



Review of *Cool Cities: Urban Sovereignty and the Fix for Global Warming*

Benjamin R. Barber. *Cool Cities: Urban Sovereignty and the Fix for Global Warming*. 2017. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 224 pages, ISBN 978-0-3002-2420-7 Cloth (\$26.00).

It is much harder to implement good ideas to slash heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions than it is to come up with them. For nearly 30 years now, urban boosters have sought in cities a solution to this conundrum. Most have made varieties of a simple argument: cities are where most people now live, they cause most of the carbon emissions, and unlike sclerotic nation states, cities are arenas for a more intimate and nimble and pragmatic form of democratic governance. In its strongest version, the argument that the late political theorist Benjamin Barber made in *Cool Cities: Urban Sovereignty and the Fix for Global Warming*, urban politics are *the* solution that will save democracy and the climate at once. To achieve this, Barber suggests, cities must insist on their own sovereign rights and work together through fledgling institutions like the Global Parliament of Mayors that Barber helped organize.

Cool Cities' argument is not convincing. Many political, economic, and technological developments have explicitly reshaped (and breathed hopeful life into) climate politics in the past several years. One would have to scroll a longtime down the list to reach Barber's favored one: a modest growth in cities issuing climate-oriented press releases and sharing best practices around policies like bike-share programs and painting rooftops white.

Moreover, the book contains no systematic analysis of how urban processes and carbon emissions interact. There are strong words about inter-city cooperation, when case by case the action is almost entirely in the relationship between the city, its region, and its national



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government. In a book devoted to the idea of grassroots citizen power, there is hardly a mention of the existing grassroots insurgencies that convulsed cities in the past several years, like the movements of the squares in Brazil, Egypt, France, Greece, Turkey, Spain, the United States and elsewhere—not to mention all across Latin America a political cycle earlier. Most of these urban movements foundered; nearly all have had *national* consequences as important as their urban ones.

And yet, Barber's argument that citizen action in cities could cool the planet still warrants close attention. It is not primarily in mayors' enthusiasm for networking and climate policies (important as these are). Rather, it is precisely the revolts of citizens – and let's add migrants, documented and undocumented, to this group – against authoritarianism and economic insecurity where one finds the seeds of a compelling urban climate agenda. To see how, one must take a careful stock of cities' carbon footprints. Two things stand out.

First, many of the ways in which cities could reduce emissions, like landfill methane capture installations or LED street-lamps, are low-hanging fruit that require a bit of political leadership, but are fundamentally the sort of policy that technocrats are good at, and will keep getting better at. The harder and more structural issue is the combination of land use, transit, housing, and buildings—in short, the urban form. Shifts to that form, especially densification paired with improved transit, could yield massive reductions in big cities' carbon emissions (Floater et al. 2014).

Second, when surveying different social organizations of density, one discovers that the neighborhoods that are lowest-carbon and attractive to live in are those that are anchored by affordable housing and traversed by public transit. It follows that urban movements from below for dense, well-connected, well-serviced communities with local employment are low-carbon protagonists, whether they say so or not—and increasingly, they are saying so (Cohen 2017; see also Davis 2010). These movements played huge roles in recent years' urban revolts and they very often speak of a “right to the city”—the one urban right that *Cool Cities* has no time for.

Of course, movements are limited in what they can achieve without allies in political office. While it is good that working class and community movements want to change cities in ways that would reduce emissions, the environmental upside of this agenda could be furthered by more deliberate efforts to harmonize social, economic, and climate agendas. This is now starting to happen. Take Align, in New York City, an organization that works on behalf of labor, housing, and community group constituencies; it has begun weaving those groups' demands into a broad climate justice framework, as it applies pressure on left-of-center mayor Bill de Blasio. Align has also released sharp research reports supplementing its framework, like a study showing that just 2% of New York buildings are responsible for half its electricity use (Trump Tower among them), or another that spotlights how much more brutal working class commutes are.

Barber does not engage with urban politics at this level of detail, or in terms of class conflict. But it is surely compatible with his vision to suggest that inter-city networking will be most promising when it reflects not just mayoral staffs trading PDFs and spreadsheets, but thicker webs of confrontational, effective social movement pressure and top-down policy response.

So yes, cities can be key to climate politics. I have argued, in the spirit of *Cool Cities*, that cities can be venues for vast improvements in the efficiency of energy consumption (and thus decarbonization), and for the construction of new multi-class alliances around low-carbon changes to the urban form. But, *pace* Barber, cities alone cannot translate those emissions reductions and that political momentum into a zero-carbon pathway. Rather, the crucial link is between these urban efforts and a whole other series of political projects—around energy landscapes, confrontational frontline movements keeping fossil fuel in the ground, national carbon pricing regimes, university research clusters, et cetera.

Now that scholars like Barber have so helpfully put cities on the climate map, we must work harder to specify the political economic, organizational, and physical terrain of urban spaces that are most promising for slashing emissions. And we must spotlight the relationships between those in-city efforts with all the other work that will be needed to transform the economy into one that supports long, rich lives for everyone.

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