



10-1-2013

Megacities: A Survey and Prognosis

Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Farhat-Holzman, Laina (2013) "Megacities: A Survey and Prognosis," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 69 : No. 69 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol69/iss69/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Megacities: A Survey and Prognosis

Laina Farhat-Holzman
Lfarhat102@aol.com

Introduction

The role of geography phases in and out of civilizational studies, always competing with the roles of the individual and those of politics and culture. Today, modern geography is getting another run as a major player in how civilizations behave and interact. Jared Diamond's important work, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, 1997, took on the question of geography's role in the civilizational advantages of Eurasia over the New World and Africa. Robert D. Kaplan's *The Revenge of Geography* (2012) shows the inevitability of much of today's geopolitics that loom even above individuals and events.

One aspect of geography includes the evolution of megacities in developing countries and how such cities affect the behavior of their residents, including those attempting to govern them. Climate, aesthetics (an ignored topic), sociological issues, population explosion and the new fertility crash impact populations only recently living a village life.

Demographic changes are part of the study of geo-politics, as are the physical features where cities are located. Megacities must be studied by demographers, economists, medical practitioners, educators, and political scientists, which makes the discipline complicated and interactive. This paper can only provide an overview of a topic that will weigh most heavily on civilizationists for years to come.

Megacities

The rise of megacities is not a new phenomenon in the world. One fascinating study by Tertius Chandler¹ traced the world's largest cities back to the first in 3100 BCE. Since there were few censuses before the end of the 18th century in Europe, he used travelers' estimates, data on the number of households within cities, the number of wagons carrying foodstuffs for cities, the size of the military, the area of city walls, church records, food supplies distributed to the citizens, and even estimates of lives lost during disasters. These estimates include most of the suburbs as well.

Chandler provides a fascinating list, part of which is offered on the next page:

City	Year it became No. 1	Population
Memphis, Egypt	3100 BCE	>30,000
Ur, Babylonia	2030	65,000
Babylon, Babylonia	612	First over 200,000
Changan, Xian, China	198 CE	400,000
Rome	25	450,000
Constantinople	340	400,000
Baghdad	775	First over 1 million
Cordova, Spain	800	700,000
(no more megacities until 15 th century.)		
Beijing, China	1425	600,000
Constantinople	1650	700,000
Beijing, China	1710	900,000
London, England	1825	First over 5 million
New York	1925	First over 10 million
Tokyo	1965	First over 20 million

Of course, since 1965, many other cities have joined the list of megacities, some of them with severe problems in managing these communities. The difficulty in assessing the accuracy of these numbers can be seen in almost every printed table, such as that in Wikipedia, which posts conflicting figures from a number of sources. Those numbers provided by the United Nations are the most problematical and are at the moment on the low side. The UN numbers have been provided by the host nations themselves (I called and asked), which aside from the developed world, make little pretense of taking a census.

However, other institutions have posted their estimates for the largest metropolitan areas in the world today, and a number appear to be over 20 million: Cairo, Egypt; Dhaka, Bangladesh; Istanbul, Turkey; Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo; Lagos, Nigeria; Lima, Peru; Mumbai, India; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Shanghai, China; and Tehran, Iran are among these. In addition are a rising number of other, some new, cities in China.

In all of these cities, the countryside farming villages are emptying out, creating huge slums in their country's major cities. As terrible as these slums are, life there appears to offer more possibilities than life in feudal villages. Furthermore, as these countries are pushed into democratizing, the new city dwellers will vote, a daunting prospect for democracy's future.

Says *Forbes*, urbanization is continuing rapidly, and it is estimated that by 2030, 60% of the world's people will be city dwellers, "billions of people will be living in vast slums in the developing world, facing a long list of urban ills on which starvation may be just another bullet point."

Forbes further notes that there is some hope that the developing world might learn from the most developed countries some techniques for surviving such growth. Tokyo, in 1900, was the world's seventh largest city with 1.5 million people (London was the largest that year with 6.5 million). Today, Greater Tokyo is the world's largest city with a population of 35.2 million. But Japan is having a population crash, which means that the growth of Tokyo is beginning to slow down. But even with 35.2 million, Tokyo is a modern, very well run metropolitan area. This is not so for the majority of countries, such as a number of those listed above. For example, Lagos had 300,000 people in 1950; it now has an estimated 16 million people, and it is a city already crumbling into chaos.

