

ACTON INSTITUTE POWERBLOG

COVID-19 could inspire an ‘age of dispersion’ from megacities

by JOSEPH SUNDE • April 10, 2020



In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the constraints of “social distancing” have inspired new waves of innovation across spheres and sectors. “Life will never be the same” has become a common refrain—an ominous nod to the steady “Zoomification” of everyday life and its looming influence on the future of work, school, church, the family and beyond.

The transformation in *how* we live is bound to have an impact on *where* we live, as well. Given that densely populated cities are **reporting the fastest spread** of COVID-19 cases and related deaths—from Wuhan to Milan to Madrid to New York City—even as widely dispersed states **continue to resist distancing mandates**, many are reflecting on the future of “megacities” in a post-COVID-19 world.

In a set of reflections at **Quillette** and **Tablet Magazine**, Joel Kotkin argues that the latest pandemic will simply speed up our journey toward a coming “age of dispersion”—leading to profound shifts in population density as workers move toward mid-sized metros or rural and suburban neighborhoods.

“One possible consequence [of COVID-19] is an acceleration of the end of the megacity era,” Kotkin writes. “In its place, we may now be witnessing the outlines of a new, and necessary, dispersion of population, not only in the wide open spaces of North America and Australia, but even in the megacities of the developing world.”

Up until now, such dispersion has been due to factors like “high housing prices” and “growing social disorder,” **Kotkin argues**. Yet the current crisis introduces a range of other considerations:

Pandemics naturally thrive most in big cities, where people live cheek by jowl and are regularly exposed to people from other regions and countries. Like COVID-19, the bubonic plague came to Europe on ships from the Orient, where the disease originated. As historian William McNeill noted, the plague devastated the cosmopolitan centers of Renaissance Italy far more than the backward reaches of Poland or other parts of central Europe.

*Being away from people, driving around in your own car, and having neighbors you know, all have clear advantages when it comes to avoiding and surviving contagion. Even the urban cognoscenti have figured this out. Like their Renaissance predecessors during typhus and bubonic plague outbreaks, **contemporary wealthy New Yorkers** are retreating to their country homes where they struggle with **the local townies** over occasional short supplies of essentials.*

In the long run, the extraordinary concentration of COVID-19 cases in New York threatens an economy and a social fabric that were already unraveling before the outbreak began.

In the **Quillette** piece, Kotkin surveys similar pandemics across a number of cities and time periods, examining how densely populated cities have coped with public health crises in the past. The results have varied, with many cities overcoming the obstacles and managing to protect freedoms while preserving peace, order, and social diversity.

Yet in the major metros of modern-day China, for example, we get a clear glimpse of density gone wrong—from sanitation and pollution issues to class divisions to the consolidation of power among insulated elites. Here, on the frontiers of megacity dystopia, pandemics pose a much greater risk, and the authoritarian government isn't waiting around for people to self-govern and self-correct:

Once held up as a grand ideal, the megacity is increasingly losing its appeal as a way of life. Chinese science fiction writers—increasingly the last redoubt of independent thought in that increasingly totalitarian country—envision an urban future that is, for most, squalid and divided by class. There are already **deep divisions** between those who hold urban residence permits, hukou, and those relegated to an inferior, unprotected status...

During my last visit to Beijing, Communist Party officials shared their concerns about how these divides could undermine social stability. They have already **essentially banned new migration into cities such as Beijing and Shanghai**, and encourage migrants to move to the less crowded interior or even **back to rural villages**. Given the dictatorial nature of the regime, it's not shocking that growth is already shifting to "**second tier cities**" including some in **the interior**.

Thankfully, most Western megacities are in a much healthier place, despite their **increasingly predictable mix** of consolidated power, expensive housing costs, counterproductive price controls, onerous regulation, and cronyist central planning. Yet in free societies with abounding opportunities, those features may prove distasteful enough, leading to voluntary exits across the great cities of **Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States**:

As a new study from **Heartland Forward** demonstrates, both immigrants and millennials—the key groups behind urban growth—are increasingly moving to interior cities and even small towns. This is true even in San Francisco where nearly **half of millennials** described themselves as "likely" to leave the City by the Bay, a dramatic shift from a decade earlier, due in large part to insanely high housing prices and deteriorating conditions on the streets.

Indeed, as Richard Florida **has noted**, the bulk of the new growth of the "creative class"—the well-educated millennials critical to the urban renaissance—is "shifting away from superstar cities." The **rise in the migration of such prized workers** is now two to three times faster in Salt Lake City, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Grand Rapids, MI than in regions around New York, Los Angeles, or Washington, D.C.

Again, in light of COVID-19, people would seem to have more, not fewer, reasons for such dispersion—whether inspired toward wider spaces and cleaner air or the abounding innovation we’re about to see in virtual work and exchange. “Even before the current pandemic, **the benefits of working remotely** were apparent in terms of productivity, innovation, and lower turnover, particularly among educated **millennials**,” Kotkin writes. “These digital natives have already accepted the notion that they can accomplish as much at home as they can in the office.”

There are social and cultural benefits, as well, at both the macro and micro levels. Cities of all shapes and sizes bring unique benefits to society, and given the lopsided clustering we’ve seen in the recent past, a shift toward greater dispersion and geographic diversity may represent a healthy cultural corrective. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*, our nation’s power, freedom, and virtues stem from its diversity of townships and cities—geographically, culturally, and otherwise.

In America...it may be said that the township was organized before the county, the county before the State, the State before the Union...The independence of the township was the nucleus round which the local interests, passions, rights, and duties collected and clung. It gave scope to the activity of a real political life most thoroughly democratic and republican... Local assemblies of citizens constitute the strength of free nations. Town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it.

The **list of fastest-growing mid-sized metros** is far from a series of quaint 19th-century townships, and the pressures of the latest pandemic make the new drivers of such a dispersion are unfortunate. Nevertheless, the coming of such an age would bode well for civil society and the preservation of liberty in an era where massive consolidations of power can pose significant risks.

“Property would be far less expensive and accessible to the middle classes,” Kotkin concludes. “Larger living space could be ideally configured from home-based work that would bring back the family-oriented capitalism of the early modern era. Rather than bringing us to a high-tech Middle Ages, we could use this crisis to develop a new and more human economic and social model that combines a cosmopolitan outlook with a better, and safer, way of life.”

Image credit: Urban density, Mark Lehmkuhler (CC BY-ND 2.0)



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