CITIES AND THE GLOBAL ORDER

- GLOBAL CITIES, WORLD ORDER AND POST-PANDEMIC FUTURES

  Simon Curtis

- THE TABLE WOBBLES: CITIES AND A FALTERING MULTILATERAL ORDER

  Ian Klaus

- CITIES AND INTERNATIONAL LAW: LEGALLY INVISIBLE OR RISING SOFT-POWER ACTORS?

  Elif Durmuş

GLOBAL CITIES, WORLD ORDER AND POST-PANDEMIC FUTURES

Simon Curtis

*Senior Lecturer in International Relations,
University of East Anglia and Senior Fellow on Global Cities
at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs*

The long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the development of the world's cities is not yet known. But as with previous outbreaks of disease throughout history, it will be felt in the ways infrastructure and urban planners adapt to the spread of the disease. Just as the cholera outbreaks of the 19th century accelerated moves to sewerage systems and new sanitation infrastructure and practices in cities, so the legacy of this 21st century pandemic will reshape urban form. Already we are seeing varied responses: in some cities transportation is being remodelled by the rapid implementation of new cycling networks; in others existing agendas are being brought forward, such as Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo's "15-minute city", where all the goods and services people need are placed within walking distance of their homes; urban greening trends have accelerated (e.g. Boston's "Big Dig"); existing shifts towards surveillance technologies and the use of big data in cities have been extended; central business districts have emptied in response to needs to physically distance (placing question marks over their viability in the long term); and new local community solidarity initiatives have emerged in response to the collective challenges the pandemic poses (Safi, 2020).

But cities were already in the throes of decades-long transformations of a profound nature before the virus struck. Although clearly an important shaping force on society, COVID-19 will not transform cities permanently on its own. Instead, its short-term effects will interact with deep-lying structural transformative trends that are already playing themselves out in our cities, and in the wider international system in which cities are embedded. It will accelerate some of those trends and retard others. The future of cities will be made in the intersections of these trends, and by political actors that can successfully bend long-term trends and short-term crises towards the realisation of their own visions.

We might see the emergence of COVID-19 and its rapid transmission around the world as offering an inflection point: drawing together multiple strands in politics, society, economics, ecology and technology; laying bare previously overlooked connections and conjunctures; offering a vantage point from which to reflect on broader historical movements and shifts. The advent of the virus has also acted as a catalyst: accelerating some develop-

ments in cities that were already visible before the pandemic struck, such as the implementation of digital technologies in the creation of "smart cities", the emerging tensions between major cities and the states in which they are embedded, and prompting reflection on how to make cities more socially just and environmentally sustainable.

At the same time, cities, states and societies have all had to adapt and change in relation to the specific challenges the virus presents. COVID-19 has paused the frenetic onward surge of urban life and given a chance to reflect on broad trends. But while the virus alone is not enough to fully recast the shape and direction of cities, it may be woven through and entwined with these trends, with its influence making certain futures more probable and others less so. The future of global cities, their interplay and engagement with other powerful entities like states and international organisations and broader geo-political, geo-economic and ecological forces already posed pressing and open questions before the pandemic hit.

> COVID-19 will not transform cities permanently on its own. Instead, its short-term effects will interact with deep-lying structural transformative trends that are already playing themselves out in our cities, and in the wider international system in which cities are embedded.

In this short discussion of these major transformative trends I make use of the concept of the "global city" to denote a historically specific urban form: a form that may be subject to transformation. The sociologist Saskia Sassen (1991) introduced this concept to the discussion on urban change to describe a distinctive form of city whose features, morphology and webs of global connectivity emerged in the late-1970s in response to the restructuring of the global economy following the collapse of the post-World War II Bretton Woods system. Global cities are urban forms that are intrinsically and inseparably linked to the specific era of globalisation that followed from this economic restructuring. Global cities were a product of the regulatory environment created at this time (with its emphasis on free market exchange, privatisation, deregulation and financialisation) and were shaped by the global flows of deregulated capital that it set loose. They became its material expression (in the generation of new urban forms and infrastructures) and came to shape the development and direction of globalisation itself.

