

Towards the Global City From the Nation-State to the Urban Polity

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Last night I encountered a typical example of the way people think about public life. A discussion of militant Islam in central Asia included a brief description of the relevant geography, explaining how extensions of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan curled around each other, imposing a complicated politics on a strategic, densely populated valley. A simple area map depicting the borders of these and neighboring countries illustrated the point. With it, the review made an observation about Central Asia that is all-too-familiar throughout the history of the past two centuries: the intertwining extensions defined a potential locus of conflict as these borders, historical accidents, divided a relatively homogeneous population and attached the parts to three separate, rather different, and potentially hostile nations.

This particular area map included a few dots, indicating places – Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Samarkand, Dushanbe, Kunduz, and so on – and it had written on it reference to a few topographical features – the Pamir mountains, a lake or two, a river, the Ferghana Valley. Nevertheless, the map depicted primarily borders defining separate areas, within which peoples live, and this map, like so many others, is an instance of the paradigmatic map of modernity, the great area map in our minds, changing here and there over time, but continually dividing humanity into complex systems of *we* and *they*. Whether it is politics, culture, or economics, people define public life through sets of borders demarcating contiguous areas, within which they aggregate all manner of extrinsic characteristics, with events driven by the flux of their ideas about these constructed aggregations.

Within the EU, of course, intimations of alternative constructs are beginning to take hold in the general thinking about public affairs. The character of the emerging alternative is not entirely clear, however. The historical objectification of national borders within Europe is beginning to give way to their progressive dismantling. Yet the difficulty of this process, arising as the slow, massive movement towards the EU leads people to lower the national boundaries separating each component area from the others, indicates the degree to which area mapping became fundamental to the way that people conceptually constructed public reality during the modern era. And it is not yet apparent whether this glacial transformation represents a substantial shift of particulars within the dominant way of thinking, or the beginning of a leap to an alternative way of thinking, a way of organizing awareness of public life by some other scheme that foregoes the use of borders and area maps. Does the EU reflect a development in which people are simply changing the relevant borders that they use in thinking about common experience, while they still rely on principles of area mapping to think about public life? Or are they putting some other conceptual strategy into widespread use? Let us consider, as the global era dawns, how that paradigmatic area map may be changing, leading not to changed borders but to a quite different construction of what is important in the conduct of public life.

As print-based communication displaced reliance on the iconography and manuscripts of medieval culture, maps were greatly empowered as a form of thought and communication. Before print, that great engine of modernity, manuscript maps would reproduce poorly and were prone to degradation in

the process. Printing made the accuracy of maps progressive and permitted their widespread dissemination. Maps, which defined different areas, large and small, and allowed observers to inventory the characteristics of people and places within those areas, became powerful tools in the modern mode of imagining communities. They were essential in modern state formation. The use of maps in modern life heightened consciousness of diverse borders and organized experience according to the way those borders group people within and set them apart from those without.

Area maps became a constituent element in the way people thought about public life. This constitutive power of maps did not arise from any particular mapping, but from the pervasive reliance on the practice of area mapping in the constructions of modern political, social, and economic thought. Observers would first demarcate an area, large or small, and once they established that, they would count and observe; they would compare and contrast; they would analyze all manner of statistics and extrinsic characteristics, and these became the stuff of public life. Maps provided constructs with which people could aggregate externalities, which became collective abstractions as people attributed intentions, interests, character, will, and diverse capacities to act to those aggregations that the maps displayed. Such intellectual practices deeply characterize the modern sensibility, informing how people around the world describe, orient, and understand themselves and others.

Nation-states have been, of course, the archetypal entities constructed in this manner, what the anthropologist, Benedict Anderson, has called the “imagined communities” of modernity, defined by their borders on a map, and energized by all sorts of actions and policies and programs structuring life for those within the borders and relations to those outside them. The drama of modernity, in its largest sense, has been one in which essentially accidental borders, encompassing a chaos of extrinsic characteristics, have been made through violence, compulsion, seduction, persuasion, enculturation, and education into a more or less rational repertoire of qualities, shared within borders and distinctive from those on the other side. This process is by no means complete, leaving much room within any given border for internal conflict among those whose external characteristics are still discordant. And in a world in which resources are all-too-scarce, all-too-many conflicts of interest and belief break out between peoples across the myriad borders laid out upon our world.

