



Understanding Cities

Networking

Michael Pryke

Hello, I'm Michael Pryke. No matter if you're in Glasgow or Bristol, Moscow, Bombay or Singapore, you get the feeling that somehow or other the city you're in seems to be disturbed, unsettled in some way, by the cross-currents of globalisation. Beginning to recognise some of these trends is one thing, but how do we begin to make sense of them and what do they imply for cities and city futures? Indeed, do all cities face the same future? What do cities have to do in a sense to survive? These are the sorts of questions being addressed by a wide range of people, from those involved international organisations like the World Bank, to protest groups, business communities, to government ministers and local politicians. From the different perspectives they're all trying to untangle these and related issues, and to say something about what globalisation, at least in its present form, holds in store for cities and those who live in them. Needless to say, these issues have not escaped the attention of open theorists. I spoke to three of them to help make sense of what's going on. First to Nigel Thrift, Professor of Geography in the University of Bristol; then to Professor Saskia Sassen from the University of Chicago and author of numerous influential books on global cities; and lastly to Professor Ash Amin from the University of Durham. One of the telltale signs of change is the language used to talk about cities. Talk today is of enabling of public-private partnerships, of managerial skills. In short, you're tempted to say that no matter if you're in Manchester or Moscow, Swansea or Sydney, New York or Nairobi, cities seem to be more entrepreneurial. There's more than a touch of the private sector in a way a city's problems are tackled, in how it's sold and talked about as a place to invest and to locate. This is a view held by Nigel Thrift.

Nigel Thrift

I think the key word is entrepreneurship, that one can make a city more entrepreneurial just as firms have to be entrepreneurial, have to go out into the market, have to gain market share, somehow or the other cities can do the same thing. They, too, can become entrepreneurial. The whole of entrepreneurialism clearly implies that cities have to become more competitive. The way that this is usually argued is through the notion of globalisation, that all cities are now open to the chill winds of global competition and that basically they have to get their act together. They can no longer sit slumped around the national economy hoping for handouts from national government, that they're in it by themselves in a sense and they have to compete. So that cities have to become smarter, they have to become in all sorts of ways the kinds of places that people would want to invest in. The second way in which they must become competitive is in terms of their workforce, the workforce must become a learning workforce. And then thirdly, I think there's an idea as well that going along with this those cities will be increasingly competing with one another, cities will have to co-operate with each other at times in order to allow this competition to be most effective, that somehow or the other cities will network with one another, and that means two things. First of all it will learn best practice from other cities, the things that work, that's important. It will also network in terms of competitions so what you're seeing, I think, is that competition therefore is certainly operating, and operating more strongly, but sometimes this will mean more co-operation as well.

Michael

Why this emphasis on city networks? What does it tell us about cities and a global economy, an economy in a sense scripted by the conventions of neo-liberalism which allows markets a free reign? Saskia Sassen provides a clue when she talks of global cities.

Saskia Sassen

The global city is a function of a network. The network is the basic mechanism through which the global economic system gets integrated, through which markets get integral, through which we have the integration of markets that we talk about. It is the way this global economic system can expand, by incorporating yet another place. When Argentina and Brazil decided to go seriously into joining the global economic system, that meant deregulating, privatising, giving the Central Bank autonomy to have a strong banking system, etcetera, etcetera, all the conditions that are necessary, they become part of the network. That means that they have built the bridge through which whatever the kind of wealth that you can produce, either by recalculating foreign capital through Argentina and Brazil, or by re-enacting natural extraction projects, the natural riches under privatised conditions, etcetera, that can get incorporated into this global circulation and production of wealth that we call the global economic system, so the network is the strategic architecture of this system.

Michael

In part of this network of global cities would seem to have its attractions but how does a city, in a sense, position itself in a network?

Saskia

If you want a role in the network, be it Sao Paulo, Sydney, Johannesburg, Bombay, you know a whole and these, this is a strategic geography that cuts across the old north-south divide, that is the space for the managing of this global economic system, and that is a space of power, slightly de-territorialised, but when it hits the ground, it hits the ground in these massive concentrations of resources.

Michael

But is it simply a case of piling up the right resources? Have a city's past, its previous connections, its social and cultural heritage affected its chances of making it as a global city? Take somewhere like Moscow, for example, once the centre of the Soviet empire, now very much on the fringes of globalisation but in a sense trying to edge itself onto the global stage. Saskia Sassen again.

Saskia

I think that Moscow is in such an extraordinary condition of transitions, many transitions that I think it would be almost impossible to get a good handle on what is going on there. It's like with India; three years ago Bombay looked really hot and the Indian stock market was very hot up 'till two years ago, and then other things began to happen.

Michael

And these other things are not about economics in any straightforward sense. They relate to a city's cultural, social and political heritage, which is the place-specific things that happen to complicate both the way globalisation works, and the view that globalisation equals sameness, that in a sense it leads inevitably to a sort of one-track urbanisation.

Saskia

I keep saying that the global economy is a strategic system of power, that there is a strategic geography within which it gets enacted. I am one of those who believe that it is a very partial event. I am looking at the implementing of this system, its designing, its managing and there I see that it is a system that does not need majorities. It needs just very, very specific elements, so there is a way in which the specificity of each country, the mess in Russia, the new religious wars in India, may or may not interfere with the global project, but it's certainly the case that the global economic system is not about to go in there, homogenise it all, modernise it, get the religion out, get the mess out of Russia, no, and it may not just move in there in any significant fashion, because the global economy is not a no-universalism, it's another particulars, but it's a particularise which concentrates the most strategic forms of power that we have today.

Michael

Even the notion of competition produces a mix rather than a single shared future for all cities. Nigel Thrift again.

Nigel

One of the reasons why consultants are being constantly asked in is to think of new things that can make cities more competitive. So what there is is, if you like, not just a race of cities but a race of ideas, a race to find new things that can be produced, new ideas that will make cities more competitive in the future. So what we see is cities kind of on the escalator of not just economic competition but also competition for new economic ideas that will make cities more competitive in the future. It follows that not all cities can take on the same ideas at the same time so almost from the start some cities will, if you like, be doing different things from others.

Michael

So we have many things occurring here, all of which echo the idea of settlement and openness. If globalisation is not a new universalism, and if cities have varied starting points, then there's a need to be aware of the very particular city-focused goings-on which mean that the influences and ingredients of globalisation settle in some cities, unsettle some others, and slip by yet others. Saskia Sassen sums up this view.

Saskia

You know we always think of the global economy as the neutral, the technical, the modern, the non-particular, a new universal – in my view it is not – and so in that sense it will stay out of many situations or move in very partially, like China is a very good example of a partial move into – when those Chinese firms operate in the global economic system they have to adopt the international standards for accounting, for financial reporting, for legal, etcetera, but that doesn't mean that most of China can continue to operate under its own system which is very different.