

# KETTERING REVIEW

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A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving  
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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The *Kettering Review* ® is published by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

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ISSN 0748-8815 (print)  
ISSN 2471-2914 (online)

KETTERING  
**REVIEW**

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Fall 2017

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**Cover art:** Carol Vollet Kingston and Joan Harrison collaboratively created the cover image, *I Have Work To Do* (2017). This digital photomontage homage to Robert Kingston was created using scans of a painting by Carol Vollet Kingston, *Summer Doldrums* (oil, 1993), vintage engravings, and text from Robert Kingston's writings.

# Political Institutions Old and New: Cities Not Nation-States

By Benjamin R. Barber

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*Our most ancient  
and enduring political  
bodies—our towns  
and cities—offer  
an alternative to  
dysfunctional nations.*

National governments rooted in sovereignty, trying to shape global politics across their borders, are no longer positioned to govern effectively, either singly or in common. Top-down centralized democracy is confronting a world in which, as Thomas L. Friedman noted in 2015, “all top-down authority structures are being challenged,” and in which there is greater opportunity for pluralistic societies that can govern themselves horizontally. These conditions challenge the authority of monolithic governments that believe their societies can only be “held together top-down with an iron fist.” Even if democracy were less compromised than it is, even if it didn’t so often seem like a rationalization for plutocracy, it would remain trapped inside the box of national sovereignty.

Hence, our dilemma of bordered and blinkered independent states confronting borderless, interdependent problems. Every challenge we face today crosses borders. Climate change, terrorism, refugees in flight from genocide, civil war and economic meltdown, labor, commodity, and capital markets in turmoil, pandemics, crime, drugs, weapons of mass destruction, and the anarchy of our ubiquitous digital technology—all are global in their causes and consequences. No Chicago warming, only global warming; no Tokyo Internet or Paris Web, only the World Wide Web; no state-based war, but malevolent NGOs like Al Qaeda and quasi-states like ISIS, accompanied by endless civil wars. States like Libya and Iraq have effectively ceased to exist.

We confront these brutally interdependent challenges with antiquated nation-states,

wrapped in the very sovereignty and independence that leave them incapable of meeting the new perils. We have HIV without borders, war without borders, immigration without borders, a digital Web without borders, but we do not have citizens without borders or democracy without borders. Who do we imagine can contain global warming without borders if there is no government without borders? On this devastating asymmetry between problems and responses, turns our future. Unless we find ways to globalize democracy or to democratize globalization, humankind will be in ever greater peril.

**T**he institutions we think of as global or international are all state-based: the United Nations and the international financial institutions associated with the global system (the World Bank, the Asian Bank, the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank); the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. We depend on them as international entities to help achieve solutions to cross-border problems. The UN secretary-general's office and the European Parliament do try to assume transnational leadership in pursuit of sustainable goals. Yet the nation-state was conceived in an age of independence, where national jurisdiction circumscribed human problems, leaving them amenable to amelioration only from within. The borders delimiting state action are irrelevant to such global perils as climate change. This makes COP21 [the 2015 meeting of the Paris Climate Change Conference] a dubious "success."

I want to suggest, then, that we can find an answer to the dilemma of independent, bordered nation-states wrestling ineffectively with

interdependent, borderless challenges, and thus to our inability to address climate change through nation-state democracy, by changing the subject. From states to cities; from prime ministers and presidents to mayors. Our most ancient and enduring political bodies—our

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## Every challenge we face today crosses borders.

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towns and cities—offer an attractive alternative to dysfunctional nations. Let interdependent cities do globally what independent nations no longer can do: let mayors and their neighbors, the citizens of the world's cities, address climate, regulate carbon, and guarantee sustainability through cooperative action. Let mayors cool the world.

There are good reasons why cities can effect changes that nations cannot. We have always



been what Edward Glaeser calls “an urban species.” Today, more than half the world’s population lives in cities; in the developed world, more than three-quarters do. China is growing new cities of more than a million at a

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## Let interdependent cities do globally what independent nations no longer can do.

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dizzying rate. A few decades ago, Shenzhen was a town of perhaps 20,000; today it is a megacity of more than 18 million. Meanwhile, burgeoning conurbations in Africa and Latin America are making New York and London look provincial. Cities, as I have mentioned, generate nearly 80 percent of GDP and 80 percent of greenhouse gases. And because they create much of the problem, they can contribute significantly to the solution, if they have sufficient resources and can act with sufficient autonomy. As Michael Bloomberg reminds us in his provocative article



“City Century,” cities can act more quickly than states and are less likely to be “captured or neutralized by special interest groups.” For mayors, reducing carbon pollution “is not an economic cost; it is a competitive necessity” that manifests the “congruence between health and economic goals.”