Can we think about public life without reliance on bordered areas? Are there human habitats, polities, that are not defined by borders and the aggregate identities of those within the borders? If so, would thinking and acting within polities without borders differ from thinking and acting within imagined, area-based states? To answer these questions, let us think about maps that represent, not areas, but places, and ask what maps of different places allow people to do. Places dot the world; they do not divide it up into contiguous areas. Places do not aggregate people and their extrinsic characteristics; rather places situate people’s actions and interactions and inform the meanings people derive from what they do there. A place – New York or Barcelona, for instance – is where a polyphony of people conduct their lives in a constructive diversity of purpose. Of course, one can treat a place as if it were an area, conducting a census within its borders and counting characteristics of the people and the things there. But such area maps of places are not as useful as a good place map itself, which is what designers call an *affordance*, “a visual clue to the function of an object.” Place maps do not aggregate extrinsic characteristics; they situate particularities in ways that enable people to interact together with them. Place maps tell the user how to work and get around within the place; they indicate what one can do and provide indications of how the place operates, providing addresses, routes, modes of communication and transportation. Place maps help to sustain the actualities of experience that can take place at and through the place.

Cities, urban places, have long been the archetypal actual communities, the complex places represented in good place maps. Persons, not aggregates, live and work, think and act, in cities and other places. Cities do not merely aggregate extrinsic characteristics of those who fall within their borders. The borders of a city, like other borders, are relatively meaningless fictions, especially compared to the operational city, which usually stretches well beyond its formal borders. Places, real communities, are of diverse types – villages, towns, and cities; languages and cultures; clubs and companies; churches and universities. They are not imagined entities, but functional operating systems enabling people to choose and act together. Place maps of real communities convey an understanding of how they work and what a person can do within them. Place maps do not define a *we* and a *they*; place maps enable all sorts of diverse people to participate in the real, operational community. An internal place map, a good city map, for instance, allows a person to define his or her choices and to carry them out. The place map goes with other tools enabling localized interactions – phone books, guides, listings, schedules, the whole apparatus of urban choice. An external place map shows the linkages between places, the autoroutes, railroads, airports, and sea-lanes, the filigree of connections linking different places together. In sum, whereas area mapping produces imagined communities and aggregates extrinsic characteristics, maps of real communities, places, show the means and opportunities for a diverse array of human interaction.

Historically, cities and other complex places were the first interactive operating systems that people created, with which they could expand their choices and effect lives of intention, personal and communal. Cities organize diversities and allow each person to select his or her actions as intention suggests from within a complexity of possibilities. Historically, cities were highly unusual, inhabited up until the demographic surge of the industrial era by a small proportion of humanity. Now, however, a new drama is replacing the drama of modernity. To be sure, headlines still cry out the acts of the old with ethnic cleansings, *jihads*, intractable minorities locked in deadly struggles with implacable states. Here and there, these wreak catastrophic havoc and they could undermine historic order if they continue to spiral further and further out of control. This atavistic drama of modernity will die out slowly, replaced by a more hopeful drama of post-modernity, in which interactive places become the dominant loci for public life, for people doing interesting, valuable things in concert with each other.

With an upwelling population, cities grew immensely, and the proportion of peoples living in urban places, relative to those who did not, increased more rapidly still. Great technological innovations in transportation and communication immeasurably expanded the power of persons to interact within and between places. Critics can decry the quality of options offered by the new interactivities, or the lack of discrimination many display in exercising their choice. All that notwithstanding, greatly expanded populations now live in places where each person can and does exercise an extraordinary range of choice in highly interactive settings. The challenge of present-day public life is to create a complex, vibrant culture, solving global problems of equity and the environment, as each person asserts both a stake and a role through the exercise of his or her choices in our actual communities.

