

The 21st Century Cities in Global History

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Futurists have consistently undervalued the role of the city. I believe the 21st century megacity will enter human history as an autonomous independent actor and exert a determining influence in world affairs.

Megacities, typically with over ten million population, have constantly increased in size and importance, and today account for 55% of global population. By 2050, this number will increase to 68% according to the UN's *World Urbanization Prospects*.

After a brief historical introduction on the changing role of cities, this article describes five characteristics of the 21st century megacity: 1) demographically dynamic, 2) politically autonomous, 3) economically driven, 4) religiously vibrant, and, 5) globally networked.



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The changing role of cities

Cities created the great cultures and civilizations of humanity. The rulers of Memphis in Egypt, Ur in Mesopotamia, Xi'an in China, Harappa in India, Athens, Rome, and later Paris, Mexico City, Cuzco, Timbuktu in Africa, London, and New York exploited the surrounding agricultural peoples and natural resources to create kingdoms, empires and states.

These great cities centralized the economies, founded the first writing systems and official languages, wrote law codes, established formal religions, and constructed monumental public buildings. The civilizations these cities created dominated humanity until today.

With the rise of the nation-state, upon the unification of Spain in 1492, the new cities of Madrid, London, Paris, and later New York City, Cairo, Moscow, and Beijing, replaced the cities of old as the creators and disseminators of national and eventually global cultures.

The city continued as the incubator of national cultures until the dawn of the 21st century. In his book, *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman describes the rise of a world in which globalism is replacing nationalism. Globalism, according to Friedman, is marked by the free and unimpeded flow of people, ideas, capital, cultures, languages, products, raw materials, and religions across once impermeable borders.

Samuel P. Huntington underscores the impact of globalization in *The Clash of Civilizations*, arguing that civilizations are replacing the nation-state as the major actors in history. However, neither Friedman nor Huntington appreciated the impact the megacity will have in the 21st century.

Demographically dynamic

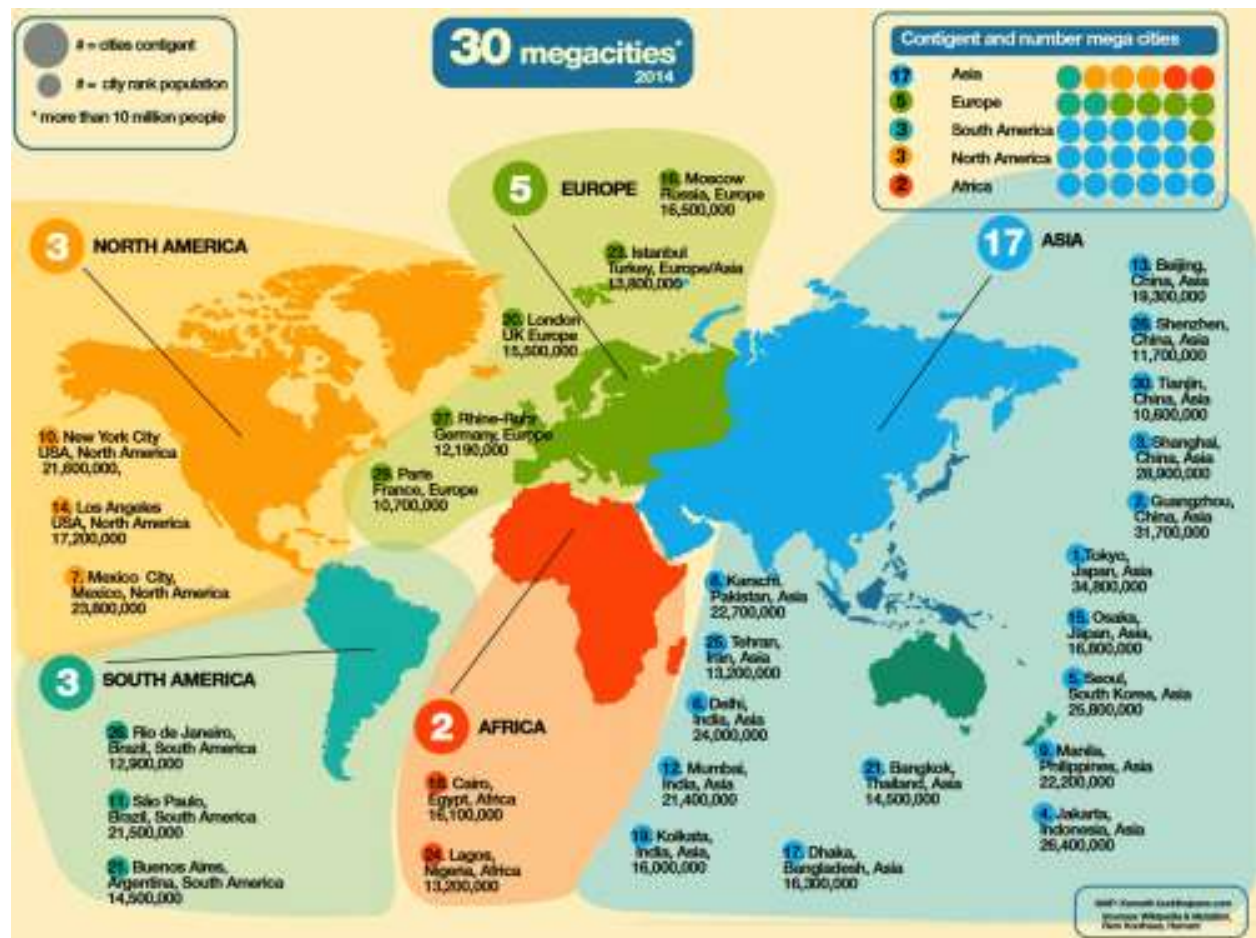
The first characteristic of the 21st century megacity is its demographic dynamism. During my January 2018 vacation in Dubai, I was struck by the diversity of employees staffing everything from the passport control booth to the cleaners of the rooms in my hotel. Over 80% of the residents of the city and United Arab Emirates were temporary foreign workers with no chance of becoming citizens. Workers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Thailand, the Philippines, Africa, Europe, and the U.S. made the city run while a handful of local managers ruled the wealthy oil producing city.