While asserting that “the world’s first Metropolitan Generation” is just now coming of age, Bloomberg notes that the city stands at the beginning of our history. Human civilization was born in cities, and democracy was first nurtured in the polis. Cities are our most enduring political bodies. Rome is much older than Italy. Istanbul older than Turkey, Boston older than the United States, Damascus older than Syria. Cities are where we are born, grow up, go to school, marry, and have children; they are where we work, play, pray, grow old, and die. Concrete and palpable, they draw their existence from their concrete, organic growth rather than from boundaries drawn on a map; from the art of communal life rather than the science of public administration. Cities define our essential communication habitat in a way nation-states cannot.

**N**ations are too large for participation and engagement but too small to control the global centers of power. Too big for community and association but too small for the world economy. Cities are closer to us, more human in scale, more trusted by citizens. Fewer than half of Americans trust the president or the Supreme Court, and less than 10 percent trust the Congress they themselves elect, but 70 percent or more trust their mayors and municipal councilors. The same is

true worldwide: local government is deemed more trustworthy than national government except in a few nations, such as China, where local government isn't local but is controlled from the center. (To the degree that they trust anyone, the Chinese appear to trust the party and the central government more than their local leaders, whom they consider impotent pawns.)

To respond effectively to climate change, we need to restore democracy to its deliberative roots in competent citizenship at the municipal plane. It is easier in the city to reinstate popular government as a domain of deliberation, accountability, and citizen participation. The neoliberal assault on "big government" has little traction in cities, where government is small and focused on sewers, schools, policing, housing, traffic, and jobs. Nations stare out suspiciously across fortified borders at neighboring countries, while tribal nativists call for higher walls and prime ministers appeal for higher defense budgets. Antagonism is the modus operandi, and war is its final recourse. Cities are open and transactional, defined by trade, culture, and commerce. Nations are often in a zero-sum game: when Germany grows larger, Poland grows smaller. Yet Berlin and Warsaw can both flourish without thinking that the success of one must entail the other's failure. Indeed, their relations in trade, culture, transportation, and environmental sustainability are necessarily interdependent. Success requires cooperation.

We can address climate change, then, by talking about cities and asking that their mayors talk to one another. Environmental sustainability will be achieved when we secure sustainable



democracy, and democracy is sustainable today mainly in the municipality.

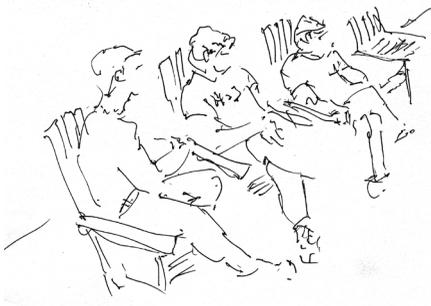
Cities have an enormous potential for ecological cooperation, engaging their citizens directly in climate action (through, for example, pedestrian zones, recycling, and mass transport) even as they act on a global scale through collective action. They are already actively seeking sustainability across national borders through

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## We need to restore democracy to its deliberative roots at the municipal plane.

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urban networks, such as the C40 Cities [a network of megacities committed to addressing climate change], ICLEI [Local Governments for Sustainability], and Energy Cities Europe. These networks, undergirded by larger, less specialized associations like the US Conference of Mayors and the United Cities and Local



Governments network, are not very well known. But they are hugely effective intercity associations allowing cooperating cities to do what nations have failed to do.

If presidents and prime ministers cannot summon the will to work for a sustainable planet, or even live up to the modest agreements they so reluctantly negotiate, mayors can. If citizens are defined by nations as spectators to

their own destinies who think ideologically and divisively when they think at all, neighbors and citizens of towns and cities are active and engaged. They tend to think pragmatically and clearly, which is to say publicly and cooperatively; they think in the way theorists of democracy have always said they would in a well-constituted civil society that empowered them as members of a commons.

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*Benjamin R. Barber was a world-renowned political theorist who died earlier this year at the age of 77. At the time of his death, Barber was a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Fordham Law School Urban Consortium. He was also the founder of the Global Parliament of Mayors, and the author of 18 books including the recently published Cool Cities: Urban Sovereignty and the Fix for Global Warming. Permission to reprint this excerpt from Cool Cities is granted by the Yale University Press. Cities is granted by the Yale University Press.*

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