

NewStatesman



BY
JOHN ELLEDGE

[Follow @jonnelledge](#)

BOOKS 25 SEPTEMBER 2017

The New Urban Crisis charts the problem with “winner-takes-all” superstar cities

Like the issues Richard Florida identifies, his solutions are many, varied and intimidating.

By [Jonn Elledge](#)

The city, the late political theorist Benjamin Barber argued in his 2013 book *If Mayors Ruled The World*, would be our salvation: while nations concerned themselves with sovereignty, wars, and other forms of political dick-waving, it would be cities that would have to address global problems such as climate change.

There was, though, a slight kink in this argument: a big reason cities were best placed to reduce emissions was because cities were producing most of them. The city, as Barber himself acknowledged, has always been an ambiguous and contradictory idea – representing, on the one hand, civilisation, opportunity and freedom; on the other, decadence, poverty, isolation. There's little point trying to work out which view is correct, since clearly both are. The true meaning of the city is simply a matter of taste.

It's another contradiction that's at the heart of *The New Urban Crisis*, the latest manifesto from Richard Florida, an American urbanist and guru of the "creative city" approach to urban regeneration. Cities now house around 55 per cent of the world's population; the most successful – London, New York, San Francisco – are today as sought after as ever, sources of growth, innovation and cultural vibrancy.

So used are we to this state of affairs that it's easy to forget how big and how recent a turnaround this is. Just a generation ago these same cities were characterised by industrial decline, crime and depopulation as their citizens fled to the suburbs. Between 1939 and 1988, London lost a quarter of its population.

In the 1990s, that changed. Living downtown became aspirational again – I've always suspected New York sitcoms to be the culprit, although the departure of foul-smelling industries should probably get some credit, too. Crime fell; populations rose. Today, while Britain's international stature may have faltered, London is one of the few serious candidates for most important city in the world. Together, Florida says, these "superstar cities" are so successful that, with just 7 per cent of the world's population, they can generate 40 per cent of its GDP. It's stirring stuff.

That's the good news. The bad – the crisis of the book's title – is a messy set of connected problems. One is the failure of urbanism in the developing world where, in contrast to earlier phases of history, cities are booming without much in the way of economic growth. Florida credits this, as he does so much else, to globalisation: why develop your own resources when you can just buy them in?

Another concern is the scale of the drop off between the most successful cities and the rest. In a pattern familiar in the UK, the ambitious, talented and creative are drawn to those centres where productivity, and wages, are highest. The resulting brain drain makes it even harder for the places they leave behind to catch up.

This "winner-takes-all urbanism", as Florida terms it, would be bad enough if the two sides contained equal numbers of cities, but they don't: the few-dozen cities with high wages and booming tech scenes are dwarfed in number by those where wages are low, deindustrialisation is still a concern, and the new urban crisis looks a lot like the old one. The cities in the latter group include many that were recently unexpectedly enthusiastic for Brexit on one side of the Atlantic, and for Donald Trump on the other.

Perhaps the biggest issue of Florida's new urban crisis, though, is that winner-takes-all urbanism doesn't even seem to be working for the people who live in the superstar

cities. The clustering of economic activity in a relatively small number of cities has sent land values through the roof. The result is that, even though average wages are higher, after housing costs the poor are effectively worse off in New York than in, say, Houston.

Not for the first time we've managed to construct an economic system that's brilliant for wealthy landowners but terrible for pretty much everyone else. "Class today," Florida writes, "is not just about the kind of work we do, but also the places in which we live, which shape everything from our access to jobs to the schools our kids attend and our prospects for upward mobility." It's a sort of Marxist theory of place.

Like the problems Florida identifies, his solutions are many, varied and intimidating. They include a land-value tax and better public transport, to enable more people to live and work in these big, productive cities; a new generation of subsidised housing for key workers in danger of being priced out of places that wouldn't survive their departure; higher minimum wages and even that perennial favourite, a universal basic income.

It's not that these ideas are bad, or unambitious: quite the opposite. What's not clear is how we would implement them. There are still some winners in the current system – and those who can afford to grab a slice of the superstar cities include much of the West's dominant political class.

Florida's new urban crisis is, he claims "the defining issue – and struggle – of our time". Perhaps he's right. But while one side of that struggle has the numbers, the other wields all the power. We may be struggling with these particular urban contradictions for some time to come.

The New Urban Crisis: Gentrification, Housing Bubbles, Growing Inequality and What We Can Do About It

Richard Florida

Oneworld, 320pp, £20

Jon Elledge edits the *New Statesman's* sister site [CityMetric](#), and writes for the NS about subjects including politics, history and Brexit. You can find him on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#).