*The New Left Review*³ ran an article by Mike Davis, "The Third World's Megacities," in 2004, with an ominous first paragraph:

Sometime in the next year, a woman will give birth in the Lagos slum of Ajegunle, a young man will flee his village in west Java for the bright lights of Jakarta, or a farmer will move his impoverished family into one of Lima's innumerable *pueblos jovenes*. The exact event is unimportant and it will pass entirely unnoticed. Nonetheless, it will constitute a watershed in human history. For the first time the urban population of the earth will outnumber the rural. Indeed, given the imprecision of Third World censuses, this epochal transition may already have occurred.

See also: Koonings, Kees, and Krujit, Dirk, *Megacities: the Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*, Zed Books, 2010.

The fate of megacities appears to be a game changer indeed.

England's Experience

Even well before the Industrial Revolution, during the time of Henry VIII, the nobility were enclosing grazing lands for the wool industry, forcing villagers to flee to London to find work. London had its first growth then. But by the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in 18th century England, the countryside further emptied into cities with little infrastructure to care for them. Throughout Europe, this burgeoning growth made worse the problems of crime, filth, and diseases caused by crowding, lack of sanitation, and contaminated water. The Black Death cycles were over by then, but typhoid, tuberculosis, typhus, and other diseases cut swaths through urban populations.⁴

Fortunately for Europe, these problems were addressed by the emerging scientific revolution. For the first time since Rome fell, cities began to have safe water and real sanitation systems. The discoveries of modern medicine began to treat the nastier endemic diseases. Today, modern cities in the developed world have become

increasingly livable. The rural exodus has been absorbed, educated, and integrated into the urban world and its suburbs. While not perfect, modern cities are by and large a triumph of order and the best of them continue to attract and flourish. This is not the case with the megacities of the developing world.

Africa

Probably the worst problems of mega-city explosions are found in sub-Saharan, Central, East and West Africa. The population explosion and the end of colonial occupation have pushed millions of people from villages into urban slums of such appalling ugliness that it boggles the mind. An American NGO that helps the handicapped around the Third World to make artificial limbs, wheel chairs, and promote awareness of the needs of such people, has an uphill struggle. They sent me a picture of a man on crutches (which is a rarity because the handicapped are hidden) trying to cross a main street in Lagos. There was a panorama of wall-to-wall cars, gridlocked against any pedestrian crossing, especially one who could not run, not to mention hobble.

It is a tribute to the innate health of many urban Africans that they have not been swept with infectious diseases from their inadequate water and sewage systems. But already, diseases such as AIDS have plagued the continent with devastating consequences, particularly for women and children.⁵

India

Again, it is a tribute to the hardiness of those who have survived childhood in village India that they can survive their megacities! India, with a population of over one billion, has few modern sewage systems. Children often run barefoot through slum streets full of raw sewage, in the shadow of the latest skyscrapers and lavish penthouses.⁶

The rivers of India are so polluted that it is a miracle that the millions who travel to the confluence of these rivers to take a sacred dip in the waters do not succumb. But then again, in Medieval Europe, most people survived the polluted holy water in the cathedrals. In both cases, this must be the power of faith over science.

Unlike some of the megacities in the developing world, Mumbai, however, is somewhat unique and planning is going on. Planners estimate that by 2031, the metropolitan region will increase to 34 million. The geography of the city precludes urban sprawl, something that may make transport strategy feasible. I would hope that by then India might have finally addressed its failure to have clean water and sewage systems.

China

Population explosion has created such demands on what were once China's great rivers that some are now going dry before reaching the ocean. Those not dry are heavily polluted. But worse than the water issue in China is the air pollution in their megacity Beijing, now reaching levels that are already bringing an early death to the vulnerable young and old. This pollution is beginning to have political ramifications on China's ruling party.

One would think that having a command society (the government makes all major decisions) would make city planning easier to implement. However, there are major complaints of political corruption and the consequences of bad planning create disasters so terrible that the generally stoic Chinese public raises the specter of public demonstration. Most of the megacities being built in western China today are of dangerously sloppy construction, a factor that outrages victims of earthquakes or floods in these regions and is beginning to create political problems for the government.

