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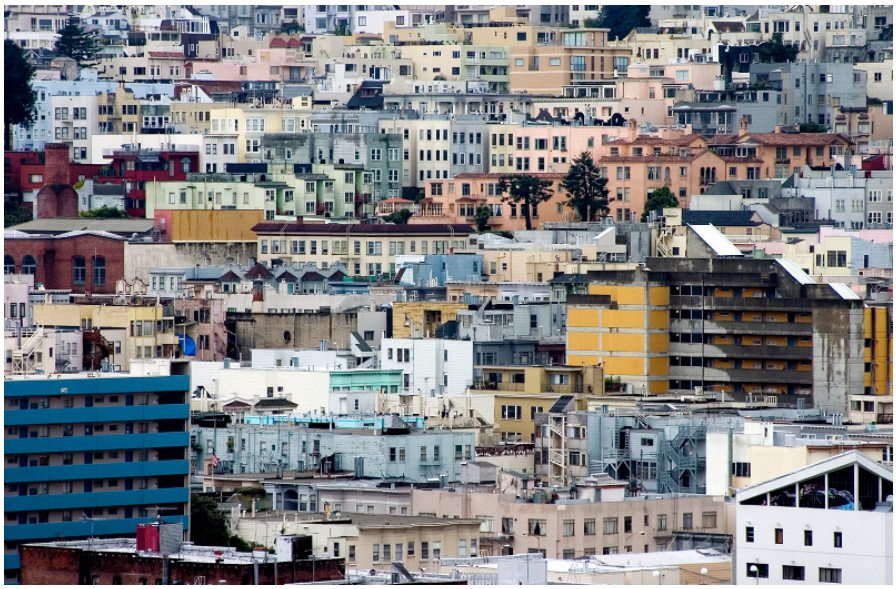

In 1951, Isaac Asimov, father of science fiction, opened his most famed book *Foundation* with a graphic portrayal of the planet that was leading an imaginary galaxy mastered by humankind in all its width. “Its urbanization, progressing steadily, had finally reached the ultimate. All the land surface was a single city.” A few years later, J.G. Ballard, in another of the columns of modern-day fictional literature, depicted a similar atmosphere in his dystopian novel *The Concentration City*, where the urban settlement in question encompasses everything known to its inhabitants, which cannot do anything more than accepting the view “that the City stretches out in all directions without limits.” No escape is offered to the impuissant protagonist, who travels endlessly along rail lines, only to get back to the point of origin without ever leaving a disturbing conurbation.

Many are the examples in the contemporary arts that refer to such images, demonstrating that the interplay of a frail humanity with a muscular urbanism has a resonance deeper than mere whimsical attraction. Fictional parallels notwithstanding, these visions might not be too distant from reality: if at the outset of the 20th Century only one in ten used to live in cities, nowadays half of the human population is settled within metropolitan areas. If at the time of Asimov and Ballard some of these trends were only apparent, we are now at a stage of human history where the urbanization of the world’s population is unmistakably evident. There are presently 400-odd “million-plus” settlements, and evaluations for the year 2050 estimate a growth of the urban population up to two-thirds of humanity, making this contemporary geographical trend the largest urban migration in history.

Humankind, to use an elegant expression coined by architectural historian Joseph Rykwert, has been “seduced by a place” it itself created. The contemporary rates of urbanization consolidated throughout history have made the metropolis a central symbol of civilization, to the extent that we might now live in what Henri Lefebvre called the “urban society.” Certainly, the graduates of

2025 will not be able to ignore to socio-political impact of this worldwide trend and global transformation. Yet, we now need to start educating international practitioners and students about the momentous impact of urbanization.

From a social, as much as from a technological viewpoint, humankind is now mirrored in the city more than in any other construct. If the “move to the city” is not a novel characteristic of our existence, its contemporary ecumenical scale and staggering pace, its varied mobility and social complexity, as well as the unprecedented potential connectivity among people are all traits that, ipso facto, specify the “urban” epoch we live in. Social and physical aspects of urbanization since the early 20th Century have not just brought about quantitative changes in the dislocation of humanity across the globe; cities have also become the hinges of our society as they influence both lifestyle and mobility of the world’s population. They have become the defining feature of humanity’s modes of aggregation, and persistent scenery for the vast majority of its social interactions. As American economist Robert Murray Haig highlighted at the outset of this “city boom” in 1926: “instead of explaining why so large a portion of the population is found in the urban areas, one must give reasons why that portion is not even greater. The question is changed from ‘Why live in the city?’ to ‘Why not live in the city?’” The urbanization of the world’s population is not solely a physical process, but also an inherently social revolution that redefines the spaces of interaction amongst people, and thus conversely the contemporary practice of political relations. It is the rise of this “urban age” that makes educating international scholars and diplomats a non-postponable necessity.

Urban settlements have grown exponentially, to the extent that we can now legitimately talk of several “megacities” of eight million inhabitants and increasingly widespread “hypercities” with 20 million souls living within less and less identifiable boundaries. This momentous exodus, boosted by a ten-fold multiplication of urban population during the past century, has resulted in a radical redesigning of most of the world’s cityscapes, accompanied by the sprawl of suburban areas across the Earth, and the creation of hybrid urbanities born out of the merger of once-separated municipalities. In many locations around the globe it is now possible to travel from “city” to “city” without ever leaving an urbanized landscape, as it often happens to many commuters on the American East Coast, the Chinese Pearl River Delta, or in the Tokyo-Yokohama region. Soon—key experts in the field warn—we might witness the construction of a continuous urban corridor stretching from Japan/North Korea to West Java.

Parallel developments are evidently taking place in Europe and the United States, as well as in parts of Latin America and coastal Africa. These simultaneous transformations, alongside many other features, testify the universality of the urban experience, capable of influencing our species from its early days, and epitomize the state of our evolution through the eras. Yet, this epoch has something different. The phenomenon of growth itself is different to the extent that its rate is accelerating, and its features are somewhat unique in respect to its classical, medieval,

and industrial predecessors. These features are also strongly connected with the processes prompted by globalization in the recent decades: as technology progresses, distances shrink, social relations are restructured and places are shaped by changing patterns of flows. This is not casual: metropolitan growth and globalization are tightly intertwined into a mutually-constitutive relationship to the extent that, as Edward Soja and Miguel Kanai noted in 2008, “we can speak of both the urbanization of the entire globe and the globalization of urbanism as a way of life.”

Crucially for international analysts, urbanization brings about a revolutionary change in our society as much as it creates global trends that threaten this very society as a whole. Megacities and metropolises are nowadays the loci of giant new problems for public management. The urbanization of poverty, for example, represents one of the fundamental challenges of the present day, as the width of governance voids and unregulated settlement foster the proliferation of slum dwellers, which now account to almost 32 percent of the world’s urban population. Crammed shantytowns and uncontrolled suburban ghettos have burgeoned everywhere around the globe in both rich and poor countries, as more and more people suffer from shelter deprivation and health hazards, fuelling other human security threats such as pandemics, terrorism, and urban violence—all everyday concerns for the contemporary diplomat. This is not, however, a call for duplicating the extensive theorization achieved by urban studies scholars thus far. Rather, it is imperative for international educators, as much as for foreign policy professionals, to prompt a more effective and eclectic engagement of their pupils and peers with this solid body of urbanist knowledge, in order to adapt to the rapidly urbanizing world in which international relations are increasingly embedded.