

BOOK REVIEW

Edward Glaeser, Karima Kourtit and Peter Nijkamp (Editors),
Urban Empires. Cities as Global Rulers in the New Urban World, Routledge, 2021

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Urbanization is a global trend and the concentration of economic and social activities in large urban centres has generated huge economic development, but has also become a cause of economic and social imbalances. The transformation of cities into mega-cities initially started in cities such as London, Paris, New York and Tokyo, but to these are added many very large cities in other parts of the world, such as Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Shanghai, Mumbai etc. The book focuses on the fact that some of the world's largest cities have become so influential that they can be called "urban empires".

The editors of the book – Edward Glaeser, Karima Kourtit and Peter Nijkamp – have succeeded to reunite 44 contributors which are experts in the field and to produce 23 state-of-the-art chapters on very challenging contemporary urban development issues.

The introduction written by the editors points to the main cause of the emergence of urban empires, which is the combination of urbanization and centralization. Thus, an urban empire cannot be formed in a predominantly rural country, nor in the situation where urban areas are made up of middle-sized cities. Every urban area has an influence on adjacent areas, but an urban empire provides proximity to a spectacular array of potential collaborators. In this context the authors of the book seek for responses to the following key questions: what are the technological and social forces that have increased this demand of proximity? Why some urban empires look like a single large city and others like a network of connected smaller cities? Enormous disparities of wealth have only negative insurmountable aspects? Is the public capacity able to face the challenges of development of world urban empires?

In the section titled “Positioning of Cities” the authors examine the role of large agglomerations in the present globalized world. Researchers show that the place still matters, since cities are the key sites where complex, transnational, digitized economic operations become concrete.

That is why they reintroduce place in economic analysis. Urban spaces are also dominated by the corporate culture, but in connection to multiple other cultures and identities. The operational space for the economy is based on a very diverse world of specialized firms, both corporate and smallish is reflected in the concept of Global City.

The authors present different facets of the position of cities in the world. They suggest that cities and urbanization increasingly build on the concept “winner take all”, since the super-star city has the ability to attract disproportionate shares of global talent by concentrating venture capital and globally oriented economic functions. Most large cities do not have much or any employment in sectors that show little propensity to agglomerate and have low productivity (traditional manufacturing, personal services, leisure, agriculture). This leads to polarization of the urban system which allows the formation of “alpha cities” able to have a dominant share in output and wealth, while other urban areas are stagnant or in decline. Remote places, such as the small island Lindisfarne presented as case study has no access to urban networks and has no benefit from agglomeration and network externalities. Another chapter is adopting a network science perspective on cities in order to find out when such an urban empire exists. This is a broad view of what might constitute an urban empire, which can include clusters of activity both in cities (e.g. neighbourhood) and among cities (e.g. world regions).

Researchers also analyse agglomerations based on examples, such as Los Angeles, highlighting the proliferation of government units within a region, which is called fragmentation. They reveal the difficulty to assess the efficiency of public support services under these circumstances. Another focus is on the rise of large urbanized areas called mega urban regions, by questioning the limits of urbanization imposed by the continued negative spillovers of growth. Significant results of research show that in developed countries connectivity has made it possible for the city to grow as a single entity and the large urban agglomerations are often associated with the core of the country’s economy. By using examples, authors show that in developing nations the positive relationship between average city size (larger than the optimal size) and economic growth at national level may not be valid.

The section titled “Assessing of Urban Developments”, contains topics referring to the relationship between increasing urban agglomeration and economic development. An important discussion is about how slow transformations of the network infrastructure for transport and communication have caused major changes in the European economy, while the emergence of towns became economic coordination centers. The very slow pace in changing networks of infrastructure resulted in a balanced economic development in the UK, while the situation is different for

unbalanced developing countries such as China. Other keys of development are the various proximities (geographical, virtual and organized proximity), as well as the changes that have resulted in what is called Big Data, while both potential development sources bring new opportunities and challenges to city planners.

A remarkable part of the section consists of a comprehensive analysis of the research programme at Politecnico di Milano dealing for more than 30 years with topics related to urban structure, competitiveness and growth. One of the major issues is the optimal city size, whereby the distance between benefits and costs is maximized. The goal of this study was to embrace the scattered production on urban economies.

The focus on defining city size and growth is a problem also treated from a historical perspective. Empires have risen and fallen with regularities, but as technology has progressed, empires have become somewhat more robust and flexible. Authors argue that the global urban system will be possible, considering new forms of planetary urbanization. They provide a starting point in thinking about the shape of the global city system. An important topic refers to cities of our age that tend to be involved in two types of political battle: a) the relative power position of major cities in relation to regional or national governments and b) the competition among cities on achieving the highest possible global recognition.

The section titled “Learning from Cities” focuses on transformation processes in large urban concentration and experiences in various regions of the world. Researchers have identified structural transformations in global city regions and provide the perspective of the post-urban world as starting point, while the basic assumption is that the knowledge economy has dissolved the traditional urban-rural dichotomy. Another facet of the transformation is the changing industrial organization illustrated here with the case of American megaregions. Authors refer to the transition of these regions from the old resource-based economy to the new knowledge-based economy, by taking into account the importance of path dependence. Case studies such as Seoul, Los Angeles and San Francisco highlight the role of global cities that serve as nodes of both virtual and physical flows. However, these outstanding positions with high dependence on cyber activity makes them vulnerable to cyber-attacks. The need of higher resilience in this respect is explained by referring to the case of Detroit automobile industry.

A major topic is the role of urban governments in the development process. An important analysis refers to the public expenditure impact on urban population growth, taking into consideration that in fact all specific programs which could change people’s behaviour have generally budgetary impact.

The book *Global Rulers in the New Urban World* is a remarkable collection of studies about the various aspects of the spatial dimension of modern large cities and their influence on economic and social development at national and global level. The excellent high level scientific contributions reveal a complex reality by explaining new facts and processes based on case studies and by using advanced analysis tools. In many cases the authors provide findings and solutions by showing how to put theory into practice and introduce new scientific concepts which are also starting points for the future. The above considerations have been meant to emphasize that the book will definitely become a milestone in the field of urban economics.