



The  
Economist

# The world goes to town

A special report on cities | May 5th 2007



# The world goes to town

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After this year the majority of people will live in cities. Human history will ever more emphatically become urban history, says John Grimond

**W**HETHER you think the human story begins in a garden in Mesopotamia known as Eden, or more prosaically on the savannahs of present-day east Africa, it is clear that *Homo sapiens* did not start life as an urban creature. Man's habitat at the outset was dominated by the need to find food, and hunting and foraging were rural pursuits. Not until the end of the last ice age, around 11,000 years ago, did he start building anything that might be called a village, and by that time man had been around for about 120,000 years. It took another six millennia, to the days of classical antiquity, for cities of more than 100,000 people to develop. Even in 1800 only 3% of the world's population lived in cities. Sometime in the next few months, though, that proportion will pass the 50% mark, if it has not done so already. Wisely or not, *Homo sapiens* has become *Homo urbanus*.

In terms of human history this may seem a welcome development. It would be contentious to say that nothing of consequence has ever come out of the countryside. The wheel was presumably a rural invention. Even city-dwellers need bread as well as circuses. And if Dr Johnson and Shelley were right to say that poets are the true legislators of mankind, then all those hills and lakes and other rural delights must be given credit for inspiring them.

But the rural contribution to human progress seems slight compared with the

urban one. Cities' development is synonymous with human development. The first villages came with the emergence of agriculture and the domestication of animals: people no longer had to wander as they hunted and gathered but could instead draw together in settlements, allowing some to develop particular skills and all to live in greater safety from predators. After a while the farmers could produce surpluses, at least in good times, and the various products of the villagers—grain, meat, cloth, pots—could be exchanged. Around 2000BC metal tokens, the forerunners of coins, were produced as receipts for quantities of grain placed in granaries. Not coincidentally, cities began to take shape at about the same time.

They did so, first, in the Fertile Crescent, the sweep of productive land that ran through Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Palestine, from which Jericho, Ur, Nineveh and Babylon (pictured above) would emerge. In time came other cities in other places: Harappa and Mohenjodaro in the Indus valley, Memphis and Thebes in Egypt, Yin and Shang cities in China, Mycenae in Greece, Knossos in Crete, Ugarit in Syria and, most spectacularly, Rome, the first great metropolis, which boasted, at its zenith in the third century AD, a population of more than 1m people.

Living together meant security. But people also drew together for the practical ▶▶

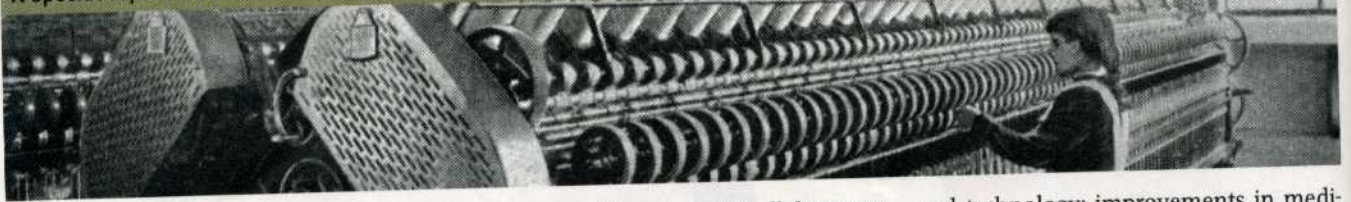
A list of sources is at

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▶ advantages of being in a particular place: by a river or spring, on a defensible hill or peninsula, next to an estuary or other source of food. Also important, argue historians, was a settlement's capacity to draw people to it as a meeting-place, often for sacred or spiritual purposes. Graves, groves, even caves might become shrines or places for ceremonies and rituals, to which people would make a pilgrimage. Man did not live by bread alone.

But bread, in the broadest sense, was important. People came to cities not just to worship but to trade—the shrine was often the market, too—and the goods they bought and sold were not just farm products but the manufactures of urban artisans and skilled workers. The city became a centre of exchange, both of goods and of ideas, and so it also became a centre of learning, innovation and sophistication.