As places of importance to public life, urban polities can help people overcome two barriers to progressive development. These two barriers overlap. First, the will to form new goals is weak. As forms of collective action, nation-states are running out of creative potentialities, while some vague global-state, experienced as an area including all areas, lacks meaningful, moving definition. In the most advanced parts of the world, area-based polities are weakening as means for mobilizing collective effort. In parts where development lags, there is something retrograde to the passionate *we*, leading to extremist destruction. With the strongest, most tepid; with the weakest, most obsessed – the capacity

to tackle worldwide problems of ignorance, want, equity, and the environment is sorely lacking. Second, commitment to unfinished purposes is flagging. People have been forming a conviction that state action has reached and exceeded the limits of its effectiveness, and as a result, people have been reducing effort at social welfare measures in favor of public parsimony and privatized opulence. Area-based polities are naturally bureaucratic, having to act on aggregate groups through impersonal policies and programs. Whether God helps those who help themselves is moot, but it is certainly true that bureaucracies best serve those who serve themselves. With those who cannot serve themselves well, the law of diminishing returns seems to have a complement in the sphere of bureaucratic action – a law of escalating effort whereby the costs of helping each increment of those in need mounts steadily higher. As this law takes effect, the public senses limits and perceives bureaucratic programs to be ill suited to address yet unfulfilled civic aspirations. This raises a barrier of fatalism and passivity, an unwillingness to bother, in societies that once devoted extraordinary effort to shared public purposes.

Area-based polities have exhausted their agenda and lack new purposes. It would be premature to say that cities, place-based systems of interaction, present a means around these two barriers in public life. All the same, cities may offer a path to future possibilities well worth exploring further.

Draw a map of the world as if there is a clear, night sky all around the globe, with conventional borders disappearing on land areas that all seem dark. Dotted them all, however, will be the lights of large towns and cities. Illuminate the roads and rails, the flight paths and sea-lanes, the electric grid and humming telecommunications lines pulsing with phone and Internet traffic. All this will wrap the earth in a glowing representation of human interactions and activity. Here global experience begins to become visible, and the places we find it are overwhelmingly in the cities around the world. This global experience consists, not in some massive aggregate of outward similarities, but in great webs of concrete interactions among people. Over the past fifty years, there has not only been a tremendous movement of people into cities around the world, but even more life in each of those cities has begun to interact extensively with life elsewhere, with life in other cities. People around the world are beginning to make a global city, of which all the different cities around the world are like different districts, with people moving rather freely from one part of town to another – whether it is across the park or on another continent. The literature on different global cities – London, Tokyo, New York – slightly misses the mark. Drop the plural – these and other cities linked by all the transportation and telecommunications capacities of our time, constitute an urban lace-work enveloping the world, the fast emerging global city where we all live.

At this point in the historical emergence of the global city, it is possible only to ask some difficult, yet hopeful questions. Is there a distinctive set of interests that those who live and work in the global city form as they interact with one another? Ecologically, can a global city, housing most of humanity, prove relatively efficient and benign? Urban life seems to exercise a natural population control and it can be economical, per capita, in the consumption of unrenovable resources. Can one foresee a kind of global urban interest developing, one stressing environmental control, the protection of civil liberties, cultural autonomy and creativity, the full development of each person's potentialities? Advanced nation-states have become finely tuned balances of countervailing powers without much ability to concert the parts in balance towards a demanding common goal. Yet the real problems require determined foresight. Might the global city be a setting from which people can assert such leadership?

