Urbanities: Justin Davidson

Cities Vs. Trump
Red state, blue state?
The urban-rural divide is more significant.

A few years ago, on my way from eastern Oregon to Salt Lake City, I pulled off I-84 in Boise, Idaho, a place I knew only from a Lynyrd Skynyrd lyric. I strolled downtown and, in a farmers’ market smelling of lemon sage and lavender, found the best artisanal granola bars west of Burlington, Vermont. As I scanned the pale young crowd and noted the vendors’ earnestly precious names (Hoot ‘n’ Holler Urban Farm, Blue Feather Bakery), it occurred to me how much the scene resembled a Saturday morning at Smorgasburg, or at Ferry Plaza in San Francisco, or in Boulder, Santa Fe, or Portland, Maine. The vibe was relaxed, prosperous, and gently urban. Around that time, the real-estate blog Estately ranked Boise fifth on its list of best cities for conservatives: “The tech jobs are plentiful, the Mormonism abundant, there are no restrictions on assault weapons, and there’s plenty of art, music, and theater.” And yet,
like most red-state cities, Idaho’s capital is remarkably short on conservatives. Last November, while Hillary Clinton mustered only 27.5 percent of the statewide vote, she hit north of 75 percent in some of Boise’s urban precincts. Politically, the city might as well be on a different planet from towns that lie a couple of exits away.

And this is true in more than just America’s twee precincts. More than ever, urbanites share a common affiliation, whether they are in Idaho or Massachusetts, whether they’ve built up earthly treasures or scrape by on minimum wage. In presidential elections, votes are tallied by county and grouped by state, but zoom in closer and you see that Democrats cluster like blue inkblots on a mostly red map and that many jurisdictions are sharply divided. In the 2016 election, virtually every large urban center and many small ones—white Boise and majority-black Baltimore, wealthy San Francisco and beaten-down Detroit, sprawling sunwashed megalopolis and shrinking union strongholds—rejected the man who became president, often by yawning margins. The density that is one of the defining characteristics of cities forces encounters that, more and more, seem to strengthen Democratic principles—and separates urban dwellers from their rural cousins.

While cities like New York and Seattle have always been liberal, others have con-

verted much more recently. After World War II, San Francisco was up for grabs, voting Republican in 1942 and 1956, after which its Democratic tilt increased from year to year. Philadelphia was a Republican bastion until 1951, when a new charter combined with a corruption scandal to demolish the political machine. Ward leaders and local bosses switched their allegiances just as middle-class whites were fleeing to the suburbs, leaving the heavily black central city to the party of civil rights.

Columbus, Ohio, saw the light of liberalism only decades later, not because of some grand political realignment but as a by-product of creeping prosperity. A varied economy of largely white-collar employers is now drawing a population that is increasingly young, diverse, well educated, and addicted to pleasant living. “When I first moved there 20 years ago, Columbus was a dull, sleepy midwestern city, a solidly Republican city. It isn’t anymore,” says Steven Conn, a history professor at Miami University in Ohio and the author of Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century. “People are interested in better public schools and better urban amenities like bike trails and so on, and the Republican Party is against everything they care about week to week.” In some areas, that process is ongoing. Just this month, in a single

What Is a Sanctuary City?

The so-called sanctuary movement began in the mid-1980s, when hundreds of thousands of refugees from the U.S.-funded civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala began crossing the border into Arizona and Texas (in 1984, less than 3 percent were granted asylum, compared with 60 percent of Iranians and 40 percent of Afghans). Following the lead of a Presbyterian minister in Tucson, hundreds of churches, synagogues, and college campuses across the U.S. proclaimed themselves “sanctuaries” and began sheltering and transporting thousands of refugees. In 1999, San Francisco became the first city to label itself a “sanctuary city” and banned the use of city resources to assist federal immigration authorities. Today, there’s still no set definition of a “sanctuary city” though they all limit their cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement in one form or another. This can mean simply refusing to question people about their immigration status, which has been the policy in Los Angeles since 1979, or disregarding all ICE detainers without a warrant, as is the case in many cities, including L.A., Chicago, New Orleans, and New York. And while New York has banned ICE agents from Rikers, L.A. and Houston still allow federal agents access to their jails. In all, about 60 cities and hundreds of counties have some kind of sanctuary policy. Jordan Larson
congressional district in one of the reddest states, Sedgwick County, the Kansas jurisdiction that includes Wichita, swung to the Democratic underdog in a special election; he was swamped by the surrounding rural vote and lost, but by much.

