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The Rise of Progressive Cities for Human and Planetary Flourishing – A Global Perspective on Asia's Urban Transition

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Abstract. With Asia expected to add more than a billion people to its urban population by mid-century, attention is turning toward cities as spheres of governance for meeting pressing social, economic and environmental concerns and fulfilling people's aspirations for a better life. Asia's accelerated urbanization is a major contributor to an on-going global urban transition that will see the entire world become an estimated 85 percent urban by 2100, marking the 21st century as one of profound transformations in society and human settlement of the planet. Key questions arise from this human engagement in citymaking. What are the purposes of making an urban world? Can the urban transition be steered away from the negative impacts already associated with it? Instead of being the source of anthropogenic destruction of the Earth's biosphere, can cities generate more caring and nurturing relationships with the environment? In other words, can cities become a major contributor to human and planetary flourishing? As documentation of the urban anthropogenic sources of global climate change shows, the stakes in answering this question are very high.

1. Planetary Urbanization

As cities and networks of cities continue to rapidly expand in their reach, the 21st century is not just the advent of the world's first urban century. As explained by Brenner and Schmid (2014:751):

The urban represents an increasingly worldwide, if unevenly woven, fabric in which the sociocultural and political-economic relations of capitalism are enmeshed. This situation of planetary urbanization means that even sociospatial arrangements and infrastructural networks that lie well beyond traditional city cores, metropolitan regions, urban peripheries and peri-urban zones have become integral parts of a worldwide urban condition.

In this context, governance of human settlement of the world and planetary resources increasingly emanates from cities rather than from nation-states, with impacts of decisions made in cities on the world and its biosphere increasingly far reaching. From the perspective of government institutions, namely, the local state, Asia's exceptionally rapid urban transition will see the entire region become politically organized into city regions that will account for the vast majority of population well before the end of this century. Agrarian societies will have passed into history, and even the seemingly most remote areas

will be subjected to decisions made in cities about the appropriation of resources and construction of infrastructure. The current use of the term Anthropocene to mark a new geological age in which nature is largely determined by human interventions is a key dimension of planetary urbanization, which is endangering our planet. In other words, how a city is governed is not just about the city itself, but is about the future habitation of the planet and the health of its biosphere (Duara 2014).

How a city is governed confronts other concerns as well. Urbanization has long been associated with promises of rising prosperity, manifold technological advances, the end of work as drudgery, and many more hopes for human flourishing. While some of these promises are being realized, others are moving further beyond reach. Even as the global per capita continues to rise along with urbanization and starvation level indicators show fewer shares of populations below poverty lines, cities around the world are experiencing rising inequalities, marginalization of people, environmental degradation, and other undesirable patterns such as persistence of urban slum populations, violence, and rising vulnerabilities to environmental disasters (UNESCAP 2012, Deen 2015, Douglass 2014, 2015).

As planetary urbanization advances in its reflexive process of increasing global interdependencies, imperatives for cities to do better become ever more self-evident. The World Economic Forum's identification of poor urban governance as one of the major risks to the world is just one of many concerns about the growing importance of cities in the world system (WEF 2015). Parallel calls for good cities, just cities, livable cities, eco-cities, sustainable cities and smart cities point toward similar concerns (Friedmann 2000, Fainstein 2005, Ho and Douglass 2008, ADB 2014).

In the discussion here, a concept of progressive cities is presented as a means to both assess the record of cities and identify ways forward that draws from existing experiences. The further intention is to set forth an alternative discourse on cities that, in centering on human flourishing, is fundamentally different from other constructs now dominating conversations about the city. Specifically, participatory governance, distributive justice, social conviviality, and non-instrumental relations with nature – what I will call the 4 pillars of a progressive cities – are missing or have been muted in widely circulated concepts for improving urban governance.

The focus on city governance underscores the importance of the local state in the formation of the city as a polis, or political sphere, for meaningful public participation in policymaking and planning. A principal motivation for developing the idea of progressive cities comes from the appearance of reformist urban governments in many countries in Asia, including those in countries that have strong-arm national governments. In countries around the world national governments are increasingly having to devote attention to austerity measures and external relations, including corporate interests. By default, cities are becoming the level of citizen-government interactions, contestations and negotiations about the purposes of government for the commonweal. And as urbanization proceeds, cities are also more observably articulating the global systems of flows of people as well as goods, services, finance and information.