I ate at small restaurants run by South Asians, my hotel room was cleaned by a Nigerian, the receptionist was from the Philippines, the banker I met was from New York, the guy who ran the Internet café was from India, and the dentist I had to visit was from Russia. An estimated 15 million shoppers flock to the tax-free city every year. I couldn't help feeling I was visiting a futuristic space colony with a constantly changing staff. No one I met dreamed or hoped of becoming a citizen, calling Dubai "home," or settling in for the long term.

The great cities of the world have always been magnets for both national and global migrants. But Huntington argues in *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* that the American melting pot managed to blend millions of English, Scotch, Irish, Germans, Italians, Orthodox Jews, and Puerto Ricans into "Americans." However, by the eve of the 21st century, the fire had gone out.

The residents of Dubai and the other cities of the world barricade themselves in ethnic ghettos, with

houses of worship, newspapers, social clubs, libraries, bars, orphanages, sports clubs, restaurants, and grocery stores, and see no need to adapt. English is the official language of the new millennium, everyone eats hamburgers and drinks beer, mass communications keeps them in touch with their global friends and family, and computer programming and nursing are global professions. The Chinese in Dubai, Koreans in New York, Russians in Rio, Arabs in Paris, Turks in Berlin, Pakistanis in London, and Indians in Lagos pass easily from one megacity to the other.



Politically autonomous

The second characteristic of the 21st century megacity is its growing political independence from surrounding nation-states. Like many dynamic megacities, Shanghai is chafing at the bit to forge its own path in the 21st century. It hosts a myriad of ethnic neighborhoods populated by an ever-changing population of foreigners. Alongside Americatown, there are Africatown, Frenchtown, Japantown, Israeltown, and Russiatown.

The Communist Chinese government is attempting to chart a path for the 21st century that will preserve the unity of the Middle Kingdom, the dominant role of the Communist Party, and centrality of Beijing in the nation while simultaneously acknowledging the autonomous aspirations, goals, and identities of megacities like Shanghai. The government granted Hong Kong and Macau the status of Special Administrative Regions, Shanghai is a Special Economic Zone, and other cities have varying degrees of autonomy. The 50-square mile autonomous free trade zone of Shanghai already has autonomous Internet freedoms, arbitration and judicial institutions, money exchange rules, residency and immigration conditions for Chinese and foreigners, educational policies, religious rights, and many other unique conditions.

