The Rebirth of the City-State

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If history decides that the twenty-first century began in 1997, it will be because Hong Kong's transition from British colony back to Chinese city will have marked, more strongly than any other single event, the end of the age of the nation-state and the refocusing of human affairs around an almost forgotten but in fact irrepressible alternative: *the city-state.*

In the era of the nation-state, we came to take for granted those maps of the world where every bit of land was assigned a color corresponding to the nation claiming sovereignty over it. So, with Hong Kong, it was assumed that the new maps produced in 1997 would simply change the city's coloration from, say, the green of the Commonwealth to the orange of the People's Republic. But in fact, long before 1997, Hong Kong had itself irretrievably redrawn the real, living map of its part of the world. It had done so simply by succeeding as a city. Its remarkable economic success had, like a powerful magnet, etched its lines of force into the surrounding countryside, as if oblivious to the fact that many of those surroundings were still part of the People's Republic.

By 1990, Beijing had already granted to Guangzhou Province the right to operate as a "special economic zone," enabling this region to carry capitalism much further forward than any other part of the People's Republic. What this amounted to was simply a recognition by the Beijing government that it would be to everyone's advantage to allow Hong Kong to exercise its natural economic influence within its own region.

Once that influence had been acknowledged, there was little chance of a reversal. China's need for foreign currency would not be diminishing after 1997, and long before then it had become clear that Hong Kong could generate far more of that currency if its natural economic relationship to its surrounding region were given the freest possible rein. Reduced to its simplest terms, what all this meant was that the historical logic of the city-state had become more compelling than the logic of the nation-state. To understand the historical significance of 1997, then, we need to consider in more general terms the postmodern rebirth of the city-state.

After decades of observing cities more closely than any other American journalist of his generation, Neal Peirce finally concluded that as the economy had become more global, nations had steadily lost their economic relevance. "Nation-states," Peirce (1993, 1) wrote, "excel at war; they are proving increasingly limited and sometimes shockingly incompetent in the arena of economics." But the very globalization of the economy that had weakened nationhood from without was at the same time strengthening another, internal challenge to nationhood. The new configuration of the global economy, Peirce (1993, x) wrote,

> drives one to visualize our great cities, their suburbs, exurbs, and geographic realms of influence as *citi-states*—entities that perform as critical actors, more on their own in the world economy than anyone would have dreamed since the birth of the nation-state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Five years before Berlin tore down the wall that had sundered its cityhood, Jane Jacobs (1984) had prophetically sounded the two themes that Peirce now made the basis of his city-state argument. Like Peirce, Jacobs had seen that the essence of nationhood had always had more to do with war and defense than with the creative, productive, entrepreneurial work of economics. Convinced that city regions alone produced prosperity, while nations pursued a very different mission, Jacobs foresaw that the outcome of the struggle between the Soviet and the American empires would center upon their mutual effort to spend one another (mainly through the arms race) into oblivion or submission.

Having apparently won the Cold War, Americans may be tempted to say that the Soviet Union's capitulation reflects its economic decline and our ascendancy. But that viewpoint requires us to ignore the overwhelming national debt we incurred in the course of the war, both the domestic debt of government borrowing and the international debt brought about by years of radical imbalance between imports and exports. Our huge backlog of social and environmental problems is one more form of indebtedness incurred in our single-minded pursuit of national ascendancy. Now, with the war behind us, our inclination is to attempt to address these issues with new national policies and programs. But if Peirce and Jacobs are right, the nation is likely to prove as clumsy, inefficient, and ineffective in this arena as it ever has.

Why might cities, or "city-states," prove to be more capable than nations of generating prosperity or of deploying that prosperity to address social and environmental problems? The answer is necessarily complex, but behind any extended argument for the economic or social efficacy of the city lies the simple fact that a city is, by nature, *organic* and that it bears to its surrounding region a natural, organic relationship that is the very essence of a successful economy.

Unless we understand the compelling power of these natural organisms, we will be repeatedly astounded by their ability to wear down and render irrelevant national and other artificial boundaries—and we will therefore fail to appreciate or to assist constructively the transition from the age of the nation-state to the new global age of the city-state. With or without our conscious assistance, city economies will continue relentlessly to remake the world.

