

If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities. Benjamin R. Barber. 2013. 432 pages. New Haven: Yale University Press. \$30. ISBN: 978-0-300-16467-1

This book turns our attention to the role of the local level in a world which is more and more interconnected and globalised. As such, it is divided into two big parts: first giving arguments for the global governance of cities and second proposing concrete tools by which this could be done. The number of subjects covered is spectacular and varies from history and urban planning to inequality, social justice, new technologies, art and civil society. After each chapter describing one of the parts of the everyday life of cities nowadays, a mayor of one city and its life story are presented. One of the biggest impulses for writing the book and for starting the thinking about the powers the cities could have was likely to have been the enormous success of the former mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg (in position from 2001 to 2013).

From the number of subjects covered, it is obvious that the author has carried out in-depth research in the subject, while the work of Saskia Sassen has been most probably the biggest source of inspiration. Despite this detailed research, the answer to the basic question 'how does the author define the city itself' is hidden and unclear. This is especially important, given that the attitude and the arguments used we can easily guess that the author would be most probably of North American origin: the shape of thinking within the boundaries of the American system of cities is omnipresent, even in the final parts of the book where new tools for global governance are suggested. This is interesting, because traditionally it was the European cities that were the ones with more powers and traditions in self-governance within the territory. What size should the author's ideal city, which takes step by step the powers traditionally accorded to state, have, to be able to fulfil the roles proposed by the author? Would it be possible also for other cities than global metropolises to do so? What about the cities of middle size and their role?

The city is, in general, is seen by the author as a formidable alternative to the conventional nation-state paradigm. The reader can – among other insights – appreciate the detailed description of evolution of the cities: from ancient Rome through the medieval age and Industrial Revolution to Singapore in these days. However, the author suggests that the evolution of cities is tracing a kind of circle: from the founders of democracy to the new hope for democracy, creating, at the end, the single planetary city, Ecumenopolis, a Gaia-town of sorts.

If considering the new role of cities, it is true that when putting, for example, an emphasis on the ecological dimensions of today's world, nation states are not able to agree effectively on the measures which have to be undertaken to limit the production of CO₂. On the other hand, cities are creative in making advances towards more ecological means of transportation, like bike or car sharing. However, one of the challenges the current city in the developing world faces is that the newly rich people forget very quickly the conditions in which they grew up in, and as such they do not think much about combating poverty and social exclusion in their city. Another question which comes to mind is: if the cities will have such super powers, what will be the new role of states? Also, as currently the cities have no sovereignty and the borders do not define them, how could they really exercise their powers? For example, in relation to environmental issues? How could the cities save the world without the help of states?

Surprisingly, even if the book discusses the cities of both developed and developing world, there is no importance given to the migration, even if this movement of people is one of the key elements in the growth of cities (and this is even more true when we speak about the countries of the global South). Cities will still serve as machines of integration, regardless of the international or rural origin of newcomers, and as such I would have appreciated the author's view on integration measures which could work more effectively, especially given that the author himself highlights that the cities bear the consequences of terms set by states.

The author's main suggestion, the key point of the book, is to establish a new global assembly, the parliament of mayors, the global league of cities, which is really interesting. However, if we would examine it in more detail, we will find that it would be impossible to make it work. The author suggests that from all the cities in the world we should elect 300–400 to this body. 50 places will be given to the megacities with population of more than 10 million; 125 places to cities from 500,000 to 10 million inhabitants and 125 places for cities with fewer than 500,000 of inhabitants. The cities represented in this assembly, which should convene three times a year, would be chosen by random draw in their category. None of the cities should participate in the assembly for the second time, unless all the cities in its population size category have already participated. So, that means that such body will bring together in one year a maximum of 1,200 cities from all over the world, which should – with the exception of global megapolises, which are not even in sufficient number to fill all the places in the assembly accorded to their category – never meet again. The proposed composition of parliament does not respect current (or even predicted) distribution of cities within the world. According to the World Urbanization Prospects, the 2014 revision (United Nations, 2014), there is currently only 28 cities with more than 10 million inhabitants (while the number of proposed places is 50). Cities with population size between 500,000 and 10 million inhabitants are 985 (while the number of proposed places is 125 – so a city would participate in assembly once in eight years), and in the smallest cities, i.e. with fewer than 500,000 of inhabitants, live about 2 billion people, so their number is certainly much bigger than 125 proposed places and they would most probably participate in the assembly once in 24 years. Thus, under this model, the global megalopolises will become stronger and will cooperate closely, while other cities (which should maybe need more help) would not have a real chance to have an influence. Maybe making more parliaments with cities from one geographical region would be more functional.

To conclude, even if I remain fairly of the possibility of establishing the new parliament of mayors, I think that this book can be very useful for a reader who would like to know more

about the evolution of cities in a global context since the dawn of times, as well as about the current urban challenges, and the ways in which cities react to them face them.

Markéta Seidlová

Charles University Prague

Reference

United Nations (2014): World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision. In:
<http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/highlights/wup2014-highlights.pdf> (accessed on 15/01/2016)