Global Eco-Cities: Pursuing the Utopia of Sustainable Urbanisation

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES   **13** CLIMATE ACTION

by Mattia Albanese

2019 was the year of social protests. From the *Gilets jaunes* to Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future, citizen action impetuously made it to the forefront of social and political discourse. Reviving the traditional ritual of street protest, demonstrations of all kinds have occupied the streets and central squares of Europe's most important cities, demanding change and reform for the improvement of society and the environment.

The fact that these events have taken place within cities, and not elsewhere, demonstrates how protesters still look at the urban space as the natural arena for social confrontation, and cities as the embodiment of a communitarian "social fabric".[1] This is not only the case for capitals. Similar events also took place in many large metropolises from Barcelona to Milan and Munich, cities that form the backbone of Europe's economy.

Indeed, 2019 was also the year of the city. Political events in Europe and across the world are drawing attention to the important role that cities play in shaping, orienting and inspiring people's opinion about how things are and, most importantly, *how they should be*.

As was the case during the Middle Ages, cities are the place where free thought is exercised and where information is born and travels. Just like Thomas More chose a city-island as the location for his imagined utopian society, it is in the world's *global cities*, as Saskia Sassen would say,[2] that the ambition to develop an ideal society is nourished.

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[1] Vinicius M. Netto, *The Social Fabric of Cities*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017.

[2] Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, 5th ed., Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, 2018.

Mattia Albanese is Global Governance graduate from Tor Vergata University of Rome, currently pursuing a MA degree in Economics held by the Einaudi Institute for Economics and Finance (EIEF) and LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome. This is a winning article (2nd place) submitted to the 2020 edition of the IAI Prize contest and presented at a public debate organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome on 28 September 2020.

As the author and global strategist Parag Khanna wrote, cities "are both the cancer and the foundation of our networked world, both virus and antibody. From climate change to poverty and inequality, cities are the problem – and the solution."[3] Any effort to improve human cohabitation on this planet, any activity that aims to foster sustainable development, should thus begin by addressing the role of urban dynamics.

Today, more than ever the image of an ideal society is one that is both sustainable and resilient, thriving and dynamic, prosperous and connected to the rest of the world. In other words, the habitat that most resembles this utopian society is that of an eco-city.

As Khanna wisely pointed out, cities are simultaneously the problem and the solution: traveling though rush hour traffic in São Paulo, Brazil or studying waste cycles in Lagos, Nigeria is not necessary to realise that agglomeration and our consumerist society often comes at a high cost. The industrial revolution has seen cities grow bigger and more prosperous. External economies of scale, understood in the Marshallian sense as the reduction of costs linked to an expansion of production, are the engines for this industrial development and growth.

Today, the paradigm of an economy driven by increasing global consumption, often fed by fossil fuels, seems to stand in sharp contrast with this goal of improved harmony between human beings and natural ecosystems.

Environmental economists look at problems of pollution and the loss of biodiversity under the lens of negative externalities:[4] as market economies fail to factor in the negative effects industrial activity have on society as a whole, and environmental services are not attributed the correct importance in global value chains, the burden on future generations and the environment is destined to grow.

If, in a very simplistic way, environmental management can be reduced to externality management[5] there is still much that today's global cities can do to limit their environmental footprint and contribute to the birth of a radically new developmental paradigm. Going back to Adam Smith, the father of modern economic thinking, it is possible to interpret economies of scale in an alternative way: the real secret of wealth is not unlimited growth *per se*, but lies in the creation of increasingly specialised labour, able to perform industrial tasks in more efficient ways.[6]

Translated into today's world, it is the concentration of highly specialised

[3] Parag Khanna, "Beyond City Limits. The Age of Nations Is Over. The New Urban Era Has Begun", in *Foreign Policy*, No. 181 (September/October 2010), p. 128, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20753992.

[4] Partha S.Dasgupta and Paul R. Ehrlich, "Pervasive Externalities at the Population, Consumption, and Environment Nexus", in *Science*, Vol. 340, No. 6130 (19 April 2013), p. 324-328, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1224664.

[5] William J. Baumol and Wallace E. Oates, *The Theory of Environmental Policy*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

[6] Duncan K. Foley, *Adam's Fallacy. A Guide to Economic Theology*, Cambridge/London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 6.

human capital, people who are capable of generating better and more innovative ideas, that make cities special. To use Paul Romer's words, the juxtaposition of a *world of objects* (and therefore, in economic terms, of products), to a *world of ideas* (therefore the multiple ways in which these objects can be combined to create new value propositions) sheds light on a new type of economic growth, grounded in human capital-abundant cities and decoupled from resource consumption and material wealth accumulation.[7]

This new economy revitalises positive externalities that are generated in the city environment. Proximity improves interaction and boosts creativity, generating network economies that overcome the problem of scarcity and transform consumers into prosumers which, by joining services, co-create them and therefore improve their value.[8]

In this context, traditional problems of overconsumption and exhaustion, often referred to as the "tragedy of the commons",[9] are matched by increasing benefits that derive from the sharing and pooling of resources within a city.

