

Navigating the urban age

Whatever we might say is right or wrong with cities of the 21st century, they're indisputably a defining feature of our age. As much as we're *post-modern*, *post-gender* or *post-colonial*, we're also *post-rural*. Our existence, for an increasing majority, is *urban*. Even more than that; our aspirations are urban. This is visible almost everywhere: in the US, people with advanced education are clustering in a dozen or so, mostly coastal, cities. In Afghanistan, refugees returning from Pakistan and Iran move to big cities, rather than moving back the villages from which they fled decades ago. In Nigeria, Lagos alone adds 77 people every hour to its burgeoning city boundaries. If people voted with their feet, cities would certainly be the winners.

But, in the case of the citizens who live in them, it often doesn't look like they're winning. Most people live in cities which are crowded but disconnected, with scarcity of jobs, housing, and, consequently, of opportunity. If cities that work well can increase prosperity, those that don't make the lack of prosperity more visible and exacerbate inequality. The same networks which increase productivity, also provide new avenues of dissent and discovery. Being *urban* both amplifies the voices of the distressed and allows them to access new networks of common thinkers.

Think about Tahrir Square: would that have been the stage of revolutionary change if the network of dissent from Cairo and surrounding areas didn't exist? The digital and personal connections necessary for such change wouldn't have been so strong had the square been in the Sahara — for the city is “a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet”, as sociologist Richard Sennett once wrote.

Often, these networks are dominated by the young. Over the past few months, Sudan's Khartoum, where the majority of citizens are under 20, has been the site of protests which transcend the traditional networks of ethnicity and religious conservatism. However, when existing networks breakdown in cities, new ones may not always be as progressive as seen in Khartoum. For example, in Karachi, Pakistan diverging ethnic identities have been mobilised to form networks of solidarity and of opposition, often to deadly results.

Together, *urban* age exists in the three-way intersection of the *promise* of opportunity, the *amplification* of voice, and the emergence of new, more powerful, *networks* of solidarity; each of these have important implications for public policy. How does a government fulfil the promise of opportunity expected of cities? Working with its residents to develop a right to the city, meet expectations of jobs, housing, sanitation, and clean air. Especially when there is an exponential growth of residents. It is hard to imagine how Lagos will be governed in 2050, when its population is expected to have 10 million more residents, particularly in regard to the challenges presented by climate change and technology.

Perhaps, navigating such an age requires coming to grips with radical uncertainty — the idea that we do not know what is going to happen, and we are not even able to fully imagine it in the present. Try telling someone in 1991 that in two decades, protesters in Cairo will breakdown power structures by supplementing offline networks with those formed online over a social network, amplified by 24/7 television channels.

Under radical uncertainty, making urban policy will require unprecedented responsive experimentation. Context is king: what works in another city might not work in yours; what worked in your city a few years ago might not work today. Cities need policy structures which not only get the known fundamentals right, but which are also flexible enough to change according to context, for example merging governments together when inhabitants spread beyond the local jurisdiction. This balance is hard to strike, but possible, and it could be key to navigating the urban age.

Most cities are, however, still to get the basics right. Many cities are still disempowered because of power concentrated at higher spatial scales. Nigerian cities, for example, do not have control over

design standards and building regulation — instead, these are prescribed at a national level. Britain has only recently started to transfer power over transport to cities. Due to the very interaction based on which the urban age exists, cities are controlled by political networks which can sometimes be opposed to national ones. The result is a vertical struggle, which can lead to more control taken away from cities. Cities are being set to fail.

Reversely, there are question of spatial justice. Blossoming cities exist alongside areas left behind, as cities hoard the benefits of proximity and productivity. London has been described by some as ‘shackled to a corpse’ when referring to provincial England. Kampala generates two-thirds of Uganda’s national economic activity. The young, rather than returning to the provinces to set up rural homes are instead now residing in cities for longer. Is there a role for policy to guarantee interspatial justice ensuring that cities like Kampala and London don’t run away and devour all opportunities for urban and rural counterparts? Due to their complexity, cities need decentralised authority to make good policy decisions, without restricting the ability of national governments to distribute economic gains to those places left behind. If this doesn’t happen, it won’t be the case of cities being ‘shackled to a corpse’ but – as Paul Collier puts it – their rural counterparts being ‘chained to a shark’.

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