City-State or Flagship city?

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Cities have intensified their roles in the world as independent actors. We could even say they are currently one of the main intermediaries between globalisation processes and individuals. Urban strategies to take part in transnational economic and cultural flows inevitably presuppose certain models of citizenship and participation. In the present context, it seems a given, furthermore, that cities take up competitive positions on a global market, almost as though they were products. The fundamental challenge they face is therefore to define the model they adopt to stake out their global position whilst connecting it to local citizen participation. In my opinion, there are essentially two models for cities of the future: the city-state and the flagship-city. Each of these models implies a particular community model, understood as the framework within which individuals define their identity and exercise their status as citizens.

Identity and citizenship

The origins of citizenship as we understand it can be traced back to classical Athens. Athens’ conception of a citizen was innovative in that it ceased to consider ethnic identity as being the basic criterion for belonging and substituted it with a political criterion: what marked an Athenian’s capacity as a member of the community was his ability to participate in the affairs of the polis. The political system was objectified to a large degree by the way territories were divided up; borders and cities were basic elements in the process. If we now take a leap forward in time, we will find that the status of belonging to a community was similarly objectified with the emergence of the modern state which took root in the Peace of Westphalia. Here, the foundations were laid for the idea of citizenship to be linked to the idea of the nation-state from the 18th century onwards. This evolved further during the democratising processes of the 19th and 20th centuries, with the gradual development of civil, political and social rights.

Besides a series of established rights and duties, citizenship constitutes a dimension of individuals' identity. We understand identity to be the conception individuals have of themselves and the way they express this, through discourse in relation to different ‘Others’. In this process, the wider community is the framework within which individuals socialise and shape their identities. And I feel that to a certain extent cities mediate the relationship between the community and the individual. The city is a vehicle linking the formal status of citizenship with its exercising in practice, insofar as it articulates the individual's pertaining to a community. Thus the identity of the individual as a citizen is not restricted to an institutionalised conception of a set of rights and duties; citizenship is also a set of shared values and practices.

The city has historically been a source of social, economic and cultural innovation and this role has been strengthened even further in recent years. Intensified globalisation, technological change and migratory movements have their effect on cities. This requires cities to be aware of how they mediate between the individual, the community and these global processes. What role should cities play in the playing out of identities in a
globalised world? Will they tend to become independent economic and cultural spaces, where social relations will solely be articulated on the worldwide level of the ‘global city’? Will this model tend to make cities more like each other and generate a sort of harmonising cosmopolitism? Or will cities become hubs from which a community's culture can be projected, while maintaining roots in its own territory? In brief, will cities participate in the globalising processes from the standpoint of what makes them different or what they have in common?

City-state or flagship-city?

Cities are the stage where current-day society acts out its problems, challenges, opportunities and debates. In fact, the ongoing reflections on their nature are part of what makes them a source of innovation and social change. Precisely this makes it necessary to reflect consciously on the scenarios we imagine for our cities, and according to which model we approach their development; not only from the physical and legal aspects, but also from the standpoint of a community project, only too often pushed back out of the limelight as a result of excessive emphasis placed on the physicality of planning. Cities are the stage where models of belonging are put into practice, the framework within which individuals' identity - understood as a set of values and practices - is configured, where they can act as citizens in the broadest sense of the word. Exercising citizenship reflects a vision of society over and above a mere set of formal rights and obligations. From the role of cities as intermediaries between local and global flows follows the necessity to be aware of the idea of the city as promoted by governments, organised society and economic networks.

I believe that the challenge for cities is to position themselves with respect to the two strategic options mentioned above. On the one hand, city-states seek a place on the international market by exploiting the resources and strategic opportunities that present themselves. These are major conurbations such as Los Angeles and Shanghai, or specialised cities - we could almost call them single-issue cities - like Las Vegas and Venice. On the other hand, we have the flagship-cities of national or regional communities which promote participation in the globalisation processes from the standpoint of their self-interpretation as cultural communities.

This two-fold option that I raise does not claim to be universally valid, but hopes to be locally useful. Alternative models can be thought up. Cities in states like Germany and the United States often play a hyperspecialised role in a network of cities: Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich, Boston, Seattle and Houston are cities that may have a lesser impact on the world market-stage but they participate in a special way; for example, through a high level of sectoral specialisation. In the case of Germany, some of these cities even maintain their autonomous political status as a city-state. However, the important thing is that cities and their citizens articulate the models they prefer, and on which they will orient their course of action. This is not so much a singular strategic plan as a situation whereby all urban policies contain a strategic component.

I feel it would be mistake for Barcelona to choose the city-state option. At the moment it cannot compete with the hyperspecialised, high-value-added cities mentioned here,
among other things because it is not a worldwide or European leader in any specific sector. Equally, a single-minded opting for low-value-added single-issue industries such as tourism would generate an unsustainable city model. In the arena of flagship-cities, Barcelona is also on a secondary plane: London, Paris and Madrid are clearly on a different level. In many cases, cities in this category are state capitals, so we could expect state-wide institutions to play an important role. However, this group also includes cities like Milan, Sidney and New York, which are not capitals. Nevertheless, it is necessary to debate openly the articulation and projection of a city’s future narratives, and to implement the resulting political approach both internally and externally. This ought to happen from the realisation that a city is - along with other dimensions - a moral community that will have values and practices worthy of fostering.