To speak of *an* economy implies that there must be more than one; no day passes, for example, without some Montana official speaking about "the Montana economy." But who can believe that something as vital and fluid as "an economy" could be meaningfully defined by a set of straight lines drawn arbitrarily across the landscape, crossing the Continental Divide, encompassing on one side of that divide millions of acres of arid grassland and on the other millions of acres of timber and mountain valleys?

The economic activity generated by such landscapes cannot possibly be improved by imposing upon it artificial boundaries like those of state lines or artificial names like "the Montana economy." But the economic activity generated by such landscapes might indeed be intensified and turned to greater good by attending closely to how such landscapes and such economic activity, between them, define in their own terms something that can meaningfully be called "economics." In every case, such real economies turn out to be nothing other than the organic relationship of cities and towns to their surroundings.

Describing those relationships is impossible without invoking the image of a nucleus within a larger structure. Sometimes the larger structure looks like a living

cell, sometimes an atom, but from either perspective, the city functions as a nucleus for an organized set of entities and activities surrounding it. Like a cell or an atom, a city region is a distinct, meaningful, indeed indispensable, structure of wholeness. And like a cell or an atom, the city region depends for its own coherence upon its nucleus, without which it can neither exist nor function.

I enjoy flying into Missoula, or any other city, because of the opportunity to observe the steadily intensifying level of activity that appears as the plane nears the city. From scattered farmsteads and villages, the network of highways, rail lines, and power lines begins to converge as the density of dwellings and other buildings steadily increases. Finally, if the city is a large one, the skyline of the central business district will appear, proclaiming dramatically that here activity is so intensified and concentrated that it cannot be contained at ground level, but has been pushed into the sky itself.

Nothing is so fundamental to a city as this concentration of humans and human activity within a small compass. Here the image of the nucleus becomes more than a metaphor. We see how the city, by concentrating in one spot a certain critical mass of human energy and activity, creates in a very nearly physical sense a gravitational field whose lines of force both expand the vitality of the center and at the same time reach into and organize the surrounding countryside. It is precisely the synergy created by this concentration of human activity that makes the city the fundamental engine of all economic growth and change.

I've become intensely interested in how this phenomenon affects Missoula and its economy, but I first became aware of it by observing its operation in a much smaller community. If you take Interstate 90 fifty miles upriver from Missoula, you will come to the little town of Drummond, where Flint Creek, descending from the snow-capped Pintlar Range, flows into the Clark Fork River. "Welcome to Drummond, the Bullshippers' Capital of the World," the sign at the edge of town says, and what it means is this: Here, by some combinations of topography and climate, chance and entrepreneurship, most of the surrounding ranchers have become specialists in raising not just cattle but bulls. They invest in sturdier fences and more expensive feed grains than the cow-calf operations of other ranching locales and make the investment pay—enough ranches supply the Drummond sales ring with enough high quality bulls to attract ranchers from Wyoming to Saskatchewan to look for good breeding bulls in Drummond. That is synergy, and this is a prosperous little economy, inconceivable without the ranches of the Clark Fork and Flint Creek Valleys, and inconceivable without Drummond at the hub.

Drummond, in turn, is part of a larger economy for which Missoula serves as the hub. In fact, one of Missoula's nicknames, "Hub of the Five Valleys," captures the topographical and ecological essence of Missoula's economy. Reaching fifty to 100 miles in all directions, up the Clark Fork, Bitterroot, Blackfoot, and Flathead river basins, Missoula's economic region is almost entirely defined by the lay of the land surrounding it and what that land produces. What it produces most visibly is trees, and for an entire century Missoula's economy centered on trees, on the cutting and sawing of trees into lumber, and the synergy that all that cutting and sawing naturally produced. But in the midst of all the sawmills, plywood plants, and a pulp mill spread throughout the five valleys, the University of Montana, and especially its Forestry School, gave that cooperation a special, knowledge-seeking spin, and this helped attract the headquarters of Region One of the Forest Service to Missoula.

