

A REVIEW: “TRIUMPH OF THE CITY” BY EDWARD GLAESER

Book review of “TRIUMPH OF THE CITY” by Edward Glaeser (Penguin, New York; February, 2011)

“How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier” promises the subtitle of this book. Does it deliver on such high ambition?

Edward Glaeser gives us an insight into how an economist — with a self-confessed taste for the virtues of the free market — views the way in which cities might be some kind of “force for good”. Succinctly put, and writing as an engineer, this is my take on the essence of his argument.

First, in the tradition of an unfettered market, and given a level playing field for all participants in it, competition amongst city governments for people and firms is healthy.

Second, cities thrive on small firms, small-scale entrepreneurship and commerce, and skilled citizens.

Third, city governments should invest in people, not grand buildings and civic projects, for these do little for the vitality and prosperity of a city. What city governments can and should do are:

- (i) keep unit accommodation costs low; and
- (ii) facilitate the realization of such by loosening and cutting all manner of bureaucratic red tape, especially that relating to over-zealous preservation of the already built urban environment.

In addition, in the US, the federal government should not subsidize the inclination of individuals towards acquiring ever larger units of accommodation through tax relief on mortgage interest payments.

Fourth, if all of the above leads to erecting ever taller buildings in central city districts, so much the better for the success of the city, its communities, and the environment.

Fifth, “environment” as such is essentially understood in the single dimension of the carbon footprint of fuel consumption for personal transport by car and the heating and cooling of buildings.

In short, smart environmentalism is decidedly not rural and traditional, but urban and radical, including, in particular, interventions by city governments to charge users for access to the city’s road network (as in London).

In the end “our greatest triumph” makes us:

Smarter ... because face-to-face contact (together with body language) enables ideas for invention and innovation to transfer more faithfully and more swiftly within the city — notwithstanding the death of distance through today’s information and communication technologies;

Greener ... because we shall build taller and more compactly downtown;

Healthier ... because of the modern urban water infrastructure;

and **Happier** ... because being urban poor is better than being stultifyingly rural poor — and cities are at least springboards to middle-class success.

CFGNet is motivated by the challenge of re-engineering cities such that they may become net contributors to ecosystem services — forces for environmental good, as we express this, going beyond Glaeser’s rather narrow and limited

environmental ambition. Paul Romer argues for deploying cities as forces for social good, in the guise of his “charter cities” (www.chartercities.org). McKinsey and Co. have reported recently on the empirical evidence for what we always knew: that cities are indeed forces for the global economic good; and will continue to be so (“Urban World: Mapping the Economic Power of Cities”; www.mckinsey.com). Taken all together, on this triple-bottom-line account, we ought to be able to achieve sustainable cities.

It has been argued elsewhere¹ that pursuit of the “economic good” of their peoples became a core imperative of national governments in the 19th Century, likewise their “social good” in the 20th Century. Granted thus the pursuit of economic and social goods, it is high time national governments incorporated securing the environmental good as their third core imperative — and before this century is all played out.

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¹ Dryzek, J S, Hunold, C, Schlosberg, D, Downes, D, and Hernes, H-K (2002), “Environmental Transformation of the State: the USA, Norway, Germany and the UK”, *Political Studies*, **50**, pp 659-682.