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Cities: The Vital Core

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On a cold day in February, just a couple of weeks after George W. Bush began his second term, I sat down with a dozen men and women from across the country to talk about what government could do to clean up the environment, provide workers with a living wage and fight discrimination. This was not some gripe session to coincide with the opening of another dismal four years of federal policy-making; the people who had gathered at a conference center on the shore of Lake Michigan were mayors who have the power--and the desire--to create a progressive alternative to the constant claim that government cannot be a force for good. And, as the enthusiasm that characterized the February gathering to forge a "New Cities" coalition of progressive mayors illustrated, they are not going to let the conservative interregnum at the federal level prevent them from leading the way in the cities, which remain the engines of American economic and social advancement.

Unfortunately, most Americans, even most American progressives, do not always think of cities when they consider where the antidotes to the right-wing politics of the moment are being developed--let alone where the models for the next progressive era are taking shape. In most nations, cities are a big deal--the mayor of Mexico City is likely to be his country's next president. But in America, cities are the neglected stepchildren, exploited and abused when not simply ignored. Often they are portrayed as rank collections of pathology, modern Gomorrahs deserving destruction, and often enough they get it, with the aid of racist and destructive policies. American indifference to the death of our cities regularly astounds foreign visitors: After wandering the desolate streets of Detroit on a tour of America, French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy pondered the "mystery of these modern ruins" and wondered whether, instead of sharing Europe's love of cities, America finds the concept of such love "perhaps foreign to it."

It is time for progressives to reconsider and realign our views on cities--the most productive and most sustainable centers of our economy, the most vital and generous centers of our culture and, potentially, the most democratic and forward-looking of our many units of government. It is time to recognize that properly organized and empowered metropolitan governments--which link cities and suburbs in pursuit of goals that cannot be achieved separately--may hold the key to rebuilding an American economy of broadly shared prosperity. And it is time, above all, to understand that these perspectives are not unduly optimistic; indeed, they are the sentiments being expressed by the mayors and City Council members who have come to refer to themselves as "new urbanists," and who are beginning to coalesce in the burgeoning New Cities and Cities for Progress movements.

Cities matter to America, and they matter especially to progressives, for three basic reasons.

The first is that, notwithstanding population loss and disinvestment, most of our population and economy is still located in our urban centers. Even narrowly defined by their central city limits, cities account for about 25 percent of the total US population. Add their adjacent suburbs to mark out what you might call the "metro core," and you get a majority of the population. Add the suburbs connected to this core and each other--what the Census describes as "metropolitan statistical areas" (MSAs)--and you get upwards of

80 percent. And since metropolitan areas are on average richer and more productive than nonmetro ones, their share of the economy is even greater than their share of the population. The metro core contains more than half the population but about two-thirds of the national economy; the broader MSAs account for close to 90 percent of the economy. Worth emphasizing is that, within metropolitan areas, the economic interdependence of suburbs to one another and the central city is high. They share common infrastructure and largely common labor and product markets. About 80 percent of the economic value these regions produce is consumed within them. Our national economy is largely and simply their aggregate. If you want to do anything about the American national economy, particularly anything constructive, it follows that you must do it with cities.

The second reason is that cities contain the natural base of progressive politics. The metro core is where the black and brown and white working class live; where union members are most densely congregated; where the middle- and upper-class liberals are; where most of our lead education and research institutions are located; where most innovation, new commerce, art and pop entertainment starts; where the associated "creative class" and "cultural workers" generally reside; and where gays, single professional women and young people with brains and attitude don't feel like freaks. Their combined presence is felt in city culture. Cities are more cosmopolitan than the rest of the country, more committed to science and reason, more skeptical of business and military bullies, more interested in new things and much more diverse and tolerant. Years of federal and state budget cuts, the bias of education-funding formulas that favor the schools of newly developed suburbs over those of aging urban cores, poor planning, racial divisions and trade policies that have shuttered once booming factories and sent service industries offshore, have made it harder for cities to function. But, at a fundamental level, cities remain home to dynamic, liberal, solution-oriented populations who, when they come together, as they recently did behind the candidacy of Antonio Villaraigosa to elect him mayor of Los Angeles, can use democratic structures to chart a future that reflects their shared progressive values.

In the imperfect measure provided by major party voting, this is clear enough. Behind the famous red/blue map of Electoral College results, and the pundit hokum about that map's reflecting a great cultural divide, the actual electorate appears in varying shades of purple, with a moderate opinion structure not much different from that of a generation ago. But within this purple haze of our politics, a deep blue urban archipelago of voting does stand out. Stretching across the country, it marks the islands of city life. On those islands, as John Nichols's piece in this issue makes clear, the current generation of urban leaders is doing many new and good things--remarkable things, really--with an energy and practical intelligence and openness to experiment that should embarrass our national politicians. Far from being collections of pathology, cities are a prime source of new solutions to social problems. Indeed, well-run cities pretty much are the solution to most of those problems. Consider, for instance, the decisions of dozens of cities to abide by the Kyoto Protocol: While Washington fights the future, cities embrace it. When the mayors of the New Cities initiative gather in Chicago this month, they will not be debating whether global warming is real; they will be developing strategies to make their communities models of energy efficiency.