Research on progressive has the further intention of allowing for the possibilities of collective human agency to steer urbanization and citymaking as a dynamic process that has no single destiny, but is instead open to people making their own histories within or against the constraints they face. This point of departure for research stands in contrast alike to structural arguments about the unyielding hegemony of the world system and to developmentalist formulations of a single linear development path that all societies are to follow toward greater human welfare and happiness. Using human flourishing as a central concept contributes to further opening discourse by broadening the idea of the city as a theater of social action and multifaceted experience of “becoming human”, including social and cultural relations as well as material ones.

2. Historical Antecedents of the Progressive City

The word “progressive” as a term used to describe government gained attention in the West, particularly the U.S., at the turn of the 20th Century as a reaction to the high levels of inequality, immiseration of many, and corrupt corporate-government relations of what Mark Twain (Twain and Warner 2006) called the “Gilded Age” of extreme wealth and power in the hands of a few. Popular novels such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1887) contributed to the emergence of civil society organizations pressuring government to adopt a series of fundamental political reforms that together comprised what became known as the Progressive Era (Campbell 2002). The resulting reforms worked into national politics to take action for greater inclusion, such as women’s suffrage, social justice through labor protection laws, and environmental protection in the form of a national park system (Stradling 1999). Although historians tend to limit the Progressive Era to the years from the late 1800s to World War I, echoes persisted through the Great Depression and into the Fordist era of capitalism lasting into the 1970s.

From a longer historical perspective, ideas that reach toward the idea progressive government have existed since the appearance of the world’s first cities. Throughout the world, including Asia, rulers of ancient city-states and empires gained and retained their legitimacy by calling on religious and spiritual relations between heaven and earth, with good governance underpinning the moral authority to rule (Abu-Lughod 1991, Short 1996). Emperors serving under the Mandate from Heaven in China and Korea is one of the more well known examples. Rather than being divine incarnations, these rulers were expected to live and rule with moral principals that included justice and protection of the welfare of people. The building of cities and their designs reified these relations in street layouts or geographical orientations of cities.

In the West, earlier concepts of progressive governance appeared periodically over centuries in the form of utopian formulations of Plato in ancient Greece, Thomas More, and on to the utopian socialist reactions to the horrific conditions of the industrial cities arising with capitalism in 18th and 19th centuries. The latter culminated in Ebenezer Howard’s Garden Cities that have been constructed in many parts of the world and continue to be called upon today (Flank 2009, Cabannes and Ross 2013).

In the post-colonial era in most of Asia following the end of World War II, cities became the evidence of the newly coined term of “national development”, and national leaders used the progress of cities in terms of increases in material welfare to justify continuations of their leadership. Developmentalism and now neo-developmentalism continues to prevail in national ideologies supported by such institutions as the United Nations and World Bank. In asserting a linear development path for all societies its current neoliberal formulation asserts that development is to be driven by economic growth dependent on attracting global investment. In so doing, it subordinates both state and society to never-ending competitiveness (EUI 2011, CLC 2105). Cities are thus viewed as functional platforms to attract footloose global capital, rather than as they were previously understood as “theaters of social action” in which society produced its economy rather than economy producing society (Mumford 1961). Today attracting such investment now inevitably entails place marketing in the form of iconic buildings and privatization of public spaces under public-corporate partnerships. In these contexts, the rise of progressive cities in Asia is an important corrective to Asia’s own “great transformation” (Polanyi 1954) to unfettered capitalist competitiveness and all of the distortions of governance it is bringing to people’s lives.

In this regard, urban problematics are becoming globally similar rather than sharply differentiated among world regions, and critics have begun describing current conditions as the “New Gilded Age” (Remnick 2001, Bartels 2010). In this era, however, it is a new Gilded Global Age. Inequalities are almost everywhere now passing well beyond previous levels, collusion between state and corporate interests is reaching levels beyond previous experiences in scale and scope, and the world’s biosphere is in danger of collapse in the world’s first urban century. Some observers also now see a Second Progressive Movement emerging in the U.S., Europe and Latin America (Sachs 2011, Harvey 2012, McGuirk 2014, Glastris 2015). This movement is now being led by cities rather than national governments (Clavel 2010, 2014). Newly elected mayors are calling themselves “progressive” in their challenges to neoliberal regimes aimed at corporatizing government (Goldberg 2014, Meyerson 2015). As evidenced in papers presented at this conference, progressive cities are also emerging in Asia.