Aesthetic Consequences of Megacities

When I see pictures of the slums of Mumbai and those of Nigeria and the Congo, I wonder what the effect of such ugliness and barren landscapes is on children. Even filthy medieval European villages and towns had beautiful countryside around them---a place to escape when city life became too horrible. In addition, medieval cities had splendid cathedrals open to all people where something beautiful could be seen. Not so in today's megacities, which must have an effect on a child's psyche and perhaps play a role in the brutality of life in such places. This is an issue that warrants investigation by psychologists.

Geo-Political Case Studies: Turkey, Iran, and Russia

Turkey

The problems of both Turkey and Iran are related. Both are countries with clear national identities and histories. Both countries face an emptying of rural populations to the cities, the majority of them in the national population centers. Such population explosions strain infrastructure and bode ill for political security.⁷

Turkey began with the Ottoman seizure of Byzantium in 1452 and soon became an enormous Ottoman Empire, comprised of numerous ethnicities and in some cases peoples with prior national histories (Greece, Armenia, Egypt, Morocco).

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of World War I, the army retreated to their original national homeland, today's Turkey. They drove out the lingering

population of former occupants, Christian Greeks and Armenians. The Kurds, an Iranian tribe, remained, because they were Muslim. The Kurds comprise the only ethnic problem faced by Turkey today, and it is still unresolved.

Turkey's main problem stems from the unevenness of its development. Western Turkey was the beneficiary of enforced modernization, at the hands of a respected president (with the army behind him), Kamal Atatürk. Western Turkey, and particularly Istanbul (once Constantinople), were brought up to western standards in literacy, health, and relatively orderly governance. All visible signs of Islam were banned: the veil, the fez, and Arabic script. Islam was deliberately relegated to the realm of the personal, and its beautiful edifices to near museums.

Eastern Turkey has a strikingly different geography from the West. It is actually part of the Iranian geography of water-lean high plateaus. Agriculture has become increasingly difficult as population increases and water sources prove inadequate. A grand government water project is not yet finished, despite decades in the making. People are leaving the villages for great cities (including those in Europe), living in slums on the outskirts of metropolises.

But unlike the slums of India and Africa, Turkish slums are clean and orderly. This is in part attributed to Turkish culture, which is mostly law abiding and generally not volatile. Villagers have also brought with them the one familiar institution in an otherwise alien modern city: traditional Islam. Herein lies conflict with the secular modern Turkey.

Because of democratic elections, these overwhelming hordes of traditional Muslims have elected one of their own, the first Islamist prime minister, Recep Erdogan, reluctantly permitted by the professional military who were once the guardians of secular Turkish democracy.

The Islamist leadership has undertaken a careful, slow eroding of the secular nature of Turkey. He has intimidated and reorganized the army, rendering it his tool rather than the nation's protector. The headscarf has returned in the public sphere and the prime minister has made it clear that women should be at home having babies for their country (in the face of a sharp crash of fertility).

In this orderly country, one issue has emerged that reflects the worst consequences of the new megacities: abuse of women. Turkey is near the top of the global list for murder and battery against women; I do caution, however, that they are on such a list because statistics are being kept by secular women's organizations who publish them for the world to see. Such attention is not permitted in such other countries as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran, all of whom may well have even worse numbers than Turkey, although without watchdog statistics.

The Anatolia News Agency (July 13, 2013) reported that incidents of domestic violence in Turkey increased from 48,000 in 2008 to over 80,000 in 2011, representing an increase of nearly 70 percent. This data was gathered from Turkey's law enforcement agencies. The majority of this abuse appears to be worst in the more pious rural areas of the country.

Wife abuse statistics may not indicate that conditions are worse for women today than ever before. The difference is that someone is counting. It is also possible that if this problem has increased, it may be the result of stress: stress of removal from rural villages to unfamiliar city slums; stress of women learning that they do not have to suffer abuse in silence; stress on the men who find any challenges from their women and daughters insufferable; and stress on the economy to absorb their numbers. Women are just the canary in the mine when it comes to stress.

