

INTRODUCTION: (COUNTER) TRENDS IN GLOBAL CITIES SINCE THE 21ST CENTURY'S FIRST MAJOR CRISIS

Eva Garcia-Chueca

Senior Research Fellow and Scientific Coordinator,
Global Cities Programme, CIDOB

Lorenzo Vidal

Researcher, Global Cities Programme, CIDOB

The concept of “global cities” became popular in the 1990s to account for the strategic role of major urban centres in articulating the effervescent neoliberal globalisation of capitalism. In what Joseph Stiglitz (2003) called the “roaring nineties” – a decade of apparent optimism and free market bonanza – certain cities emerged as key spaces for territorialising global processes. As Saskia Sassen discussed in *The Global City* (1991), these cities acquired capabilities for global operation, coordination and control of the flows of capital and of a transnationalised workforce.

More than two decades on, the transnational space anchored in global cities has changed substantially. The urban populace has since increased by more than 25% and now encompasses the majority of the world's population; a global crisis has swept away the mirage of continuous finance-led economic expansion and sparked a popular reaction and suspicion towards the promises of globalisation; whilst the prospects of widespread ecological catastrophe have become more real.

This scenario invites a new interrogation of the notion of global cities, particularly from the perspective of its associated modes of governance, city production and urban regulation. The prevailing urban development pattern has forged “city brands” and boosted inter-urban competition, attracting financial and real estate rent-seeking activities as well as the insufficiently problematised “talents” of the global “creative classes”. It has also generated a process of planetary gentrification and further uprooted cities from their surroundings.

Transformations in the “glocal” conditions embodied in global cities pose new challenges for city dwellers and public authorities. The scalar restructurings of the global governance system suggest a repositioning of cities at different levels. The claim to the “right to the city” underscores, in turn, the existing disputes around the appropriation of urban space and its production. In the interstices of these processes, new models of development, both within and beyond the prevailing value systems and digitalisation paradigms, require special consideration.

Transformations in the “glocal” conditions embodied in global cities pose new challenges for city dwellers and public authorities

The first section discusses the role of cities in the global governance system, characterised by their growing centrality in economic geographies, but also by their persistent absence from formal political structures that are of an inter-state character

This volume is the result of a conference on “The new challenges of global cities” held at CIDOB – Barcelona Centre for International Affairs on September 28th 2018. Experts, professionals and policy-makers came together to discuss some of today’s key contemporary urban issues from an international perspective. The objective of the conference was to raise and discuss some of the central elements of the research agenda for the Global Cities Programme, which was recently launched by CIDOB with the support of Barcelona City Council. The discussions between the participants, as well as those with audience-members, addressed each topic’s complex particularities, while drawing connections between them with all their continuities and discontinuities.

The seminar generated a heterogeneous but interconnected exchange of challenges and proposals for addressing the ongoing urbanisation processes in their key political, economic and social dimensions. The growing importance of cities in configuring global agendas was underlined, as was the highly contested nature of urban space itself. The cumulative effect of certain globalising processes was recognised, along with the multiplicity of responses and transformations at the local level. In other words, it touched upon some of the main trends and counter-trends and centripetal and centrifugal dynamics that characterise the growing and changing contemporary urban landscape. This has to a large extent been captured by the content and structure of this monograph.

I. Structure of the monograph

The monograph is structured around the three thematic sessions of the international conference “The new challenges of global cities”: (1) Cities in Global Governance; (2) The Right to the City: Towards a New Urban Paradigm; and (3) New Urban Development Models.

The first section discusses the role of cities in the global governance system, characterised by their growing centrality in economic geographies, but also by their persistent absence from formal political structures that are of an inter-state character. In this context, the different political institutionalities cities have been forging in the international arena are explored.

Sheila R. Foster and Chrystie Flournoy Swiney of Georgetown University (United States) argue that through the networks that represent them cities exercise “soft power”, mainly through lobbying campaigns and collective action. Despite their relative lack of power compared to national governments and international institutions, cities are increasingly managing to influence global agendas on subjects such as climate change and migration. The authors find that while the weight of cities in global governance remains limited, their emergence in recent years is an unprecedented phenomenon that is destabilising the pillars of the Westphalian state system.

According to Enrique Gallicchio of Universidad CLAEH (Uruguay), cities can improve their local governance capacity if their territory is managed through multilevel dialogue, if all the actors in the terri-

tory participate in policy design, and if they have greater impact on global agendas, especially the 2030 Agenda. To do this, it is important to move from “the territorialisation of policies”, in which local governments manage decisions taken at other levels, towards the “construction of territorial policies”, where the territory establishes itself as a subject through multi-actor articulation and building alliances and networks at both territorial and global levels.