But in these origins lies a further crucial point that is often missed by many urban theorists. The global city has been made possible by a particular configuration of *geopolitics*. Global cities are the product of a historically specific form of liberal world order, underpinned by a historically specific configuration of geopolitical power (Ikenberry, 2011). Under the hegemony of the United States, a liberal, open trading order has been fostered over the past four decades, underwritten by US military power in the last resort, but providing a secure and stable environment in which cities could begin to play important roles on the world stage, firstly as economic actors and sites of economic power and, more recently, as political players (Curtis, 2016). It is only in this stable global environment that cities, long stripped of their military or defensive capabilities, could begin to find their niche and to evolve.

Now this environment seems to be under threat from a number of different sources. Losing the protection it afforded is likely to have profound consequences for the viability of "global cities" as such. The US hegemony that underpins the system has been perceived to be in decline for a decade, while other powers like China have risen, shifting the locus of economic power to the east. But the advent of the Trump administration and its inward-looking nativist policies has further exacerbated this per-

ception of decline, decay and abdication of international leadership. The rising prominence of authoritarian states on the world stage, from China to Iran, Russia, Turkey and Brazil, lends further weight to the idea that the liberal moment is passing, as do the increasing prevalence of right-wing movements across the world. Threats to the future of the European Union also push in this direction – none more so than Britain's decision to leave. But the most important challenge to this configuration of world order is the unresolved 2008 financial crisis, which swept away not only decades of growth, but also the ideological legitimacy of neoliberal capitalism – the very form of global economic organisation from which global cities drew their lifeblood. All of these are morbid symptoms of a system under great strain. Even before the disaster of COVID-19 was inserted into this toxic mixture, the future of global cities, if we mean the specific form of city that thrived in this now decaying environment, was under threat. The pandemic further threatens to accelerate a decline in what is an open form of global order, offering the prospect of borders, barriers and walls of various kinds closing down the free movement of global flows.

However, even when such existential threats are real, the very fact of the existence of global cities – novel urban forms not seen before in the histor-ical record – has opened up new possibilities in the international system. Global cities have original features, new capacities and capabilities and a new weight on the world stage that have altered the nature of world politics and global governance and offer novel possibilities, pathways and futures for the evolution of international society. And this is necessary, because in a world of transnational challenges, including global pandemics, but also the climate emergency and the crises of global capitalism, cities' capacities to help with global challenges via their globe-spanning networks, leadership and agenda-setting capabilities, are going to be necessary. This is a world in which states have struggled to deal with such challenges. That makes cities acting together on the world stage a critical governance resource – and one that needs to be better understood and defended.

In the space of this short essay I want to examine the intersection of three dimensions of the transformation of cities before concluding with some thoughts on what is at stake in the future evolution of global cities in a post-pandemic world. These dimensions are: globalisation, global gover-nance and geopolitics.

I. Globalisation

Globalisation produced global cities. But it has become apparent in the last decade or so that globalisation has brought many problems in its wake and that its future is unclear. Because global cities are products of the forces that unleashed contemporary globalisation, especially in their reliance on deregulated markets and global capital flows, they also exhibit, in their very morphology and form, many of the tensions and contradictions of globalisation (Curtis, 2019a). They become strategic sites where the more abstract forces underpinning globalism reveal themselves in concrete form. They focus and amplify systemic tensions. We have seen this in the way social movements protesting globalisation choose global cities as their sites of protest and resistance – the anti-globalisation protests of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the Occupy movements of the post-2008 financial crisis and austerity decade, for example.

A divide has begun to emerge between global cities and the heartlands of the territorial nation-states in which they formed.

SIMON CURTIS

> Cities and their leadership are able to exercise a new form of power on the world stage: the ability to convene networks of various actors.

They also demonstrate these tensions in their very materiality: in the co-existence of poverty and great wealth within the same neighbourhoods, or in the sprawling slums and informal settlements of developing world cities, such as Sao Paulo or Delhi, which nestle close by the gated communities of the super-rich (Davis, 2006; Graham, 2016). Global expressions of the "right to the city" movement have come into being, as urban citizens everywhere protest against the ways the inequalities of free market, finance capital-led globalisation have been materialised in cities, and demand more democratic control over how urban space is allocated and used (Harvey, 2012).