This realises what Christian Iaione calls the *quintuple helix approach* to the knowledge economy:[10] cities are the place where public governance, corporations and research institutions meet and interact with the educated workforce that populate urban areas, developing, commercialising and sharing new technologies.

A significant portion of recent scholarship looks at eco-cities merely as *technological showcases*, in the context of the neoliberal global order.[11] Yet cooperative governance[12] is crucial to re-interpret the city not simply as a space for co-habitation, but as infrastructure, in both a physical and cognitive sense. Eco-cities are thus e-co-cities, since they combine technological and digital feasibility with a radically new approach towards the role of government in the allocation of resources.

In 2016, through the Pact of Amsterdam, the European Commission launched the EU Urban Agenda to promote cooperation and engagement among multiple stakeholders to innovate urban areas in a socially just and environmentally sustainable manner.[13]

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[7] Paul Romer, "Idea Gaps and Object Gaps in Economic Development", in *Journal of Monetary Economics*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (December 1993), p. 543-573, https://econ171ucb.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/romer_ideasgap.pdf.

[8] María Verónica Alderete, "The Age of Prosumerism: Some Micro-Economic Analysis", in *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (September 2017), p. 1-12, https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-18762017000300002.

[9] Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons", in *Science*, Vol. 162, No. 3859 (13 December 1968), p. 1243-1248, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.162.3859.1243.

[10] Christian Iaione, "The Right to the Co-City", in *Italian Journal of Public Law*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2017), p. 80, http://www.ijpl.eu/archive/2017/issue-15/the-right-to-the-co-city.

[11] Robert Cowley, *Eco-Cities: Technological Showcases or Public Spaces?*, PhD thesis, University of Westminster, 2016, https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/9w780.

[12] Eduardo Araral, "Ostrom, Hardin and the Commons: A Critical Appreciation and a Revisionist View", in *Environmental Science & Policy*, Vol. 36 (February 2014), p. 11-23.

[13] European Commission, *Pact of Amsterdam establishing the Urban Agenda for the EU*,

Looking at eco-city developments across the world, it is clear that governance is going to be crucial to determine the future of eco-cities. The rising power of cities do not necessarily imply a loss of power for central governments: states often see urban development as a tool to channel investment and attract highly-educated communities that are crucial for a growing economy.

With respect to the relationship between rising eco-cities and central governments, three broad approaches can be identified. A first is the *entrepreneurial state approach*.[14] Here, central governments are usually the ones that pilot and oversee eco-city experiments, coordinating private resources and investments. This has been the case of several eco-cities in mainland China (Tianjin or Shenzhen for instance) or in certain Arab states (most notably, Masdar City in proximity of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates).[15]

A second is the *enabling state approach*: as outlined Iaione, many European cities are revisiting their past communal tradition to lead experiments of cooperative governance that involve a better management of common urban resources. Over the last decade, major

Italian cities like Bologna, Naples, Rome, Turin and Milan have developed various "Charter of the Commons" initiatives.[16]

These are similar to the ones adopted by communities in Northern Europe, especially Scandinavian countries. Projects are usually led by NGOs and other third-sector organisations, while the state plays an "enabling function", granting support and financing where needed.

A third approach is that of the *dormant state*: in a majority of cases, governments do not have the financial resources or skills to engage in climate action. In many countries across the Global South, urbanisation is taking place as an informal phenomenon.[17]

Uncontrolled urban expansions in Sub-Saharan Africa or in South Asia provide interesting case-studies because, even if no explicit formal effort is devoted to the minimisation of environmental impact, informal governance tools, which are by definition co-operative are devoted to the administration of common resources. The inhabitants of Agbogbloshie, a slum located north of Ghana's capital Accra, who make a living by retrofitting and re-selling computers and other devices they retrieve from the nearby swamp, are performing an exercise of "circular economy", transforming waste into

agreed at the informal meeting of EU ministers responsible for urban matters on 30 May 2016 in Amsterdam, https://europa.eu/!hH69rT.

[14] Mariana Mazzucato, "The Entrepreneurial State", in *Soundings*, No. 49 (Winter 2011), p. 131-142.

[15] Simon Joss, Robert Cowley and Daniel Tomozeiu, "Towards the 'Ubiquitous Eco-City': An Analysis of the Internationalisation of Eco-City Policy and Practice", in *Urban Research & Practice*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2013), p. 54-74.

[16] Iolanda Bianchi, "The Post-Political Meaning of the Concept of Commons: The Regulation of the Urban Commons in Bologna", in *Space and Polity*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2018), p. 287-306.

