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TESTING THE DIFFERENTIAL URBANISATION MODEL IN GREAT BRITAIN, 1901–91

TONY CHAMPION

Department of Geography, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK.
E-mail: tony.champion@newcastle.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT
This paper tests the relevance of the differential urbanisation model for depicting the spatial urban development of Great Britain. Population change is studied for eight, mainly decade-long, periods from 1901 to 1991 using a version of the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) Functional Regions framework. Rates of population growth are calculated for a Britain-wide classification of settlements based on population size and for a six-fold typology based on status within the national urban hierarchy. The differential urbanisation model is then tested for Great Britain as a whole and for four broad regional divisions. The results suggest that the British urban system had very largely moved beyond the urbanisation stage by the beginning of the twentieth century and that counter-urbanisation was the prevailing pattern before mid century.

Key words: Differential urbanisation model, Great Britain, population change, polarisation reversal, functional regions, urban hierarchy

INTRODUCTION
The twentieth century ended with a renewed surge of interest in urbanisation patterns and processes. In the more developed regions of the world, debate continues over whether a new 'post-industrial' form of settlement is evolving, initiated by the observations of 'rural renaissance' and 'metropolitan migration reversal' in the 1970s, fuelled by a large-city resurgence in several countries in the 1980s and further stimulated by a second round of rural and small-city growth in the same countries in the 1990s. In the less developed regions, of particular interest in recent years have been the twin themes of the rapid rate of overall urbanisation and the apparent reduction in growth rates of some of the largest cities (UNCHS 1996; Brockerhof 2000).

The differential urbanisation model was put forward by Geyer in 1989 to provide a theoretical framework aimed at transcending the gap which was seen as having opened up between studies of core-periphery migration patterns in the more and less developed regions of the world. Geyer (1989) proposed an integration of models that inserted an intermediate phase of urban system development within the urbanisation/counter-urbanisation dichotomy of the mainstream literature (Geyer & Kontuly 1993). This model built on Richardson's (1980) ideas on polarisation reversal in less developed countries as well as on some aspects of the counter-urbanisation debate in the more developed regions (Champion 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to assess the relevance of the differential urbanisation model for Britain. It forms one of a series of national case studies aimed at undertaking this evaluation in a variety of more and less developed region contexts (see Kontuly & Geyer 2003 for further details of this project). The test is carried out on change in total population from 1901 to 1991 on a decade-by-decade basis, except for the two-decade period 1931–51, and uses a set of geographical
areas that approximates to urban-centred regions.

The paper begins by setting up the test in terms of time period, data source and geographical framework. It then looks at urban-system trends on the basis of two classifications of the areas used: first, for 11 size groups and, second, for a six-level typology of position in the urban hierarchy. The third section presents the results of two formal tests of the differential urbanisation model, one for the whole of Great Britain and the other for four separate regional divisions. Subsequently, explanations for the observed patterns are discussed, with the paper ending by raising some issues for further investigation.

FRAMEWORK FOR TESTING THE DIFFERENTIAL URBANISATION MODEL FOR GREAT BRITAIN

Three interrelated questions need to be addressed in setting up the basis for the test. These are the period of time to be covered, the data to be used for measuring change over time, and the geographical units to be used to represent the urban places that comprise the individual components of the urban settlements system. All three impose major constraints on a comprehensive long-term test of the model for Britain: ultimately, pragmatism has to prevail in what must therefore be considered essentially an exploratory investigation.

The selection of the time period for the test must bear in mind, on the one hand, the developments in urban settlement system that are being looked for in this test and, on the other, the time that Britain is likely to have been affected by them. The key part of the model to be tested is the transformation of settlement system change from a state of urbanisation to a state of counter-urbanisation, with the hypothesis being that there is a distinctive intermediate state that can be denoted as polarisation reversal. As specified by Geyer and Kontuly (1993), these three states are distinguished by the relative growth rate of three city size categories: large (originally primate), intermediate and small. While urbanisation is defined as occurring when the large city category is growing the fastest and counter-urbanisation when the small city category is, polarisation reversal is when the intermediate category is in the ascendancy.