What can contemporary cities contribute toward improving the human experience? The concept of human flourishing provides the core focus in attempting to address this question.

3. Toward a Holistic Concept of Progressive Cities for Human Flourishing

An overarching purpose of the concept of a progressive city put forth here is to set forth a broad normative framework for research aimed at linking grassroots mobilizations over urban governance to theories about the contemporary urban condition. In bringing the local state into the analysis, the further intention is to better understand the city as a political sphere below the nation-state in terms of prospects for realizing people’s aspirations for well-being and better lives. With the exception of Clavel’s seminar research on progressive cities in the U.S., this subject largely remains in daily newspapers and popular magazines (Clavel 1986, 2010, 2014). Neither basic nor applied research on

progressive cities in Asia has yet to be widely undertaken.

Clavel's research provides a point of departure for studying the rise and decline of progressive cities in two ways. First, he stakes out the normative position that progressive cities are those that are successful in redistributing public benefits and the economy toward greater equality, and, second, such cities rise from grassroots mobilizations that are able to gain effective voice in urban governance coalitions. In also adopting the approach of focusing on social mobilizations for progressive forms of city governance, research findings on these mobilizations in Asia finds a much broader complexity of aspirations for better cities than either material benefits or collective consumption can capture. The concept presented here therefore reaches beyond material considerations in a way that allows for cross-checking impacts of changes in one dimension on all of the other dimensions.

For the above reasons, the concept of human flourishing is given the central focus for arraying and assessing interactions between four principal dimensions of inclusion, distributive justice, conviviality, and environmental well-being that link individual fulfillment with social relations and the environment in the production of urban space. These dimensions are simultaneously historically contextual in being stimulated by discontents about injustices now and are also transcendent visions for a better world.

Human flourishing

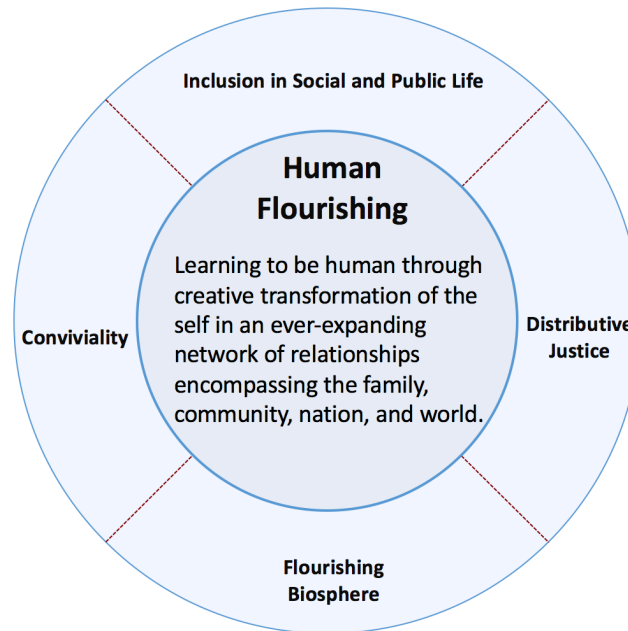
Often drawn from Aristotle's 4th century BCE concept of *eudaimonia*, the idea of human flourishing is not unique to Western philosophy. Confucianism also speaks of human flourishing as "learning to be human" through continuous "creative transformation" of the self in "an ever-expanding network of relationships encompassing the family, community, nation, world and beyond" (Tu 1993:142). In Aristotle's as well as Tu's and other interpretations (Rasmussen 1989, Lacey 2015), human flourishing concerns well-being derived from the capacities to strive, validate personal potential, gain self-fulfillment and cultivate love and friendship, all of which emerge from engagement with others in society. In contrast to "happiness" as a state of satisfaction, human flourishing "conveys the idea of a process, of both a personal project and a goal for humanity" (Triglav Circle 2015). While individual freedoms are critical for human flourishing (Sen 1999), it is realized through inclusive engagement in society, not in isolation from it, and it involves obligations to others as well. Flourishing is thus a "communal act", with the self "never an isolated individual but a center of relationships" (Tu 1993:142). This understanding echoes the idea of the right to the city as a collective rather than individual right (Harvey 2003).