Global warming, air pollution, public transportation, economic development, immigration, and press freedom are pressing issues for all coastal megacities, while the national politicians in distant capitals have differing priorities. Bi- or even trilingual education is an urban priority while national leaders seek to impose the national language.

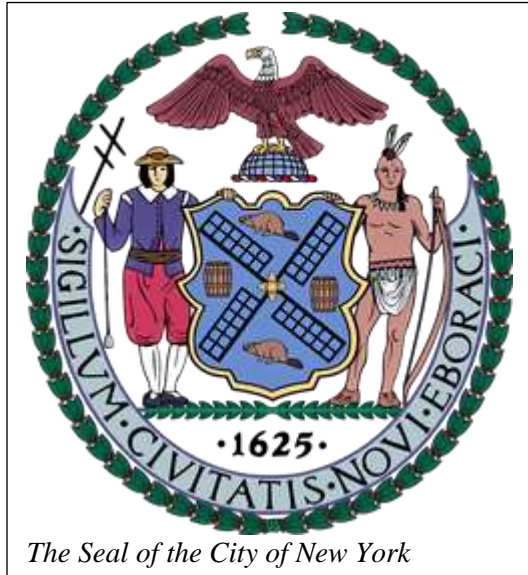
Autonomous, even independent cities, have long played an important role in history but their fate was generally incorporation into emerging kingdoms and empires. Alexander the Great conquered the city-states of Greece, the Baltic Hanseatic League cities were absorbed into the Russian, Polish, German, and Scandinavian kingdoms, and the Swahili coastal trading cities of East Africa lost their independence. However, in the flat world described by Friedman, megacities are finding that economically, demographically, culturally, and politically, they have more in common with other megacities than with the nations in which they are located.

Like New Yorkers, many residents of Shanghai possess multiple passports, speak several languages, have homes in America and Europe, maintain off-shore bank accounts, consider their corporations as their primary loyalty, and are equally at home in any global megacity. They resent the heavy hand of Beijing's communist rulers with as much anger as New York Wall Street bankers who detest Washington meddling, Sao Paulo businessmen who hate corrupt Brasilia intervention, and Cape Town industrialists

who oppose black political dabbling from Pretoria. In fact, a growing political party in Cape Town is demanding the independence of the city-state from South Africa.

Economically driven

The third characteristic of the 21st century megacity is its demographic dynamism. Unlike Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia, New York City was hell-bent on making money. Wall Street, Fifth Avenue, and Madison Avenue are global shorthand for finance, shopping and advertising. Even the city's official seal illustrates the centrality of business to its identity: along with a windmill, it features two beavers (the beaver pelt was the leading export of colonial New Amsterdam and New York); two barrels (containing flour, the second leading export); and a Dutch sailor (with a Native American, a trading partner).



The Seal of the City of New York

The Dutch founded New Amsterdam as a purely commercial enterprise; it was never intended to become the capital of a nation or an empire, but merely a trading post to export the beaver furs and grain to the mother country. It was only later that President Washington tied the fate of the city to the emerging new nation by nicknaming it the Empire City. Following New Amsterdam, the Europeans ringed the globe with coastal trading posts that would become megacities, such as Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Dakar, Lagos, Cape Town, Mumbai, Karachi, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Jakarta.

The 16 ethnic and religious groups who made up the population of New York City at the American Revolution were followed by millions of other immigrants, from both the American hinterland and abroad, who came hoping to make their fortunes.

New York shares with the other megacities of the world a common economic quest for wealth. The ambitious young person from Mexico, China, Russia, South Korea, or Pakistan casts his or her eyes to the booming megacity on the nearest horizon and sets out to achieve wealth and glory. They concoct business deals with a cousin in Paris, a brother in Singapore, a nephew in Shanghai, and a trusted friend in Rio, and taking advantage of off-shore shelters, shady deals, a bit of arm twisting, and good old bribes, hasten to plaster their names on family-owned hotels, restaurants, factories, and banks. Success is the common value that unites these flat world tycoons who recognize no national boundaries, no national loyalty, and no limits.