If there was synergy among sawmills, scholars, and bureaucrats, it was not always a pleasant or peaceful one. In the 1960s, Arnold Bolle, dean of the School of Forestry, wrote a scathing report accusing the Forest Service of denuding the Northern Rockies by encouraging clearcutting to feed the endless appetites of the mills. A Wilderness Institute sprang up at the Forestry School, and an outstanding interdisciplinary Environmental Studies Program at the University, and gradually a new kind of synergy began to be noticeable in and around Missoula.

More and more organizations and activities devoted to wildlife and wildland preservation took root here. By the early 1990s, when the Boone and Crockett Club, the exclusive trophy-hunting organization founded by Teddy Roosevelt, decided to relocate its headquarters from the East Coast to the Rocky Mountains, we could argue that Missoula was the ideal place for the club to practice its newly defined mission of habitat protection; we were surrounded by that habitat and bustling with organizations devoted to its conservation.

When some of the other cities vying for Boone and Crockett's nod argued that Missoula, with more than its share of environmental activists, might be too much of a hotbed for what was still, after all, a hunting organization, the club's officers responded, in effect, "Yes, we are a hunting organization, but that now means that we have to be a conservation organization. Conservation is challenging work; no one has all the answers about how best to do it, and we think sound and sustainable answers are more likely to come from vigorous debates among committed practitioners than from isolated efforts of people or organizations who think they already know the answers." And with that, the club called the mayor's office to say that it had decided to move its headquarters to Missoula.

The episode enabled us to understand something of how the city functions as an organic economy and how that economy necessarily depends upon and shapes the equally organic relationship between Missoula and its surroundings. The word *business* has taken on such a specialized meaning in our profit-oriented society that we have almost wholly forgotten its original meaning.

But as soon as we recall that business simply means *busy-ness*, we at once bring into sharper focus the crucial role of cities in economic activity. Busy-ness is almost by definition a function of concentration and is likely to call to mind a beehive or an anthill—those quintessential social settings where the concentration of individuals induces a constantly creative and restorative activity. The synergy produced by such concentrated busy-ness is of the very essence of cities, but it is also the heart and heartbeat of economics.

In fact, if we move up the organic scale from the cell to a complex organism, the image of the city as nucleus might shift to that of a city as the regional economy's heart, as it continually draws goods, capital, information, and people into itself by those highways, rails, and transmission lines we see converging on it as we fly in—drawing them in, mingling, enriching them by all the forms of its busy-ness, and then pumping them out again in a never-ending interchange between city and countryside, which, the more closely we attend to it, the more we recognize it as something that might in fact be called *an economy*.

For too much of our history, the busyness of cities has been perceived as a threat to maintaining ecological integrity. But if city-states are reemerging as primary forms of human organization when environmental awareness is assuming global dimensions, it may be because we are just now gaining an understanding that human

inhabitation must become more organic if it is to conform to organic ecosystems. The adaptation of life forms to one another and to the limitations and possibilities of their surroundings is what evolution has always been about, and it is precisely such evolution and adaptation that drives the reemergence of the city-state.

Often the city's evolution is easiest to discern in its relation and response to the evolution of its key economic components. The Boone and Crockett Club, for example, never would have come to Missoula had its own mission not been changing from a focus on killing animals to protecting their habitat. The same evolution has been evident in the Forest Service, a major Missoula employer that has faced the deficit-driven retrenchment of federal bureaucracy precisely when it has had to understand how to manage the severely overcut northern forests in a new way. As sawmills all around Missoula have closed in response to the shrinking supply of federal timber, the Forest Service and the City of Missoula have found themselves walking a common path but calling it different names.

Ecosystem management has become the new mission of the Forest Service, sparking an internal debate about whether the agency should just be managing trees and animals or whether it needed to factor human communities into its work. Without exactly being asked, I found myself siding with those in the agency who argued that if the small, timber-dependent communities did not evolve sustainable economies, they would, out of desperation, put so much pressure on the forests that the ecosystems would not be sustained either.

My stake in the argument had to do with Missoula's own sustainability. As many of the smaller towns around Missoula lost their economic base as their sawmills closed, and as Missoula drew more and more of their retail, medical, and other economic activity into the city, I and other Missoulians began to worry about the long-term sustainability of that kind of parasitic growth. We had become convinced that our city's long-term prosperity depended on the prosperity of the smaller communities throughout the Five Valleys.

