seem to capture much of the attention of literature on airports lately.

3.2 London Heathrow Airport

Expansion at Heathrow, the UK's main long-haul hub airport, has been one of the most controversial spatial planning subjects in the UK for many years. David Cameron even pledged to cancel a Labour-approved third runway there during the 2010 national election campaign, before effectively re-introducing that option in 2012 with the creation of the Commission (Griggs and Howarth, 2013a). The current research and deliberation by the Airports Commission over runway expansion at London's Heathrow Airport - an airport already considered by some to be "one of the country's truly great planning catastrophes" (Hall and Hall, p. 2, 2006) - represents another significant conflict between, on one hand, economic growth through infrastructure expansion and intercity connectivity, and the potential limit to this trajectory of growth because of concerns of urban sustainability. A central issue has been large number of residents in the region who would be newly affected by the aircraft noise of a third runway (320,000 versus 18,000), an estimate strategically emphasised in the "Gatwick Obviously" advertisement campaign.

Heathrow contends that the proposed expansion is "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform our region through sustainable growth, skilled jobs for local people, career-related training, more apprenticeships, better public spaces and improved transport" (Airports Commission, 2014a, p. 3). The large-scale expropriation and demolition of parts of the London Borough of Hillingdon, however, as well as the threat of more noise and air pollution constitute significant environmental externalities of airport expansion here. At the local level, most borough councils in west and central London are strongly against this proposal, as is Conservative Greater London Mayor Boris Johnson. The existing conditions at the Heathrow have a long history of conflict with the local community, especially under the flight paths in west London. This has led to a tradition of activist groups such as HACAN ClearSkies (Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise), which emerged from the experience of residents in Richmond and Kew in the 1960s, and has over the years been joined by other groups such as S.H.E. Stop Heathrow Expansion, NoTRAG (No Third Runway Action Group), and the direct action group Plane Stupid (Stewart, 2010). There are no LBCs or London MPs who support expansion at Heathrow.

It has been suggested that the particular history and indecision on the topic of runway capacity around London "has been transformed into a wicked policy issue that defies a rational and equitable policy solution" (Griggs and Howarth, 2013b, p. 283). It is even more difficult to predict how urban governance could possibly reconcile the economic arguments for a new runway in West London. With the Heathrow versus Gatwick runway controversy being negotiated at the national level and in the political realm, spatial planning will likely be tasked with managing an increase in traffic and public transportation flows to the expanded airport and the change to the local landscape in the process of expropriation and demolition needed to make way for the proposed expansion.

3.3 London Gatwick Airport

Gatwick Airport, the UK's second busiest, highlights the tension between the global city-region's flows of air traffic and urbanisation trajectories on one hand, and struggles for social justice and representation by local communities. Although there would be far fewer people newly affected by aircraft noise, the proposed runway would inevitably have consequences for the predominantly rural and exurban character of this part of the city-region. Located in

Crawley, West Sussex, Gatwick is situated past the outer edge of the protected Green Belt. This means that any new airport-adjacent development such as housing would comprise an extension of the city-region over this growth boundary, perhaps even promoting the London city-region ‘leap-frogging’ the Green Belt and reconstituting space on the periphery (Soja, 2011) through airport expansion.

Opposition groups have also campaigned against aircraft noise and flight path changes, and have launched campaigns against the second runway proposal as well. These groups include the Gatwick Area Conservation Campaign (GACC), Communities Against Gatwick Noise and Emissions (CAGNE), CAGNE East, Plane Wrong, One’s Enough and most recently the Gatwick Obviously Not campaign (a reference to the Airport’s “Gatwick Obviously” Airports Commission-era slogan). At Gatwick airport the threat of airport-related development and urbanisation seems to be particularly pronounced. For example, in their recent report on the case against the second runway, the GACC warn of ‘urbanisation’ – followed by noise, flight paths, night flights and surface congestion – and especially housing pressures that would accompany airport expansion. They estimate that, as a consequence of new direct and catalytic jobs, up to 45,000 new residences would be needed around West Sussex (2015, pp. 1-2). Gatwick, meanwhile, claims that only 9,300 new homes would be needed, and spread over 14 districts and over 25 years (Airports Commission, 2014b, p. 8). Likewise, concerns of congestion on existing roadways and the public cost and inconvenience of expanding local infrastructure have been recurrent themes during the recent Airport Commission’s consultation period. This proposed runway is opposed both by the councils of Crawley and West Sussex, as well as most other local boroughs and county councils in the London city-region.

Increases in air traffic, unpopular flight path trials last year and the recent Airports Commission consultation period also seem to have only fuelled pressure between the Gatwick and its subregional environment. If the Airports Commission indeed recommends that a new runway be built at Gatwick (and if the new government indeed acts on that recommendation), the expansion of the airport, and with it the expansion and intensification of ‘London’ and accompanying inward migration south of the Green Belt could be read as a regional rebalancing of this politically toxic land use to the less densely populated edges of the region, as well as the further ‘operationalising’ of the periphery (Brenner, 2014) for the purpose of global city-region’s metropolitan growth. While an expanded Gatwick may be the least objectionable solution to the perceived need to increase runway capacity in the London city-region, the increase in air traffic, airport-related development and surface congestion brings into question the political deliverability of such a proposal, and the challenge of integrating the ‘space of flows’ with the ‘space of places’ (Castells, 1996).

4. Analysis

Although London’s Heathrow and Gatwick airports are located in distinct parts of the city-region, the interface of urbanisation and global air traffic flows around each site depicts an observable “reconstituting of the inner and outer cities” (Soja, 2011, p. 283) through the complex process of airport-oriented metropolitan urbanisation, or so-called “aero-regionalism” (Addie, 2014). Airport operation, expansion and related urbanisation portrayed indeed show a ‘global-local mismatch’ (Merk, 2013) in the priorities of urban development, and a tension between the economic value of global transport flows for their surrounding cities and regions on one hand, and urban governance and spatial planning that attempts to balance social and environmental concerns on the other hand. From the perspective of the city-airport interface, the urban aeroplane embodies the paradox of globalised urbanisation, and perhaps, the tentacles of the global city, not only extending around the world, but also unevenly intensifying in communities across the city-region, from the centre to the periphery. Flight paths in particular intensify the dynamic between the city-region and the airport in a

manner that is distinct from the port-city interface, in that the noise and air pollution of the planes inevitably extends the point of conflict with residents far beyond the airport perimeter fence.

Seen through the lens of the port-city-inspired urban-airport interface, the airport-adjacent communities near Heathrow and Gatwick, and under their flight paths, appears to be a contentious and uneven physical and political landscape. The politically volatile issues of airport expansion and the socio-spatial consequences of this paradox of airport proximity and conflicting growth trajectories remain a vital issue that is certainly worthy of critical urban scholarship. Such wide-ranging socio-spatial consequences of this paradox of airport proximity and conflicting growth trajectories, such as metropolitan urbanisation and noise pollution, remain a compelling issue that demands further research and theorisation.

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