Cities: Potential and Reality at the End of Growth

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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On a rainy day in Berlin there's wonderful reason to be indoors on the Internet or writing a song. I didn't manage any time in nature due to the weather, so I took my meditation break outdoors on a crowded but peaceful, umbrella-crammed street. Not surprisingly, a thought came to me.

Incidentally, my essays in the past year have almost all come from brief meditation sessions I've done daily amidst natural or quasi-natural surroundings. With a secret aid I have my own ritual, the subject of an essay itself someday. It makes city dwelling easier for me.

Cities form because people like each other. Or, putting it without any idealism or naïveté, because we are a social species. People in dense concentrations certainly act all too often as if they don't like or love each other. However, the misbehavior and predation that happen in cities is for the most part rare and avoidable. The exceptions are the stuff of drama, sorrow, and manifestations of chaos.

My own recent experience along those lines was an encounter with a home intruder. I emerged unscathed, except to some damage to my normally trusting, calm modus operandi among strangers in a strange town. But still, I like Berlin very much after my six decades of observation around the world.

What if city living could somehow be restarted on the original basis of people banding together because they like each other? Or that love, solidarity and cooperation could make for real communities that function not just well but most pleasurably? It shouldn't be necessary that a surplus of money and property are the way for each person to feel secure and have a sense of happiness. That route has proven impossible, such that we have soiled our nest.

Artistic expression and urban adventure, whether outward and loud, or internal with dreams of music or expanded consciousness, may be about compensating for overcrowding and loss of pristine nature. Without a consensus on that interpretation, and with the prevalent resistance to change, cities keep on chugging along as toxic, noisy, and mostly ugly environments. Health is compromised, while petrochemical pharmaceutical drugs serve to keep people on a treadmill more than heal.

The effect on the average urban dweller is stifling: confined to meaninglessness in terms of how one spends one's life. What hope is there of having an interesting job of possible significance to the world? Regardless, why should a job (wage-slave slot) be the only way to get by? When these questions are hardly asked, or people give up without trying for liberation of the spirit if not the physical, their minds are their jail bars. As cities are generally privatized fortresses or work-camps, how can many envision living differently or creating convivial, sustainable and joyful cities?

The fear factor, manufactured as well as springing from individualism and inequity, unites people in a twisted fashion. It mainly benefits the few; the object is to guard the status quo. Or, to be charitable to history's empires and today's corporate state, it may be said that people feel they must live with worsening conditions and cling to "necessary evils." The militarized police, imprisonment, surveillance, infiltration and oppression -- in large part to deactivate citizens' movements such as Occupy -- are results of cities gone wrong. To fix these problems and rectify "human nature" under capitalism is realistic for some, but ultimately the effort may be nothing more than applying band-aids or tilting at windmills.

Activism is an avocation or occupation that wasn't necessary when our species lived in bands, tribes, and villages with ancient traditions. If pointing to the truth of a social situation makes certain people uncomfortable or threatens their sense of privilege, the costs of activism can be high. Apart from alienation by and from the mass of cities' residents who just go along for the ride -- believing that things are the way they're supposed to be or always will be -- costs can be higher than just being ignored and unable to procure material comfort. We can point to the travails of truth tellers such as Bradley Manning, and so urge everyone to stand up for those actually exercising freedoms that society professes to defend. We can also endlessly point our fingers at the latest scoundrels engaging in corruption and other crimes. But how does this change anything? Does reformist critiquing work?

Revolutions generally come from hunger in the belly. When bread and circuses run out, and enough people get restive and start to panic, then the power of the herd surpasses the elite's power of control. One result can be a pointless revolution that rearranges the deck chairs on the Titanic. Or, a changing of the guard that persists in fouling the planetary nest. By waiting until the point of elections' being too late for peaceful change, governments are seen to be the failures they had long been. The Economist magazine in its May 31, 2013 issue editorialized in its Charlemagne op-ed that the downside of reducing wages for the sake of resuming "growth" "could stir up social strife." But what of the conditions of the working and unemployed people that existed beforehand, that were poor enough that people finally took to the streets and "caused" "strife?" The goal of "growth" -- a sustained period of profit-taking without tipping the population over to rebellion -- avoids any reshaping of the social pyramid.

Cities and energy

It is clear to many that today's failure of central bank economics, with the lamented unemployment and risk of open strife, will proceed and spread to more stable realms such as Germany. But many more people could see the inevitability of greater failure and strife if they had a little education on peak oil. This topic extends hopefully into ecological carrying capacity. For such awareness to grow, the hype about endless energy resources through technology and capital would have to be exposed and retired.

The U.S. as the next Saudi Arabia is a falsehood perpetuated by special interests and aided by cornucopian delusion. The simple fact is that extraction of conventional, cheap oil with its high net-energy return peaked globally several years ago. Ongoing ample supplies of petroleum are being maintained only through smoke and mirrors, such as massive subsidies masking the true higher cost of oil and its substitutes. The hoped-for "recovery" for "growth" is a pipe dream, because cheap energy and ample materials are seriously on the wane. Welcome to the downslide of Hubbert's peak oil curve. Unfortunately, the demise of plentiful, easily accessible oil and gas mean also the demise of petroleum-fed human populations.

As soon as some see the inevitability of economic collapse and the fall of the dominant order, they do "unproductive" things such as stopping the buying of useless or questionable consumer "goods." Our biggest concern is not for the availability of commodities in general, but specifically food. The termination of the importation of clothes or bicycles is no big deal; people will get around those problems creatively. But lack of food for all, and insufficient clean water (supplied today substantially via petroleum), presents an Armageddon-type scenario. Thus, today's early work undertaken for more sustainable cities -- with the goal of more equitable distribution of meaningful wealth, and with greater cooperation among people liking each other -- can be torn asunder by rioting mobs. The shopping they rely upon today is close to the high water mark of recent middle class affluence. It can never be had in the post-oil world even if non-oil sail transport were maximized by slashing "defense" spending.

I asked in a Culture Change column in 2006, "Where's your eco-village?" The question remains, with all its complications, restraints, challenges and promise. Could it suddenly become worthy of meditating on and taking action? Will cities become eco-cities? It's a matter of location, scale and structure. But if decided by technocrats for the elite, it will be a non-starter.

Some cities today are conducive to furthering an existing collection of village-like neighborhoods. Los Angeles has elements of this already; Berlin much more so. Thus far, modern cities are created by others for others, as a resident's direct participation in building has shrunk over time. If today's viable urban villages are refined through collective effort to become linked centers in concentric circles of density at the core, yielding to wide nature corridors, then future eco-cities may come along. The only way such a development could succeed on today's coastlines, given the impact that anticipated rising sea levels will have in the coming decades, would be to implement immediate radical sequestration of carbon globally.

So what comes first? -- fighting the elite, redesigning cities, or pulling the plug on fossil-fuel combustion and desertification? Take your pick or add more; there's plenty to do on a rainy or sunny day.

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Further reading:

Ecocities: Rebuilding Cities in Balance With Nature , a book by Richard Register. His organization's website: ecocitybuilders.org

Ecovillages, with Albert Bates. He has several articles on CultureChange.org.

Where's your ecovillage as meltdown approaches?
Aug 14, 2006 – Culture Change Letter #139

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