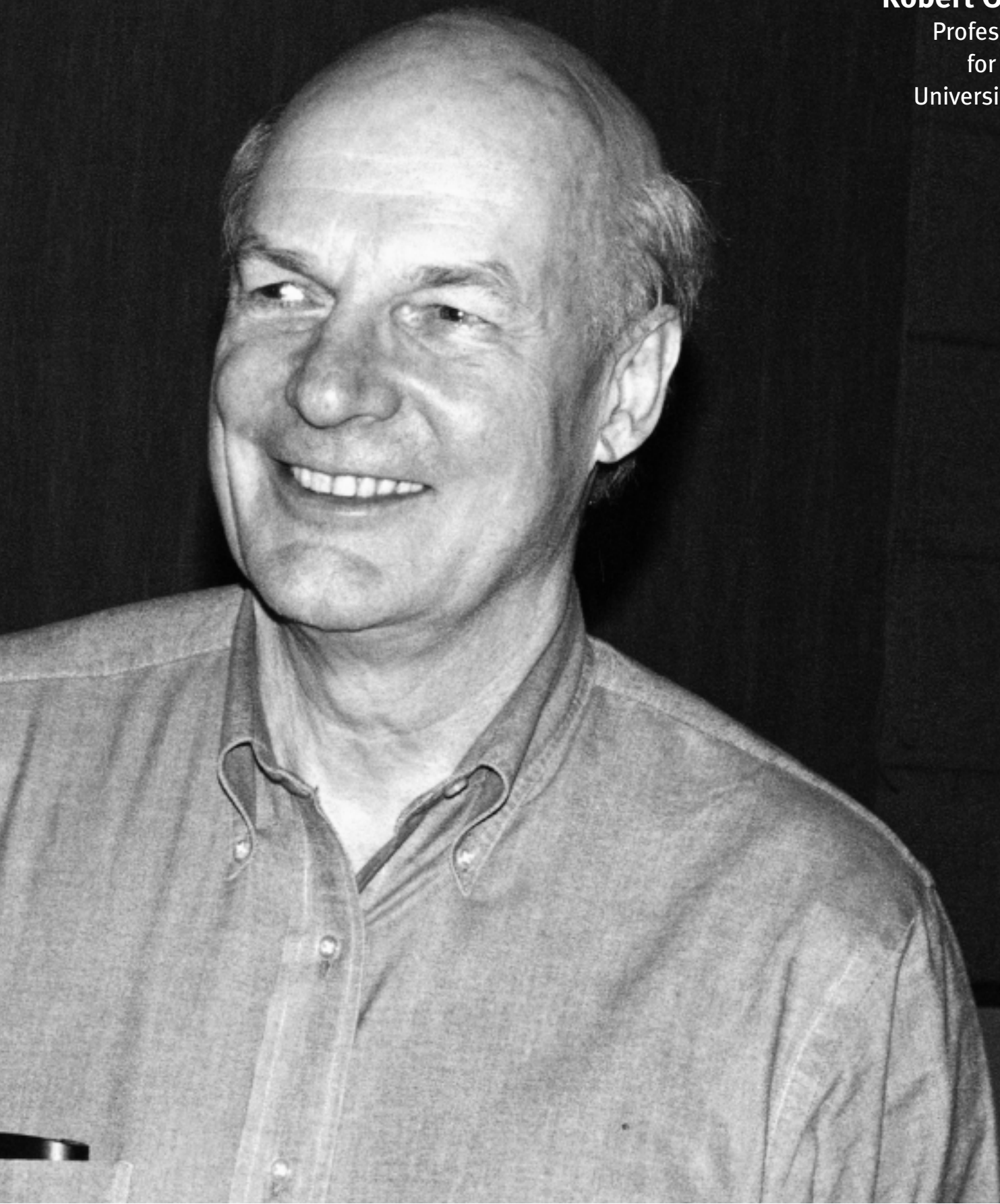
A global city, situated here, there, and everywhere in diverse urban districts around the world, may help overcome the second barrier too, the sense that contemporary polities have reached and exceeded the limits of effective public action. Throughout the 20th century, nation-states have acted

through rationally administered bureaucratic programs. Skepticism has spread wide and deep, suggesting that such means have ceased to be effective, however far we may still stand from fulfilling the energizing aspirations of humane democracy. If the means will not work, expending ever-increasing resources on the best of intents is mere stupidity. Can people in the global city develop new means that will make pursuit of the best intents wise once again?

CAP A LA DE LA NACIÓ-ESTAT

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Robert O. McClintock, professor a la Universitat de Columbia a Nova York i que va participar en el Fòrum “L’Escola i la Ciutat” celebrat a Barcelona el passat mes d’abril, aposta en aquest article per la superació de la Nació-Estat i la seva substitució pel que ell anomena la Ciutat Global. Un espai que no agrupa entitats imaginades marcades per les fronteres geogràfiques, sinó sistemes operatius funcionals que fan possible que la gent esculli i actuï conjuntament. Una comunitat on es fa possible la unió entre l’educació i el medi urbà.