Iran

Everything that applies to Turkey also applies to Iran. Iran also went through a steep modernization period under Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son, resulting in their first population explosion in centuries. Because modern technology does not require the peasant labor that farming required in the past, villages have emptied out, swelling every city, particularly Tehran. I lived in Tehran when the population of the city was two million. It is now perhaps 14 million for the city proper, and close to 20 million including suburbs, with a combination of modern amenities such as highways, trains, airports, water systems, sewage systems, skyscrapers, and city parks. However, it also has air pollution nearly as deadly as Beijing's.

Unlike Turkey's creeping Islamization, Iran's was born in a 1979 revolution that restored Islam's old power, including interference with the educational system, the civil service, courts, and most egregious of all, removal of women from equal status, along with a return of the oppressive Muslim dress code and curtailment of personal freedom.

This process is not sitting well in cities; it is difficult to give up certain social freedoms once one has had them. The educated class is unhappy, but so are the new slum dwellers from the countryside. For them, religion is their only familiar institution, one that is not only provided by Muslim operatives from their villages, but by politicians who provide benefits to curry votes in the make-believe democratic elections.

The stress of trying to bring former peasants into urban life is a global issue. It is alienating and stressful to people who have experienced one culture for centuries and are now plunged into modern urban society that frightens and repels them.

Women are the hot button issue that makes such stresses especially painful. Modernity demands the equality of the genders, an equality that threatens power structures down to

the family level. It is very difficult for women without education or the means to support themselves to abandon the former culture of male dominance. They recognize the devil they know, not the devil they do not know. On men, however, this stress is worse because they have the most to lose in modernization. It is difficult to give up total, life-and-death control over one's family in patriarchal societies. Islamic and traditional Hindu village cultures are having the most difficulty with this loss of control, and their frustrations are being acted out against "enemies" considered easy targets, their womenfolk.

Russia

According to the editors of *Stratfor* (a strategic forecasts think tank), Russia's population of 143 million is expected to decline nearly 10 percent by 2030. The drop is mainly among ethnic Russians; however, for the moment, the population of Muslims, both indigenous and immigrant, is actually increasing. The decline of ethnic Russians and the increase in the Muslim population means Muslims may comprise 16 percent of the population by 2030. Some estimates put this figure at more than 20 percent, due to illegal immigration.⁸

Of course, little noted by these estimates is that if the Muslim population modernizes, their fertility rates will resemble those of the Russian population.

Today, however, the increasing Muslim share of the Russian population has spawned an ultranationalist backlash. Over the past three years, large nationwide protests have demanded immigration reform and an end to subsidies for Muslim parts of the North Caucasus. A rise in ultra-Orthodoxy played into this, with religious-based vigilante groups trying to take responsibility for Russian security.

What happens when the Russian military must find recruits in a declining population of ethnic Russians? *Stratfor* notes that Moscow has to downgrade its ambitions from maintaining a million man army to maintaining an 800,000-strong one. The country's demographic changes have also prompted debate inside the Kremlin regarding whether and how Muslims should be integrated into the army.

Stratfor further notes: "In another major demographic change, the first generation born after the fall of the Soviet Union is coming of age. Approximately 21 percent of Russians were born after the fall of the Soviet Union. This shift has changed the mindset of the population. The new generation never knew a world dominated by Russia and the United States during the Cold War, and they were too young to understand much of the chaos of the Yeltsin era. Most of this generation's experiences occurred under a stable and relatively strong Russia under Putin. Thanks to the Internet, the younger generation also has had many more opportunities for exposure to the outside world than

were previously possible.” More than 50 percent of Russians now use the Internet, up from less than 10 percent in 2006.

Stratfor again: “Because of these changes, political discourse has become much more varied inside Russia -- something that has put extraordinary pressure on the Kremlin. Anti-Muslim sentiment, the generational changes and the expanded political consciousness all came to a head in 2011 and 2012, when large anti-Kremlin protests swept the country. The protests seemingly caught the Kremlin off guard. Moscow scrambled to respond, instituting a series of sweeping changes to government policy, demoting or purging key government members, and then cracking down on the protesters. In light of the new situation, the Kremlin has reconsidered how best to maintain control.”