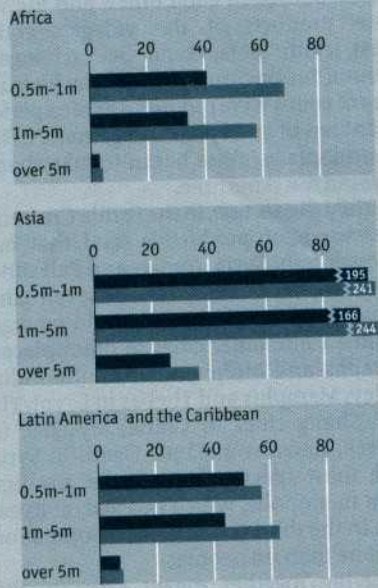
This was so not just in the Fertile Crescent but, over the centuries, in Alexandria and Amsterdam, Cambay and Constantinople, London and Lisbon, Teotihuacán and Tenochtitlán. It was in the city that man was liberated from the tyranny of the soil and could develop skills, learn from other people, study, teach and develop the social arts that made country folk seem bumpkins. *Homo urbanus* did not just live in a town: he was urbane.

Cities were much more than all of this,

**More cities**

Number of cities by population

■ 2000 ■ 2015



Source: UN-Habitat

of course, and they were not all the same. As they developed, some were most notable for their religious role (latter-day Rome), as the hub of an empire (Constantinople, Vijayanagara), as centres of administration (Beijing), political development (Florence), learning (Bologna, Fez), commerce (Hamburg) or a special product (Toledo). Some flourished, some died, their longevity depending on factors as varied as conquest, plague, misgovernment or economic collapse.

**Technology turns even-handed**

Whatever the particular circumstances of a city, though, its vigour was likely to be affected by technological change. Just as it was improvements in farming that brought about the surpluses that made possible the first fixed settlements, so it was improvements in transport that made possible the development of trade on which the prosperity of so many cities depended. Other technological changes made it possible to survive in a city. The Romans, for instance, constructed aqueducts to bring fresh water to their towns and sewers to provide sanitation.

But only the rich benefited. Most Romans, and many city-dwellers throughout history, lived in squalor, and many died of it. Towns were crowded and insanitary; people were often malnourished; and disease spread fast. Though cities grew in size and number for long periods, they could decline and fall, too. Between 1000 and 1300 Europe's urban population more than doubled, to about 70m (thanks partly to a new system of crop rotation, made possible by better tools). Then, with the Black Death, it fell by a quarter. Country people died too, but the city-dwellers were especially vulnerable. Their health depended above all on clean water and sanitation, which few had, and cheap soap and medicines, which had yet to be invented.

Not surprisingly, the next big change in the development of the city also turned on a leap in technology: the invention of engines and manufacturing machinery. The Industrial Revolution did nothing at first to make urban life easier, but it did provide jobs—lots of them. With the new factories of the industrial age that began in the late 18th century was born an entirely new urban era. Peasants left the land in their multitudes to live in new cities, first in the north of England, then all over Europe and North America. By 1900, 13% of the world's population had become urban.

The latest leap, from 13% to 50% in just 107 years, also owes something to science

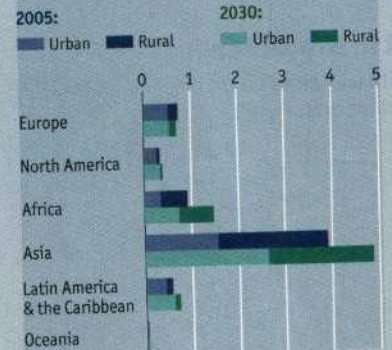
and technology: improvements in medicine, coupled with new knowledge about ways to avoid disease, have enabled more and more people to live together without succumbing as once they did to diarrhoea, tuberculosis, cholera and other pestilences. The same developments, however, have similarly lengthened lives in the countryside, leading to a huge increase in rural population. Human ingenuity has not matched this increase with commensurate growth in rural prosperity. As a result, ever more villagers have been upping sticks to seek a better life in the city.

The sheer scale and speed of the current urban expansion make it unlike any of the big changes that have punctuated urban history. It mostly consists of poor people migrating in unprecedented numbers, and then producing babies on a similarly unprecedented scale. It is thus largely a phenomenon of poor and middle-income countries; the rich world has put most of its urbanisation behind it.

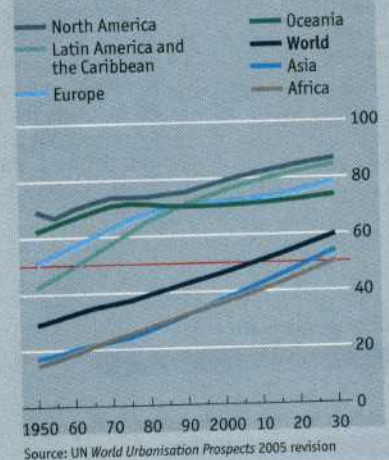
In poor countries, though, the trend is ▶

**More city-dominance**

Urban and rural population by region, bn



Urban population by region, %



Source: UN World Urbanisation Prospects 2005 revision