L’altra nit vaig descobrir un exemple típic del que pensa la gent sobre la vida pública. En un debat sobre l’Islam a l’Àsia Central s’inclouia una breu descripció sobre la rellevància de la geografia, explicant com les extensions de Kirguizistan, Tadjiquistan i Uzbequistan s’enllaçaven una amb l’altra imposant una complicada política en una vall estratègica i densament poblada. S’il·lustrava aquest punt amb un mapa senzill de la zona que mostrava les fronteres d’aquests països i dels seus veïns. El mapa mostrava principalment fronteres, marcant àrees separades, entre les quals hi ha habitants, i com tants d’altres és un exemple del mapa paradigmàtic de la modernitat, el mapamundi geogràfic dins les nostres ments, que canvia aquí i allà en el temps, però dividint constantment la humanitat en un complex sistema de nosaltres i ells.

Dins de la Unió Europea, comencen a haver-hi indicacions sobre uns models alternatius en el pensament general de la política pública. Tot i així el caràcter de l’alternativa emergent no és del tot clar. El tradicional concepte de les fronteres nacionals a Europa comença a desmantellar-se. I encara no està clar si aquesta gradual transformació representa un canvi substancial en el pensament dominant o és el principi d’un salt a una manera alternativa de pensar, una manera d’organitzar la consciència de la vida pública a través d’un altre model que prescindeix de l’ús de fronteres i mapes geogràfics.

Les Nacions-Estat han estat les entitats arquetípiques construïdes seguint aquest model, el que l’antropòleg Benedict Anderson ha anomenat “les comunitats imaginades” de la modernitat, definides per les seves fronteres en un mapa i vigoritzades per tota mena d’accions, polítiques i programes, estructurant la vida d’aquells que viuen dintre les fronteres i les relacions d’aquells que hi viuen fora. El drama de la modernitat, en el seu sentit més ampli, sorgeix essencialment de les fronteres

accidentals, que inclouen un caos de característiques extrínseques, que han estat marcades per la violència, la compulsió, la seducció, la persuasió, la culturalització i l’educació en un repertori, més o menys racional, de qualitats, compartides dins les fronteres i diferenciades d’aquelles que estan a l’altre costat.

Podem pensar en la vida pública sense dependre de les fronteres? Existeixen hàbitats humans, governs, que no es defineixen per les fronteres i les identitats agregades de tots els qui hi viuen? Si es així, la manera de pensar i actuar dintre dels espais sense fronteres seria diferent de la manera de pensar i actuar dintre els estats imaginats, basats geogràficament? Per contestar aquestes preguntes, considerem els mapes que representen no estats o països, sinó espais i ens preguntem quins mapes de diferents comunitats permeten a la gent desenvolupar-se. Les comunitats marquen el món, no el divideixen en àrees contigües. Els espais així definits no són simplement la gent i les seves característiques extrínseques, sinó que són on es donen les accions i interaccions de la gent i informen sobre el significat del que la gent hi fa. Una comunitat local –Nova York o Barcelona, per exemple– és on una polifonia de gent condueix les seves vides en una diversitat constructiva d’intencions. Els mapes d’aquestes comunitats no agreguen les característiques extrínseques, sinó que situen particularitats segons les maneres que permeten a la gent d’interactuar. Aquests mapes informen l’usuari de com treballar i moure’s en aquest espai; indiquen què s’hi pot fer i com funciona, oferint adreces, rutes, itineraris, mitjans de comunicació i transport.

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Fa temps que les ciutats, els espais urbans, es consideren els arquetips de les comunitats actuals, els llocs complexos representats en bons plànols. Persones, no agregacions, viuen i treballen, pensen i actuen, en les ciutats i altres espais. Les ciutats no només incorporen les característiques extrínseques d’aquells que es troben dintre de les seves fronteres. Les fronteres d’una ciutat, com les altres, són ficcions sense sentit, especialment comparades amb la ciutat funcional, que normalment s’estén més enllà de les fronteres formals. Els espais, les comunitats reals, són de diversos tipus –pobles i ciutats petites i grans; llengües i cultures, col·lectius i empreses, esglésies i universitats. No són entitats imaginades, sinó sistemes operatius funcionals que fan possible que la gent esculli i actuï conjuntament. Els plànols de les comunitats reals no

defineixen un nosaltres i un ells; permeten que tot tipus de gent diversa participi en una comunitat real i funcional. Un bon mapa de ciutat, per exemple, permet que una persona defineixi les seves opcions i les porti a terme.