In fact, what we were experiencing here in Missoula was our local equivalent of the Hong Kong story. In two entirely different settings, national governments were being brought to acknowledge that their own capacity to generate and sustain prosperity had waned, if it had every really existed, and that the organic relationship of a city to its surrounding region had to be enlisted as a central player in that work. The magnitude of this shift in perspective can hardly be exaggerated.

Nowhere in this country and almost nowhere in the world have we recognized the natural, self-defining boundaries of city-regions. Our political language blinds us to the natural relationships between cities and their surroundings. By referring time and again to imaginary places called, in our political discourse, "rural America," "urban America," and "suburban America," we create an image and a practice of separate urban, rural, and suburban nations, and we all but eliminate the possibility of acting on a sound understanding of how city-center, suburbs, and rural surroundings might together operate as an effective engine of economic prosperity.

A trip to Washington, DC, near the end of my first term as mayor left me sadly wiser on this score. I was one of a dozen panelists from what the invitation called "Rural America" invited to brief the Secretary of Agriculture on the resources available to rural areas and the best means of mobilizing those resources. As the event unfolded, I found myself deeply impressed by the wisdom and passion of my fellow panelists from "Rural America." They urged the Clinton

administration to leverage scarce federal resources by using face-to-face local collaboration to tap local know-how.

But I could not shake off the perception that we were in part being asked to help the Agriculture Department find reasons to continue to have national rural programs at all. After all, if the real resources are regional or local, why strain so hard to find some networking, or clearinghouse, or leadership-training role for the national government? "Because we have to do something," the very walls of the auditorium seemed to whisper, "or else why would we need to be here?"

As I listened to my colleagues, it occurred to me that there might be a vastly more effective mechanism for accomplishing all the laudable human resource-mobilizing objectives the panelists were proposing. Throughout history, the role of cities had been precisely to focus, organize, and multiply the resources of the surrounding regions to which they are organically connected. In the era of the nation-state, we had not only lost sight of this essential role of cities, but what is worse, federal policy had misled both cities and their rural surroundings into believing that they could prosper independently of one another.

So it was that I argued to Secretary Espy that the best long-term favor he could do for "Rural America" would be to admit that there is no such place, nor any such thing as "the rural economy," just as there is no such place as "Urban America" nor such a thing as "the urban economy." But there are real places like Louisville and the region surrounding it, or real economies like that of Missoula—not the city itself of roughly 60,000 urbanites, but the city and its two dozen or so surrounding small towns whose long-term prosperity depends on our figuring out how to make the region operate as the natural economy it is capable of being.

If this were true, then one of the best ways for the Agriculture Department to help its rural constituents would be to insist on a rigorous review of the long list of federal policies that have exploded the natural integrity of city-regions, deluding city centers, suburbs, and rural surroundings into ignoring their mutual dependency.

David Rusk, the former mayor of Albuquerque and author of *Cities without Suburbs*, refers to "four decades of misguided policies that have favored suburb[s] developed over inner cities, fragmenting urban areas by race and class" (1993, 4). No currently conceivable amount of federal largess to either city centers or rural areas could begin to compare in magnitude or effectiveness with the reinvestment that would naturally occur if the national government were to stop enabling the illusion of these places' independence from one another.

An outlander can never go to Washington without being moved by the palpable sense of history clinging to the place. As a farm boy who became a mayor, I'm always drawn to Jefferson and his elegant memorial, always reminded of his hatred of cities, of his impossible dream that the frontier would allow us forever to create farmers as fast as people piled up in cities. But it was Jefferson too who warned us against ever being caught in the dead doctrines of a bygone age—especially his own, who called for a revolution every now and then to keep alive the human meaning behind his timeless revolutionary invocation of "the course of human events." The nation created by Mr. Jefferson's document has so commanded our attention that we can barely conceive that the course of human events has finally brought us to the end of the age of the nation-state and to the renaissance of the city-state. We will not get on with the work of our own age until that realization strikes home.

Notes

[1] This article first appeared in the Autumn 1994 issue of *Orion* magazine.

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