But it is not just the left that has problems with the orientation of globalisation. Now, with years of austerity beginning to bite, global cities, with their cosmopolitan and open orientation, with their diverse populations and multiple forms of identity, culture and belonging, have started to come into conflict with the rise of nationalist and nativist feeling brought by globalisation's attendant uncertainties and destabilisation of tradition. A divide has begun to emerge between global cities and the heartlands of the territorial nation-states in which they formed. We have seen this in voting patterns around Brexit and the election of US President Trump: a clear preference in metropolitan areas for remain in the case of Brexit, and for Democrat in the case of the US election in 2016. We have seen it in the tensions between the Trump administration and US cities over Sanctuary Cities and the rights and protections they afford migrants. We have seen it in disagreements over the implementation of the Paris Agreement (Trump repudiates it, while global city mayors say they will implement it). Recently, we have seen it in debates about law and order in liberal US cities in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests.

Can this divide be healed, or will it continue to drive a wedge between global cities and the nation-states in which they are historically embedded? This becomes a hugely significant question for the post-pandemic future, because global cities have begun to exhibit many new capabilities and new forms of agency and power as they have evolved over the last four decades of globalisation. These capabilities and forms of agency and power may be particularly significant in a future in which many transnational problems (themselves unleashed by globalisation) are proving beyond the capacities of states to deal with, largely because of structural limitations built into an international system based on territorial sovereignty. The question is: will they be fostered, or will they be crushed by the return of the state and the rise of nativist politics?

II. Global governance

Global cities first emerged as a functional requirement of a new form of global economy. But many powerful cities are now moving to translate their economic power into political influence on the world stage.

As the state drew back from allocating society's productive resources in response to the new neoliberal paradigm, these decisions were transferred into the hands of private actors: major firms or emerging transnational corporations who located themselves within the central business districts of global cities such as London, New York and Hong Kong. This spurred the natural agglomeration economies that cities have

always fostered; kickstarting decades of astonishing growth for these key locales. Such cities drew upon their historical advantages – and the new regulatory environment – to draw in wealth and concentrate power.

But now these cities have begun to seek power beyond the economic sphere. The primary mechanism for exercising new political powers has been unexpected, perhaps, but also fully in line with the ways global cities have evolved economically – via globe-spanning networks, connected by digital information technology infrastructures. There has been a surge in the growth of functional political networks connecting cities around the world. Today there are between 250–300 organised associations of cities globally – the vast majority of which have been formed in the last three decades – covering issues such as climate, security, health, resilience and many others (Acuto, 2016; Fernández de Losada, 2019). Such transnational municipal networks (TMNs) are conduits for cities to exert influence on global agendas, development goals and international norms (including the evolution of international law) (Blank, 2006). They offer new forms of governance that act in parallel to that pursued by traditional state diplomacy, giving cities a new presence among the constellation of global governance actors, helping both to shape and implement the agenda of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, the New Urban Agenda and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, for example.

But, more than this, some of the most powerful TMNs have even begun to develop their own agendas, regardless of the direction of states. The C40, for example, a group of almost 100 of the world's most powerful cities, embraced a "global green new deal" agenda in 2019, committing its members to develop policies to achieve the Paris climate goals of limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and halving emissions by 2030 (Curtis, 2019b). Such decisions are far from negligible: C40 members encompass a twelfth of the world's population, their economic power represents a quarter of the global economy, and they are the key strategic sites in which the climate emergency will have to be tackled.

The emergence of this kind of activity is hugely significant because it represents a new form of agency and governance capacity within international society: a new form of diversity in a system long the preserve of state actors. Cities and their leadership are able to exercise a new form of power on the world stage: the ability to convene networks of various actors, including the expertise of private firms, to amplify the voices of social movements and to direct the capacities and abilities of those networks towards certain governance goals. Additionally, many cities offer a form of legitimate representative agency, with mayors having been democratically elected by sizable populations. Such developments offer the prospect of real influence on global governance agendas and outcomes in the years to come.

