

CAN CITIES COPE WITH CLIMATE CATASTROPHE?

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Waking recently to images of commuters drowning in a subway car in China was a vivid reminder that even citizens in the largest and most modern cities are vulnerable to climate catastrophe. More significantly, in a month of extreme heat and flood, there is little doubt that such catastrophic events are the product of global warming and cities are just as much at risk as picturesque forests, tundra and historic towns in temperate valleys.

Megacities are among the most polluted and polluting places on Earth. However, there is an enduring myth that they are like “Dreadnoughts”, indestructible; except, even those “Castles of Steel” were to be made extinct by flimsy, early “String bags”, those carriers borne biplanes. Cities do fail and some disappear, but others survive the most extreme catastrophes, as San Francisco did in 1906, or Lisbon two centuries earlier. Human-induced disasters have perhaps had more enduring consequences for cities such as Roma, or post-industrial ones like Napoli and even Detroit.

The past 18 months have reawakened a sense of foreboding that cities might still be the cauldron of pandemic diseases, not so different from those that once wiped out more than 30% of our forebears in Europe or Asia. Covid 19 has inflicted the most profound shock to most of the world’s megacities, reducing many to a fraction of their prior dynamism, across most kinds of activity, except health care. Its toll on human life has highlighted the appalling consequences of social and economic inequality both within and among such cities.

Nevertheless, such megacities also demonstrate an extraordinary capacity to spring back to life. Will that be the same as before, or will there be enduring changes in the role and purpose of cities and how they perform? Undoubtedly efforts to mitigate the impact of such catastrophe cannot simply attempt to preserve the prevailing ways of metropolitan life. How will changes in peoples’ behaviour, their values and those of the organisations they belong to, reshape the way cities evolve? Going green will be a consequence of such shifts in human behaviour, not a panacea for our current way of life. We need to recognise that it would be folly to attempt to mitigate the impact of climate change simply to preserve existing ways of urban life. We have to try to anticipate what such cities might offer their future citizens and how to ensure that endures.

Megacity scenarios can illustrate ways in which cities at different stages of economic development might embrace forces for change that would affect them all. One characteristic of these we called the “Spot Market” economy that has come of age as the online marketplace to sustain Covid lockdown. Yet not all surveillance is simply a function of personal choice. In some societies like China’s, it is imposed for security or control purposes, but seemingly widely accepted as a price worth accepting for the benefits of greater economic opportunity.

Some may see in this a sinister expression of what has been dubbed “Smart Cities”. Earlier emphasis on how cities might function in a digital economy in the late nineties found expression a few years later in the commercial promotion of “Smart Cities”. Despite their claim to lay the foundation for an urban digital infrastructure that would transform the civic realm, they have signally failed to do so. The concurrent success of social networks in identifying who and where we are has if anything highlighted how far cities are from harnessing such digital networks to transform their functioning. Indeed, the past month has illustrated just how vulnerable the entire city digital infrastructure is to violent climatic events.

Very few attempts have been made to question how the role and purpose of cities might evolve to serve their citizens. It is a moot point whether cities exist to support human conversation that informs the development of markets or vice versa. How are cities creating greater economic opportunity to attract more new inhabitants, or do they simply offer a refuge from a hostile environment elsewhere? Is it possible that counter forces are growing that offer citizens the chance to step off the treadmill of commuter life without jeopardising their career prospects, while enhancing their work-life balance?

Prior to telephony the city was the only focus of person-to-person communication. We are still the same social animals that crave the person-to-person contact that cities provide, even at a cost of greater health risk? The recent Covid experience that has deprived so many young people of the chance to learn at school or college, illustrates the emotional and psychological cost of isolation and online meeting. Nevertheless, we are experiencing a revolution in the way we are

able to search for and procure products, services or information that is conveyed to wherever we happen to be. Clearly our economic behaviour is changing fast and is leaving many of our cities struggling to cope.

Does the “Death of Distance” mean that cities are no longer physical markets, or can markets thrive in new locations potentially creating new cities? Some think that shopping is losing its allure, while others interpret our behaviour as demanding that it becomes a more attractive and stimulating form of leisure. For many citizens confined to work at home with families in small apartments by Covid lockdown, the high cost and lack of space has encouraged them to search for new places to live, ideally in attractive and smaller communities, from where they can work remotely. Can these offer the choice and stimulation that the best café-culture coffee and conversation seem to provide? Do they represent the emergence of new ex-urban locations or are they simply the extension of megacity living into what has been formerly thought of as a rural idyll?

The myth of rural living preserved throughout much of the old world, is perversely a manifestation of earlier dispersal of wealthy citizens to cultivate affluent lifestyles among previously farming communities that once fed the cities. This myth lies at the heart of how we define cities. Administrative boundaries are constraints that inhibit greater integration of communities across an urbanised space. They reinforce the political separation of wealth and poverty in many places. The nascent exodus of wealthy citizens seeking more space beyond their city apartments and “town houses” is a repeat of many earlier generations wish to escape the poor, the violent, the diseased and the taxes that cities tend to foster.

What might be the next force of attraction encouraging others to take advantage of the unique opportunities that cities might offer? The congregation of stimulating and innovative people has always been a draw, possibly by reason of their membership of clubs and institutions that facilitated their conversations. The density of life in cities may not of itself guarantee the stimulus that we supposedly crave. More often it becomes synonymous with overcrowding and rising property costs and failing services. Undoubtedly smaller towns can offer less stressful living conditions, but at what cost for those who seek the stimulus of city life?

The exigencies of Covid lockdown appear to have induced some to reappraise their priorities. For most the loss of time spent in ever longer commuting times, or in ever more crowded public transport seems to demand much greater freedom to determine when and where to meet for work. Greater personal control of one’s working hours and where they are spent is a challenge for many organisations, particularly those that have clung to outdated models of how to accommodate their staff in depressing and highly concentrated office space. Not even the new castles of the digital intelligentsia seem able to offset the cost of commuting from ever more distant, if barely affordable, suburbs. These are the generation who will reshape the role and purpose of cities, not those who commission these real estate assets that might (or might not) fund their future pensions. They may no longer even be prepared to work for someone – a boss – or even somewhere, a physical place of work at all, preferring to work on one or many platforms that can span their world of activity.

Post Covid there is perhaps a recognition that in one critical respect cities still offer access to one of the ultimate priorities of good health care, which few small communities can provide. It is often heard that a new abode must be close to both good schooling and good hospitals. Therein lies a challenge. What is meant by both good schooling and hospitals will most likely be among the aspects of city life that will undergo the most profound change. In some societies future security might become a more important criterion, were public services to wither. As in all other fields, new virtual platforms will bring people together in shared spheres of interest and work, no less so in health care as in law, finance, education, perhaps even government. We need to reimagine the role and purpose of cities old and new.