The second section explores the right to the city as a demand and practice that has (re)emerged in opposition to neoliberal urbanisation processes and their unequal development in both the Global North and South.

AbdouMaliq Simone, Visiting Professor at the University of Sheffield (United Kingdom), reflects on how the urban is expressed in the Global South, arguing that the Urban South is a normative fiction imposed by a “white sensibility”. In fact, “urban majorities” exist in which different origins, livelihoods, capacities, passions and situations are fluid. These urban areas are inhabited by bodies that struggle to preserve the possibility of continuously changing their livelihoods, and are shaped by high-density proximities and unforeseen interactions. Urban majorities’ constant adaptations and adjustments to volatile urban environments form the city’s main engine of production in the so-called Global South.

Betânia Alfonsin, Professor of Law at Fundação Escola Superior do Ministério Público in Rio Grande del Sur (Brazil), gives a historical review of the social and political process in Brazil since the 1980s that made the “right to the city” a principle that inspired new urban policies and new legal and legislative developments. A pioneer in this field, Brazil has also played a decisive role in global governance by working towards ensuring the right to the city is recognised on global agendas. However, the country is currently immersed in a democratic regression that is jeopardising the political achievements made over more than three decades of political struggle in the field of urban reform, as well as in labour reform and social and education policies.

Katrin Schmidberger, Member of the House of Representatives of Berlin, analyses the profound changes in housing conditions that have occurred in the German city since the 2007–2008 crisis and the establishment of an economic dynamic based on the financialisation of the housing market. In a context in which 85% of the city’s inhabitants live in rented housing, the 80% average price rise between 2007 and 2016 has caused significant social problems. In response, the city government has adopted various kinds of measures, such as regulating rents, the commercial use of residential properties (Airbnb) and empty housing, identifying “protected zones” in the city and promoting housing cooperatives, among others.

Anselmo Lee, Adjunct Professor at Kyunghee University (South Korea) completes this thematic bloc with a reflection on the different interpretations and practices existing in his country and in Asia in general to move towards the construction of “human rights cities”. The metropolitan city of Gwangju has been a pioneer in this regard, developing a normative and political framework that has allowed it to

The second section explores the right to the city as a demand and practice that has (re)emerged in opposition to neoliberal urbanisation processes and their unequal development in both the Global North and South

The third section addresses new trends in the management of resources and economic activities that form the city's material foundations and on which the "glocal" processes that characterise it interact

mainstream and institutionalise human rights at local level, as well as to project itself internationally through the organisation of the World Human Rights Cities Forum. Finding ways to align this process with other global agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, is also part of the discussions taking place in the region.

Finally, the third section addresses new trends in the management of resources and economic activities that form the city's material foundations and on which the "glocal" processes that characterise it interact.

Daniel Chavez, Researcher at the Transnational Institute (Netherlands), analyses the global trend of remunicipalising energy supplies that is influencing public policies, socioeconomic initiatives and debates in increasing numbers of cities. This trend is set within ongoing processes of democratisation and deprivatisation, particularly in the context of an essential energy transition that the market is incapable of undertaking. He underscores the limits of the partial and localist approaches to the matter and favours the comprehensive restructuring of the energy system under public control.

Francesca Bria, Chief Technology and Innovation Officer at Barcelona City Council (Spain), questions the paradigm of the smart city being sponsored by large digital companies and describes the initiatives carried out by Barcelona City Council to promote digital sovereignty and build a data commons. For Bria, technological innovations must align with the social agenda and not the other way around. Municipalities, meanwhile, must promote a New Deal on data as an alternative to Silicon Valley's "surveillance capitalism" on the one hand, and the dystopian Chinese social credit system on the other.

Marty Chen, co-founder of the WIEGO Network and Lecturer at Harvard University (USA), describes the growing importance of the informal economy in urban areas around the world, with nearly half of the working population informally employed. To make cities more equitable and to reduce poverty, Chen argues that they should work to be more inclusive towards workers in the informal sector by protecting and enhancing their livelihoods. The chapter puts forward a number of principles and measures in this field in which "politics of control" from above contend with "politics of survival" from below.

Finally, Frances Northrop, Rachel Laurence and Adrian Bua of the New Economics Foundation (UK), question whether London's economic development model as a "global city" can be exported to other cities in the UK and whether this is even desirable. Taking the process of devolving powers to local governments as a starting point for the discussion, they argue that a local development strategy based on competitive specialisation and attracting foreign investment would worsen the United Kingdom's regional inequalities. Instead, they advocate following the principle of subsidiarity and considering the most appropriate scale for each dimension of a development strategy that redistributes resources across regions and empowers each one to pursue social, environmental and welfare goals.