The two options I put forward have diverging moral evaluations. I think the flagship-city is preferable to the city-state model. And not just from the standpoint of identity formation, but also for material reasons such ecological sustainability, and the urban effects on the surrounding territory. So will we see cities eating up their hinterlands like phagocytes, exploiting their natural and human resources? Or cities that are integrated into their area of influence as a kind of soft capital, where their specificity is the basis that will enable them to situate themselves satisfactorily in terms of social globalisation, economics and culture?

In my view, the flagship-city can act like a hub for its reference territory and assumes the role of a capital city in a broad sense: political, cultural and economic. In this capacity, it can be a source of desirable identities by contributing positive values for the definition of the individual. In comparison, a city-state would probably mean a city without a distinct personality, closer to the worldwide network of cities to which it is connected than to its own territory. In this case, the city structure itself is fragile: unless it makes the effort to participate in the globalisation processes from the perspective of its differentiating factors, it may end up at the mercy of flows by means of which, in the long term, it will lose all capacity for independent status or agency.

London-Barcelona

Each in their own way, London and Barcelona need to establish models of positioning themselves towards the future. London is a leading city that has successfully played a central role in the world arena, but its very success may also sow the seeds of failure as mediator between global processes and individuals. Unless the city is able to sustain a culturally and socially cohesive society, the possibility of its ending up as a ‘generic’ global city without local identity is not rhetoric. A great city like London could become exclusive and fragment further - not only territorially but also socially - if large numbers of its inhabitants are not recognised and cannot participate in co-formulating the urban project. Besides failing to take advantage of its human potential, succumbing to such a situation could lead to an interpretative vacuum in terms of its definition as a city and as a community, thereby turning it into what we could call an ‘anomic’ city. An anomic city is one that is incapable of formulating a shared and cohesive model through which to project itself internally and externally. Such a city runs the risk of having to resort to adopting a reactive action model, both when confronting newly emerging problems -
including those resulting from its very anomie - and when taking advantage of the opportunities that arise in the global context to which it can respond through merely tactical, exclusively economic or other short-termist means.

In the case of Barcelona, the problem plays on a different level. Anomie in this case involves letting the symbolic and interpretative 'locus of control' slip away from the city to purely outside perceptions, generating contradictions that are difficult to handle (at one moment a city of squatters, at another a city of cruise ships and at yet another a city of congresses). Without a meaningful model of citizenship and community, the city is unable to take advantage of trends that it should be able to interpret pro-actively and convert into opportunities, even if it does not fully control them. Furthermore, basing its development on what are a priori perceived to be ‘uncontrollable’ factors will, in the long term, generate a city image over which it has no political influence. A city that fails to investigate and formulate alternative narratives together with its residents, letting them participate as citizens, will perpetually be faced with non-options. Using the analogy of a river current, we could say that Barcelona still has to make itself some oars that are sufficiently sturdy to control the boat against the currents of the global/local relationship. Allowing itself to be carried away by the current means that some pretty unpleasant bumps would await closer to waterfalls.

**Conclusions**

It is important for cities to create conscious interpretations of themselves and debate narratives that are rooted in the distinguishing features of their identity. Citizenship is exercised in cities as long as members of an urban community can meaningfully associate themselves with it and partake in its constant reformulation. The city project must therefore be permeable. It must allow its citizens to co-create the urban society. This process ought to take place in dialogue with the globalised context – from international institutions to newly-arrived immigrants – so as not to end up with a would-be autarchic identity project. However, the articulation of the global/local relation should be mediated based on a cultural self-awareness, ensuring that the interpretations of the dynamic global context is firmly rooted in its own identity.

The *State of the World’s Cities 2004/2005* report, drawn up by the UN-Habitat Globalisation and World Cities Study Group, pointed out that globalisation can lead to increased cultural standardisation. Interaction between cultures as a result of migration can only generate cultural innovation when the local culture plays a central mediating role. But no meaningful interaction can take place if local cultures are unable to stake out a recognisable role for themselves on the world stage, if they do not seek to make themselves visible and heard. Globalisation never ‘just happened’ – it was created, and equally needs the contributions and thought leadership of assertive, self-aware urban communities. What would otherwise emerge is a global/local juxtaposition based on a cultural void, a series of theme parks that leave our cities exhausted and fragmented. Without a vision of difference and identity, the city’s role as a community space not only loses quality but also destroys any possibility of a meeting space. Cultural dialogues and innovation need to be rooted in cultural values and conscious practice. Only this can generate social cohesion and shared action. Without this, the formal citizenship of legal
rights and obligations becomes an empty shell.

In the public sphere, this cultural imperative needs to be translated in terms of politics and policy. Politically, the citizenship values sustained by the city must be rooted in liberal democratic principles. These principles are dynamic in the long term. As societies evolve in the context of globalisation and transnational migration, the identity projects of nations and cities will be continually redrafted. In policy terms, the flagship-city model faces significant challenges and involves taking decisions that entail certain risks. Democratically debating, prioritising and promoting a series of values as the basis for public action entails that what may be perfectly valid for one city might become less relevant to another. Culturally and politically reflexive practice generates policy creativity and local differentiation. This can have, and should be allowed to have, consequences for material policies such as public resource allocation. I consider that Barcelona must debate and reformulate a flagship-city model with its citizens in order to develop a morally desirable community.

London has a conceptually more responsible role to fulfil: it has all the necessary ingredients to become successful as city-state or city-flagship. But if it tends towards a model that merely allows for cultural and spatial fragmentation, if it becomes an anomic city that excludes those citizens whose role does not fit the purely functional and competitive narrative of the city-state world, we will have lost an essential mirror for the future of our cities.