

Humanity Is an Urban Species

Nation-states are an abstraction. They have anthems and flags but the city is the place where we live. Nobody lives in Poland or the Czech Republic but in Warsaw, Krakow, Prague or Ostrava—says Benjamin Barber in conversation with Maciej Nowicki

Tony Hsieh, American businessman-visionary, said: “If we repair the cities, we will repair the world.” Are cities really capable of saving the world?

Let us begin with the fact that states are unable to cope with global challenges. They used to be a fantastic recipe for freedom and independence of nations but they cannot propose a global social system or jurisdiction. But in the 21st century everything that is important—from the financial sector to wars and terrorism—has a supra-national nature. And we are constantly seeing situations where pandemics or ecological disasters occur in the name of sovereignty. We hear such things as: “Nobody will monitor air pollution in my own country! Or oversee arms production!” Democracy has to be globalized or it will die a natural death. It has to spread like a pandemic, like a computer virus.

I will return to my question: what can cities do?

First, cities are home for a huge part of the global population, more than half of humankind is living in them. In the developed world it makes up to 78%. It used to be completely different. In 1800 a mere 3% of people were living in cities and as recently as 1950 just 30%. Humanity has changed its nature: we have become an “urban species.”



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Photo: www.benjaminbarber.com

Second, Western civilization was born in cities, it is there that we made our first steps towards politics. Later cities proved to be too small and states took over the leader's role. But now we are returning to cities but in a different form—we live in an informal “cosmopolis,” a global network of cities. And to go back to your question—maybe they will not save the world. For now they are not up to this task. But they do cope with many problems against which states have been incredibly inept.

Could I have some examples...?

There is a lot of them. Cities cope better with problems related to drugs and immigration, public transport and health care. When the mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, introduced solutions, which limited smoking and sales of sparkling drinks, the main cause of obesity among children, the White House could only look on with amazement. And great tobacco corporations and those producing sparkling drinks—promoting their interests in Washington through countless lobbies—were unable to block it.

Let us imagine that several dozen large cities forbid driving cars with internal combustion engines. What would the car industry do? I will tell you: they would start competing in producing electric cars.

States have achieved nothing in the matter of environmental protection, we have seen the failed summits in Dubai, Copenhagen and Mexico City. Many states, such as the United States, have not even signed the Kyoto Protocol. But cities have done much good in this field—and they are using 80% of global energy and are responsible for 80% of global carbon emissions. Cities turn from heavy fuels to gas, they use the newest technologies for insulating buildings, they utilize solar energy. This is extremely important. In New York, fuel used for heating and cooling buildings was responsible for 90% of carbon emissions. In Los Angeles emissions were reduced by 40%; to achieve that it was enough that ships

stopped using internal combustion engines when entering the harbor and hybrid drive was installed in lorries transporting the cargo. Today more than 50 megacities are learning from each other how to cut down on pollution. And now let us imagine that several dozen large cities forbid driving cars with internal combustion engines. What would the car industry do? I will tell you: they would start competing in producing electric cars.

You said that cities had been cradles of freedom: it is there that the rights we now enjoy were gained. But today cities are expanding faster in areas where there is no democracy (not in the West). After all, it was in the city of Singapore that the model of free-market authoritarianism was created, then copied by China and now posing the biggest threat to liberal democracy.

McKinsey Report from 2012 shows that all 136 cities, which in the near future will join the group of 600 cities with the highest GDP, will belong to the developing world. One hundred out of these 600 cities lie in China. But is it really true that in Singapore there is less freedom than in the Catholic Buenos Aires? It is a Western prejudice. In China we do have an authoritarian communism but it does not change the role of the city one bit. In Shanghai there is definitely more freedom than in the villages of Sechuan. Besides, do you really think that people in Cyprus or Greece feel free? Ask them. They will probably say that they have no say in anything that banks decide all. The West emphasizes how much it has done for freedom. Such boasts sometimes seem empty nowadays.

If I were to compare Western cities and today's megacities of the former Third World, I would focus on something else. Western cities attracted people from the countryside, offering them a promise of a better life and rapid economic advancement. But in the developing world people are moving from the countryside to cities in flight from unem-

ployment—their local agriculture stands no chance on the global market. As one poor Indian said: “For me a decent life in the city is a car which didn’t hit you, malaria you didn’t catch and a slum owner who didn’t beat you up.”

