



National League of Cities

Emerging Issues: Big Think Books See Big Roles for Cities in Big Global Changes

by Bill Barnes

A flotilla of Big Think Books (BTBs) about cities has heaved into view.

Five recent BTBs come from brand name authors, each with major capacity to produce and distribute. Glaeser, Florida, Kotkin, Calthorpe and Kasarda may not be household names, but they have places in the lesser pantheon of economics and urban affairs.

This column and next week's provide a glimpse of key themes in each of these BTBs and some analysis of the controversial issues on which the authors agree and disagree.

Economy in Places

Most significantly, all of the books treat the futures of cities, urbanism and spatial patterns of settlement as key components of global economic transformation rather than as backwater topics or separate but not-too-important phenomena.

This perspective puts place (cities, towns, regions) at the center of the "change" discussion. It's a welcome grounding of the abstractions that dominate too much grand policy discourse. Those abstractions unconvincingly treat economic, social, and technological developments as if they occur everywhere but nowhere in particular — up in the air.

In "The Great Reset," Richard Florida offers the most elaborate framework for the urban/economic connection. He organizes the past 150 years as three "Great Resets," each involving a basic shift in economic trends and a "new spatial fix" that went with it. Late 19th century industrialization was accompanied by huge industrial cities.

The mid-20th century Reset comprised technological innovation and consumerism and their spatial partner, suburbanization. The current Reset is rooted in the "idea-driven knowledge economy that runs more on brains than brawn" and in the limitations of the suburban model of development. "Megaregions" will be the spatial fix for this new era. They will require and thrive on new infrastructure needed for increased physical mobility, including high speed rail.

BTBs such as Florida's are especially good at moving readers out of the routines that fill our days and into places with wider horizons. A reliable expert on books and life, the poet Emily Dickenson, assures us that "there is no Frigate like a Book to take us Lands away."

You might also view these books as competing narratives about the future of cities and regions. The operating visions that leaders and citizens use to think about the future of their communities are implicitly rooted in such stories. So it's worth assessing these broad narratives as a way to test the feasibility of the local vision.

BTBs are the kind of publications that spell their Big Ideas with capital letters. A significant downside of BTBs, of course, is that their Big Theories tend toward the one-size-fits-all fallacy. Hedgehog thinking sells books; real life is mainly about fox thinking.

Cities and Suburbs

The BTB most recently in the spotlight is Edward Glaeser's "The Triumph of the City." (See Neal Pierce on Glaeser's book in the [February 21 issue of *Nation's Cities Weekly*](#).)

At a recent event at the World Bank's Washington headquarters, Glaeser said that cities are the "crucial connectors" across the world and that the "key city characteristic" is bringing people together to learn from and stimulate each other. He's against "sprawl" and he tends to focus on "great cities" or at least the dense, tall parts of them, like the Manhattan where he grew up.

There's not much in the book about actual community life excepting Glaeser's preference for taller buildings and less historic preservation in places where space is unaffordable and his personal distaste for "leafy living" in the suburbs.

Other BTB authors describe a future for cities and suburbs that contrasts with Glaeser's preference for the Manhattan model. Joel Kotkin, in "The Next Hundred Million," predicts "suburbia will probably remain the focal point of innovations in development."

He says there will be a few large, dense "productive resorts — places adapted both to business and recreation — for the elite and those who work for them." Newer "cities of aspiration," especially in the Sunbelt, will take on more of the urban functions for "upward mobility."

Peter Calthorpe's "Urbanism in the Age of Climate Change" is wisely less concerned with the unproductive city versus suburb argument. Calthorpe, a co-founder of the Congress for New Urbanism, argues that city and suburb should be integrated in "sustainable regions" that are characterized by "traditional urbanism" — walkable, mixed use, rich in public life. His book aims to "quantify many of the co-benefits that complement the carbon reductions of a more sustainable urban form."

Florida also declares there "is no ... city versus suburb, winner takes all battle" debate. Rather they are all part of the "new spatial fix," the "megaregion."

Perhaps these books and the discussions they provoke might help get us past the dead-end city versus suburb obsession and into a more sophisticated and useful exploration of inter-local and regional possibilities.

(Next time — more on BTBs, including: will airports be the new centers for urbanized areas?)

Bill Barnes is the director for emerging issues at NLC. Comments about his column, which appears regularly in Nation's Cities Weekly, and ideas about "emerging issue" topics can be sent to him at barnes@nlc.org.

To read previous columns, visit the [Emerging Issues webpage](#).

National League of Cities
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue NW Suite 550 · Washington, DC 20004
Phone:(202) 626-3000 · Fax:(202) 626-3043
info@nlc.org · www.nlc.org
[Privacy Policy](#)