Friedmann's (2000:466) more recent formulation of human flourishing presents it as a fundamental human right to the "full development of intellectual, physical and spiritual potentials in the context of wider communities." It is a process experienced differently by each person even as it is a collaborative expression of capabilities and aspirations for "another city" (Lacey 2015). It thus rests on enhancing individual capacities and the differences that result from them.

For a city to provide nurturing political, economic, social, physical and ecological

relationships for human flourishing (Friedmann 2000:468), advances must be made in four dimensions of a progressive city: inclusion, distributive justice, conviviality, and the global biosphere.

Figure 1. The Four Pillars of Human Flourishing in Progressive Cities



Source: author

Inclusion in social and public life – cosmopolis versus globopolis

An axiomatic proposition for progressive cities is that unless people who reside there are included in decisionmaking processes about their cities, no acceptable way exists to normatively define what constitutes progressive governance for human flourishing. Inclusive social and public life is therefore a foundational pillar for a progressive city. The contribution of political participation to feelings of personal efficacy is worthy itself, and unless people who reside in cities are included in decisionmaking processes about their cities, the uses of political power will continue to marginalize and ignore many voices. Recent reports indicating that democracy is diminishing in more than half of UN member states is a worrying reminder that sustaining inclusionary political systems is a never completed task (Deen 2015).

Inclusion in spaces of community and social life is also both desirable on its own terms and as a source of civil society engagements that often link with political participation. Of particular interest is the capacity of civil society to gather in civic spaces to engage in political discourses at arms distance from either the state or private business interests (Douglass, Ho and Ooi 2010; Daniere and Douglass 2008). Public and community spaces, the commons, and some privately owned spaces with traditions of community life are essential for inclusionary social and political life to flourish in cities.

As used here, one of the theoretical bases for inclusion is the concept of cosmopolis. Sandercock's (1998, 2003) exposition of what can be called "grassroots" cosmopolis echoes Conley's (2002:129) definition of the world as city in which inhabitants "can assert their differences and negotiate them in a productive and affirmative way". Conley continues to contrast cosmopolis with globopolis (Douglas 2009), by declaring that cosmopolis "differs from the homogenizing global city that silences many of its citizens." From this perspective, the city is not only for and by its "citizens" but is also more broadly a welcoming provider of rights of inclusion to "the stranger" (Kristeva 1993, Holston 2001, Falk 2003). As with all dimensions of a progressive city, a cosmopolitan polity rises from social encounters in public and common spaces in which people are able to use their agency to negotiate and make tacit agreements on how to accommodate each other.

Distributive Justice

Literature on currently existing conditions of cities throughout the world shows an overarching concern for a socially just city that includes redistribution of wealth, assets and income to those who are marginalized, poor, oppressed, dispossessed, made invisible or are otherwise not included as beneficiaries of a city's economy and services. The theoretical building blocks and debates about distributive justice are many. One major stream flows from Marxist and post-Marxist writing, beginning with Harvey's (1973) landmark book, *Social Justice and the City*, that currently gravitates to Lefebvre's (1991) well known concept of the right to the city (Harvey 2008, Brenner et al. 2009, Marcuse 2009, Soja 2011).

A key element of this positioning is the relationship between social justice and the production of urban space, which reaches beyond earlier attention to collective consumption (Castells 1977; UCLUL 2015) to the right to make and change the city itself (Lefebvre 1991, Harvey 2008). The importance of this extension is to view a progressive city as a continuous process of inclusive engagement that intertwines redistribution with citymaking.

As Harvey (2008) notes, having the right to the city is hollow without having the means to realize it in practice. This opens the discussion to the concept of empowerment, which diverges into many intellectual streams but has a common focus on going beyond identifying victims to proposing progressive ways forward through collective self-empowerment. Strands range from Freire's (1993) classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to Friedmann's "whole economy" concept of *Empowerment* (1992) and on to the focus on specific tools that are circulating around the world, such as research by Cabannes (2004) in tracking the global spread of participatory budgeting. Each contains elements of resistance, the creation of new spaces, and pursuit of alternative community projects that can readily be seen in contemporary cities throughout Asia and the world (Friedmann 2011, Harvey 2012, Padawangi et al. 2014).