II. Within, against and beyond the global city

Overall, the monograph indicates the continued relevance of the concept of the “global city”, but also problematises it and suggests that it should be transcended in order to discern the main challenges facing the urban world today as well as possible solutions. In other words, it encourages lines of research that link with but go beyond the “global city” as it has been predominantly interpreted in academic and public policy debates.

To this end, first it is proposed that the “global” dimension of the city should also be traced through the political articulations of international municipalism and the (not always successful) efforts to introduce multi-level dialogues to global governance structures. Second, strategies that give shape to the “right to the city” are analysed, whether through institutional political action or the social practices of “urban majorities”. These offer an alternative to the urban model that dominates today’s “global cities”, which has favoured competitiveness, connectivity and an exclusionary notion of cosmopolitanism. Finally, emerging forms of urban development are explored that seek to rebalance socio-territorial inequalities and recompose the public and the common after decades of neoliberalism.

The “global city” concept helps explain the continued economic weight of cities on the world stage. Certain spaces in urban centres continue to play a strategic role in articulating the economic processes that structure globalisation, despite the shock of the latest global crisis and the recent statist revival. These spaces also share realities and problems related to their proximity to the processes of internationalisation of capital and hosting transnational workforces. The financialisation of the real estate sector, gentrification processes and the coexistence of culturally diverse populations of varied origin are particularly strong common denominators of “global cities”.

However, almost three decades since the concept was coined, developments in international relations allow for it to be resignified to account for the growing political role of cities on the world stage. This has been achieved through city diplomacy and the increased political influence on global governance (even in terms of “soft power”) of the rich ecosystem of city networks working to influence global agendas. In other words, cities are currently acquiring a global dimension not only because of their incorporation into transnational financial flows, but also because of their participation in global governance processes and political structures.

But the “global city” concept is problematic for a variety of reasons. First, because of the normative value it has acquired. All cities now aspire one way or another to become “global cities”, which is synonymous with dynamism, attraction and influence. This imaginary depoliticises the neoliberal forms of urban governance associated with an internationalisation strategy that is driven by market forces and whose negative social and environmental effects are significant.

The monograph indicates the continued relevance of the concept of the “global city”, but also problematises it and suggests that it should be transcended in order to discern the main challenges facing the urban world today as well as possible solutions

Focussing analysis on a narrow understanding of the “global city” leaves out some of the spatio-temporal processes and realities that are crucial to a deep understanding of contemporary urbanisation, global political economy and the main challenges and opportunities presented

The analytical and explanatory value of the concept also has major limitations. It sketches out a world system composed mainly of a series of interconnected large cities, with almost no mediation with other scales and levels of government. “Glocal” processes seem to be territorialised and deterritorialised in these cities, taking the focus away from what happens outside and in between. In such a way, on the one hand, the importance of the state and the inter-state system is minimised and, on the other, so is what happens in the wider territory in which these cities are embedded. More often than not these are metropolitan territories that comprise a complex urban system with multiple interdependencies that must be administered – those with the metropolitan peripheries, and the peri-urban areas composed of intermediate cities, small cities and even rural centres. Transcending the realm of the “global city” also means thinking in terms of unequal development between urban areas and between rural and urban areas, which underpin the main social and environmental problems of our time.

Hence, focussing analysis on a narrow understanding of the “global city” leaves out some of the spatio-temporal processes and realities that are crucial to a deep understanding of contemporary urbanisation, global political economy and the main challenges and opportunities presented. A renewed urban and international research agenda should transcend this focus to more comprehensively include the multi-scale and multi-level dimensions of the processes studied, as well as other forms of city production, governance and urban regulation. Decentering the “global city”, broadening its focus and changing its outlook transforms the object of study and our approach to it: from celebrating “creativity” and “class cosmopolitanism” to worrying about gentrification; from focussing on the competitive advantages of an international projection that ignores negative externalities to exploring the management of common goods and the equitable and sustainable maintenance of urban life; from praising the figure of the entrepreneur to valuing the worker in the informal economy.

Instead of empowering the “global city”, an agenda whose concerns are regional rebalancing and social justice is taking shape. This agenda transcends the prevailing understanding of the “global city” and allows us to think of today’s urban world through the complexity that characterises it and the need to articulate the systemic changes and transitions it requires.

References

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

Stiglitz, J. *Los felices 90: la semilla de la destrucción*. Madrid: Taurus, 2003.