In this context, the distinctive feature of Britain is its early history of mass urbanisation. Though the exact figures vary somewhat between authorities, it is generally agreed that one-third of the population of England and Wales was living in urban places at the start of the nineteenth century and that the level had passed three-quarters by the beginning of the twentieth, with Scotland's proportion not far behind (Law 1967; Champion 1975). At the same time, as made clear by Berry (1976) and Fielding (1982), the urbanisation/counter-urbanisation debate has as much to do with the changing distribution of the urban population between different sizes and types of urban centres as with the urban share of total population. Studies applying the 'stages of urban development' approach to individual urban regions suggest that, while the British urban system as a whole was still undergoing a process of urbanisation in the 1950s, signs of urban deconcentration were already becoming evident by then (Hall 1971; Hall & Hay 1980; Cheshire & Hay 1989). Clearly, the further back that this study can be taken, the better.

Data availability is a major constraint for two reasons, despite the fact that decennial Population Censuses have been taken in Britain for two centuries (with the exception of 1941 during World War Two). One problem is that there is only a relatively short history of migration data collection. The Population Census first asked a question about change of address in 1961, this being based on change of address from 12 months earlier. Before this, nationwide studies of migration had been restricted to 'lifetime moves' based on a comparison of places of birth and census enumeration (Ravenstein 1885, 1889; Friedlander & Roshier 1966) — an approach not suitable for the present study. The continuous monitoring of migration in Britain did not begin until the 1970s. Moreover, being based on information from the National Health Service Central Register, this monitoring was restricted to moves between areas that are generally too broadly defined to capture the majority of individual urban places (Stillwell et al. 1990).

The other problem is that, even if using data on changes in total population between
Censuses rather than on migration, comparisons over time are hampered by the nature of the spatial units used to report Census results. The local government districts that traditionally formed the basis of the Census distinction between urban and rural populations have altered over time, making it impossible to calculate meaningful measures of population change with the data as originally published. Moreover, the boundaries of the administrative areas containing urban centres have rarely kept pace with the physical expansion of the built-up areas.

For the purposes of this study, therefore, use is made of a dataset based on the local government districts (LGDs) that were introduced for Greater London in 1965, for the rest of England and Wales in 1974 and for Scotland in 1975. The main element of this dataset comprises estimates of population for these areas for the Census years 1901 through 1971, produced by Helen Mounsey in a process of matching former districts and their sub-areas to the 'new' local government geography (Mounsey 1982; see also Rhind 1983, Appendix 5). These data relate to the enumerated population, i.e. 'population present' on Census night. The study also looks at trends during 1971–81 and 1981–91, using official estimates of total residents for essentially the same geography, allowing for the minor changes in LGD boundaries that took place during those two decades. The study does not extend beyond 1991, principally because the local government geography of Britain subsequently underwent another major overhaul in mid-decade.

The third decision concerns the geographical units to be used to represent the urban places that comprise the individual components of the urban settlement system. Following the arguments of Fielding (1982), reiterated by Kontuly and Geyer (2003), they should as far as possible relate to the whole functional unit that makes up the 'daily urban system' based on each urban centre, rather than being restricted to their physically defined areas. Previous examples of this approach to urban-region definition used in Britain include the Standard Metropolitan Labour Areas used by Hall 1971 (see also Hall et al. 1973; Spence et al. 1982) and the Functional Regions suite of area definitions developed by the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) at Newcastle University (Coombes et al. 1982; see also Champion et al. 1987).

The latter is used in this study, specifically the level of the Urban Region and Rural Area (URRA). An URRA is an urban-centred region defined on the basis of a physically built-up core area which, together with its commuting hinterland around it, comprises a local labour market. In all, the URRA framework for Great Britain consists of 281 spatial units that exhaust national space. The URRA can be classified in various ways including by size, urban status, industrial structure and regional location. The URRA are not used in their originally delineated form but instead are based on the best-fit aggregations of whole LGDs, so as to be able to use the population data just described. This introduces a degree of fuzziness, especially in rural areas where LGDs are relatively large compared with the size of URRA — a point that should be borne in mind when interpreting the results, along with the fact that a fixed geography is being employed.