En tant que agents clau en la vida pública, els governs urbans poden contribuir a què la gent superi dos obstacles per al desenvolupament progressiu. Aquests dos obstacles conflueixen. D'una banda, les ganes de formar nous objectius són dèbils. Com a formes d'acció col·lectiva, les Nacions-Estat s'estan quedant sense potencial creatiu. En segon lloc, el compromís envers els propòsits inacabats està desgastat. La gent ha anat formant la idea que l'acció estatal ha excedit i sobrepasat els límits de la seva efectivitat i, com a resultat, han anat reduint el seus esforços cap a les mesures de benestar social a favor de la parsimònia pública i l'opulència privatitzadora. Els governs geogràfics són per naturalesa burocràtics i actuen sobre la col·lectivitat a través de polítiques i programes impersonals. Això produeix una barrera de fatalisme i passivitat en les societats on abans es dedicava un esforç extraordinari als objectius públics compartits.

Dibuixen un mapa del món com si fos una nit clara per a tot el globus, on les fronteres convencionals hagin desaparegut en zones on tot sembla fosc. L'únic visible, però, serien les llums de les grans ciutats. Il·luminen les carreteres i les vies de tren, les rutes aèries i les línies marítimes, la xarxa elèctrica i les línies de telecomunicacions polsant el trànsit dels telèfons i d'Internet. Tot això embolica la terra en una representació lluminosa d'interaccions i activitats humanes. Aquí, l'experiència global comença a fer-se visible. Aquesta experiència global consisteix, no en una unió massiva de similituds externes, sinó en grans xarxes d'interaccions concretes, reals, entre la gent.

La població d'arreu del món està començant a construir una ciutat global, en la qual totes les ciutats són com diferents districtes amb gent movent-se lliurement d'una part de la ciutat a una altra: Londres, Tokio, Nova York. Aquestes i altres ciutats enllaçades pels transports i les telecomunicacions del nostre temps constitueixen un treball d'encaix urbà que engloba el món, la ràpida ciutat global emergent on tots vivim.

En aquest moment de sorgiment històric de la ciutat global, només és possible de fer algunes difícils però esperançadores preguntes. Hi ha algun grup d'interessos distintius formats per aquells que viuen i treballen en la ciutat global sorgits de la relació entre ells? Ecològicament, pot una ciutat global, on resideix la majoria de la humanitat, ser relativament eficient i beneficiosa? La vida urbana sembla exercir un control natural de la població i això pot ser econòmic, per càpita, en el consum dels recursos no renovables. Es pot preveure el desenvolupament d'una mena d'interès urbà global, que subratlli el control del medi ambient, la protecció de les llibertats civils, l'autonomia i creativitat cultural, la plena expansió del potencial de cada individu? Les Nacions-Estat avançades s'han convertit en balances afinades de poder compensat, sense massa capacitat d'harmonitzar les parts en la demanda d'un objectiu comú. No obstant, els veritables problemes necessiten una previsió determinada. Podria ser la ciutat global el lloc des del qual la gent pogués exercir aquest liderat? Una ciutat global, localitzada aquí, allà i a tot arreu, en els diferents districtes urbans en tot el món, pot ajudar a superar també la segona barrera. Al llarg del segle XX, les Nacions-Estat han actuat a través de programes burocràtics racionalment administrats. L'escepticisme s'ha escampat àmpliament i profundament, fet que suggereix que aquests mitjans han deixat de ser efectius, sigui quina sigui la distància a què ens trobem de l'acompliment de les aspiracions vigoritzants de la democràcia humana. Si els mitjans no funcionen, malgastat cada vegada més recursos en les millors intencions és merament estúpid. Pot la gent en la ciutat global ser capaç de desenvolupar nous mitjans per fer que la cerca de les millors intencions torni a ser intel·ligent una altra vegada? ■

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