Bydiplomatiet skal studeres i en politisk kontekst

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Rent bortset fra en tidsmæssigt meget afgrænset periode, som man kan kalde »den Vestfalske parentes«, har byer og bystyrer længe spillet en selvstændig politisk rolle på den globale scene. I dag lever vi således i en »urban tidsalder«, hvor byer på lige fod med en lang række andre aktører indgår på den internationale politiske arena. Vi skal dog passe på med at analysere byers internationale aktiviteter, som om disse byer eksisterer i et vakuum. Bydiplomatiet kan ikke alene reduceres til den lokale myndighed eller kommune, men skal studeres i en kompleks politisk kontekst, hvor mange interessenter er på spil. Byer fungerer således ofte som mæglere og katalysatorer for private aktørers interesser. I mange sammenhænge kan man endda tale om, at bydiplomatiet er privatiseret; det vil sige i realiteten igangsættes og effektueres af private erhvervsvirksomheder og civilsamfundsaktører. På mange områder skabes der komplekse og uigennemsigtige grænseoverskridende styringsnetværk, hvori byer indgår. Parallelt hermed skabes grundlaget for betydelige demokratiske problemstillinger. Hvem er det i virkeligheden, der styrer, når byerne laver diplomati?

The possibilities of ‘city diplomacy’

It seems clear now that much of the ‘urban age’ evidence cannot be ignored by experts of statecraft and diplomacy. Yet what does the urbanisation of the planet mean to them, and to the practice of international relations? The multilateral world, even more than states or scholars, has long recognized the centrality of cities and the urban environment to global agendas (Parnell, 2016). Certainly, the UN has contributed to generate much of the ‘urban’ talk in international affairs, especially via the work of its specialized body, the UN agency for Human Settlements (UN-Habitat) but also via several other branches like UNDP, UNEP or WHO. The World Bank Group has also been a pivotal voice in raising the profile of urban issues globally.

This expanding importance seems to be increasingly well mirrored in academia. The impact of cities on world affairs is now increasingly core purview not just in the long-lived disciplines that have historically dealt with the ‘urban’ (architecture, planning, geography, civil engineering *in primis*) but also across varied domains of the humanities, social, and even natural sciences. Critically for this issue’s discussion of the impact of ‘city diplomacy’, the city has progressively resurfaced in politics, and expanded its reach to international relations thinking (e.g. Curtis, 2016a; Acuto, 2013), whilst urban disciplines have been considering the potential of seeing the city as an ‘actor’ in international affairs (Oosterlynck et al., 2018). Equally, city diplomacy is by no means a ‘Western’ invention. Interestingly, Chinese research on the theme is today far more extensive (albeit widely limited by its linguistic barriers and lack of effective translations) in terms of gathering anecdotal evidence and casuistry as to the external relations of East Asian urban giants (cf. Leffel og Acuto, 2018).

Hence, the possibilities of this encounter, between the 'city' and 'diplomacy', between urban and international studies, are open wide in a time where much of humanity is so deeply entrenched with the built environment. Nonetheless, we should not fall prey of a superficial flirt with the urban age: whilst timely, the discussion in this issue, as much as elsewhere in academia and policy (e.g. Acuto, 2016a; Bloomberg, 2015) need to grapple with the inevitable situated-ness of city diplomacy, and relational nature of cities, and the overall contention that, after all, urban affairs are intertwined with other domains of global governance and its wider genus of stakeholders. In this article, I seek to shed some light onto this connected reality, beginning with discussing the political nature of cities when it comes to international affairs, the critical role of what we could call global 'urban brokers' in asserting a role for cities and the question as to whether we are now looking at a different type of city diplomacy. In doing so I hope to foreshadow the following articles, and offer a cautious reminder on the possibilities of city diplomacy to those wishing to interpret it in scholarly or policy senses.

The (political) spirit of cities

Perhaps as a political 'laboratory', the city might have been the original workshop for much of what we consider as key determinants of our present international system. This is for instance well demonstrated by Chris Reus-Smit's (1999) considerations on the importance of Italian city-states in the development of modern diplomacy. Relations among cities like Florence were based on shared norms that could only exist if there was an apparatus of communication capable of facilitating such shared 'international' understandings, and the procedures of embassies and ambassadors was what constituted such cardinal system (Acuto 2016b).

