REVIEW ESSAY

In Search of (Just) Climate Urbanism

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Barber, Benjamin R. 2017. *Cool Cities: Urban Sovereignty and the Fix for Global Warming*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-0-300-22420-7.

Günel, Gökçe. 2019. *Spaceship in the Desert: Energy, Climate Change, and Urban Design in Abu Dhabi*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 272 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0091-4.

It seems odd to sit down and write an essay considering the future of cities right now, after months locked inside my New York City apartment as a pandemic killed neighbors and continues to threaten friends and loved ones. My otherwise lively neighborhood turned quiet but for the rumble of trucks on the highway and the occasional siren, as if it's in mourning only to later erupt in a multi-week chorus of actual mourning over the continued loss of Black lives at the hands of the police. I can't help but wonder, is this the future of urban life? COVID-19 at the very least provides a glimpse of some potential responses to the national threats posed by climate change. Sammy Roth (2020), a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, has already made this point, highlighting the ways in which the disruptive responses to a global pandemic might not only help people better understand what's at stake with climate change but make them (and governments) more open to drastic measures. At the same time, the violent response by police to the Black Lives Matter protests in May and June 2020 provides a vivid imagery for what that authoritarianism looks like in one of the world's largest cities. My own experience, emerging from quarantine largely to join my neighbors in the streets, has shown the violence of the situation, as peaceful protestors have been met with pepper spray, tear gas, batons, and mass arrests (see Pereira and Hogan 2020).

In this essay, I explore two potential solutions to these urban futures put forward through the centrist municipalism of Benjamin Barber in *Cool Cities* and in the post-oil reality attempted in the United Arab Emirates and examined by Gökçe Günel in *Spaceship in the Desert*. On the surface, these two books appear to present the extremes of climate futures. Barber builds from his previous book, *If Mayors Ruled the World* (2014), for a decentralized approach based on urban governance. Günel, on the other hand, examines the role of a highly top-down and state-centered project in developing potential futures. However, as I will show, within the two books there is a clear desire for what might be termed "climate urbanism." Between and beyond their foci exists a spectrum of opportunity, new ways of acting and being in the world's major cities that attempts to both prevent (or at least mitigate) catastrophe while at the same time opening new

possibilities for urban life. These new ways of relating in times of political, economic, social, and environmental crises are being played out in cities and towns (large and small) that are easily missed with a focus primarily on existing political organization.

Barber's focus on cities is not new. Large portions of *Cool Cities* are simply restatements of arguments made in *If Mayors Ruled the World* but with an updated focus on both the unique conditions that emerged as a result of the Trump presidency and a specific attention to the potential role of mayoral governance in responding to climate change. Central to Barber's argument is the idea that "national states and their fractious political parties are undermined in their democratic aspirations not only by parochialism but by money, media, and manipulation. They boast that they represent the citizenry, but many citizens regard them as bogus" (10). In this case, it doesn't necessarily matter that the United States has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement against the interests of its citizens because, as the key polluters, the world's urban areas have the ability to affect environmental change in a way the Paris Agreement could not. If these cities were to act autonomously of their respective states, they could act as "surrogate sovereigns" and more accurately represent most of the world's population and the economies that they produce (19).

Key to this argument is the political resistance of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio to the demands of the Trump administration and the growing number of cities who elect officials that ostensibly represent something other than the desires of the countries in which they reside. Sadiq Khan (London), Ahmed Aboutaleb (Rotterdam), and others are all held up by Barber as being indicative not only of this but also of the idea that if these city leaders were to formally collaborate—"associated in networks that stretch across the borders of nations whose traditional sovereignty is in default" (28)—a variety of social issues could be solved. The limits of the Paris Agreement, which Barber rightfully characterizes as toothless and otherwise largely ineffective, matter less because a more meaningful agreement could be made between cities. The argument is, at times, compelling. Drawing on the popular involvement in bottom-up movements such as the People's Climate March and the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, Barber shows how it's already possible to bring about change in ways that sidestep the political norms of a nation-state-based democracy. However, Barber creates and then falls into what Mark Purcell calls the "local trap" in which urban autonomy is conflated with "greater democracy or justice" (2006: 1931).

Ultimately, however, Barber's ideas fall short on a variety of fields. First, there are statements made throughout the book that ignore both ecology and history, and it's not clear whether this is willful to justify the argument or based on a lack of engagement with those from other disciplines. For example, in the chapter on the Anthropocene, Barber characterizes it not as a period of large-scale human impacts on the planet brought about by colonialism and the rise of global industrialization (Ruddiman 2013) but instead as a movement from "stasis and continuity to change and disruption" in which "humans have altered the natural order in favor of triumphant artifice" (44). Barber suggests, with little evidence, that technology can solve this issue and bring the planet back within its "natural boundaries." It's unclear what is meant by previous stasis and continuity, what is considered natural or artificial, and how technology could resolve these issues. Barber also ignores a key part of the resilience literature that suggests that new and other systems of organization emerge, thrive, and fail in anthropogenic disturbances, including systems that might better suit life regardless of what environment the future holds (Wakefield 2020).

