Democratic Cities of Tomorrow.
Impact of Megapolises on Economical, Political and Environmental Tendencies in the World

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Abstract

Think about how you respond to the question "Where are you from?". Maybe you will say Prague or Berlin, Athens or Hong Kong. But probably not Germany or Brazil or Poland. Because cities are usually the places we identify us most with. In over next 20 or so years almost two thirds of us, people on this planet, will live in or around them. Cities are like laboratories, places of experimentation of possibility. They create the bigger part of GDP of any country; political decisions are made in interest of these metropolises. But they are also places with big problems, which influence all of us. But how did we get here? How do we live in such huge megapolises and what does it cost us?

Think about the last fifty years. In the last 50 years human population more than doubled, our use of food and water more than tripled, and our use of fossil fuels more than quadrupled. In just 50 years! In our single lifetime the world has changed more that during all the history combined. During the last several hundred years we developed technologies, political systems and and gained resources to successfully manage and gain advantage of it. But did we really?

In this paper I would like to research the phenomena behind megapolises. Political systems that rule them, harm they cause to environment, and direction that our modern economic system is pushing them towards. And I would like to answer the question - with current growing level of urbanization, resource consumption and pollution is it possible that we even will afford to have cities in close future, and if yes - then how and what are the consequences?

Keywords: Economics, mega polis, environment, democracy.
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Think about how you respond to the question "Where are you from?" Maybe you will say Prague or Berlin, Athens or Hong Kong. But probably not Germany or Brazil or Poland. Because cities are usually the places we identify us most with. In over next 20 or so years almost two thirds of us, people on this planet, will live in or around them. Cities are like laboratories, places of experimentation of possibility. They create the bigger part of GDP of any country; political decisions are made in interest of these metropolises. But they are also places with big problems, which influence all of us. But how did we get here? How do we live in such huge mega polises and what does it cost us?

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Think about the last fifty years. In the last 50 years human population more than doubled, our use of food and water more than tripled, and our use of fossil fuels more than quadrupled. In just 50 years! In our single lifetime the world has changed more that during all the history combined. During the last several hundred years we developed technologies, political systems and gained resources to successfully manage and gain advantage of it. But did we really?

According to an ecologist and executive director of the California Academy of Sciences - John Foley agriculture is the biggest thing we've ever done to the planet. And the one thing that makes agriculture possible – water. Turns out that 70% or 90% depending how you do the bookkeeping, of all the water consumed by people around the world is used for one thing - irrigating crops. Nowadays water and food are connected in a way that is just not sustainable. Agriculture is the most powerful force unleashed on the planet since the end of the ice age and even if it is using up a lot of land and a ton of our water – we don't need to stop using it. We just need to do it smarter. [1]

Also it is needed to consider that the demand for agriculture and irrigation is going to grow mainly because of growing population or 7 billion people today heading towards at least 9, more importantly changing diets as the world becomes wealthier as well as more popular for increasing dietary consumption of meat, which takes a lot more resources that vegetarian diet does. So more people eating more staff, richer staff and of course we have to replace oil with other energy sources which will certainly include some kind of bio energy sources. If you put these together it's really hard to see how I get to the rest of the century without at least double in global agricultural production.

But if we keep doing that we will have to start rationing water all around the world like how much people use it, or drink it, how much people grow food and how much a day do they get. Simply like in Mad Max movie. But I'm actually an optimist. Maybe it's not even optimism but I have hope. It's different than optimism. And my hope is that we can change that narrative. Humans at their best when they push to a corner and really see a problem actually respond magnificently. And technology can help. There exists drip irrigation, organic farming methods that can hold more moisture in the soil, get rid of loan, and get rid of things that can waste water really conspicuously. Let's tighten up our infrastructure, let's cover up our canals so the water can't evaporate, repair the pipes for leaks fixed. There are lots and lots of things like that we can do.

But in fact we need to invent a new kind of agriculture that blends the best ideas of commercial agriculture of the green revolution, with the best ideas of organic farming and local food, and the best ideas of environmental conservation. Not have them fight each other but have them collaborating together. But this is hard; you need to get people to focus on a problem that is not in the face, it just doesn't seem so urgent. Plus we have experienced millions of years of evolution and thousands years of history telling ourselves that we should be out there exploiting resources so we can survive to

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[1] Foley, J. (2014). NY Times Article. pp. 53-54.

the next day. If it meant using a little more soil or a little more land, or grabbing a few extra animals to east – that was or job. But consider that all of human history we were basically insignificant compared to the size of the Earth. And now suddenly in one generation or so we flipped it around, now humans are bigger than the Earth, our appetite for resources is bigger than what the earth can actually provide. That's never happened before so we're trying to get a smart as possible in a generation or two, to undo millions of years of evolution are thousands of years of history. Everything we created has leaded us to the situation we are in now. And agriculture is only one part of huge chain which includes resources, energy, environment etc. And I'm mentioning it one after another because they stand in one chain order and existence of one is impossible without the others. But all of it serves one target – to nurture gigantic crowds of people, in other words – cities.