Houston's journey toward liberalism merges these same ideological, demographic, and economic shifts and has transformed the political landscape of conservative and largely rural Texas. A vast majority of Texas's votes come from just a dozen or so counties: Harris County, which contains Houston, is by far the most populous, with 16 percent of the state's population, and it's growing fast. Republican presidential candidates—including two generations of locally based Bushes—won the county handily until Obama squeaked by, twice. In 2016, Clinton took the Houston area by 12 percentage points. That local quasi-landslide could represent a particular distaste for a certain New York real-estate developer, but the larger trend looks epochal. Over the decades, the urbanized area has spread; Houston has even acquired one of those expensive gewgaws of contemporary urban living, the ultimate conservative bugaboo: a new light rail, 23 miles of it. Today, the city's population is 44 percent Hispanic (and growing) and only 25 percent white (and falling). The demographic train is pulling away from Harris County and leaving the Republican Party behind.

Conn, the historian, sees the liberalizing of cities as an inexorable process: "The combination of density, diversity, and economic dynamism makes people see that they share an interest in large public things," he says. The Houston Chronicle's editorial page recently excoriated President Trump's nationalistic policies using strictly economic logic rather than philosophical concerns. "Our city runs on free trade, oil and gas, and low-cost labor," the paper pointed out. "But now we have to deal with a president who sees Houston's booms as a threat. It is like a doctor who misdiagnoses a cold for cancer and recommends a full slate of chemotherapy. The radioactive solution of a border tax, import tariffs, and immigrant roundups will weaken the economic fundamentals of our Gulf Coast port city."

There is plenty of irony in the fact that Donald Trump exhibits such antipathy to cities, given that he is a product of the nation's largest. But it's worth remembering that despite being a New Yorker, the president has rarely, if ever, experienced urban life. For most of us, living in cities means living close to those who are both like us and not. Even just walking down a city block means having no idea who will cross your path, what they believe, or how they will behave. Strolling is a succession of chance meetings, the vast majority of them superficial. At times, a dense neighborhood can feel like a village, where you bump into friends or revive dormant acquaintances. At other times, it means confronting a vast and entrenched homeless population. Urbanites take this haphazardness for granted. We have the ingrained habit of sharing space, of encountering difference, of swimming in the collective soup.

Trump—like many Americans who duck from house to car to office to mall—rarely experiences an unplanned encounter. He has spent much of his life in gilded rooms, surrounded by people he employs. His idea of transit consists of elevators, limos, helicopters, and private jets. Until he moved into the White House, he hardly set foot in a place he didn't own. Maybe that's why he knows so little and appreciates less about his own hometown, why a president who was born and bred in New York City spends his time stoking ancient fears about it. When he started planning Trump Tower in the late 1970s, it was an expression of confidence in the deluxe appeal of midtown Manhattan at a time when a seemingly ungovernable city had bled nearly a million people. Now, when urban crime sits in the eerily low range in many cities, when companies follow their most desirable employees into revitalized downtowns, and when many metropolitan areas are more worried about housing shortages and gentrification than about falling apart, the president has revived a vision of cities suppurating with violence and sin. Once he sold urban real estate to customers who wanted to live there; now he sells fantasies of urban horror to those who prefer to shudder from afar.

The Trump administration's disdain for urban culture has a rich bipartisanship pedigree. Thomas Jefferson formed his view of nationhood around a belief that the countryside was not only preferable but morally superior. "I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America," he wrote to James Madison in 1787. "When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe."

In 1904, the original muckraker, Lincoln Steffens, went on a crusade against corruption in Minneapolis, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Chicago. (He considered New York relatively benign.) He, too, intimated that there was something about governing large concentrations of people, about cumulative economic might combined with massed indifference, that nurtured the worst forms of power. Membership in an urban elite, he suggested, was inherently putrid. "There is no essential difference between the pull that gets your wife into society or a favorable review for your book, and that which gets a hanger into office, a thief out of jail, and a rich man's son on the board of directors of a corporation," he wrote in The Shame of the Cities. "And it's all a moral weakness; a weakness right where we think we are strongest." Deity, opportunism, callousness, shortsightedness, venality—the metropolises concentrated these vices into a noxious stew.

The urban renaissance of the past few decades has opened up a new line of moral attack. The Times columnist Ross Douthat recently argued that large cities are not the tolerant utopias that liberals idealize but black holes of privilege, sucking in resources and jobs. Douthat writes as if Manhattan were the norm: "If [cities] are dynamic, they are also so rich—and so
rigidly zoned—that the middle class can’t afford to live there and fewer and fewer kids are born inside their gates. If they are fast-growing it’s often a growth intertwined with subsidies and “too big to fail” protection … We should treat liberal cities the way liberals treat corporate monopolies—not as growth-enhancing assets, but as trusts that concentrate wealth and power and conspire against the public good.” One way past America’s political impasse, he proposes, might be to break up the largest cities and disperse their corporate headquarters and government offices to smaller provincial burgs. The prescription is worth exploring—the Department of Agriculture might fit in nicely in Omaha, say—but his premise is astonishingly wrong. New York City ships far more tax money to Albany and the IRS than it gets back. Many of the federal dollars that do wash into the five boroughs generally pay for projects of regional and national importance, like airports, roads, and security. Cities don’t sluice away public funds; they’re engines of the U.S. economy. Just 20 of them generate more than half of the nation’s GDP, a percentage that continues to increase. Big cities grow bigger because they are efficient social organizations, not because they’re subsidized liberal pleasure domes.