However, the question arises once more: how will states accommodate the rise of this new form of agency? Will they embrace the novel governance capacities emerging within cities and work with cities to empower them to help solve global governance challenges such as climate change and health issues? This would enable international society to move beyond the roadblocks and impasses built into its structure, where competitive state sovereignty has led to the repeated failure to deal with these challenges. Or will states seek to supress these emerging forms of agency and city diplomatic activity? Already we see signs of this – in the

The decline of US hegemony has been mirrored by the rise of Chinese power and influence in the last decade. As China exerts more influence and seeks to reshape the nature of international society, we should expect this to be reflected in the nature of urban space.

clashes between US cities and the Trump administration mentioned earlier and in moves by Russia to resist the encroachment of city activities onto the territory of state sovereignty (Acuto, 2017).

The post-pandemic future for global cities faces two forks in the road. The first is a choice between a cosmopolitan, interconnected internationalism and an international system of renewed state control. The second is between an increasingly crisis-wracked form of capitalist city.

III. Geopolitics

Indeed, the pandemic has accelerated recent trends towards the return of the state. States have had to step in to underwrite economies in ways that exceed even the 2008 financial crisis, using their sovereign power to keep stalled societies afloat and roll out national health responses. Everywhere the neoliberal illusion of the small state is beginning to be burned away by the harsh light of the pandemic. The return of the state to the centre of economic decision-making joins the trends towards populist nationalism and authoritarian states that were already gaining momentum. The international environment is quickly shifting, and the climate that made liberal globalisation and the global city possible is beginning to darken. The emerging forms of multi-stakeholder global governance described above may not be able to survive in a less hospitable climate, as the liberal world order begins to decay.

The decline of US hegemony has been mirrored by the rise of Chinese power and influence in the last decade. As China exerts more influence and seeks to reshape the nature of international society, we should expect this to be reflected in the nature of urban space. Just as global cities are a reflection of, and intrinsically connected to, US liberal hegemony, so the very different values China espouses will materialise in the tight connection between geopolitics and urbanisation. Since 2013 China has been engaged in a vast project of infrastructure construction and urban development across Afro-Eurasia, both within and beyond its borders. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as this multi-faceted policy is named, is nothing less than an attempt to instantiate a Chinese-led form of globalisation. Drawing, so far, around 70 countries into its orbit of influence, the BRI incorporates twothirds of the world's population, has a projected $1.5 trillion price-tag, and incorporates six land and maritime economic corridors (Maçães, 2018). Belt and Road cities have yet to find their form, but the early signs are that they will be shaped by a number of trends drawn from Chinese developmental models: emphasising the spatial form of the transnational economic corridor and smart surveillance technologies applied to cities, as seen in Shenzhen, Hangzhou and Shanghai within China, and beyond in the models of Bonifacio Global City, Manila and the "smart city" of Astana (Curtis and Mayer, 2020).

Such cities and urban corridors will likely eventually project political and economic principles and preferences that are very different to the open, liberal trading order in which global cities have thrived. Indeed, the current travails of Hong Kong are emblematic of the fault lines where two possible world orders grind against each other: the open, networked trading city of recent decades and the emerging Belt and Road system of tomorrow.

China's relative success in suppressing COVID-19 – especially through the application of smart surveillance technologies – as more open societies in the West struggled, may mean its urban model appeals

to developing countries seeking an alternative to the liberal model. It should also be noted that Chinese cities are active participants in many transnational municipal networks (Mierzeijewski, 2020). The possibility remains that, as Chinese-inflected forms of urbanism evolve, China may use these conduits to diffuse its own experiences, urban developmental models and technological forms back through the networks. The eventual fate of global cities, and the networks they have begun to form, may eventually come to look quite different to the picture we have today.

IV. Post-pandemic futures

The inter-connected future of the international system and of cities is at a crossroads. This was the case even before COVID-19; but the pandemic has opened a window on these dynamics, even as it influences them in various ways.

What possible futures are emerging at this juncture? They are multiple and complex, but as a useful simplifying sketch two distinct pathways are appearing along two contrasting political fault-lines.

