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“ARE CITIES FINISHED?”

(Project Syndicate – February 19, 2021)



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Far from rendering cities obsolete, as some predicted early on, the pandemic has unlocked an ever-broader potential for renaissance – what the economist Joseph Schumpeter famously called “creative destruction” on an urban scale. The potential rewards are enormous, but there are also considerable risks.

PARIS – Rue de Rivoli, a boulevard running through the heart of Paris, has been developed in fits and starts. Napoleon Bonaparte initiated construction in 1802, after years of planning and debate, but work stalled following the emperor’s abdication in 1814. The boulevard remained in limbo until another military strongman, Napoleon III, completed the project in the 1850s. The next century, construction began again – this time, to accommodate cars. But this past spring, Rue de Rivoli experienced its fastest transformation yet.

With Paris traffic subdued by a COVID-19 lockdown, Mayor Anne Hidalgo decided on April 30 to close the nearly two-mile-long road to cars, in order to create more space for pedestrians and bicyclists. Workers repainted the road and transformed a major artery in central Paris – home of the world-renowned Louvre museum – virtually overnight.

It was not just Rue de Rivoli. Using only paint and screw-in markers, nearly 100 miles of Parisian roads were temporarily reallocated to cyclists in the early months of the pandemic – a revolution in urban reprogramming. It was later announced that the changes would become permanent.

The Parisian example highlights the extent to which the pandemic has accelerated the pace of urban innovation, compressing what would have taken years into months or even weeks. Beyond highlighting the flaws in pre-pandemic urban systems – such as high levels of pollution – it has allowed city leaders to bypass cumbersome bureaucracy, and respond much more efficiently to the needs of people and businesses.

Those needs are changing fast. One of the most discussed changes relates to the separation of home and work. In the early days of urbanization, people walked to work. Later, they began to take public transport. It was only after World War II and the rise of suburbanization that people began to drive cars from their homes to giant factory complexes and office towers.

During the pandemic, remote work has become the rule in many industries – and many companies plan to keep it that way, at least to a large extent. This re-integration of work and home threatens one of the last remaining vestiges of the Industrial Age: central business districts that pack and stack office workers in skyscrapers.

With many workers unlikely to return to their cubicles, old office towers may be transformed into much-needed affordable housing after the pandemic. One-dimensional business districts could become vibrant neighborhoods.

Non-work activities have been transformed as well. Dining, entertainment, and fitness have increasingly been moving into the open air, occupying space that used to be designated for cars. So, as with the bike lanes in Paris, the pandemic is creating prototypes for a permanently post-automobile, human-centric city. In fact, the changes in Paris are part of a broader plan to create a “15-minute city” (ville du quart d’heure), where core daily activities – including working, learning, and shopping – can be carried out just a short walk or bike ride from home.

So, far from rendering cities obsolete, as some predicted early on, the pandemic has unlocked an ever-broader potential for renaissance – what the economist Joseph Schumpeter famously called “creative destruction” on an urban scale. The crisis left governments with little choice but to adopt a fast-paced, trial-and-error approach. The extraordinary innovations in pedestrianization, affordable housing, and dynamic zoning that have emerged highlight the power of positive feedback loops.

Nonetheless, a Schumpeterian approach is fundamentally experimental, and even the best-designed experiments sometimes fail. Moreover, the costs of those failures are not borne equally: those with the least influence tend to suffer the most. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has disproportionately affected the poor and vulnerable.

In this new age of urban innovation, leaders must take great care to minimize the risks to – and redistribute the returns toward – disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. That means, first and foremost, listening to them. The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States is a powerful example of a disadvantaged group demanding to be heard. Leaders everywhere should pay attention and address racial and class divides head on. Urban design is central to any such strategy.

To support this process – and help maintain flexibility and speed in urban innovation after the pandemic – leaders should consider creating participatory digital platforms to enable residents to communicate their needs. This could encourage policies that improve quality of life in cities – especially disadvantaged neighborhoods – including by limiting problematic trends like rising pollution and gentrification. Only with an agile and inclusive approach can we seize this once-in-a-century opportunity – or, rather, meet our urgent obligation – to “build back better.”

A stroll along Rue de Rivoli today reveals none of the desolation and dullness we have come to expect on city streets during the pandemic. Instead, the storied boulevard is bustling with masked Parisians, zooming along on bikes, scooters, e-bikes, and rollerblades, or pausing for coffee at cafes and restaurants. A street deadened by the pandemic has been revived. With thoughtful planning, bold experimentation, and luck, such transformations can be just the start for cities everywhere.

