

## Chapter 16

# **Turbulence and Sedimentation in the Labor Markets of Late Twentieth-Century Metropoles<sup>1</sup>**

*Nick Buck and Ian Gordon*

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### **Introduction**

The economy and labor market of metropolises such as London, Paris, or New York, at the close of the nineteenth century had a number of characteristics with renewed resonance a hundred years later. In London's case these included a dependence on workshops and service establishments catering for elite consumer markets, and industries linked to an unstable global economy, accompanied by a substantial casual labor market which (now) seems to have been a major contributor to concentrated deprivation and an apparent absence of "social cohesion" in the inner East End. At the time, however, an influential body of opinion attributed the problems to other processes within the city, which over a period of years demoralized initially employable and responsible (rural) migrants to the city, and concentrated a social "residuum" in its inner areas (Stedman Jones 1971). In New York, with a similarly structured economy and comparable social concerns, an additional factor was the rapid influx of (particularly Jewish and southern Italian) migrants into ethnically segmented labor markets (Buck and Fainstein 1992). And in Paris too, though craftworkers exercised more power than elsewhere, this was largely irrelevant to the masses of provincial immigrants for whom the reality was one of competitive individualism in a labor market characterized by small firms and great seasonal instability in employment (Harvey 1985).

For much of this century things have been very different in such cities. In London, for example, much larger, nationally orientated employers emerged, as market orientation and mass production came to the fore in manufacturing (Hall 1962), service functions were increasingly bureaucratized, and the tide of internationalization was reversed (Hirst and Thompson 1996). Thus, particularly in the middle decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s, London appeared simply as the dominant industrial centre, at the heart of its most prosperous region, enjoying relatively low levels of both unemployment and social disorder. In New York an additional stabilizing factor over this time was the halt to large-scale immigration. Since then the tide has turned again, with a particularly early and rapid onset of

deindustrialization in London, the continuing dispersal of routinizable jobs as employers (both public and private) pursue spatial and/or organizational divisions of labor, and (especially in New York) a renewed influx of labor from low-wage economies. Unlike other cities exposed to such radical shifts in their economic position, for the metropolises this has meant not simple loss, but a switch back to other sources of competitive advantage. In particular, increased emphases on international linkages, flexibility, marketed expertise, novelty, money, and cultural products all play to their comparative strengths. But the benefits of success in these terms have been very unequally distributed and, in the London case, a sharp deterioration in unemployment levels (relative to the rest of the country as well as the experience of earlier decades) appears as the central factor in growing social exclusion, and is a credible threat to social cohesion in the city (Buck 1997).

Within the context of their national urban systems, these leading centers can seem quite unique, even idiosyncratic, both in their economic history and in the current tension between economic success and social failure. Clearly their experience has been very different from that of cities in the old industrial regions, but these are themselves becoming less and less typical of the cities of advanced (post)industrial societies. Whether or not the experience of the metropolises now has relevance to a much wider set of cities is a matter basically of the weight placed on analyses emphasizing their peculiar role within an emergent global economy (Sassen 1991), as against those focusing simply on agglomeration as an intensifier of pervasive trends toward deregulated and more flexible economic relations in an increasingly competitive world. Though the empirical focus of this paper is on one of the "global cities," namely London, the features which emerge as crucial to labor market developments are essentially those of agglomeration, and of much more general relevance.

In terms of labor market effects, the (exceptionalist) "global city" interpretation focuses largely on an hypothesized polarization of demand growth in these cities (since the early 1980s), on advanced international services *and* low-level local service functions – squeezing out those functions which previously offered both accessible *and* worthwhile jobs.<sup>2</sup> Difficulties with fitting this model to the London case include a lack of actual growth in low-wage services (at least prior to the late 1990s), limited absolute growth in globally oriented services, and a pattern of structural change with considerable continuity over the past 40 years. In fact, a structural shift away from routinizable jobs also figures within the "simple agglomeration" account, as an expected feature of *all* high order centers (not just those with an international orientation). But this account also emphasizes ways in which agglomeration affects labor market processes, particularly in relation to the risks of unemployment. Even in the London case, we shall argue that these labor market processes are more important contributors to social divisions than headlined "global city" developments.