Similarly, Barber argues that nation-states emerged from an era of political liberalism that no longer exists and thus that their power to enact change is at the very least different from what it used to be but that national sovereignty remains important because "we do not have citizens

without borders or democracy without borders” (65). This focus on citizenship and democracy reflects a larger and much more troubling paradigm at play in the work, one that Barber not only refuses to challenge but seems to defend: colonialism. Borders, citizenship, and the nation-state emerged not from nowhere or from a natural progression of history but, like climate change and the Anthropocene itself, from the violent colonization, enslavement, and genocide of most of the world’s population (e.g., Baldoz and Ayala 2013). That focus also makes the general lack of discussion of postcolonial cities make sense in a way: Barber doesn’t acknowledge or engage with colonialism and its global economic and environmental impacts. This is not particularly surprising, given Barber’s dismissal of even the most tepid political ecological approaches to climate change and climate justice movements in favor of an ill-defined green capitalism.

Sitting in stark contrast to Barber’s heavy-handed polemic is Günel’s carefully considered *Spaceship in the Desert*. If, as Barber argues, there is hope in a technological fix to climate change, then Günel provides an ethnographic account of one such fix: the post-oil experiment of Masdar City in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. The city, approximately 11 miles outside the city of Abu Dhabi, is a project of the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology, a renewable energy and clean technology company founded in 2006 and funded by Mubadala, the emirate’s investment firm. Masdar City is not a perfect case example, however, and Barber would likely object on multiple grounds. It is, to start, a fully planned city designed by a single architectural firm to run entirely on renewable energy based on a future in which oil markets no longer support extraction, rather than an organic city democratically designed and constituting manifold economic possibility. Its governance structure falls entirely outside the vision of liberal democracy that Barber takes for granted, with both the design and governance being top-down rather than “bottom-up.”

It does, however, represent an approach to climate change that, according to Günel, attempts to operate independently from “ethical, moral, and political entailments,” a sidestep that Barber might consider important depending on the definition of “political” (11). Likewise, the approach rejects “environmentalism” in favor of a preservation of the political, economic, and social status quo “in a time of ecological destruction,” which is in line with Barber’s defense of both borders and capitalism (13). This attempt at a technological fix outside a consideration for ethical, moral, and political decision-making (i.e., purely technical) could overcome some of the limits to Barber’s approach. It is market-oriented, somewhat capitalist in nature (even if initial funding was provided for by the state), and represents the kind of green cities Barber imagines.

Günel organizes the book around the parts of the city, focusing on green buildings, renewable energy and clean technology, exchange, transportation, and—significantly—global governance structures. As with the best ethnographic works, Günel highlights the complexity of those with whom he is living and working. While it may be easy to dismiss or criticize their desires for a city that can maintain the status quo, he is careful to situate individual ideas within a broader personal history that gives them a clear logic, even if it’s a questionable one at times. Despite this, I found myself wanting to better understand the thoughts of others in Abu Dhabi who were not necessarily directly affiliated with Masdar. Space in the text dedicated to outlining the CVs of various researchers could have been better used considering the role of the green city among the broader populous, especially situating it within the broader issues at the intersection of infrastructure development, human rights, and migrant labor issues in the UAE (Kendall 2012). This is something Günel clearly considered and highlights at various points, but only somewhat sparingly throughout the text. This is in part because the focus was on the inside of the project and its competing visions for the future rather than on the project within a broader world of social relations. However, it’s difficult to read the book and not help but wonder about the context in which this is occurring, particularly following Barber.

What's left unclear is how certain international connections are made. There's an extreme focus on connections between various international universities and Masdar, but not on how, for example, a London architecture firm—perhaps most famous for designing the Gherkin—came to design an entire city in the middle of the Abu Dhabi desert or why Italian firms were brought in to consult on transportation in a country that has experienced massive transportation infrastructure development over the past two decades (see discussion in Al Nahyan et al. 2012). There is also, in general, a lack of political and economic analysis of these kinds of decisions, which could be useful in highlighting already existing international connections Barber and others discuss while at the same time exposing broader faults in an increasingly privatized global urban planning and design regime. As a result, the text at times feels like an ad for the city and the Masdar Institute rather than an ethnographic text. That these issues arise in what is otherwise an important and well-thought-out ethnographic work highlights the difficulties in assessing what the *actual* material impacts of green capitalism are, much less the *potential* impacts they might have if broadened to the global scale, capitalocentric vision of someone like Barber. As Günel states, "In the imagined future of [technical] adjustments, Abu Dhabi remained a liberal space for Western white businessmen and a space of exclusion for South Asian workers" (143).

The ideas about the future of cities presented in these two books exist on a spectrum. But the spectrum they represent is one limited to a focus on technological fixes to climate problems that, in different ways and for different reasons, seek to maintain the status quo in some way. It's one in which solutions that address growing inequalities and an apparent growing authoritarianism cannot be addressed. For Barber, the idea of a world without borders or capitalism is not only unnecessary but appears to be counter to his vision of climate solutions emerging from a global network of mayors. This is in line with the emirate position expressed in Masdar City, in which sociocultural and economic divisions matter less than ensuring the technology to survive exists for those privileged enough to use it. As such, despite their differences in form and intent, these books should be required reading for those seeking more just worlds in the face of ecological destruction. Understanding the pervasiveness, power, and language at play behind these forms of adaptation feels increasingly necessary for finding and building a just climate urbanism.

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