Even more critically, Reus-Smit points out how the foundations of these cities' sovereignty and shared norms, the "moral purpose of state" at the heart of their existence, was a "pursuit of civic glory" (1999) which needed to be enacted through rhetoric and gestures by these cities. Whilst all this might sound very medievalist in principle, an even summary look at the contemporary language of city branding and the pursuit of 'global' urbanism in both global North and South will testify as to the continuity of this approach in the present landscape. Cities, and in particular city governments from which much of the active influence of cities emanates, are now very busy at refining the practice of network power aimed at communicating and claiming a specific geopolitical and socio-economic positioning (Bouteligier, 2013; Acuto, 2016b; Johnson, 2017). So for instance Stockholm presents itself as the a key gateway into the North of Europe, promoting itself as or "The capital of Scandinavia", and as London and Tokyo strive to reaffirm their primate status as global cities by presenting themselves as, respectively, the "capital of capitals" and "The creative capital", while Berlin and Copenhagen seek to offer a milieu of prospect as the "City of opportunities" and a metropolis that is "Open, welcoming, and with something for everyone". This symbolic assertions are, as I've illustrated elsewhere on Dubai for instance, not just rhetoric. On the bases of these ideals, city governments *and* their corporate partners are charting plans and developing strategies that, to paraphrase Sassen's (1991) core concern on the "global city", allow the global to "hit the ground" in very particular ways in very particular places. Plans and strategies, in cities, turn into concrete, mobility gateways and, not least, displacements.

To assert networked influence on a national, regional or even global stage, cities deploy techniques of "worldmaking" (Roy og Ong, 2011) which confer influence to cities by mediating people's understanding of and relationships with the world, thus generating influence through a "control over perception" (Bourdieu, 1989). So, for instance, Beijing has undergone radical transformations before the 2008 Olympics as the city's planners have engaged popular architects from around in an attempt to promote the Chinese capital as a cosmopolitan global city. In order to do so, local government and enterprises have collaborated in a concerted attempt to design a Beijing capable of appealing to consumerist and capitalist audiences around the globe, using "architecture as branding" and seeking to convene a new image of the old communist stronghold (Ren, 2008). Rhetorical branding meets here the material transformation of the city and the orders it is entrenched into. Challenging as it might be, these initiatives might in fact engender important confrontations with the central sovereign affiliations shaping the international society. For instance, in their book *The Spirit of Cities*, Daniel Bell and Avner de-Shalit (2013) argue for a post-national ideology of *civicism* whereby one's loyalty to the city surpasses that to the nation, creating a new level of identity and agency beyond national citizenship – one of several critical pieces of the Westphalian architecture that is now being remodelled by the advent of an urban age.

In fact, one could reasonably argue that we might have only undergone a brief Westphalian moment that obscured the more-than-local role of cities and in many case suppressed their quintessentially transnational positioning. The now 'global' role of many cities is deeply intertwined with the possibilities and contradictions of a neoliberal order (Curtis, 2016b). Key in this historical continuity are two core issues: first, the pursuit of this civic glory is, from a city viewpoint, very much intertwined with the need for national and international competitiveness versus other cities; second, the push for external engagement and 'global' reach is very often sustained, where not prompted, by actors other than city governments and in particular by the mediating action of the private sector – both key features of the importance of "cities in civilization" that Peter Hall (1998) pointed out throughout his extensive scholarship.

Contrary to much 'novelty' writing, these are therefore not unprecedented challenges. Parallels with historical cases, especially in the West, are easily drawn, but the scale of global outreach for these two dimensions might warrant particular interest at this historical juncture. As with their national counterparts, global cities have been engaged not only internationally but also in fierce regional power plays where shifting geopolitical attractions have signified a search for supremacy in East Asia, the Gulf or Latin America. For instance, as Hong Kong strives to assert itself as "Asia's world city", in contraposition to Taipei's goal to be "The heart of Asia", Seoul has also recently aimed regionally and branded itself towards presenting "The soul of Asia" while, perhaps in a more globalised gateway fashion, Singapore propositions itself as "distinctive, dynamic, delightful". Once again, as with the cases above, rhetoric might not correspond to practice, but can nonetheless offer an important barometer of the kind of leadership these cities are putting forward onto the international stage. Equally, it might illustrate how cities, after a state-centric Westphalian moment, might be going back to more explicitly market-driven and commercial identities. Here, city diplomacy rhymes not just with collaborative city-to-city cooperation, but also with mounting needs for distinctiveness and superior performance to their peers to attract new business and satisfy their inevitable economic bases. Yet we shall not make the mistake of considering cities as self-contained islands nor, as some more popular writing and policy advocacy about the rise of cities (Barber 2013) might have asserted, fall prey of the seduction of the idea of city-state.

