

Knowledge of Festivals: The Mega-City in the Developing World

by

Sheldon Wein

Professor of Philosophy and of International Development Studies

Saint Mary's University

sheldon.wein@gmail.com**Introduction**

When it comes to organizing social interaction we have devoted the attention of some of our greatest minds to two deeply connected matters: economics and morals. This was appropriate for we needed knowledge of the former to learn how to enable us to have the means to survive and live well and the latter to enable us to protect lives worth living. But too little attention has been paid to politeness and good manners. This is a matter than urgently needs correction.

The mores—and here I use the term broadly to include, morals, religions, superstitions, traditions, rules of etiquette, and patterns of belief—which arise and survive when people live together in small groups cause much greater problems when taken to larger social groups. The intolerance so typical of the village—the homophobia, the oppression of women, the exclusion of those with divergent religious views, the worship of tradition, the you choose your favorite stupidity that some members of our species believe about others members of our species—causes much more serious difficulties and dangers when people with such views come together to live in mega-cities. Whether the (alleged) observation made by thinkers from Adam Smith, through Karl Marx, to Benjamin Friedman, that economic growth which occurs most frequently, surely, and dramatically in urban settings, brings with it moral progress is correct, one thing is clear, lack of moral progress is much more of a problem in the mega-city than it is in the village. Overcoming the moral failings of villages seems an intractable problem for our species. Overcoming the moral failings of urbanites may not be.

Everyone agrees that the rules enabling human interaction to succeed vary with the circumstances and that the circumstances of humans have recently been changing quite rapidly and, consequently, with these changes we have had to alter the social rules that enable us to interact tolerably well. The changes in our collective circumstances over the past four centuries has been dramatic:

- then almost everyone was badly off
- today this is increasingly not the case
- population has grown dramatically
- there have been huge technological changes
- conjoined with these changes have been huge changes in the mores of members of our species (taken collectively)

This last fact, the change in mores has occurred most dramatically in cities. Of course, all of us think that some of the current mores of billions of people living today belong in the distant past. But, whatever we think of the existing city mores, they are relatively new

ones.

In the developed world we have devoted huge resources to the task of integrating newcomers into our rapidly growing cities. By contrast, the mega-cities outside the first world can do much less for their newcomers.

Adaptation

Newcomers to first world cities expect to have to adapt. Of course, many of them want to retain parts of their culture, their religious beliefs, their ways of life, and their moral views. But they expect to have to make some adjustments to the new world in which they have moved. Newcomers to developing world cities often lack such expectations, or have them to a much lesser degree. Of course, there are some who think that the process of immigration selects individuals who are more readily able to adapt. Those people who know they can't adapt or who are unwilling to make the enormous effort tend to be less likely to be immigrants than those who are. So when two people leave their developing nation village and one goes to the first world and the other goes to the big metropolis in her own country it is the former person who is, whether by nature or by nurture of what combination of the two matters not, likely the more adaptable of the two, or so it is sometimes held. This is, of course, extremely controversial. If it is true then mega-cities in the developed world have many new highly adaptable citizens who need to do lots of adapting and mega-cities in the developing world have many new residents who, while they have less adapting to do, are not as ready, willing, and able to do that adapting.

Economic growth, liberation, and trust

The evidence that a minimum degree of trust between individuals unrelated by blood or marriage is an essential to those who move to the mega-cities of the developing world attaining a decent life. Getting new urbanites to trust their new neighbors, to adopt less fanatical religious views, to be less xenophobic, less sexist, and less violent, to become more open to education and be more liberal, generous, and tolerant is a great challenge. Furthermore, in those cases where peasants lack the capacity to abandon and replace their illiberal views we need to get them to hide those views.

What has been done?

A lot of thinking has been devoted to what causes people to change from peasants to urbanites (not in the physical but the attitudinal sense). We now are fairly sure that economic conditions (particularly two things: how the economy is organized, and what its rate of growth is) are a huge factor and that levels of education, constrained religions, and female participation are also important. Very little thinking has been done on what manners and customs we should seek to cultivate in people to get them (and us) through the difficult time while people are throwing off rural mores and adopting urban ones. Adam Smith suggested that public funding for the fine arts and various festivals was important to undermine the deleterious effects of religious fanatics and to keep them from poisoning the minds of new urbanites with an overly rigorous morality. He also thought that successful urbanites had a duty to reflect on the manners and customs appropriate for urbanites to adopt towards the impoverished new arrivals to urban areas and to seek to get them to adopt amongst themselves. Unfortunately, his advice in this matter has not been followed.

We do not know what “small morals” to teach to the new urban poor or to adopt towards them. We need to think on this.

What should be done?

The anosognosic newcomers arriving in the mega-cities of the developing world need to adopt whatever mores will enhance their inclination to rely on and support a critically reflective attitude supportive of the rule of law, especially where this conflicts with tradition and peer pressure. We need to learn what these are and how to get them to be.