Conviviality

Human flourishing is inseparable from the vitality of social and cultural life for itself rather

than being instrumental to economic competitiveness or other ends such as regime maintenance. Inspired by Ivan Illich (1972) and further interpreted by Lisa Peattie (1998), this dimension moves into ideas of human creativity, efficacy, and self-awareness that are not simply the result of individual acts but are also a process of validation through interpersonal relations. Human flourishing from this perspective is not an end to be enjoyed at some future point in time, but is instead an on-going practice of engagement of people with people. In Peattie's (1998:247) words, "In human happiness, creative activity and a sense of community count for at least as much and maybe more than material standard of living."

In Illich's view (1972:18), the way forward is that "society must be reconstructed to enlarge the contribution of autonomous individuals and primary groups". He warns, however, that "as conviviality is reduced below a certain level, no amount of industrial productivity can effectively satisfy the needs it creates among society's members." Peattie (1998) interprets Illich's thesis in terms of the city as a site for pursuing the conviviality of human relationships. She posits conviviality to be the ultimate purpose of citymaking, which requires a plentitude of shared public and common spaces in which "conviviality is, indeed, the very nourishment of civil society itself" (p. 250).

Conviviality has a direct relationship to the concept of civicism. Writing in 1900 Hamilton uses the term civicism to mean the formation of a civic culture through associational life that rises above social divisions and utilitarian ends. In chastising American urban radicals for making the city that is "mechanically planned and kept in motion according to the principles of mechanics," he called for a deeper understanding of human nature beyond offering that "which appeals to selfish individualism" (p. 750). This deeper human nature he called civicism: "the birth of the community spirit" through "closer interrelation of the lives of the members of the community, a larger stock of common enjoyments" (p. 757). This spirit would become the major source of civic action for "excellence" in city governance. Bell and de-Shalit (2012:1) go even further to state that "a city's particular ethos can also inspire social and political theorizing of global importance".

Sustaining the planetary biosphere

The advent of the Anthropocene inaugurates a new planetary era in which human beings have become the principle determinants of the state of the environment and the world biosphere (Fieldman 2011). The 21st century presents a crisis of rapidly increasing proportions that is not only manifested in global climate change and sea rise but also in environmental disasters of unprecedented scale and frequencies, many of which are occurring in city regions in Asia (Douglass 2015).

Cities have long been identified as the major sources of massive environmental destruction. An urgent need now exists to reverse these trends. To accomplish this, a new relationship with nature is an imperative that is particularly challenging to cities. Traditionally defined as agglomerations of non-agricultural production, cities and their residents lose contact with nature. Polluting industries can also be put offshore in distant locations, effectively exporting their environmental impacts. In both experiential and economic ways, the

impending crises resulting from anthropogenic transformations of nature has remained largely invisible to cities, even though air, land and water pollution in Asia is the highest in the world.

Recent worldwide grassroots movements for urban farming, organic food production and low-carbon energy uses promises to be an irrepressible trend toward changing relations in the ecology of cities that can potentially reverse the unsustainable human appropriation of environmental resources. At the heart of these transformative practices is a shift from the instrumental relations with nature advocated in the widely adopted UN Bruntland Report (1987) on *Our Common Future* that defined sustainable development only in terms of human wants. New principles for progressive approaches toward the environment call for going beyond sustainable development as “doing no harm” and toward the restoration and regeneration of nature by consciously returning more than is taken (Cho 2014). From the perspective of human flourishing, the more profound need is to renew the understanding of human beings being from nature and with nature as a life-long process of engagement in the world.

4. Progressive Cities in 21st Century Asia

Research on progressive cities in Asia is too scant to allow for solid generalizations based on comparative analysis. In a vacuum of such research, two types of assessments of the current state can be made. One is based on an explanation of why societal attention for a better world is shifting to cities. The second consists of insights extrapolated from current political trends that point toward the rise of progressive city governance. In both approaches, Duara’s (2014) point is accepted that any notion of progressivity that can move toward action must be both contextual and transcendent. In terms of progressive cities, his position can be taken to mean that city governance must resolve issues of immediate concern to residents while also being transformative in transcending contexts by offering alternatives that express aspirations for a different world. Without an idea or vision of what can be, social mobilizations lack a compass and might well prove to be ephemeral. At the same time, unless these ideas take root in actual settings, they can handily be dismissed as utopian fantasies.

