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14. Beyond anti-urban sentiments

Towards a new metropolitan European family

Zef Hemel

Unlike in continents such as Asia, America or Africa where large cities are normal and accepted phenomena, in Europe anti-urban sentiment is still very dominant. This sentiment has had a long history. Whenever cities became too large or powerful, European rulers yielded to the temptation to destroy them or to establish new cities in order to undermine the power of existing cities. The French historian Fernand Braudel describes how the latter was a tried and tested means of maintaining the precarious balance of power especially in Middle Francia, which after the death of Charlemagne was sandwiched between France and Germany and also included the Low Countries. Cities in Europe are consequently on the small side.

Anti-urban sentiment

This European state practice of curtailing and splitting up cities took on a whole new meaning during the industrialisation period. In many parts of Europe, the early stage of industrialisation coincided with rapid urban development as an impoverished population was drawn *en masse* to the city. This mass movement alarmed the powers that be who feared that it could lead to revolutions, anarchy and socialism. In the beginning, this unprecedented process of urbanisation was countered with utopian ideas of garden cities, especially in the nation-states of France, Germany and England. The idea was that the people had to return to the countryside. The first examples of garden cities were soon followed up with notions of regional decentralised urban designs that were interconnected by a thick web of railway

infrastructure and harmoniously interwoven with nature and the untouched landscape of villages and farmland. According to the utopians and the elite, London and Paris in particular had to take the lead because these metropolises were seen as inhumane monsters that had to be tamed using all means possible given their size. But also in the coalfields of Wallonia, Silesia, the Ruhr region and the Midlands, the spreading urbanisation was viewed with great suspicion. At the end of the 19th century, this modern planning project culminated in the acclaimed regional plan of Ebenezer Howard, who enjoyed great success from 1913 with his foundation, the International Federation for Housing and Planning, which focused on spatial decentralisation. In the 20th century – and certainly after the Second World War – the core focus of spatial planning in many European countries was determined (largely by the winners) to be controlling the size of cities by the state. Every effort was made to limit the size and scale of existing settlements and to prevent the coalescence of towns and cities. Europe became a champion in designating and maintaining buffer zones, building new towns, stimulating well-ordered processes of suburbanisation, designating new growth centres, promoting urban networks and containing and confining the metropolis.

From Europe, this anti-urban sentiment initially spread to North America, where it was articulated in a unique way by the hugely popular philosopher Henry David Thoreau in his book *Walden*. However, due to the dominant ideology of civil liberty – an ideology Thoreau also adhered to – as well as the weak tradition of state planning in the New World, this sentiment never gained a foothold other than through unrestrained suburbanisation. As a result, Europe stands alone in its aim to contain urban growth. Within most European states, urban networks are still primarily regarded as a means to divert urban growth to less urbanised regions and not as a growth strategy for existing metropolises. Recently, the French artist Yona Friedman (b. 1923) expressed just this point in *Métropole Europe* (2008, but based on his *Continent-City Europe* from the 1960s). By building

a high-speed rail network, he argues, the cities of Europe would be transformed into one huge decentralised metropolis of 40 million inhabitants. He concludes: 'Un "Grand Paris" ou un "Grand Londres" n'est pas la solution pour l'avenir' (A "Great Paris" or a "Great London" are no solution for the future). Friedman once again touched a sensitive chord. His *anti-mégalopole* corresponded to the old European way of thinking that prefers to keep cities small. But it also did justice to the existing spatial configuration of cities in Europe that is indeed unique in a certain sense. It is thanks to Europe's topography and history but above all the prevailing view of proper spatial planning that no other continent has such a rich and spread-out urban structure.

Restricting the growth of cities certainly has its advantages. Usually the advantages mentioned include quality of life, preservation of rural areas, balanced growth and a just society. But it would be wrong to attribute these and other qualities entirely to cities whose sizes have been restricted. Much relates to one's convictions. It is simply inherent in everything that has become a key component of one's own culture and is no longer called into question. And yet there is still room for discussion. Moreover, the drawbacks, which certainly exist, are too often trivialised by the dominant culture. Indeed, the policy of containing urban growth is often justified by listing the disadvantages of unrestrained growth. These disadvantages are then greatly exaggerated, while the advantages are explained away and the protagonists of growth discredited. The arguments for metropolitanism are the economic strength, diversity, sustainability and dynamism that increase almost without exception together with the size of cities. Globalisation, moreover, is increasingly confronting Europe with new urbanisation patterns in which mega-regions and megacities dominate. Take China, where metropolises of 100-150 million people are developing and partly being planned in the deltas of the Yangtze and the Pearl River but also in the more northern areas, around Beijing (named Jing Jin Ji). In Asia, it is understood that the formation of metropolises is necessary in order to ensure long-term economic growth. European cities are

at risk of becoming Lilliputians, even compared with metropolises that are growing uncontrollably: Istanbul (moving towards 23 million inhabitants), Moscow (20 million) and Cairo (already 20 million). To continue asserting that the European pattern of many relatively small cities is preferable in terms of quality of life can in these circumstances turn out to be mistaken, peculiar or even unwise.

Towards new forms of metropolitanism

The good news is that also within Europe a new pattern of considerably large cities is forming. As far as is known at present, this future metropolitan pattern appears to be partly the result of economic processes that thrive in so-called post-industrial 'creative cities' and partly related to changing demographics – one of a future decline in population as Japan is now experiencing. Young people are once again being drawn to the big cities, and immigrants are joining them. A few already large cities will thus once again grow considerably, beginning with the largest, most internationally oriented cities: London and Paris. Other, mostly industrial cities will, on the contrary, stagnate or shrink. The circumstances for urban expansion appear to be the most favourable in the centre of the continent – in Switzerland, Austria and southern Germany (Vienna, Zurich, Munich, Basel, Geneva). Cities with important airports are also doing well. Intellectual centres with renowned universities have outstanding credentials. But young talent can be demanding and they make their choices deliberately. The largest and most diverse cities with a hub function, an international climate and good universities are in any case on the winning side. Within the nebulous urban fields that Europe currently comprises, new urban centres of gravity are forming into dense spaces of unprecedented human activity, benefiting from enormous advantages of agglomeration. As a network, these cities could even develop into a new family of cities that could bring the European project further, more so

than the current struggling nation-states can. But there are no guarantees. In the current process of globalisation, Europe must not get in the way of this selective growth. Europe would be well advised to subdue – this time from Brussels – the anti-urban sentiment that keeps rearing its head and instead to give the major, vital cities plenty of space to flourish. A strong alliance between the European Union and the major cities could give a positive twist to the crisis in which Europe currently finds itself.

The author

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Further reading

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