The pure agglomeration effect on labor market processes is to reduce the risks of labor market flexibility, since new jobs and workers are easier to find when required in the external labor market, encouraging higher turnover rates, both directly and also through "natural selection" of firms and workers needing or wanting such flexibility (Gordon 1988; Scott 1988). This can be one of the major competitive advantages of the metropolises, but there may be important side effects, both in terms

of underinvestment in skills by free-riding firms, and of unforeseen risks falling on individuals with little organizational support. Two other side effects of some importance are the attraction – both through domestic and international migration – of especially heterogeneous populations, and residential segregation of more and less advantaged groups at a broader scale than in less extensive labor market areas.

In this paper, our focus is on the contribution of labor market processes to a growing concentration of unemployment within the metropolises, as the key factor in increased social inequality within them. In the London case this is indicated by the fact that 10 of the 14 inner boroughs now figure among the 20 districts with the highest unemployment rates in Britain – whereas none did at the start of the 1980s, and other parts of the region have some of the lowest rates. Traditionally, such problems are seen as ones of the inability of a spatially and occupationally constrained labor force to adjust in the face of major structural shocks. With different political perspectives and/or reality judgments, this implies either a need to counteract the processes of change or to absorb them more effectively through promotion of labor market flexibility. By contrast, the hydrological metaphors in our title imply a rather more fluid perspective on metropolitan labor markets, with various forms of flexibility and adjustment actually contributing to an increasing concentration of unemployment and underemployment. Both the concepts of turbulence and sedimentation involve parallels with two alternative sets of ideas invoked to account for problems of unemployment, exclusion and incohesion in late nineteenth-century London, in terms of casualization and demoralization/residualization (Stedman Jones 1971). In this paper, however, where they relate to the downside of a flexible, insecure urban labor market and to a progressive downgrading of status and competitiveness among those affected by job loss, the two concepts are seen as complementary explanations of concentrated urban unemployment.

### **Turbulence, Turnover, and Urban Labour Markets**

We turn first to the issues of turbulence and instability in the labor markets of large metropolises. These have had a particular salience over the past couple of decades because of a number of developments expected to increase general levels of employment instability throughout the advanced economies. First, governments (notably in the UK) have sought to promote greater labor market and wage flexibility. Together with higher levels of unemployment, these increase the pressure on those in the weakest position in the labor market to take poor-quality jobs offering worse conditions of security. Secondly, management practices within large organizations have favored a sharper division (across all grades) between core employees, with substantial job security, and a less secure periphery, including workers on various forms of more flexible contract (though actual numbers on these contracts are still limited in the UK). Recent tendencies to “downsize,” and “delayer” bureaucratic organizations have also added to job insecurity among managerial, professional, and technical workers. Nevertheless, detailed empirical research shows that the growth in instability has in fact been greatest for the less skilled workers (Gregg and Wadsworth 1995). Finally, the overall incidence of job instability has also been raised by structural shifts in employment, away from larger organizations and from the public sector, toward small firms and private services sectors, as well as by a growth

of self-employment, part-time work, and employment of women in childbearing age groups.

These processes are occurring both inside and outside the metropolises, though some, linked to deindustrialization, will be proceeding faster there. In these cities, however, a number of other factors continue to encourage higher rates of job turnover than are found elsewhere. First among these is the direct effect of agglomeration – appropriately thought of in terms of numbers of business units/employers, as well as numbers of workers – in encouraging higher rates of job turnover. This reflects the fact that with a larger range of employment opportunities available to workers, and a larger external pool of workers (with relevant skills) available to firms, search costs are lower for both, and new jobs/workers can be secured more readily when they are wanted. In consequence firms may be less concerned to retain workers – adjusting employment levels more rapidly to fluctuations in demand, and doing less to avoid natural wastage – while workers will be more willing to leave in search of better jobs, and invest less in a particular employment relationship. A second-order effect is to make survival easier for firms experiencing substantial fluctuations in their product market (including those in new or fashion-related activities), and harder for those needing a more stable environment. Similarly, among the more mobile groups in the population, the metropolitan cores can be expected to attract and retain residents with a stronger preference for flexibility over security.