You said once that Moscow was almost the same as New York but with more snow. How should we understand that?

Cities differ in terms of culture, religion, languages, this is obvious. But apart from that... All are densely populated, they have a sewage system, buses and taxes, problems with parking or collecting rubbish. Their aims and functions are almost identical. And this is why mayors can successfully copy solutions used in other cities. I will give you an example: after the 9/11 attacks Rudy Giuliani sent his best people to the FBI, CIA and Interpol for 18 months so that they could learn how to fight against terrorism. When they came back, they said to Bloomberg, who had replaced Giuliani in the meantime, that they had not learned anything. So Bloomberg sent them to Hong Kong, Singapore, Frankfurt, etc. And thanks to that New York became much less vulnerable to attacks. And it also led to the creation of a network for terrorism prevention composed of many cities.

And this was one of the inspirations for your idea to create a global parliament of mayors?

It would be the first step towards creating a global democratic platform. Such a parliament would not pass new laws but share the best solutions and experiences.

The long-time mayor of Jerusalem Teddy Kolek said once: “Spare me your pontificating. Then I will have time for taking care of the sewage.” This is very typical. Mayors are often more and more people remote from any ideologies and partisanship.

It is true. The story of Michael Bloomberg is an excellent illustration of that: He started as

a Democrat, then he went over to the Republicans to end as an independent candidate. It is pragmatism that counts. Never mind independence if you are a communist or a conservative, garbage has to be collected anyway. People want the mayor to look after building schools and housing, after the underground, buses and sewage rather than building coalitions, arms or promoting patriotism. It comes from the fundamental difference between cities and states. Nation-states are an abstraction. They have anthems and flags but the city is the place where we live. Nobody lives in Poland or the Czech Republic but in Warsaw, Krakow, Prague or Ostrava.

Most people polled respond that they moved to the city guided by optimism. Every psychologist will tell you that optimism is a kind of self-fulfilling promise. If you succumb to pessimism and stay in your village or small town, you deprive yourself of your chances.

But it is the states that wield the “hard power.” What does it signify in practice?

A very good question. This is one of the biggest paradoxes of the 21st century. States have their pride, they cherish their sovereignty, they want to impose their will on other states. And all this together makes cooperation impossible. But cities are relatively weak and this weakness drives them towards cooperation. In the case of cities mutual dependence is a natural state.

But it is the cities which are the areas of greatest inequalities. In New York they are three times higher than the average for the whole United States. The cities bring us what is best but also what is worst. Even Richard Florida, the author of the concept of “creative class”, stresses that wealth is accumulated in cities but it does not mean that it is accessible to all. Workers earn more in the cities than in the countryside but high rents or real estate prices devour all this surplus.

You can also look at it from another side. In Mumbai small children live from sorting rubbish but in the countryside they would simply have nothing to live on. People vote with their feet: they move where the opportunities and possibilities are. Perhaps they sometimes make mistakes but why would we deprive them of their right to make a choice? Most people polled respond that they moved to the city guided by optimism. Every psychologist will tell you that optimism is a kind of self-fulfilling promise. If you succumb to pessimism and stay in your village or small town, you deprive yourself of your chances.

Blogger Mathew Taylor has written that texts of political and international commentators fundamentally differ from texts of commentators describing the situation in cities: the former are extremely pessimistic, the latter optimistic.

Exactly. The whole world is disappointed with democracy. In old democracies people are cynical, they do not vote and regard politicians as corrupt. In new democracies, for example those, which emerged after the Arab Spring, the citizens are surrounded by chaos, ethnic wars and the risk of civil war. Moreover, young people in Cairo or Tunis have no chance for getting a job. If democracy is little more than voting without voters—as in the West—or anarchy, which replaced despotism, there are no reasons for joy.

Let us look at public opinion polls. The level of trust for the president, the government, the senate and parliament is in most cases very low. In the

USA just 19% of the popular trusts the Congress. In a word, a disaster. For city mayors these figures are much higher: 50 or even 70%. People trust local democracies, for local democracies still function decently.



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