**URBAN SYSTEM TRENDS IN GREAT BRITAIN, 1901–91**

This section presents contextual material on the relative performance of the various parts of the British urban system during the twentieth century. It looks at rates of population change over this 90-year period for URRA classified in two ways — by population size and by position in the urban hierarchy. The twin aims are to give an indication of what may be expected from the subsequent formal tests of the differential urbanisation model and provide some detail that can then help to interpret the results of those tests.

**Analysis by population size** — The approach most commonly used to identify the position of a national urban system on the urbanisation-counter-urbanisation continuum is by reference to the population size of its component parts. As shown by Kontuly and Geyer (2003), this follows the lead given by Fielding (1982, 1989) in his pioneering work on France. For this
purpose, the URRAs have been classified into 11 size groups on the basis of the 1971 Census populations of their correctly specified areas, i.e. not of their aggregated closest-fit local government districts. The groupings are kept fixed over the full study period. This is consistent with the fact that the framework for the whole urban system is treated as static, but it means that the results should be interpreted with caution, especially for the earlier periods under study.

The results are shown in Figure 1, with two panels separating out the four periods since 1951 from the four covering the first half of the twentieth century. The panel covering 1951–91 demonstrates how long ago Britain had completed, the urbanisation process, as defined by Fielding in terms of the relationship between growth rate and urban-region size. For all four decades shown, there is a prevailing negative relationship, with the larger URRAs growing more slowly than the smaller ones.

![Graph](image1)

**Figure 1. Population change, 1901–91, for Urban Regions and Rural Areas of Great Britain, grouped by population size in 1971: A. 1951–61 to 1981–91; B. 1901–11 to 1931–51.**

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The principal exception relates to the smallest one or two size categories. In 1951-61 it is only the 55,000–70,000 and especially the under-55,000 categories that do not conform to the full counter-urbanisation relationship. Otherwise, there is for this period a pretty regular increase in growth rate moving from right to left, with the rate rising from close to zero growth for the largest size category (1.8 million and over, comprising only London) to the 70,000–90,000 category (Figure 1). Moving forward through the decades reveals a progressively stronger performance by these two categories relative to the rest of the settlement size range. By 1961-71 the 70,000–90,000 category becomes the fastest growing of all 11 and maintains this position through the final two decades, while the under-55 category stages a marked recovery in 1971-81 and is close to the 70,000–90,000 category in the final decade shown.

The other progressive change during the 1951–91 period is in the relative performance of the two largest categories. In conformity with the counter-urbanisation relationship, London’s population grew significantly more slowly than the average for the 900,000–1,800,000 thousand category in 1951–61 (Figure 1). Though the growth rate for both these fell substantially between the 1950s and the 1960s, the two size groups had moved closer together and by 1971–81 were almost identical. Then between the 1970s and the 1980s, while both saw an upward shift in growth rate, London surged ahead of the other. The latter constitutes a major departure from the general counter-urbanisation slope for 1981–91, though it is also noticeable that the overall gradient of the slope is somewhat less steep than for the previous two decades.

Clearly, it is necessary to go further back in time to pick up signs of an urbanisation relationship in Britain – in fact, as far as the decade 1921–31, according to the evidence of the second panel of Figure 1. At that time, London was by far the strongest growing of all 11 size groups and the smallest size group the weakest, while between these two extremes there was a fairly regular progression. This positive relationship between size and growth had, however, disappeared by the 1931–51 period, when the two extremes both had low growth and there was relatively little difference between all the eight size groups in between.

Figure 1 also reveals that the urbanisation pattern was also not as strong in the first two decades of the century as in 1921–31. Even if ignoring the especially rapid growth of URRAs with 70,000–90,000 people in 1971, it is only across the smaller size groups that there is a positive relationship between size and growth. Already the intermediate size groups were generally growing as strongly as the largest ones, if not faster.