Predictions

Modernization is inevitably on the move and tradition, both autocratic and Islamist, is fighting a losing game. But in the interim, conflict will be a norm. An unexplained fertility crash in the worst of these places will provide eventual relief.⁹

A declining population will take the stress off modernization and may well raise the status of women. In addition, Islam is facing an increasing demand for a reformation in which the religion can live with modernity. The current spate of Islamist governments in the wake of the Arab Spring is being challenged by people who do not like what they see in theocracies.¹⁰

Traditional Asian societies such as China and South Korea have made the transition to modernization successfully. It will be more difficult for the Muslim world, but the trajectory is inevitable.

But most important of all, there are predictions that today’s dysfunctional megacities will eventually adopt the city planning methods of the developed world and will have much better outcomes than those we see today.¹¹

The first necessary change is to recognize the problems. That is happening today.

NOTES

¹Tertius Chandler, *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census*, Edwin Mellen, Revised ed. November 1987.

²Mark Lewis, “Megacities of the Future,” *Forbes Magazine*, 2007.

³Mike Davis, “The Third World’s Megacities,” *The New Left Review* 2004.

⁴Claire Russell and W.M.S. Russell, *Population Crises and Population Cycles*, Northfields Prospect, London, 1999, provides an overview of the cyclical nature of these urban problems.

- ⁵For a closer look at Lagos Nigeria, among Africa's worst, see "Lagos, Nigeria Facts," *National Geographic*, 2006-7, and "Nigeria: Lagos, the Mega-City of Slums," *Energypublisher.com*.
- ⁶"Mumbai" Type of Geographical entity, *World-gazeteer.com*, 2010.
- ⁷See Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, Random House, 2012.
- ⁸Strategic Forecasts (*Stratfor*), "Russia After Putin: The Demographic Challenge," Part 2 of a 3-part series on Russia after Putin, June 25, 2013.
- ⁹Margaret Eby, "The Coming Population Crash: The Overpopulation Myth," *Salon*, April 19, 2010.
- ¹⁰David Ignatius, "A Sea Change in the Muslim World," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, February 9, 2013. Also, Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Demographic Future, What Population Growth—and Decline—Means for the Global Economy," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2010.
- ¹¹Mark Lewis, "Megacities of the Future," *Forbes.com*, 2007-06-11. Also Hall, Peter; Bujis, Steve; Tam, Wendy; and Tunas, Devisari, *Megacities: Exploring a Sustainable Future*, 2010.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Chandler, Tertius, *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census*, Edwin Mellen, Revised ed. November 1987
- Diamond, Jared, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, Norton, 1997.
- Hall, Peter, Bujis, Steve, Tam, Wendy, Tunas, Devisari, *Megacities: Exploring a Sustainable Future*, 2010.
- Ignatius, David, "A Sea Change in the Muslim World," February 9, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*
- Kaplan, Robert D: *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, Random House, 2012.
- Koonings, Kees, and Kruijt, Dirk, *Megacities: the Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*, Zed Books, 2010.
- Russell, Claire and Russell, W. M. S, *Population Crises and Population Cycles*, Northfields Prospect, London, 1999.

Selected Journal Articles

- Eberstadt, Nicholas, "The Demographic Future, What Population Growth—and Decline—Means for the Global Economy," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2010.
- Lewis, Mark, "Megacities of the Future," *Forbes Magazine*, 2007.
- How Big Can Cities Get?" *New Scientist Magazine*, June 17, 2006, p. 41.
- "Lagos, Nigeria Facts," *National Geographic*, 2006-7.
- "Nigeria: Lagos, the Mega-City of Slums," *Energypublisher.com*, September 1, 2010.
- "Mumbai" Type of Geographical entity, *World-gazeteer.com*, 2010.
- "Planet of Slums ---The Third World's Megacities." *Blackcommentator.com*, September 1, 2010.

“Russia After Putin: The Demographic Challenge,” Part 2 of a 3-part series on Russia after Putin, *Stratfor (Strategic Forecasts)*, June 25, 2013.

“7 Billion, *National Geographic Magazine*, January 2011.

“The Third World’s Megacities,” *New Left Review*, 2004.