This brings us to the third and most important reason progressives should pay attention to cities. The sheer size and weight of metro regions make them a point of leverage in the national economy. Businesses today can make money in two broad ways: They can compete essentially on price alone to produce lowest-common-denominator commodity goods (the "low road"), or they can compete on innovation, performance and distinctiveness, for which customers are willing to pay a premium (the "high road"). The low road is associated with downward wages, rising inequality and insecurity, poisonous labor relations, environmental damage, rootless businesses and a shattered tax base for public goods--basically, what we've seen increasingly in America during the past thirty years. The high road, in contrast, is associated with higher wages, greater shared prosperity, respect for workers, environmental sustainability, more rooted businesses and stable communities, more capable and resourced public

authorities. To compete in the twenty-first century, America has to get on the high road. Unfortunately, the Bush Administration, with its rigid free-trade orthodoxy and refusal to invest in innovation, is not taking it, and neither are most of the states, which vie with one another in a desperate race-to-the-bottom competition for the few factories that are still being built on the American mainland.

Cities are well positioned to follow the high road. Think Seattle. Think Silicon Valley. Cities and regions can do a great deal to choose the route they take to the economic future. Those choices are made easier when the federal and state governments are supportive. But even on their own, or in cooperation with one another, cities can provide an infrastructure of education and training systems, research institutions, advanced physical infrastructure, systems to promote cross-firm learning, information systems to measure accurately the value of social and natural assets and the costs of their renewal, systems of social insurance (such as healthcare) to improve the efficiency of labor markets, and a bottom line "social wage" independent of particular employment.

These public goods and conventions don't move around. You build them somewhere, and they stay there. And when they are well developed, companies begin to depend on them. These relationships give communities--and interest groups within them, such as trade unions--greater bargaining power. The synergy that is created when cities develop their social infrastructure does not just help create and keep jobs. By massively reducing waste in the economy, it can also massively reduce private consumption costs and increase real disposable incomes. Almost 60 percent of average household income is now spent on housing, transportation, utility bills and healthcare; savings of 40-50 percent in all these areas could now be achieved through better organization, yielding a 25-30 percent permanent increase in workers' disposable income. And through their effects, workers in high-road communities are made more secure, more truly equal in enjoying the gift that membership in those communities provides and more willing to do constructive things to preserve and improve these communities. High-road cities thus accept the efficiency of markets but supplement that efficiency with the productivity of democracy.

Are cities going to create their own single-payer healthcare systems? Not in the short term. But especially where state governments are cooperative, they can create structures that lower healthcare costs while expanding access. And they can do even more in other areas. It is, for instance, much easier and economical to develop mass transit where there are lots of potential riders. The cost of a street light or sewer connector is no greater on a crowded street than on a nearly empty one, but more people get the benefits and the costs are more broadly spread.

These are not utopian calculations. They work because American cities inherit vast assets from their past-built infrastructure, residential and commercial stock, diverse human capital--which are a lot cheaper to fix or improve than build anew. They already have the preponderance of our most advanced companies, and they are overrepresented in the more knowledge-intensive economy we need to expand in the future. They already have a much larger share of their workers in this "new economy" than other regions (about 60 percent, as compared with 46 percent in the suburbs, and a tiny and rapidly dwindling share in rural areas), which is a big reason why the downtowns of many cities, even in the current anemic recovery, are booming. Knowledge industries require information exchange, and cities facilitate that through density, the all-time promoter of chat.

This is where the new-urbanist mayors come into the equation. Particularly in booming college towns such as Palo Alto, Madison, Ann Arbor and Boulder, local officials have emerged as critical players in the sort of high-road economic development that is creating jobs without many of the challenges--pollution, heavy infrastructure demands--that once were associated with attracting and expanding industries.

But this is not just a college-town equation. Cities in general benefit from broad demographic and cultural trends: a growth in immigration, with cities and their inner suburbs the first destination of most new arrivals; a postboomer boom of empty-nesters who are attracted to low-maintenance condo life, shorter

commutes and more cultural amenities than suburbs offer; a growing population of elderly, eager to preserve their independence and seeking access to quality healthcare and personal services; an increase in the number of "nontraditional" lifestyles and living arrangements, attracting everyone from single professional women without children to those raising kids on their own, same-sex couples with children and without, and people just deferring marriage or too busy with careers to bother thinking about mating--most of whom find the diversity, tolerance and crowded anonymity of cities more welcoming than suburban or rural life. As a result, cities have begun to reverse past trends of population loss; in the past decade, cities as distinct as Atlanta, Chicago, Denver and Memphis have experienced population growth, often for the first time in decades.

Such signs of life make the prospects for building a brighter future seem more realistic than at any time in recent years. What stands in the way is, as ever, politics: a federal budget that essentially sends the message "Bush to Cities: Drop Dead"; state policies that promote sprawl; regional politics that pit natural allies--central cities and older suburbs--against each other. But a growing number of young and innovative officials are finding ways to reduce the frustrations by working together and by borrowing ideas from one another and from some of the brightest thinkers on the planet.

The mayors I have worked with in recent months display an optimism and enthusiasm I have not seen enough of among progressives in recent years. It's infectious. We cannot abandon our struggles at the federal and state levels. But we need to turn more of our attention to the hometown fights that are far more winnable than distant battles in Washington. We always say we're for grassroots politics. Well, the grassroots are growing in our cities.

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