Concerning the imperatives for cities to become critical levels of governance, an important point to be made is that national governments are increasingly less able to assist in pursuing a human-centered process of political engagements. As summarized by Duara (2014:78):

The problem with nationalism lies not only in that it ... subordinates or devalues the links between individuals and other expressions of community as scales below and above the nation ... A program of shared sovereignty – a new universalism – can gain meaning only if it develops from the ground up, only if it can relate everyday experiences of the good to the universal (Duara 2014:78).

A contributing limitation of national level government in contemporary post-colonial states is their overt attempts to orchestrate the creation of national identities by suppressing popular participation in an era in which societies have “succumbed to capitalist forms of

universal commodification” (Duara 2014:60). This explanation finds concurrence with Dressel and Wesley’s (2014) analysis of the continuing crisis of the national state in Asia, which they conclude is the result of the intertwined impacts of overt identity construction through attempts at totalizing governance at a national scale while subordinating society to the ideology of endlessly hyper economic competition in the name of national survival.

As previously noted, at the city level this takes the form of nationally sponsored city marketing with proclaimed “iconic” mega-projects and other simulacra that are turning cities in touristic theme parks displacing citymaking by residence (Sorkin 1992). These are alienating trends that exclude people from citymaking and place-making that link their identities with the built environment. Through participatory governance processes, cities can be more attuned to local contexts while also part of global flows of people and ideas through networks of cities.

These two attributes of cities and city systems – contextual and transcendent – can provide the urban crucibles for unending hybridities of place-based and transformative urban politics. Recent political events in cities in Asia suggest that cities are taking on these twin roles in moving toward progressive forms of governance. The city is the level at which “civicism” can provide an antidote to “statism” in moving toward a cosmopolis approach toward citizenship, inclusion, distributive justice, and conviviality emanating from diversity. As revitalized by Bell and de-Shalit (2011:4-5) with reference to China, in a global age in which national states are becoming more uniform under the hegemony of global capital, “cities may come to the rescue” through the realization of a civic culture that is both local and transcendent beyond the nation-state.

All of the above lead to the major premise that to the extent that progressive cities are appearing in Asia, they are doing so at a particular juncture in history marked by Asia’s massive urban transition and the rise of cities in a time of widespread discontents that find little or no resolution at national scales. They thus turn to localities where direct action and legitimization of the state are more rooted in local experiences and at a scale at which aspirations of ordinary people are more likely to gain political voice. Variations among cities in processes and outcomes of political change are, however, substantial. Some cities become more entrenched in elitist and corporate machinations while others are able to build up from neighborhood and community mobilizations to create openings for visionary leaders to gain effective power as mayors or city managers. The unevenness of the progressive turn is one of the major subjects for further research.

However defined, how do progressive cities arise to effectively take on the complexity challenges they face today? Several theories are available, but research is as yet insufficient to validate one over another. A large body of literature, for example, points toward economic crises as the triggering mechanisms that can lead to needed political reform. Democratization in Indonesia in 1998, the proximate cause for which was a deep globally-linked financial crises, can be cited a case in point. Other formulations posit that economic growth alone is sufficient for generating a large urban middle class that eventually demands political freedoms and other progressive reforms. Conversely, real world experiences show that political reforms have come through peaceful means and have

appeared in lower and higher income economies alike. Moreover, as previously noted, political change at a national level does not spread evenly or to the same degree among cities. Why some cities turn to progressive governance and others do not cannot be explained by national level phenomena alone.

A more fruitful starting point for answering this question draws from Clavel's (1986) pioneering research on progressive cities, which consistently found that histories of grassroots activism provided the origins for progressive governments to appear. In addition, mayoral leadership is also crucial in its synaptic role of resolving conflict and using the state apparatus to advance progressive agenda. The tentative position taken here as a starting point for further research is that a decisive factor in the rise of progressive cities is a progressive urban culture that, while perhaps not representing the entire populace, is able to bring unfulfilled aspirations of people into political spheres. Research is thus needed in every city on the histories of social mobilizations and the political openings they have or can make toward generating progressive cities from the ground up.