Certainly, as organized polities, globalising cities need to wield the momentous forces of the urban age. Yet they do not have to do this by sheer sovereign force and individual capacity. I would then argue it is now critical, not least as demonstrated by historical cases, to step beyond city-state thinking. The government and govern*ance* of cities is today confronted by pressing pulls that call for a more subtle form of global engagement where even highly independent cities require a less walled engagement with other polities, institutions and spheres of governance. Traditional city-states are by no means on the rise. Even Singapore and Dubai have progressively opened their 'doors' to extensive engagements with other actors and, as in the case for instance of both joining the C40 network as observers, acted more like *cities* than as *states*. The old version of the walled city-state, as the Emirates in the 1980s, or Brunei, Monaco and pre-1997 Hong Kong, might in fact represent a peculiar formation with a variety of slightly different flavours that now seems far from at the front of providing the international leadership that multilateral diplomacy gridlocks like climate change appear to require. From an international relations standpoint, city-state thinking presents substantial problems and critical weaknesses. Thinking of the influence of city diplomacy in terms of network power, on the contrary, requires a network understanding of international affairs – one that city diplomacy has had for a long while.

However, it is not just government and intergovernmental organizations, or indeed academia, that are betting on cities and supporting them in "going abroad" (Hobbs, 1994). Many would, in fact, argue that it is the growing interest, commitment and analysis by the private sector that is signalling the advent of cities as central foci of our time. Indeed, the expression "urban age" itself, brought to fame by the homonymous series of conferences hosted by the London School of Economics' Cities programme, was largely made possible by the support of Deutsche Bank – certainly a private sector pioneer in this type of research investment (Brenner og Schmid, 2014). Philanthropies and foundations are also progressively focusing their support on the urban drivers of the 21st century. Front and centre is the spot occupied today by Bloomberg Philanthropies, led by former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, but similar efforts can be found internationally in the efforts of, amongst others, the Ford, Rockefeller, Children Investment Fund, Realdania, and MacArthur Foundations, to name but a few. This is no trivial consideration: if we can quite easily answer in the affirmative questions one (centrality) and two (recognition), questions three (front-running) and four (impact) appear to be validated only if we consider cities *in partnership* with these other entities, some of which we could call global 'urban brokers'.

Linking with global 'urban brokers'

Often lacking recognition from national governments, cities have however been forced throughout much of the 1980s, 1990s and early-2000s to turn to seeking private backing to support their transnational endeavours. Central to the role of cities in responding to global challenges, then, are the catalytic efforts to drive applied investments that many city networks have been leveraging. Testimony to the growing perception that cities are key playground and inevitable partners in 21st century economics, is the growing urban emphasis of major corporate and industry interests like Siemens, Honeywell, JP Morgan and many others. Here we see the powers of coalition that cities hold, as catalysts (and thus leaders, in my view) of global initiatives. However, this also highlights the growing challenge by cities to retain influence in an age of fragmentation and "business privilege" (Thornley et al., 2005).

