Rethinking global cities

Pal Ahluwalia & Toby Miller

Published online: 05 Sep 2016.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

EDITORIAL

Rethinking global cities

In 1950, only London and New York were big enough cities to qualify as megalopolises. The 15 biggest cities in 1950 accounted for 82.5 million people; in 1970 their aggregate was 140.2 million; and in 1990, 189.6 million. Four hundred cities today have more than a million occupants, and 37 have between 8 and 26 million. Almost 50% of the world's population lived in cities in 2000, up from 30% in 1960. In fact, more people are urban dwellers today than were *alive* in 1960; and for the first time in world history, more people now live in cities than rural areas. Most of the remainder are desperately poor peasants. Across Latin America, for instance, 70% of people moved from the country to the city in the 40 years from the mid-twentieth century, with Mexico City growing from 1.6 million residents in 1940 to 19–29 million today, depending on which figures you consult (Miller, 2007).

The big realty firm Knight Frank (2015) is interested in alternative ways of thinking about global cities: 'if we measure a city's importance by political power, Washington DC and Beijing will be at the top of the tree, followed closely by Brussels, the power base of the EU. If we assess quality of life, a clutch of northern European, Canadian and Australian cities, led by the likes of Melbourne and Toronto, will dominate.' But Knight Frank is more exercised by where high net-worth individuals – the mega-rich – actually live. And the answers are quite different.

They still choose to reside in London or New York, despite Asia's proliferation of billionaires. Then it's Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Miami, Paris, Dubai, Beijing, Zurich, Tokyo, Toronto, Geneva, Sydney, Taipei, Frankfurt, Moscow, Madrid, and San Francisco, with Vienna rounding out the top 20.

On the other hand, a technological emphasis would make for a very different ranking, based not on wealth but education, inventiveness, investment, and successful productive corporations versus mindless fictive capital. The list here reads: San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Boston, London, Chicago, Seattle, Berlin, Singapore, Paris, São Paolo, Moscow, Austin, Bangalore, Sydney, Toronto, Vancouver, Amsterdam, and Montreal (Florida, 2015).

On the one hand, this tells us that the *über*-elite want to reside in liberal-capitalist democracies where the rule of law protects their investments and they don't have to do much bar worry less than they would elsewhere that their children may be kidnapped. On the other, it suggests that global cities are principally shaped by, and testify to, 'post-industrialization, globalization and migration' (Hall, 2004). For those of us who are neither unproductive capitalists living from the wealth generated by others, nor lank-haired entrepreneurs drawing on Pentagon-funded college research in order to 'innovate,' what does all this imply? What is the public interest that might be served – that *must* be served – by global cities?

As Hall (2004) avows, however we define and inhabit these places, the challenge must be to construct

> shared, diverse, just, and egalitarian forms of common life, guaranteeing the full rights of democratic citizenship and participation to all on the basis of equality, whilst respecting the differences which inevitably come about when peoples of different religions, cultures, histories, languages, and traditions are obliged to live together in the same shared space.

References

Florida, Richard. (2015, July 27). The world's leading startup cities. *CityLab*. Retrieved from http://www.citylab.com/tech/2015/07/the-worlds-leading-startup-cities/399623/

Hall, Stuart. (2004, October 27). Divided city—the crisis of London. *openDemocracy*. Retrieved from https://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-multiculturalism/article_2191.jsp

Knight Frank. (2015). *The wealth report: The global perspective on prime property and wealth*. Retrieved from http://www.knightfrank.com/wealthreport

Miller, T. (2007). *Cultural citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, consumerism, and television in a neoliberal age*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

<div align="right">

Pal Ahluwalia
Toby Miller

</div>