**Analysis by position in the urban hierarchy** – In this analysis the URRAs are grouped on the basis of a six-level typology devised by CURDS (Champion et al. 1987). As shown in Table 1, these comprise:

1. London Dominant.
2. Conurbation Dominants (Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne).
3. Provincial Dominants (Bristol, Edinburgh, Leeds, Nottingham, Sheffield).
4. (Other) Cities.
5. Towns.
6. Rural Areas.

Not surprisingly, this ranking displays a broad correspondence with population size. This is partly explained by the fact that levels 1 and 2 are identical to the two largest size groups used in Figure 1, while level 3 is a subset of the 450,000–900,000 size group. Below these levels, however, the classification is rather different. The URRAs that were classified into eight separate size groups are now divided only three ways. Second, while there is a broad correspondence between size and urban status, there are many cases of URRAs that have a higher position in the urban hierarchy (in relation to employment, services, etc.) than their population size would suggest and vice versa.

Table 1 shows the variation in rates of population change across the six levels of Britain’s urban hierarchy for each of the eight periods. The main features of each period are as follows:

**1901–11:** A relatively small range around the national growth rate of 10.4%, apart from the very low overall growth of the rural areas.

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Table 1. Population change, 1901–91, for a six-level urban hierarchy for Great Britain, % for period.

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<td>4.7</td>
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<td>9.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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Note: See text for definitions of the hierarchical levels. Note that the change rate for 1931–51 covers the full 20-year period.

**1911–21**: Again a relatively flat pattern, this time with a lower national growth rate. London’s growth rate is now less than half that of the conurbation dominants. The rural level is now losing population, but its differential from other levels is smaller than previously.

**1921–31**: A clearer relationship with urban level, with strong growth for London and a progressively higher rate of growth moving up from rural to towns to cities.

**1931–51**: An inverted-U relationship with the lowest growth recorded by the highest two levels and the rural areas.

**1951–61**: A clear counter-urbanisation relationship for the top five levels, but a major discontinuity for rural areas, which register overall population loss.

**1961–71**: A similar pattern to 1951–61, except that the range for the first five levels is steeper, the top two levels are quite similar, and the rural level exceeds the national rate for the first time.

**1971–81**: An almost perfect counter-urbanisation relationship across the six levels, resulting from a further rise in growth rate for rural areas (against the national trend), but with the first two levels again very similar.

**1981–91**: A counter-urbanisation relationship for five of the levels, as in 1961–71, but now it is the rural level that conforms, while London’s growth is more positive than for the next two levels.

The patterns of growth rate differentials across the urban system based on hierarchical levels match quite closely those found from the more disaggregated size-group analysis. The post-1951 decades all exhibit a general counter-urbanisation relationship – one, however, that excludes the lowest of the six levels in the first two decades, is nearest to perfect for 1971–81 and then ‘loses’ London in the final period. Before then, the 1920s are confirmed as having an overall urbanising pattern, albeit with very little variation across the second, third and fourth levels, while the prevailing image of 1931–51 is an inverted U. As with the size-based analysis, the first two decades of the century display a generally flat pattern apart from the very weak growth of the Rural Areas – certainly not an urbanisation relationship that is in any way as clear as for 1921–31. These observations raise a number of questions, which will be addressed following the formal testing of the differential urbanisation model.

**TESTING THE DIFFERENTIAL URBANISATION MODEL**

As mentioned above, the basic test of the differential urbanisation model requires the classification of URRA into three categories: Large City, Intermediate City and Small City. In any analysis, it is a moot point where the boundaries should fall. For this exploratory analysis, we take the a priori six-fold typology based on hierarchical levels, collapse the top three levels into a single large city category, treat the (other) cities and towns’ levels as intermediate city and small city categories respectively, and ignore the lowest category of
rural areas. This section starts by applying this framework to the British urban system as a whole, and subsequently Britain is subdivided into four major regions with different historical and geographical backgrounds.