For most of its history, London's employment structure has been characterized by small firms, and service sector industries, many linked to elite consumer markets or innovative activities, all involving unstable demand at the plant level. The port, which had been a particular source of instability, reflecting global trade fluctuations, is no longer relevant. However, global links through finance seem to have taken over this role, being substantially responsible for the bubble economy of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The speculative character of this boom/bust actually reflected a (misplaced) confidence on the part of many businesses in continuing growth, rather than the uncertainty which encourages the design of shorter-term employment relations. And it is not obvious that dependence on global markets should particularly encourage flexible employment strategies – especially when many of the players are rather large. On the supply side, various factors promote unstable relations. In particular, London's role as an entry point in many professional and managerial careers (see Fielding 1989) encourages a concentration of younger more mobile people in the residential population, as does its role as a consumption center, as a refuge for those fleeing overseas political events or domestic family breakdown, and as a haven for nonconformist lifestyles.

In looking at actual levels of instability in the London labor market, as compared with other parts of the country, we focus on differences in rates of job turnover,<sup>3</sup> as a direct indicator of labor market turbulence, rather than on the incidence of types of “nonstandard” jobs (including part-time jobs of all sorts) which is sometimes misleadingly taken as a general index of labor market flexibility. Three measures of mobility are considered (differing as to whether or not moves into and/or out of employment are considered as well as moves between jobs) in order to allow for different cyclical influences on each type of move. Overall though, the dominant pattern is for higher rates of turnover during years of strong economic performance

(when opportunities are greatest and the risks facing voluntary job quitters are least). Depending on the type of move involved, over an average year between 10 and 16 percent of men and between 11 and 21 percent of women in the working age range made one of these transitions, with rather more exits and entrants than direct job changes. As we should expect, the incidence of mobility varies between occupations, industries, and age/sex/marital status groupings as well as spatially. In relation to the workers involved, these variations are likely to reflect differences in career and life-cycle positions, expectations and responsibilities, previous work histories, and the extent to which people possess transferable skills, as well as differing attitudes toward risk and security. From the employers' side, as well as shifting patterns of labor demand, they will reflect different personnel strategies for different segments of the labor force, involving higher or lower planned turnover rates according to a balancing of future uncertainties about needs against costs of hiring, training, and socializing new staff.

Because of this range of influences, in comparing areas, it is necessary to look not only at recorded turnover rates, but also at standardized rates, controlling for identified sources of variation other than area. For the South East region as a whole, which is the probably relevant labor market unit for the London metropole, such comparisons show that rates of mobility are substantially higher than elsewhere in Britain, and this is not simply the result of compositional differences in the population. Controlling for these effects, entry/exit rates are about 20 percent, and interjob moves about 30 percent, above the national average. Within this area inner London stands out, largely as a reflection of the predominance of rented accommodation in its housing stock, as compared with owner-occupation in the suburbs, as well as some lifestyle preferences likely to be associated with different attitudes to security/change. The other British conurbations have turnover rates much closer to the national average, but falling below this in the case of those with particularly high unemployment rates (Merseyside, South Yorkshire, and Central Clydeside). The general pattern within Britain appears to be one of higher turnover rates in both larger/denser labor market areas *and* those with a stronger pressure of demand – a combination yielding the highest expected rates in the London region and the lowest in nonmetropolitan areas outside the South East.

From the worker's point of view this turbulence of the London labor market has both positive and negative consequences. For some workers it provides a context for greater choice between jobs, leading to more rapid career advancement, while for others it may lead to weak human capital formation, insecurity, and ultimately a restricted range of satisfactory job choices. These consequences will be distributed more or less directly by occupational level and type of industry, so it becomes important to know how London's turbulence affects different groups. In fact, the tendency to higher rates of turnover applies to almost all occupations and industry groups in London – being most marked in those types of job which are generally most stable, including professional and managerial jobs, reflecting London's role as an entry point and site for rapid advancement in white collar careers.<sup>4</sup> In relation to age, however, the normal steep decline of mobility rates with age is strongly exaggerated in London, with the tendency to greater instability being concentrated among young workers, and more or less disappearing by the age of 40. By that time it is likely that most of those involved will have successfully made the transition

to an established job, rather later than their peers in the provinces, though possibly at a higher level.