“BIDEN’S GOOD START ON CHINA”

(Project Syndicate – February 18, 2021)



Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong and a former EU commissioner for external affairs, is Chancellor of the University of Oxford.

With US President Joe Biden restoring American support for multilateralism and international partnerships, the world’s democracies should be better placed to halt the Chinese government’s bullying. But China should be welcomed when it is prepared to be constructive on issues like climate change and antimicrobial resistance.

LONDON – US President Joe Biden’s new administration has begun to show its hand regarding its policy toward China. So far, three encouraging developments stand out, suggesting that the United States will regard the huge, Leninist surveillance state not just as a competitor, but as a determined threat to all free societies.

For starters, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said that the Chinese communist regime is committing genocide against Muslim Uighurs in the northwestern province of Xinjiang. Moreover, Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has highlighted China’s failure to cooperate fully with the World Health Organization mission investigating the origins of the coronavirus in Wuhan and perhaps elsewhere in the country. If the Communist Party of China (CPC) has nothing to hide, why has it once again refused to be open about the source of the pandemic?

Lastly, and most important, Biden himself has made clear his determination to work with partners to confront global problems. The CPC certainly falls into that category.

Despite former US President Donald Trump’s chest-thumping mercantilism, Chinese President Xi Jinping would rather be facing a re-elected Trump than a Biden-led US. The reason is simple: the last thing China wants is for liberal democracies to come together to constrain its appalling behavior.

Instead, China wants to pick off its critics one at a time. That is what it tried to do with Australia when Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government called for an independent inquiry into the origins of the pandemic. With Biden restoring American support for multilateralism and international partnerships, the world’s democracies should be better placed to halt the Chinese government’s loutish bullying.

China will label any such coalition of liberal democracies an attempt to launch a new cold war. It is nothing of the sort. China has been the aggressor, and democracies should seek to restrict its damaging and dangerous behavior. We must underline the fact that the Chinese regime not only opposes the values that underpin free societies, but is also totally untrustworthy, breaking its word whenever doing so suits Xi.

June's G7 summit would be a good forum to start building the partnership a better international order requires. The United Kingdom will chair the meeting, and should seek to show that it can still play a valuable international role even after its damaging decision to leave the European Union.

The G7 countries – the US, the UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan – have invited India, Australia, and South Korea to join this meeting, and I hope they will attend subsequent meetings as well. After all, democracies share an interest in protecting themselves and other countries from the CPC's thuggish threats and breaches of international rules.

This new G10 partnership should discuss digital cooperation and collaboration in high-tech industries with a view to avoiding excessive dependence on Chinese exports. And governments could share information on how best to confront Chinese espionage, intellectual-property theft, and efforts to use research collaboration to steal knowledge useful to China's military and its surveillance state.

A new G10, with other countries as well, should work together more closely within United Nations agencies like the WHO, as well as in bodies dealing with human rights and development policy. We must point out collectively when China assaults freedom, as it has done so blatantly in Hong Kong, or human life itself, as in Xinjiang.

Likewise, we should quietly make it plain to Xi that we will not stand aside if China steps up its bullying of Taiwan. While challenging the "one China" policy today would not be wise, we should welcome more contacts with Taiwan and press to allow the island to take its place as an observer in the WHO assembly. Taiwan is a vibrant democracy with an excellent public-health record. Given the large financial contributions that democracies make to the WHO, and Taiwan's successful early detection of the pandemic in China, it deserves to be treated decently by the organization.

Those G10 countries that are members of NATO would also be wise to encourage the alliance, led by its secretary general, to develop policy responses to China's increasingly threatening behavior in the Indo-Pacific region.

Finally, although liberal democracies will not always have the same trade and investment priorities, they do have a joint interest in the World Trade Organization working effectively to ensure adherence to its agreed and justiciable rules. The Biden administration could make a good start here by unblocking the appointment of new judges to the WTO's appellate body, which adjudicates trade disputes among member countries.

One hopes that EU member states will respond to proposals like these by showing some recognition of the threat that China poses to us all. The recently signed EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment will bring few benefits to European economies. Moreover, some EU members are deluded in thinking that the deal will improve labor standards in China and end forced labor there as well.

Unfortunately, European leaders in general, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in particular, are entrusting the development of a serious global role for Europe to the sales departments of Volkswagen and other large German carmakers. I fear that, as a result, the EU is making serious geostrategic blunders in relation to both China and Russia. Surely the Union retains some inkling of what its values are supposed to be.

Biden wants serious and committed partners not only to constrain the CPC's bad behavior but also to cooperate with China when it is prepared to be constructive on issues like climate change and antimicrobial resistance. Working together on such matters is of course in everyone's interest. For the world's democracies, so is knowing where cooperation must end.

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