Dense places don’t have a monopoly on misfortune, but cities have always faced formidable challenges. The deindustrialization that nourished the Trump campaign ravaged big cities first: At the end of World War II, New York had the world’s busiest port and most productive factories. Three decades later, shipping and manufacturing were moribund and the municipal government could barely pay its bills. Dozens of cities tore down slums and put up public-housing projects—idealist efforts that often created more problems than they solved. In places like Detroit and Memphis, unemployment, redlining, crack, and gangs left vast urban stretches traumatized and bleak. Segregation persists in many cities and often worsens for two seemingly opposite reasons: Whites trickle away (as in Cleveland) or else they arrive, pushing into poor neighborhoods that longtime residents can no longer afford. In a handful of hyperprosperous cities like San Francisco, manufacturing has hollowed out and tech businesses have moved in, bifurcating the population into poor service workers and affluent creative types. Even the once relentlessly upbeat urbanist Richard Florida has written a contritely depressing book, *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class—And What We Can Do About It.*

But urban areas also teem with activists, nonprofit technocrats, planners, and social-justice fixers who keep rolling out proposals that municipal governments often adopt: pre-K programs, police body cams, running public buses through minority neighborhoods, and so on. Cities all over the world share problems and expertise, using each other as experimental labs: New Delhi converted its buses to natural gas; La Rochelle, France, launched a bike-share program; Milwaukee demolished a downtown freeway—and each of those experiments inspired hundreds of other cities to repeat it. In 2014, Houston, L.A., and Philadelphia announced a joint plan to combat cities’ disproportionate responsibility for climate-change-causing pollution by slashing CO₂ emissions, shifting to renewable energy sources, and converting streetlights to LEDs. And New York has massively boosted its affordable-housing program, raised the minimum wage, invested in high-tech manufacturing—a constantly evolving menu of tools to make the city more livable, safe, and affordable.

Some problems have proved intractable: New York’s homelessness epidemic has defied Mayor de Blasio’s expensive attempts to alleviate it. And gun violence persists in parts of Chicago despite a dramatic decrease in crime in many cities. But progressive activists can also point to a deep legacy of success, as anyone who ambles around South Bronx neighborhoods like Melrose can attest. Not so long ago, this was ground zero of hopelessness. When observers remarked that the Bronx of the ’70s seemed like a war zone, they were not merely using a figure of speech. Yet those who looked back then and saw no future for troubled neighborhoods were guilty of a failure of imagination. Grassroots organizations—like Nos Quedamos & WHEDco (Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation)—worked with successive mayoral administrations to clean up, rebuild, and repopulate areas that many had written off as toxic wastelands. Nevertheless, many conservatives see the city as the degraded outcome of decades of Democratic control. “Cities have become the equivalent of holding cells for the poor and minorities,” writes Peter Collier in the introduction to *The New Shame of the Cities,* a 2014 screed published by the right-wing David Horowitz Freedom Center. “Everything that’s wrong with America’s cities that can be affected by policy, Democrats are responsible for … America’s urban centers have slid into violence, corruption and savage dysfunction that make the snapshots of despair Lincoln Steffens produced at the beginning of the 20th century seem mild by comparison.” During his campaign, Trump distilled that message into a heartfelt plea for African-American votes: “You’re living in poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58 percent of your youth is unemployed—what the hell do you have to lose?”

In turn, urban intellectuals demonize the countryside just as their forebears exorcised the suburbs. “Rural America is the new inner city,” says Conn. “It’s where all these social pathologies collect, and they’re connected to the collapse of rural economies and rural communities. That’s exactly what you saw in North Philadelphia when the plug was pulled.”

The political gulf between city and non-city has deepened even as the physical boundaries between them have blurred. Cities have become more suburbanized and suburbs more citified, pushing the dividing (Continued on page 144)
Conflict between urban and rural America has gone on since the 18th century and will likely continue for generations. The tension is baked into the nation's foundation and the balance of power toward rural states. Thanks to the vagaries of the Electoral College, today's voter has never had a chance in this system to balance power toward rural states. Thanks to the vagaries of the Electoral College, today's voter has never had a chance in this system to balance power toward rural states.