Much of this evidence is consistent with a positive view of the role of job turnover in career progression and the accumulation of human capital. While some career progression takes place within the internal labor markets of large organizations, many other occupational career paths, particularly in professional and related occupations, depend on accumulating experience with a variety of employers. It is also likely that there has been some shift towards the latter form of career progression, for which metropolitan labor markets play very important roles.

However, there are real risks associated with a high-turnover labor market, which can have very serious consequences for some of those involved. Involuntary job losses, or the failure of some speculative moves, mean a greater risk of spells of unemployment, which though typically short are liable to leave people in a lower quality job than would otherwise have been expected. This is a particular risk for those in the type of job where short-term experience gives the worker little human capital which can be taken on to future jobs. Thus, although the differential in mobility rates between London and other parts of the UK is most marked for skilled workers, it is those in the lower reaches of the labor market who run the greatest risks of entering downward career paths as a result of the unstable character of employment relations in the metropolitan labor market. As White and Forth (1998) have shown, there is a strong tendency for the unemployed to cycle through more unstable or downgraded parts of the labor market. Indeed even the evidence of stabilization among older workers has ambiguous implications, since it can reflect not only many people finding more stable jobs, with some sort of career prospect, but also longer spells of unemployment among those who fail to achieve this by middle age. And, significantly, it is in these middle age ranges that London exhibits the highest unemployment rates, relative to the national average. For some people at least, youthful turbulence seems to be followed by a form of sedimentation in the sense of downward mobility, leading to possible marginalization. The risks of this occurring are likely to vary with the overall labor market situation, as we show in the next section where we consider the general role of sedimentation in concentrating unemployment within metropolitan communities.

### **Sedimentation, Bumping Down, and Structural Unemployment**

The relatively turbulent character of metropolitan labor markets implies rather higher levels of unemployment, especially among the middle-aged. But the sort of long-term shift toward less stable service jobs discussed in the last section is unlikely to explain the marked increase in the concentration of unemployment which London (at least) has experienced since the early 1980s. Nor in this case can it be blamed on a deteriorating economic performance, since even in the manual sectors employment trends have been no worse than in previous decades. In fact, the general evidence is that the city's "labour market" is too open, particularly in commuting terms, for there to be any close link between employment and unemployment trends at the city level. In this situation, explanations of higher levels of unemployment within inner London in particular, as compared with the regional hinterland, naturally focus on its concentration of residents from groups with

limited competitive power in the labor market. This factor could only account for a marked *increase* in the spatial concentration of unemployment, however, if *either* the residential segregation of disadvantaged groups had substantially increased over this period, *or* the competitive position of some of these groups had been substantially worsened. In the London case, there is actually no convincing evidence of an intensification of social segregation – so we shall focus on the ways in which labor market processes might have been responsible for further marginalization of those in initially weak positions.

Our basic argument is that prolonged experience of economic conditions where demand is insufficient to provide full employment leads to a *sedimentation* of the labor supply, with a continual risk of individuals falling into positions below their capacities and limited chances of recovering their position. In extreme cases this leads to people descending beyond long-term unemployment into effective disengagement from the labor market, in some form of concealed unemployment. But the underlying processes are ones which are believed to operate right across the labor market and do not depend on pathological behavior (such as an unwillingness to engage in job search) by those at its margins. The consequences are spatially uneven because of residential segregation of those in the least advantaged positions.