Accepting the above caveats, two types of evidence can be put forth to support the position that progressive cities are rising in Asia. One involves scanning of social discontents, protests and what Friedmann (2011) calls "insurgent planning", namely, the creation of projects against or in the face of opposing political power. The other follows elections of mayors and their records of accomplishments.

Concerning discontents, the rise of civil society accompanied by the proliferation of digital devices for social media and networking have allowed for an increasing variety of discontents about state and corporate uses of power to not only become known far beyond their sites of protest but to also reinforce each other. Of interest here is the large share of these contestations that reflect the 4 pillars of human flourishing introduced here. For example, the "umbrella movement" for democracy in Hong Kong is a call for inclusive participatory governance. This is paralleled by the national mobilizations in Malaysia under the "Bersih" (clean) banner directed toward ending corruption and non-transparent forms of governance. Beginning in 2006 and in 2015, it now has 84 non-government organizations registered in its support (*Straits Times* 2015). Claims for distributive justice have seen a multi-faceted array of protests, ranging from wide-scale resistance to dispossessions of land for private urban land development to demands for better wages, housing and urban services. Desires for spaces for convivial social encounters are manifested in citizens rising to prevent the privatization of public parks in such cities as Tokyo and Hanoi (Douglass 2014). These are paralleled by struggles of migrant workers to have access to public spaces to gather on weekends in Hong Kong, Taipei and Singapore (Huang and Douglass 201). Environmental NGOs and movements also abound in Asia today and are joining with international environmental organizations that go well beyond the confines of the nation-state in arguing for fundamental changes away from the instrumental appropriate of nature.

While discontents leading to protests might be seen as separate events, they are also learning from each other in what Duara (2014) calls a circulatory manner. The Hong Kong umbrella movement that began in 2014, for example, referred to the Occupy Wall Street

Movement that began in New York in 2011 and diffused globally. In carrying the torch forward, other movements in Asia and elsewhere now refer to the Hong Kong demonstrations. Similarly, in 2015 Malaysia Bersih Movement 4.0 organized events in 74 cities around the world, including Hong Kong (*Channel NewsAsia* 2015). More generally, big data being collected on protests around the world indicate that globally “the number of highly politically significant protests has reached an all-time high in the past decade” (Herzog 2015:1). Among the reasons identified for the protests were political disaffection with a new purpose of “exodus from oppression”; economic inequality; and democratization of media.

Electoral processes are also beginning to reflect long-held aspirations of people for progressive forms of governance. Following fundamental democratic reforms after the fall of the Suharto Government in 1998 and subsequent devolution of government to local levels, in 2015 Joko Widodo became the first President of Indonesia who was not recruited from political elites or the military. Instead, his pathway to the presidency began as a progressive mayor of Surakarta who became known for curtailing evictions of low-income households, building public markets and parks, instituting health care for all residents, and many other actions that quickly saw him elected as Governor of Jakarta and less than 2 years later President of Indonesia. Such a rapid rise from mayor of a smaller city to national power through free elections had never occurred in Indonesia. Its representation of the rise of progressive cities as a means of gaining national and international accord is unmistakable.

In Seoul, the election of Mayor Won-soon Park is a parallel story of an independent activist who had not previously held any public office being elected without the backing of major political parties and subsequently being re-elected by the widest margin of any candidate running for office. With backing especially by younger votes, polls taken after the election found that the overriding sentiment was that voters wanted “a new kind of politics” (*BBC News* 2011). The city’s move toward progressive policies and actions is already well documented (Cho 2014).

The political transformations exhibited by elections in Seoul and Indonesia are not the only ones taking place. Preliminary research on progressive cities in Asia highlights the adoption of participatory budgeting in Chengdu (Yi and Cabannes 2015); progressive reforms by local governments in areas of Japan that experienced the worst impacts of the 2011 tsunami and nuclear power plant melt down (Aoki 2015); activism translated into progressive government reforms in Taipei (Huang 2015). Further research is likely to disclose much more evidence of people effectively turning to cities for better lives.

In each case in which more progressive governments have emerged, the process has had origins in grassroots mobilizations around aspirations for political change. This returns the discussion to the idea of urban culture as a key dimension in the rise of progressive cities. This, however, remains speculative until more research is carried out on explaining the emergence of progressive cities among national settings in which many cities remain unresponsive to popular aspirations for reform. Nonetheless, what seems clear is that the imperatives and social energies for progressive urban governance are mounting in Asia.