[17] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Overheating. An Anthropology of Accelerated Change*, London, Pluto Press, 2016.
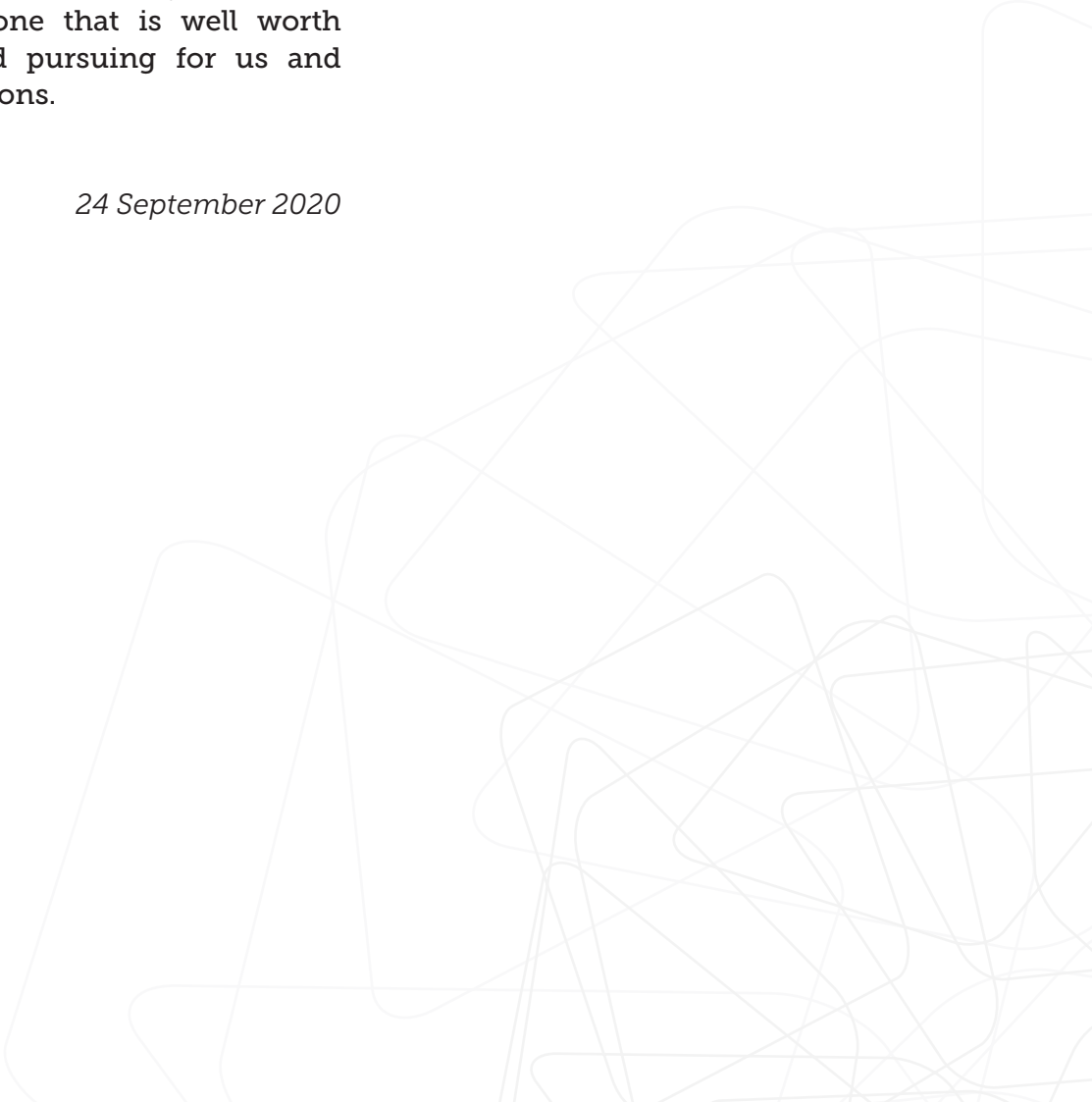
valuable merchandise, albeit often at a huge human cost.

Eco-cities are emerging across the globe in multiple ways. Governing this growth and balancing frictions within them and along their peripheries will be indispensable to make the ecological transition not only feasible, but socially just and desirable.

Ultimately, what eco-cities should teach us, is that development is not only a matter of technology or economic growth. Rather, it is a matter of dreams and utopias, a collective effort to improve one's habitat and strive for the betterment of society and the environment, in other words, an idealised objective that comes close Thomas More's island-city. A utopia perhaps, but one that is well worth imagining and pursuing for us and future generations.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy
T +39 06 3224360
iai@iai.it
www.iai.it

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Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)