Religiously vibrant

The fourth characteristic of the 21st century megacity is its religious vibrancy. A massive 16th century cathedral still dominates the 35 million residents of Mexico City, but the suburbs and slums are ruled by evangelical and Pentecostal megachurches.

Mexico City has a long history of generating new religions or radically reinterpreting old ones. In 1521, a dark-skinned Nahuatl-speaking woman appeared to an illiterate Aztec peasant named Juan Diego on the site of the demolished hillside temple of the Aztec goddess, Tonantzin Coatlxapeuh. The result was the veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe that blended the Aztec and Catholic religions into a syncretic Mexican cult. But as Mexico City joins the ranks of the world's 21st century megacities, another form of religion is conquering the millions of poor migrants from the provinces, immigrants from other Latin American and Caribbean countries, and the growing number of Asians and Africans seeking their fortunes there.

The Pentecostal movement was born in a small Azusa Street chapel in Los Angeles in 1906. It blended foreign immigrants, African-Americans from the rural South, Mexican workers, and rural white Americans fleeing poverty and the dust bowl into a new religious movement.

Harvey Cox, in his landmark book, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*, argues that the turbulent mixing and clashing of cultures, religions, languages, and rituals in the growing cities produced new forms of religion. They stressed concrete signs of faith such as miraculous healings, speaking in tongues, spirit possession, and ecstatic trances. The turbulence of the modern city caused the Holy Spirit to again intervene in human history.

The same force that demolished the barriers of class, wealth, race, culture, nationality, and language of Los Angeles is also sweeping the teeming megacities of the world. In Rio de Janeiro, Edir Macedo founded the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which has spread throughout Brazil, especially the 43-million strong Rio-São Paulo megalopolis, as well as the Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa, Spanish-speaking Latin America, and among the Latin American and African diaspora in Europe and the USA.

In addition to Pentecostalism, the megacity is awash in old, new and revitalized religions. The Hindu Hare Krishna and Buddhist Zen movements swept American and Western European cities, the Church of Scientology, the African-American Nation of Islam, Lubavitch Orthodox Judaism, the Mormons, and the Unification Movement of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon are only a few that took root in American and European cities.

Globally networked

The fifth characteristic of the 21st century megacity is its integration into a global network of cities. Shanghai and Rio de Janeiro have more in common with New York City and Lagos than they do with their respective nation-states.

Mumbai's 21 million official residents are part of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) that extends from Delhi to Mumbai and contains a population of 173 million. The Portuguese founded the city in 1534 and the British incorporated it into their global trading network in 1661. In 2008, the Indian government made Mumbai the gateway of its centerpiece of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor.



The official video for India's Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) megaproject

Over 30 million Indians live outside India with large populations in the cities of Britain, South Africa, North America, and the Persian Gulf. This Indian diaspora facilitates trade between Mumbai and the other megacities of the world that has proven successful and lucrative. Often the global economic objectives of Mumbai enter into direct conflict with the national political goals of New Delhi. The national government fears the growing power and affluence of Mumbai will result in increasing demands for more autonomy from New Delhi.

The goals of national governments are often at odds with those of the megacities, a state of affairs well-illustrated by the political chasm between the megacity corridors along the American East and West Coasts and other large American cities, which are solidly Democrat, while the vast hinterland between the coasts is the stronghold of Republicans. The "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan targeted Rust Belt steel mills, West Virginia coal mines, Detroit auto manufacturers, and North Carolina furniture makers. The megacities forge forward in the areas of aeronautics, robotics, AI, communications, and education.

Conclusion

Megacities will shape the 21st century. Over half of humanity now lives in urban environments and by 2050 that number will reach almost 70%. The demographic flux, quest for political autonomy, economic vibrancy, religious ferment, and globalization of these megacities will profoundly impact the religions, cultures, economics, identities, and politics of the future. Humanity will not be shaped by the races, cultures, empires, or nations of the past, but by the megacity. Get ready for an exciting century.

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Photo at top: *The Shanghai night skyline, taken in December 2014 (source: Flickr).*