5. Agenda for Action Research and Networking among Progressive Cities

Discussion on the emergence of progressive cities in Asia is as yet a speculative inquiry into the changes at the level of the local state and the prospects for participatory governance in Asia. A program of research across many cities is required to be able to go fully develop concepts and bring together comparative studies on this subject. By positing a central focus on human flourishing and four supporting pillars, the concept of progressive cities offered here is presented as the beginning of a way forward toward further conceptualization and framework for assessing the performance of cities.

Whatever components might be agreed upon among researchers, a fundamental position taken here is that all must be assessed in relation to each other. Current research on cities tends to be done by sectors or on specific issues. Such approaches risk missing impacts of the interplay and interdependences among all dimensions. Raising incomes, for example, can increase the destruction of the environment through greater demand for fossil fuels used by automobiles. Similarly, clearing slums to create green spaces for environmental management raises serious questions about social justice. Even the most unprogressive city can have one or two progressive actions while becoming less progressive in the majority of its policies. Seeing the city as a whole through a multi-dimensional lens is the only way to avoid myopic assessments that proclaim cities to be progressive from partial views of their governance record.

With this understanding, whatever progress is made along one dimension must also be judged in terms of its impacts on others. Without such vigilance, human flourishing will be compromised in the long run, if not immediately. This advocacy joins similar calls for holistic approaches to citymaking in many parallel approaches toward progressive cities such as the Manifesto by Cabannes and Ross (2013) composed of 12 imperatives, Friedmann's (2000) idea of the Good City, various concepts of livable cities (Ho and Douglass 2008), and the call for Just Cities (Fainstein 2005).

All of these considerations lead to seven key questions for applied action research:

1. Can an **overarching concept of a progressive city** be established that reflects contemporary realities and aspirations of people living in Asia's cities?
2. **How do progressive cities emerge?** Are urban culture and grassroots mobilizations the key? Are they crisis driven, or can they appear in non-crisis situations? Is a "magic mayor" the key to transformative politics for progressive cities?
3. What **governance processes** are involved in making a city progressive? Is democracy required? How can urban residents be routinely included in direct forms of participation in public decisionmaking?
4. What **policy tools** are available to move progressive intentions into practice?
5. How can we **measure the performance** of progressive cities in both quantitative and qualitative terms? Would a Progressive City Index be useful as a means to effectively compete against livable city and other widely adopted indices?
6. What are the keys factors for **sustaining the progressive governance of cities** through time? Conversely, why do such cities fail to last beyond a short time frame?

7. Can a **network** of mutually supportive progressive cities be created to give more prominence to the idea of progressive cities as a way to shift discourses on the idea of the city?

On the last point, a way to begin would be to periodically hold Progressive Cities forums to bring together people, institutions and resources for research. Today many world urban forums are regularly held, but few, if any, yet exist that place the idea of progressive cities on the agenda. In Asia, most such forums remain framed in developmentalist constructs that focus on material and economic resources and benefits rather than on the 4 dimensions of human flourishing presented above. The proposal here is to shift the frame to participatory governance of cities that includes associational life, public spaces, grassroots economies, neighborhoods and environmental as well as social justice and equality in access to the public domain. The accent is on mobilizations and engagements of city residents in governance. It is not simply to record how cities are making progress but rather how cities can be constituted as progressive forms of governance as a socially engaged political process.

Through such forums and subsequent comparative research projects, the hope is to shift discourses on cities by directly engaging multiple actors, including civil society organizations and local governments as well as academic institutions and business interests, in its deliberations on how governance can become more progressive as both process and outcomes. They would also help to focus attention on the production of urban spaces by and with residents, from lanes and neighborhoods to municipal and city region scales. The forum would bring real world experiences to explicate how the city as a physical as well as social realm is produced and what are its consequences for the quality of everyday life and for our planet.

In raising the idea of a progressive city to an international scale, forums leading to collaborative action research on what cities are actually doing would promote mutual learning processes and solidarity among cities that are endeavoring to create progressive forms of governance but are often struggling for recognition and support within their own national settings. Hopefully, through such engagements, human and planetary flourishing can together find mutually supportive ways forward.

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