From Nationalism to Civicism

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BEIJING—“I love New York” is perhaps the most successful slogan in modern history. Cities around the world are copying this slogan. “I love Beijing”—in English—is commonly seen on T-shirts in the Chinese capital. It’s easy to be cynical, to say that the whole thing is driven by money. The “I love Toronto” website is advertised as a “guide to living well in Toronto,” which turns out to mean buying and selling real estate.

But it’s not just a slogan: Many people really do love their cities. Countries, on the other hand, do not use such slogans. You don’t often see people walking around with “I love Canada” T-shirts. And, if history is any guide, one can have good reason to worry about governments that expect their citizens to express such naked, unqualified patriotism in public. Countries are too big, complex and diverse—and potentially dangerous—to merit unqualified love.

Yet there is no single word to express the sentiment of loving a city. Patriotism applies to countries or states, not cities. Hence, we need to coin a new word—let’s call it “civicism”—to express this sentiment. As the world urbanizes, civicism is spreading to distant corners of the world where people were once attached to villages or towns, and a new class of global cities is emerging and competing for the affection of their residents as well as for new migrants and tourists.

Today, more than half the world’s population lives in cities, compared with less than 3 percent in 1800. By 2025, China alone is expected to have 15 supercities with a population of 25 million each.

There are reasons to welcome such developments. Globalized cities that allow for free movement of capital, humans and goods tend to have a more open-minded attitude toward foreigners and historically marginalized peoples. True, cities cannot pro-
vide the rich sense of community life characteristic of villages and small towns. But residents of cities often take pride in, and struggle to nourish, the particular ways of life of their own cities. Montrealers struggle to promote the French character of their city, Jerusalemites struggle to promote its religious identity, and so on. In fact, cities that seem to express a particular identity, or ethos, typically generate the most intense forms of urban pride.

Cities that combine the openness of the global with an emphasis on local particularity also tend to have an international reputation that attracts visitors. People go to Oxford to experience its ethos of learning, and they visit Paris to partake of its romantic spirit. Of course, locals may disparage the stereotypes that attract tourists and visitors. But few reject the ethos itself. People in the “marginalized” neighborhoods of Oxford criticize the elitist approach to education, forcing social actors to rethink issues of fair access to education. The Hollywood idea of love is rejected by Parisians themselves: Their own idea of romance is meant to contrast with bourgeois life. Social critics in Jerusalem argue for an interpretation of religion that holds people, rather than things and rocks, sacred. And Beijing attracts the nation’s leading political critics. In short, an ethos also provides the main source of political argument for residents of a city.

The idea that cities have a distinctive ethos—a shared way of life that informs the thinking and judgments of its inhabitants—has a long history. In the ancient world, Athens was synonymous with democracy and Sparta represented military discipline. Jerusalem expressed religious values, and the twin cities that made up the Zhou dynasty’s capital at Louyang flourished as a commercial metropolis.

Does it make sense to think of cities as representing different social values in the modern world? Today’s urban areas are huge, diverse and pluralistic, and it may seem peculiar to say that one city represents this or that. But just think of Beijing and Jerusalem: Can cities get any more different? Both cities are designed with core concentric circles, but one core expresses spiritual, religious values and the other represents political power. Clearly, some cities do express and prioritize different social and political values. Even cities within countries—say, Montreal and Toronto, Beijing and Shanghai, or Jerusalem and Tel Aviv—seem to express strikingly different values. Chicago’s official website explicitly distinguishes the city’s character from that of New York. Cities, as much as countries, are often sites of collective self-determination.

But is that a good thing? If people fight too hard to affirm the uniqueness of their nation, it can easily spill into hatred or warfare. But cities are different. In fact, civicism can curb the excesses of nationalism. Except for city-states like Singapore, cities do not have armies, so civic pride is less likely to take dangerous forms. Most people
do have a need to affirm social particularity, and it is usually better for that need to be attached to cities. People with a strong sense of civicism do not need a strong sense of nationalism to feel good about themselves. It’s true that the residents of capital cities are often quite nationalistic. It’s also true that people tend to rally around the flag in times of crisis, such as a major foreign-sponsored terrorist attack. But interviews we conducted in nine cities around the world show that most “city-zens” have their own sense of identity that need not stretch in full form to the nation.

There are other reasons to affirm the ethos of one’s city. Globalization has a dark side, and nowhere is this more true than in China, where 30 years of market reform have destroyed many traditional neighborhoods and ways of life. Hence, cities in China and elsewhere are investing thought, time and money in protecting their unique ethos, which helps them to resist the homogenizing tendencies of globalization. In Changsha, city-zens are consulted to determine what makes the “spirit” of their city unique, and such findings influence urban planning and protection of cultural heritage. Such efforts at city-branding are common elsewhere. Tel Aviv’s official website mentions the city’s aim to be the gay capital of Israel and one of the world centers of the gay community.

Cities with an ethos can also accomplish desirable political goals that are harder to achieve at the level of the state. We will wait a long time for politicians in the United States or China to implement serious plans to deal with climate change. But cities like Portland and Hangzhou take pride in their environmental ethos and go far beyond what the state can do in terms of environmental protection. New York City, the self-styled “capital of the world,” can draw on its ethos of ambition to effectively carry out its own foreign policy. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has undertaken his own climate diplomacy, circumventing state-based summity by directly inviting hundreds of mayors from around the world to focus on how urban leaders can share policy initiatives and technologies to reduce emissions.

There are good economic reasons to promote the ethos of a city. Cities that develop a clear identity can help to revive moribund economies. One beautiful museum transformed Bilbao from a declining industrial city into a mecca of the art world. In China, cultural tourists are attracted to Qufu because they want to learn about the home base of Confucianism and in turn help to develop the local economy. Most people tend not to worry about a city that promotes Confucianism, but such policies are much more controversial at level of the state, which is expected to be more even-handed.

Last, a city’s particular ethos can also inspire social and political theorizing of global importance. The competing models of Athens and Sparta provided the intellectual
fodder for both Plato’s and Aristotle’s political theories, and the most creative period in Chinese social and political thinking emerged out of the ferment of ideas in different Warring States cities. John Locke’s “Letter Concerning Toleration” was directly inspired by his stay in Amsterdam, the most open-minded and tolerant city of 17th-century Europe. And surely it is no coincidence that Charles Taylor’s theories of multiculturalism and language rights emerged from Montreal, where residents inevitably must navigate the tricky linguistic politics of the city.

So, there it is. Please love your city, and if you must choose, love it more than your country.