**Great Britain as a whole** – The results of the nationwide test are shown in Table 2. The first panel shows the actual rates of population change for the three city categories for each of the eight periods, while the second gives their ranking on the basis of these rates at each time. The final two lines present the state of the system according to the differential urbanisation model. The broader-level pattern runs from the urbanisation or large city stage (U) through the polarisation reversal or intermediate city stage (PR) to the counter-urbanisation or small city stage (CU). Each of these is subdivided into two stages, based on the growth-rate ranking of the other two city categories, to give a total of six stages in an urban development cycle, these being labelled I to VI (Geyer & Kontuly 1993; Kontuly & Geyer 2003).

On this basis, Britain has been consistently in the grip of counter-urbanisation from 1931. Through all five periods since then, it has been situated in Stage V, in which the small city category grows faster than the intermediate city category and the large city category grows slowest of all. By contrast, as suggested by the previous analyses, the 1920s appears to be a decade of urbanisation for Britain, with the reverse ranking of growth rates (large, intermediate, small) that allocates the system to Stage II. For the two previous decades, Britain falls into the condition of polarisation reversal, with the intermediate city category in the ascendency. Here, though, the ranking of the other two categories differs between the two decades, putting the country into Stage III in 1901–11 and Stage IV in 1911–21.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this part of the test. In the first place, Britain has occupied a mature stage of the urban development cycle for many decades. Second, over the full period of 90 years being studied here, Britain does not seem to have followed the expected sequence of events, with polarisation reversal being followed by urbanisation and with the latter then shifting directly to counter-urbanisation. Taking these two findings together, it is tempting to speculate that the 1920s constituted an aberration and that the main shift from urbanisation to polarisation reversal took place before 1901. It is unfortunate that the longer 1931–51 period cannot be unpacked into two separate decades, let alone that shorter-term changes or

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*Note: DU: Differential urbanisation, U: Urbanisation, PR: Polarisation reversal, CU: Counter-urbanisation. See text for definitions of these and of the Stages. Note that the change rate for 1931–51 covers the full 20-year period.*

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customised periods cannot be examined, as this might indicate a more gradual transition from the Stage II of the 1920s to the Stage V of the subsequent two-decade period. Alternatively, an explanation may be found in the nature of developments taking place in the different parts of the country.

Four regional divisions – For the subnational test, Great Britain is divided into four zones: London metropolitan region, Rest of the South, industrial heartland (comprising the majority of the English Midlands plus the whole of the North West and Yorkshire) and Periphery (comprising the most northerly parts of England plus Scotland and Wales). They differ in terms of regional location, urbanisation level and development trajectory (see Champion et al. 1987, p. 13, for further details). This four-fold division is the same as that employed by Coombes et al. (1989) in a comparative study of counter-urbanisation in Britain and Italy, though in that study it was the county rather than the URRA that formed the unit of analysis within these regional divisions.

The results of the differential urbanisation model test applied to the same three city categories for each of these four regional divisions are shown in Table 3. The most conspicuous feature is the recent prevalence of the counter-urbanisation pattern across the country, with all four regional divisions being found in Stage V in the 1970s and 1980s. Also notable is the geographical progression in the onset of this sustained counter-urbanisation,

| Table 3. Stages of differential urbanisation, 1901–91, for four regional divisions of Great Britain. |
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with London metropolitan region being consistently at Stage V from 1931–51 onwards, rest of the south and industrial heartland from 1961–71 and the periphery from 1971–81.

On the other hand, the progress towards Stage V is not as regular for Britain as a whole, at least for some regional divisions (Table 3). London metropolitan region is the main exception, with its twentieth-century record merely involving a simple shift from Stage IV to Stage V around 1931. Elsewhere, considerable volatility is evident. The industrial heartland was characterised by a clear counter-urbanisation pattern in 1931–51, so the temporary return to polarisation reversal in the 1950s does not accord with the differential urbanisation model. Moreover, given that polarisation reversal in one or other of its two guises is found in 1901–11 in all four regional divisions, the reversion of two of them to Stage II in the 1920s seems anomalous, as to does the occasional case of Stage VI in the first half of the century.