The first is a choice between greater state control over cities and continued autonomy and independence for cities and their transnational networks. As we have seen, certain states find the devolved model cities have carved out for themselves in world affairs hard to accept, as well as their increasing economic and political weight, and may seek to rein this trend in. But, at the same time, global cities have begun to offer a new capacity for governing global challenges – something the world needs given states' failures on issues such as the climate emergency. At the same time, many global cities also have a level of democratic legitimacy that challenges the sovereign prerogatives of states: many urban citizens are beginning to invest their identity and loyalty in the city and its leadership. Not only do such cities often have vast and diverse populations that fit uneasily within the nation-state framework, they also offer a unique form of multi-scalar local-to-global reach missing in moribund national politics today. This is very visible in the current pandemic, where top-down statist responses that marginalise local expertise and knowledge, such as in Britain, have performed poorly. Perhaps a useful middle way would be a renewed partnership between states and cities where states recognise the capacities and capabilities of cities and their globe-spanning networks as a resource and collaborate to empower them to meet global challenges.

The second choice of path emerges from the increasingly strident calls for greater social justice, equity and ecological sensitivity embodied under the "right to the city" that oppose the defence and intensification of the neoliberal hyper-financialised form of the global city, with its vast wealth disparities and contrasts in life experiences. Even before the pandemic this contrast was increasingly on the political agenda, exacerbated by over a decade of austerity policies and held in place by an increasingly authoritarian form of neoliberal capitalism, augmented by trends such as surveillance technologies and the secession of urban elites into gated communities and fortified spaces. The pandemic has merely clarified this picture: those with wealth and private resources have retreated into well-connected home offices, while those without have been left to cope as best they can.

SIMON CURTIS

The post-pandemic future for global cities faces two forks in the road. The first is a choice between a cosmopolitan, interconnected internationalism and an international system of renewed state control. The second is between an increasingly crisis-wracked form of capitalist city and moves to build alternative urban forms with greater balance, social justice and equity. The pandemic will not transform cities by itself: it offers a political opportunity that groups with different visions of future cities are trying to grasp.

References

Acuto, M. "Cities are gaining ground in global politics – can the UN keep up?" *The Conversation,* 14 September 2017 (online). [Accessed on 19.11.2020]: https://theconversation.com/cities-are-gaining-power-in-global-politics-can-the-un-keep-up-83668

Acuto, M. *Give cities a seat at the top table.* Nature 537 (7622) 611–13, 2016

Fernandez de Losada, A., "Towards a cooperative ecosystem of city networks", in: Fernandez de Losada and Abdullah. *Rethinking the ecosystem of international city networks*, Barcelona: CIDOB, 2019 (online). [Accessed on 20.11.2020]: https://www.cidob.org/en/articulos/monografias/repensando_el_modelo_actual_de_redes_de_ciudades/towards_a_cooperative_ecosystem_of_city_networks

Blank, Y. "The City and the World". *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, 44(3), 2006.

Curtis, S. *Global Cities and Global Order.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Curtis, S. "Global Cities as Market Civilisation", *Global Society*, 33:4, 2019a, 437–461.

Curtis, S. *Strength in numbers: 94 world cities have joined forces to cut emissions in half by 2030.* World Economic Forum. 16 October 2019b (online). [Accessed on 19.11.2020]: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/10/mayor-94-cities-green-new-deal-global

Curtis, S. and M. Mayer, *Belt and Road cities begin to find their form.* CIDOB Opinion 630, 2020 (online). [Accessed on 20.11.2020]: https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/opinion/2020/belt_and_road_cities_begin_to_find_their_form

Davis, M. *Planet of Slums.* London; New York: Verso, 2006

Graham, S. *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers.* New York: Verso, 2016.

Harvey, D. *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution* New York: Verso, 2012.

Ikenberry, J. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order.* Princeton, N.J.; Princeton University Press, 2011.

Maçães, B. *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order.* London: Hurst & Company, 2018.

Mierzeijewski, D. "The Role of Guangdong and Guangzhou's Subnational Diplomacy in China's Belt and Road Initiative". *China: An International Journal*, 18(2), 2020, 99–119.

Safi, M. "Coronavirus will reshape our cities: just don't know how yet", *The Guardian.* 22 May 2020.

Sassen, S. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.