The idea of a city goes to the heart I think of what it needs the human being. And why were attracted to them? Human beings are sociable, they like being with other human beings. They creative, which we tend to do together, they are imaginative which is also a community thing. The city, the township is a natural expression and natural manifestation of that social instinct we have. Cities define us where were born and educated, grow up, get married, where we pray and play, where we get old, where we die. The most challenging problems we face round the world like poverty and terrorism – they are solvable, but they are also really big. So they require a whole new approach. Democracy, the system with which we are trying to solve these problems, is in trouble, no question about that it's increasingly irrelevant to the kinds of the decisions we face that have to do with global pandemics, across border problem with markets, immigration something that goes beyond national borders, with terrorism, with war – all now cross border problems. In fact we live in a 21st century in world of interdependence, and when we look for solutions in politics and democracy, we are faced with political institutions designed 200 years ago. 21st century transnational world of problems and challenges - 18th century world of political institutions. In that dilemma lies the central problem of democracy. And my suggestion is that we change the subject. That we stop talking about nations, states and we start talking about cities.[2]

So why cities? How to solve these huge problems? If we'll look around, we'll find political institutions where democracy still kind of works and it was there that we can find this old-old notion of the human community, because we see the local government a palpable, touchable form of government. Local governments are democratic governments, that's what the government is supposed to be about, so it was the sense that cities still function with some resemblance to democracy in a way that no other political institutions do. For example when you ask young people today about democracy – they are cynical, they don't trust democracy, they don't believe in it, but when you come to the town, to the city, to the neighborhood than these people say – "Yeah I get that, that I still can believe in that still kind of works". Of course it's not true everywhere, not every city town neighborhood works great for the people

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[2] Barber, B. (2013). If mayors ruled the world. pp.42-44.

who live there but some of they do, a lot of them do. Some of the worst scourges we face, those problems can be solved by responsible municipal governments, cities and mayors working together. I believe that cities hold lessons for solving some of the world's biggest problems. I also think that the mayors who run those cities, they can actually lead the way for the rest of us. That's because mayors have an advantage that presidents and prime ministers don't.

My premise is that a mayor and a prime minister are on the opposite ends of a political spectrum. To be a prime minister or president you have to have an ideology. But mayors are pragmatists, problem solvers. Real city mayors have to get things done, they have to put an ideology and religion and ethnicity aside and draw their cities together. Good example of couple of decades ago when Teddy Kollek, the great mayor of Jerusalem, in the 80s and the 90s, was besieged one day in his office by religious leaders. They were arguing with one another about access to the holy sites. And the squabble went on and on and Kollik listened and listened, and he finally said: "Gentleman, spare me your sermons and I will fix you sewers". That's what mayors do. They fix sewers; they get the trains running there isn't a left or right way of doing it. Bloomberg in New York was a Democrat then he was Republican and finally he was an independent citizen, he said the party label just gets in the way. Luzhkov - 20 years Meyer in Moscow, have helped to found the party, the United party, with Putin, in fact refuse to be defined by the party. So mayors are pragmatists, they are problem solvers.

When you think about all the problems and all the challenges in the world, like climate change, what is it that cities or mayors can do, that those countries can't? Let us do here a tiny piece of political theory. Nation states made a promise through the social contract to their citizens who were rooted in their sovereignty, they said: "If you obey us, you can elect us and so on, but you have to obey the laws of the sovereign nation, we will guarantee your life your liberty and property". Things, we would today call you sustainability. But in the last 50 or 60 years countries can no longer fulfill the promise that "We will take care of you, we will sustain our citizens". And that's where cities have increasingly said "If you can't and won't then we have to". And that's why in this particularly urgent area of climate change, cities which are more than 80% or 90% are on water have the responsibility to say that someone's got to deal with climate change because our citizens in our cities are going to be the first to go underwater. And there are all kinds of ways in which city is working one by one, but better when they collaborate, can address climate change.