EXPLANATIONS

The most impressive feature arising from the application of the differential urbanisation model to twentieth-century change in Britain’s urban system is the early onset and subsequent pervasiveness of the counter-urbanisation phase. At the same time, it is noteworthy that neither Britain as a whole nor any of its four regional divisions has moved into the ‘advanced’ stage of counter-urbanisation (Stage VI), in which the large city category replaces the Intermediate category as the second-fastest growing. There are also some cases of regression in terms of the stages of the differential urbanisation model. This section explains the prevalence of counter-urbanisation in terms of three broad sets of factors, before looking briefly at the departures from the model.

Foremost among the main driving forces recognised to be responsible for the shift to counter-urbanisation in Britain is the changing nature and distribution of economic activity. While previous studies (for a review, see Champion 2001) have identified retirement migration as the pioneer of the shift of population from larger to smaller urban regions and into more remote rural areas, it is people of working age that have been much more important numerically. Moreover, in the last two decades at least, this residential shift of workers has occurred without a significant increase in net commuting to the cities (Turok & Edge 1999).

The twin processes of de-industrialisation and economic restructuring have led to a massive down-the-hierarchy movement of employment in Britain. The number of manufacturing jobs nationally contracted by a full quarter in the 1970s and by a similar proportion again in the 1980s. Moreover, the larger cities and towns bore the brunt of this contraction not only by virtue of the traditional importance of this sector but also due to the higher proportion of such jobs lost. Meanwhile, total employment in the service sector has grown rapidly, especially in the middle-sized and smaller cities and towns outside the main conurbations. As a result, between 1981 and 1996 for instance, while employment nationally rose by 5.7%, the number of jobs in towns and rural areas went up by almost 15% and the number in the main conurbations including London fell by 6% (Turok & Edge 1999).

A second important set of explanations relates to people’s residential preferences, along with the increasing ability to realise these. While centrifugal movement has been common to most countries of the developed world for some decades, it started earlier and has become more deeply entrenched in Britain. The urban exodus began in the first half of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the squalid conditions and disease of the industrial city. By the 1930s it had moved into top gear, stimulated by growth in rail commuting services and the accelerating use of motorised transport and reinforced by the very low real construction costs and the virtual absence of controls over the nature and location of new building at that time.

Moreover, perhaps distinctive to Britain, this process has since its outset gone well beyond suburban growth as traditionally defined. Unlike North Americans who appear to strive for a suburban lifestyle and Continental Europeans who, to varying degrees, prize urban living, for the British – and especially the English – the deep countryside seems to exercise a strong and enduring attraction. As
early as 1939, surveys were revealing that the majority of people – 61% in that year – preferred the countryside to the city as a place to live, a proportion that had risen to 72% half a century later (King 1989).

A third set of factors relates to the residential capacity of British cities, particularly taken in conjunction with planning arrangements designed to prevent the recurrence of 1930s-type urban sprawl. With regard to the latter, since the Second World War the government’s primary emphasis has been on urban containment, notably involving the restriction of the physical growth and coalescence of larger cities in the more heavily populated regions but also including the control of urban development at all levels of the settlement hierarchy. This policy was implemented through the imposition of wide ‘green belts’ in the most pressurised and sensitive areas around cities and through the designation of new towns and other places at some distance from these cities to accommodate their ‘overspill’ (for further details, see Hall 1992; Cullingworth & Nadin 1997).

Even after the decision to abandon planned dispersal in favour of inner-city regeneration was taken in the mid 1970s, the pressure for urban population deconcentration was maintained by changing demographics. By this time average household size was falling rapidly as a result of the smaller size of families, more elderly living separately from their children, more young people able to live independently and rising rates of marital breakdown. This meant that cities would have had to expand their housing stock rapidly even to keep up their existing population levels, let alone grow. Hemmed in by their green belts, most cities found this scale of building impossible. Moreover, given the fact that the most accessible destinations for this overspill were soon facing their own capacity problems, the effect was to push the urban exodus further down the settlement hierarchy and further into less heavily populated parts of the country than would otherwise have been the case.