Take the example of the Urban Design Protocol for Australian Cities. Here we meet an important consideration that I want to unpack further in this chapter: cities, understood as political communities, embody far more than just local government, with a vast variety of localised and at the same time transnational actors possibly at hand in promoting city leadership. In the case of the Protocol, city leadership for safer and more inclusive urban areas was an initiative facilitated by the Commonwealth Government but lead by a *coalition* of urban actors. A Planning Officials Group initiated the idea in 2009, in collaboration with the government's Major Cities Unit along with the Planning Institute of Australia, and was spearheaded by the City of Melbourne who took up the challenge of such a multi-scalar initiative. As in many other cases, larger or 'global' cities have the capacity to take coalesced initiatives (often not directly initiated by them) to national and international attention. Yet to continue and succeed, they require close partnership with these other brokers. In this sense the protocol was then developed by an Editorial Board of around fifty people, including state government architects, representatives of state planning departments like NSW Planning, representatives from the major national network of cities (Australian Local Government Association) and each of the capital cities, but also NGOs like the Heart Foundation, Preventative Health Taskforce, and peak industry and professional bodies, with consultation from academics. Stories such as this one are by no means different from the genesis of what might in fact be a 'newer' generation (Kern og Bulkeley, 2009) city networks like the C40 Climate Leadership Group, which relied heavily on the brokerage offered by the Clinton, Bloomberg and Realdania foundations, or the Cities Alliance, which partners closely with large actors like the German development agency (GIZ) or the Ford Foundation, or indeed the 100 Resilient Cities network established by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Critically, city diplomacy is nowadays largely embedded in a much wider landscape of city networking carried out by other entities. On the one hand, we have already encountered the role of multilateral bodies like WHO, World Bank or UN-Habitat, which have all taken leadership roles in spurring urban action on global matters from health, to environment and security. On the other hand, we are witnessing the rise not only of hybrid modes of city diplomacy, but also of numerous business leadership organizations (BLOs) coalescing the capacity of the private sector to promote the prosperity and international engagement of their cities. This is for instance the case of Barcelona Global, which is a private, independent, non-profit association, gathering key business interests in Barcelona both at the international scale, as with Deloitte, Accenture or Ernst and Young, and at the more embedded indigenous scale, as with SEAT, Saba or Telefonica. Barcelona Global was set up in 2008 as a platform for citizen's ideas and action, made up of people and companies who cares about Barcelona and its future. The association's mission is to actively contribute to making Barcelona one of the most attractive cities in the world, in order to attract and develop talent and foster economic activity. Similarly, the business sector now plays a critical (and perhaps paradoxical seen its market bases) role in the continuity of urban policy, further embedding in political-economic lock-ins these modes of transnational engagement. For example, the Committee for Sydney, originally, a lobby group and now independent think tank champion for "the whole of Sydney" sees itself a key in providing "thought leadership beyond the electoral cycle." The Committee's impact, accomplice a membership that include major companies like ANZ, Lend Lease, or Sydney Airport, universities, strategically significant local governments (but not all) and state government departments and key cultural, sporting and marketing bodies, is as key driver of the 'growth coalition' approach discussed above. Yet in doing so, it also hybridises the city diplomacy 'within' the contours of Sydney placing business interests solidly at the heart of policymaking in the global city. A central question, then, is whether this type of entrepreneurial urban politics, not just by cities but globally-oriented 'urban brokers' too, brings about a different kind of city diplomacy.

A 'new' city diplomacy?

City networks like the C40, as the rise of urban entrepreneurialism, foreground that we are now witnessing a shift in the direction of city diplomacy. For decades, especially during the Cold War, cities' international relations were mostly limited to peer-to-peer cooperation. Now we see the return (just as with pre-modern city-states) of more explicitly entrepreneurial, public-private 'hybrid', and outgoing urban policies (Haselmeyer, 2018). Traditional twinning organizations, as with Sister Cities International (SCI) have themselves stepped from more specific "city-to-city cooperation" (between cities) to a wider 'city diplomacy' between cities, and between cities and other non-municipal actors (Cremer et al., 2001). Networks are shifting, as with SCI, from an emphasis on the importance of twinning to an emphasis on the importance of strategy and alliance capability. The form and orientation of current city networks has therefore been going well beyond twinning: city networks are being constructed in partnership with actors other than municipal governments, as with the UN, the World Bank or the EU, and are increasingly intertwined with the cross-national action of the private sector that in some cases is even the initiator of such city networking efforts.