80% of carbon emissions come from cities. Which means cities are in position to solve the carbon problem or most of it, whether or not the states of which they are part make agreements with one another, and they are doing it. Los Angeles has cleaned up its port which was 40% of carbon emissions, New York has a program to upgrade is old buildings - make them better insulated in the winter, to not leak energy in the summer. That's already is having impact. Bogota introduced a transportation system that saves energy that allows surface buses to run in effect like subways, express buses with corridors. Singapore as it developed its high-rise remarkable public housing, also developed an island of parks. If you go there you'll see how much is

there of green land and park land. Cities are sharing what they do. And they are making a difference by sharing best practices. Bike shares, many of us already heard of it, it started 20-30 years ago in Latin America and now hundreds of cities around the world have pedestrian zones, congestion fees, emission limits in cities like London or California. There are lots and lots that cities can do even when opaque stubborn nations refuse to act.[3]

Mayors visit one another; and you have an effective small working group solving problems. Not a ritualistic meeting of different ideologies. This leads to the idea of a global parliament of mayors, with cities beginning to say "We will do what nations can't". But how would a parliament of mayors work? Well there is a template, a plan that suggest how that might happen but obviously that will be something that mayors themselves will have to deal with. It was proposed by Benjamin Barber, a senior research scholar at the City University of New York in 2016. And I love that idea because parliament of Mayor's - is a parliament of citizens, and a parliament of Citizens - is a parliament of us.

Although there is one more solution. All the knowledge that is out there and lets us deal with problems of today is in open source. That's why anyone can excess it, and anyone can change it. What is we could take the principles of open source and push them out beyond technology? What really appeals to me about the philosophy of open sources it's allowing for answers to appear in places that you could have never imagined. And even could create another solution for democracy.

Pia Mancini, democracy activist from Argentina, she uses open source potential in democracies to bring open source revolution in government because the whole system process is due for an upgrade.

Let's look at the characteristics of the democratic system. First of all - the few make a daily decision in name of the many, and the many get to vote once every couple of years. on the second place the costs of participating in the system are incredibly high. You either have to have a fair bit of money and influence, or you have to devote your entire life for politics. You have to become a party member and slowly start working at the ranks until maybe one day you'll get to sit at the table where the decision is being made. And last but not least the language of the system is incredibly cryptic. Is done for lawyers by lawyers and no one else can understand. So it's a system where we can choose our authorities but where completely left out on how authorities reach the decisions. Our political system remains the same for the past 200 years, and expects us to be contented with being simply passive recipients of a monologue.

So a few years ago Pia and some of her activist friends came up with an idea to solve this problem, the problem that democracy is really hard to participate. They wondered what if instead of playing iPhone games when we have a free moment or in traffic or in subway, we use those moments to contribute to democracy. And they answered that question by inventing an app that called Democracy OS.

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[3] Barber, B. (2013). If mayors ruled the world. pp.70-71.

So what we did was started with one idea asking citizens to participate in the voting and having someone inside congress voting according to what citizens decided on this online platform. But what we wanted to do with that was to push the boundaries of what was perceived as possible and doable. The application works the way to ensure that you will be very informed about all the complexities of this issue. There is a space for reading exactly the bill that's going to be next or is going to be put forward. A there is a space to debate. And then you vote. Or you want to abstain. At the end of that process you have a decision been made. So in theory you could stay engaged with issues on your way to work, you could vote on the construction of a local park while waiting for a coffee, you could talk about the proposed tax increase while you're in the grocery store. Ideally Pia wants elected officials to vote the way their constituents vote on the app. So she reached out to some politicians in Buenos Aires where she live.

She explained that here you have a platform where you can build a two-way conversation with your constituencies. And yes they failed. They failed big time. They were called naive, but to be honest they were. Because the challenges they faced were not technological, they are cultural. So it suddenly became a bit obvious that if they wanted to move forward with this idea they need to do it themselves. And so they took the leap of Faith, August last year they funded their own political party "The Net Party" in the city of Buenos Aires.[4]

And taking an even bigger leap of faith they ran for an election on October last year with this idea. If they got a sit in Congress, their candidates and representatives were always going to vote according to what the citizens decided on the Democracy OS. It was a very bald move for a young party. But they got an attention and 22000 votes, which is 1.2% of the votes. And they came in second for the local options. So even if that wasn't enough to win a seat in congress it was enough for them to become part of the conversation.

Well of course the Democracy OS is not a perfect idea. If you don't have a critical mass of people using the app, you basically hand over power to the small group of people that does use it. And then the other problem of every little vote becomes like a referendum which in some ways makes democracy less functional. And then there's the issue of secrecy. In the most democracies is a secret ballot - the right to go into a closed booth and secretly make your decision and then walk out.

But one thing is sure – if we use our strengths and change our democratic system, if we trust each other and unite to change the game rules – we can achieve unbelievable results and deal with problems which our human society is facing.

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[4] Mancini, P. (2016). TED conference transcript.