A central process is that of “bumping down,”<sup>5</sup> whereby, with an inflexible wage structure, individuals respond to demand-deficient unemployment by lowering their sights, taking a job one tier down, in a position where they outcompete others displaced to the tier below, and so on. In our analyses of London labor market flows this is indicated by the fact that people are substantially more likely to enter unemployment from higher nonmanual or supervisory jobs than they are to return there, with experience of unemployment causing a net shift downward particularly into personal service and less skilled manual jobs. A consequence is that the unemployed always include disproportionate numbers from the lowest tiers (the “unskilled”), even when falls in demand are equally spread across all types of job. This can give a misleading impression about the causes of unemployment, but would be of limited consequence if cyclical upturns and a relaxation of hiring standards could be counted on to restore everyone (including the unemployed) to their previous position within the labor market. But, particularly if recession has been prolonged there may be several brakes on this process. Those who, under pressure of redundancy, secured permanent jobs at a lower position in the occupational hierarchy may not feel the same pressure to start searching again for a better paid job, particularly if they are middle-aged or older workers. In any case, they (like the unemployed) may now be judged less employable, whether on the basis of their current occupation or a lower valuation of “experience” in the open labor market, and are particularly liable to be overtaken by younger workers on an upward trajectory. Those who have had spells of unemployment are also rather likely to have been forced to take less permanent jobs (White and Forth 1998), thus acquiring an unstable work history which further reduces their chances of regaining stable jobs commensurate with their previous standing and talents, leaving them in a state of subemployment (Norris 1978). Periods of continuing demand-deficiency are thus likely to induce a progressive growth of structural unemployment, reversible only through extended periods of full employment, rather than simply by an upturn in labor demand.

These processes are not peculiar to cities, and are believed to underlie the upward drift in European unemployment rates since the 1980s, accompanied by shifts in the unemployment–vacancy and unemployment–inflation relationships, each implying a reduced efficiency of labor market performance, raising the level of nondemand-deficient unemployment.<sup>6</sup> But they have some particular implications for the metro-poles, because these are likely to include extensive areas with concentrations of those individuals most likely to be “bumped” out of regular, secure and reasonably rewarded employment, and because some area-specific processes may exacerbate sedimentation in these areas. One such process involves a deterioration in the (crucial) networks of informal information about jobs when there are fewer local people in such regular employment. Some others operating over more extended timescales involve the impact of (male) unemployment rates on family structures, with knock-on effects both on educational achievement (Gordon 1996) and on the incidence of health problems – both leading to significantly higher risks of unemployment. And all of these have a particular salience for the larger metropolitan areas where the scale of residential segregation increases the likelihood that the personal networks of those at risk of unemployment will be localized within relatively homogeneous areas. How important these area effects may be in quantitative terms is by no means clear, but qualitatively they reinforce the simple expectation, based on individual level processes and housing market geography, that there will be growing differentials in unemployment rates between inner and outer areas during periods of deficient demand.

### *The London case*

In the London case some direct confirmation for this proposition can be found in the relationship between year-by-year changes in unemployment rates in the urban core of Greater London, and in its regional hinterland, the Rest of the South East (ROSE). Twenty-five years ago the officially recorded rates for these two areas were equal,<sup>7</sup> but subsequently a considerable gap opened up, peaking in the mid-1990s when the Greater London rate was 3.5 percent higher than that in ROSE. More detailed examination of the year-to-year changes in this differential shows no substantial association with other developments in the labor markets concerned. There is, however, a clear tendency for it to widen whenever unemployment in the hinterland is above the traditional “full-employment” benchmark of 3 percent,<sup>8</sup> as it was for most of the 1980s and 1990s, with some narrowing in the three short periods of peak employment.<sup>9</sup> Comparisons with developments in other neighboring regions make it clear that this is not simply a matter of changing terms of competition between Londoners and those living in its commuter hinterland, but involves a progressive accumulation of structural unemployment within the urban core, raising the aggregate rate of unemployment across wider areas, including the South East as a whole.

In fact, most of this increasing concentration has occurred within a small number of inner East London boroughs, notably Hackney, Haringey, Newham and Tower Hamlets, where open unemployment rates increased by 6–7 percent between the 1981 and 1991 Censuses, compared with about 2 percent in the typical London borough and 1 percent in the outer metropolitan ring. Increases in the numbers “permanently sick” or on government schemes suggest a further growth of

2–3 percent or so in concealed unemployment in the first group of areas, against apparent reductions of 1–2 percent elsewhere in the region. By 1991 there were a dozen wards in the region with unemployment rates over 25 percent (about 5 times the modal value), all lying in an arc in the inner east, between North Hackney and Brixton. Regression analyses at district level suggest that part of this pattern of change is attributable to more unfavorable trends in labor demand for semi/unskilled groups in this part of London, and partly to differential growth in disadvantaged sections of population, notably some of the newer immigrant groups. But together these account for only about a third of the increased concentration of unemployment, most of which seems simply to reflect sharp increases in those places with a history of unemployment, whether associated with population mix, earlier local job losses or a combination of these factors. One important mediating variable in this appears to be the incidence of limiting health conditions, which seems both to reflect past unemployment rates and to significantly boost current ones.

