

City Gifts
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A book review of *Triumph of the City: How our greatest invention makes us richer, smarter, greener, healthier and happier*. Edward Gleaser, Penguin Press, 2011

Well back in the 1980s when his own city, Curitiba, was making headlines for its innovative urban development process, Jaime Lerner, a successful mayor and renowned urban planner, used to say that cities are not part of the problem, but part of the solution. With an unwavering faith in the ability of urban centers to improve living conditions, Lerner was not unaware of the plight of city dwellers in many countries, including his own, Brazil. Yet, he was also convinced that with proper interventions, in what he called “urban acupuncture”, cities could regenerate themselves through more mobility, the opening of public spaces and the expansion of public services. If Curitiba did this other cities could do so as well. The interventions that he developed and implemented, and that were not discarded by his successors in City Hall, not only transformed Curitiba into a reference for urban planning in Brazil but also brought to the forefront the centrality of cities as loci of progress in the development struggles of the 21st century.

More than 20 years after Lerner left the political office (he was three times a mayor and twice a state governor), the American economist and Harvard professor Edward Gleaser advocates a renewed trust in the power of cities to foster prosperity. Gleaser is a prolific writer and accomplished scholar with dozens of publications in the field of urban economics. His 2011 book *Triumph of the City* should not be seen simply as demonstrating unshaken confidence on the benefits of urban life. It should rather be seen as an argument that the 21st Century will be dominated by city dwellers at the same time that rural areas will become more scarcely populated. The triumph of the city, indeed.

Although city living goes back to ancient times and has experienced indelible moments such as the Greek polis and its political and cultural vibrancy, and the power hungry, expansionist and magnificent Imperial Rome, for centuries populations around the world remained mostly confined to agrarian sites. Yet, slowly but steadily, people in the 18th century started to move in great numbers to urban centers where jobs were being created as the industrial revolution gained pace, first in Europe and then in the United States. In Latin America, starting in the 1950s, a rural exodus took place in some countries, particularly in Brazil and Mexico. This movement of people transformed society and politics. In Latin America, urbanization has meant the emancipation of women their engagement in the labor force. Urbanization in the region has also contributed to higher levels of education and to labor union mobilization and democratization.

Along with its great benefits, urbanization is also associated with precarious living conditions. This is a result of cities' overpopulation and their governments' inability to formulate public policies to address bottlenecks in public transportation, housing and environmental management. Shantytowns are a fixture in the major cities of Brazil and also are present in other Latin American countries, as well as in India, several parts of Asia, and the African continent. For Gleaser, while urban poverty is an actual and serious problem, the poor living in cities are better off than those living in rural areas. Gleaser dedicates considerable effort to make sure that we understand that urbanization is not the cause of poverty; he contends that as governments implement policies to improve living conditions in the cities, they end up attracting more poor people who seek better opportunities in the large urban centers. Thus, his concept, “the urban poverty paradox”, exempts the city from the common charge of being a source of

inequality and deprivation: “cities are not full of poor people because city makes people poor, but because cities attract poor people with the prospects of improving their lives”.

Gleaser has dedicated a great amount of time to studying the decline of large cities around the world, with special attention to Detroit, in the United States. Assuming that he is right when he states that “the era of the industrial city is over”, and considering that urbanization is the future (as by the end of this century the vast majority of the world population will be urban dwellers), it is legitimate to ask how can cities either acquire or retain their dynamism. Similar to Detroit and Buffalo, several other midsize urban centers in the United States went from vibrancy to lethargy as a result of fast-paced technological change and major transformations in the global economy. As globalization intensifies competition, old industries have lost their edge; in the process their host cities have lost their economic base, reaching the point of near demise. Yet, for Gleaser, urban decline can be reversed if city governments and residents understand the need to become “smaller and better”. Youngstown, Ohio, which has already lost half of its 1970s’ population, is an example of a city reinventing itself. “Shrinking to greatness”, according to Gleaser, is the approach recently embraced by Youngstown City Hall: abandoned houses will be demolished, thus opening spaces for parks and other public areas. By helping poor people, but not poor places, governments, says Glaser, will support smaller cities, which will become more attractive, less dangerous and cheaper to maintain.

According to Gleaser, cities can and do succeed. This is precisely what Jaime Lerner envisioned for Curitiba more than forty years ago. In order to thrive they need to be treated with the proper interventions, or the acupuncture suggested by Lerner. Smart public policies in transportation, housing, environmental management, and local economic development are dependent on human capital, that influx of skilled people who can work in cooperation to transform urban spaces. A certain kind of urban leadership possessing a variety of talents accomplished a lot in Curitiba, which is not among Gleaser’s case studies. However, he tells several successful urban development stories (Vancouver, Dubai, Hong Kong, Singapore and Milan) which are distinctive, but share a common characteristic of having leaders imbued with vision for their cities without fear of change.

Human capital can correct or prevent urban failure. But city dynamism requires more. According to Gleaser, immigrants are good for cities. He condemns what he calls the new wave of nativism washing over both the U.S. and Europe, reminding us that immigrants were behind the growth of great cities, among them New York City. Gleaser also believes that urban living could be more vibrant than it is – anywhere – if governments and societies could agree with new political and institutional arrangements, such as fiscal and administrative decentralization that would give more power to cities to control over their own destinies.

Cities are among the greatest human inventions, for the city is the source of cultural, political and economic innovation. Despite all the advantages of city living, people are not obligated to live in them. As Gleaser states, we should not force urbanization. Yet, he also contends that we never should constrain the growth of city life. Gleaser and Lerner both hope and work for the strengthening and improvements of cities around the world, large and small.