Finally, in terms of departures from the path predicted by the differential urbanisation model, there would seem to be two principal instances. First, while in 1931–51 all four regional divisions saw their small city category in the ascendancy, all but the London metropolitan region moved back to polarisation in 1951–61. Second is the temporary regression of the industrial heartland and periphery to an urbanisation pattern in the 1920s. Explanations for both these probably lie at least in part in the two World Wars. The diversion of national resources to the war effort in 1914–18 led to major housing shortages in the cities, which were largely rectified during the following decade, encouraging renewed population concentration. After the Second World War, the first main priority was urban reconstruction, with larger-city growth also being assisted by the temporary recovery of traditional manufacturing industries and by the introduction of planning controls. Only in the case of London, and to a lesser extent Glasgow, did the planned dispersal programme make significant progress before the late 1950s. Confirmation of the importance of these factors, however, must await analysis of data at the level of the individual places involved. This is best left until it is possible to undertake a fuller study based on properly defined URRAs as opposed to the best-fit LGD aggregations used here and perhaps also one using URRAs identified with contemporary information rather than a fixed framework relating to the 1970s.

CONCLUSION

The results of the formal testing of the differential urbanisation model, together with the preceding analyses of URRAs by population size and urban status, all indicate that Britain’s progress through the cycle of urban development was already well advanced by the beginning of the twentieth century. Using a functional approach to defining the components of the settlement system, this study of post-1901 patterns of population change has uncovered very little evidence of the urbanisation pattern of a positive relationship with urban size and status. The British urban system appears to have already reached the polarisation reversal phase of the model by 1901–11 and counter-urbanisation was the prevailing tendency by 1931–51, though temporary setbacks in both these progressions are discernible in the decades following the two.
World Wars. In recent decades, however, Britain seems to have become firmly rooted in Stage V of the model rather than moving forward to the Stage VI version of counter-urbanisation that the differential urbanisation model sees as presaging the onset of a second round of the urban development cycle.

Explanations for these observations have been found primarily in Britain’s early history of mass urbanisation and its legacy. The population exodus from the larger, older cities had already got underway in the nineteenth century and accelerated markedly in the interwar period. Moreover, the railways in the nineteenth century and also motorised transport subsequently permitted this movement to involve much more than suburban extensions of the major cities. The legacy of early urbanisation can be seen in the notion of the ‘rural idyll’ that seems to dominate people’s residential aspirations. It is also evident in the introduction of the twin policy of urban containment and population dispersal in the 1940s and in the massive urban-rural shift in employment that occurred in the wake of de-industrialisation from the late 1960s onwards. This combination of factors also helps to account for the persistence of Stage V of the differential urbanisation model, not least with the policy constraints on the physical growth of the large cities hampering their recent attempts at retaining residents and attracting new business.

At the same time, the exploratory nature of this study and the need for further investigation should be stressed. In taking the analysis back to the start of the twentieth century, the study also raises more questions than it answers. In particular, further work on the 1931–51 period would seem to be called for, following the finding that a counter-urbanisation pattern was already in place at that time rather than only emerging in the 1960s, as is conventionally believed. While the latter interpretation is based mainly on urban-system studies that did not look back before 1951 (and would have been confirmed by the present study if it had done likewise), there is a need to try and unpack that long 20-year period to see how far its overall pattern was caused by war and its aftermath as opposed to the more ‘natural’ circumstances of the earlier years. Second, in similar vein, the apparent anomaly of the 1920s also merits further attention. Third, in terms of a fuller test of the differential urbanisation model, it would seem to be necessary to look even further back in time to the period in the nineteenth century when the growth of the urban population was at its height. This ambition, however, raises the challenge of specifying the components of the urban system for then. Indeed, even before that, there is a need to confirm the results of the present study by using a geographical framework that exactly represents the nature of the urban system as it existed in the earlier decades of the twentieth century.

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