Two distinct sets of evidence on the changing spatial pattern of unemployment in the London region thus suggest that the processes of sedimentation which we have argued to play a substantial role in the upward drift of unemployment nationally are especially evident in London and bear much of the responsibility for the emergence of very high levels of unemployment within inner east London. Some of these processes clearly bear a relation to that “demoralization” which was supposedly the bane of late Victorian London, though the essential cause of more recent sedimentation has been persistently low levels of demand for labor (in the national and regional economies), and experience of unemployment itself, rather than corrupting effects of urban life. The improvement in London’s relative position in unemployment terms over the past three years of stronger demand shows what can be achieved, though these conditions would have to persist for much longer than seems likely (on the brink of another recession) for the bulk of those representing the accumulated sediment to be brought back into circulation.

## Conclusions

Concentrated urban unemployment has been one of the key factors in increased inequality in advanced capitalist economies since the 1980s. In the British case, and probably in other northern European cities, it is a much more important factor in the growth of poverty than the potential increases in low-wage service employment that Sassen (1991) drew attention to in the context of New York (Buck 1997). Concentrated urban unemployment has reflected unfavourable macroeconomic developments and policies, but also involves specific labor market processes with an important urban dimension to them. In this paper we have emphasized two characteristic combinations of these processes particularly associated with metropolitan areas. On the one hand, *turbulence*, where high rates of turnover, encouraged by large and flexible metropolitan labor markets, present hazards as well as opportunities for young workers pursuing individualistic strategies, particularly if they fail to make a transition to more durable employment relations in midcareer. On the other, *sedimentation*, where processes of individual adjustment (rather than inertia) in the context of deficient demand lead to a creeping underemployment and marginalization of workers, has its most chronic effects in metropolitan inner areas where

disadvantage is reproduced through a combination of local social processes. These two sets of processes interact in a number of ways, both at the individual and aggregate level, jointly contributing to processes of social exclusion. Turbulence at least is directly related to a labor market's flexibility, which is not only ideologically applauded but is a real contributor to metropolitan competitiveness and economic success for the majority. But, if unchecked, the social consequences of sedimentation, and of turbulence's downside, in terms of crime, family fragmentation, and school failure, all pose some degree of threat to the maintenance of this competitiveness and success.

## NOTES

1. This is a substantially shortened version of an original conference paper (Buck and Gordon 1998), incorporating a detailed examination of evidence on recent labor market behaviour and performance in the London region which underpins and illustrates the analysis in sections 2 and 3 of this paper. Copies of the full paper are available on request from the authors.
2. Though not emphasized by Sassen, there is also a supply-side aspect of the exceptionalist position in that "global cities" may be particularly attractive to international immigration from lower wage economies.
3. These derive from the UK Labour Force Survey, pooling data from the years 1986-96 to encompass a range of macroeconomic circumstances, and relate to the proportions of workers who have entered, left, and changed their employment during the past 12 months.
4. This is actually the old South East standard region.
5. This is not an effect of having a younger labor force.
6. This stems from the work of Reder (1955) who first focused on the tendency for job applicants to be ranked in terms of characteristics affecting their likely productivity rather than the wage they are prepared to work for, characterized by Thurow (1983) as "job" rather than "price" competition.
7. Because the denominator includes employment counted on a workplace rather than residence basis, rates for the core area are consistently understated, and those in ROSE slightly overstated, so London unemployment was actually a bit higher than in ROSE even at the outset.
8. ROSE unemployment rates are taken as the indicator of demand-deficiency or adequacy in the regional market since they are free of the upward drift between cycles which we associate with the accumulation of structural (non-demand-deficient) unemployment: very similar results are obtained, however, if unemployment rates in the neighbouring semi-rural regions, East Anglia and the South West, are taken as the benchmark.
9. The tipping point is actually a rate of 3.5 percent in ROSE; in the 10 years with rates below that the London differential fell in 5, and showed no change in 3; in the 14 with rates above that level, the London differential increased in 12 and showed no change in 1.

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