This is well embodied by the case of New York's city diplomacy, which puts entrepreneurial communications at its heart. In New York Foreign Affairs is conducted mainly within the Office of the Mayor by a dedicated Commissioner for International Affairs whose main role is therefore to act on behalf of the Mayor in liaising with the various international actors. On one hand, the Office manages relations with the hundreds of consulates and international organizations housed in the city. This is a form of informal diplomacy whereby the city exerts its influence on international governments through the well-coordinated and deliberate welcome it gives them. On the other hand, the office also oversees a not-for profit organization called Global Partners Inc. set up by the city to upscale its old sistering system. Testimony to the confidence and handling that major cities now have of the contemporary neoliberal order is the fact, for instance, that New York approaches this side of its international diplomacy like a corporate consultancy. Though located inside the Mayor's Office for International Affairs, the organization has its own independent board of directors charged with managing the institution effectively and profitably. Together, they coordinate a number of Global Partners Inc. summits and conferences as well as a large youth program aimed at fostering informal diplomacy through young people. To an extent, then, we can possibly notice an occasional but not uncommon privatization of city diplomacy roles beyond the mayor's office and even beyond local government itself.

However, the longevity and historical extensiveness of city diplomacy today also allows for a variety of models of city networking to have evolved. While in New York, International and Intergovernmental Affairs are kept separate, in London, "External Affairs" refers to both international relations and relations with the central government. This is because the Greater London Authority (GLA) sees many similarities in the communication between its upward relations with the central government and those with international actors. The GLA has senior staff responsible for External Affairs spread across its structure. On one hand, it has a special independent External Affairs Directorate, with a budget of 5.8 million, responsible for managing all of London's outwards relations, whether they be downwards within the community, horizontal with other local authorities or upwards with the central and international governments. On top of this, both the London Assembly and the Mayor's Private Office have senior staff in charge of External Relations. Thus, London has no one specialized International Relations committee although specialist staff can be found advising on all levels. As in New York, the Communications Officer plays an important part among the senior staff associated with External Affairs, both in interpreting the happenings of the central government and world at large and communicating them to the Assembly and in managing communications from the city to the outside. The hybridization of city diplomacy, and its growing dependency on other 'brokering' agents, as discussed above, then presents key challenges to the role of cities as local governments.

This is well embodied in the sprawl of transnational urban systems of *procurement*. "Procurement" is meant here as the acquisition of appropriate goods and/or services at the best possible total ownership cost to meet the needs of the purchaser in terms of quality and quantity, time, and location. As a major example of such an approach, Mikael Román (2010) discussed how the C40/CCI Energy Efficiency Building Retrofit Program (EEBRP) brings together the Group's largest cities, multinational energy service firms (ESCOs) and financial institutions, in order to develop a consortium. The Program allows C40 cities to access a "purchasing alliance" administered by the Clinton Climate Initiative (CCI) EEBRP team, where the latter "leverages the buying power of the C40 to achieve affordable pricing on – and thus faster adoption of – the latest energy efficient and clean energy products and technologies." In practice, CCI can act as a mediator for the Group by negotiating linkages among manufacturers and global cities thanks to the pooled resources of these metropolises and the preferential connection opened for ESCOs in their retrofit market. The Purchasing Alliance lowers investment barriers for products and technologies with significant energy efficiency improvement or fuel switching potential. Building owners can access the Purchasing Alliance products directly using their own procurement methods or as part of a larger retrofit project through an ESCO or other provider. Therefore, the Initiative allows the establishment of a financing process which allows the C40 to implement on the ground the policies showcased in the workshops. However, neither CCI nor C40 play a significant role in the final stages, where the CCI negotiates a ceiling benchmark price (not a final price) and procurement can be adjusted to adhere to a client's existing regulations and processes, leaving much of the specific implementation to the owner and its (international) market constraints. As Román noted, while the procurement operates in this case as a *de facto* governance mechanism, as an implementation strategy it seems to fall short in several cases: it may alienate some member cities with specific technology needs pushing for internationalization of standardized products and this, as a consequence, creates a tension between local industry and the global competitiveness of an exclusively-Western pool of ESCOs.

In this sense, questions of democratic accountability and of legitimate leadership are by all means not secondary to the core problem of this essay. Yet these are also echoed in the style and legacy of city diplomacy. A critical lesson of city-states is, in fact, that of their inherent competitive nature.[1] This points at an important matter: power is often exercised competitively by cities in a resource-constrained, almost entirely neo-liberalised, and highly interconnected world stage. Network power can then equally support the constitution of specialized cliques of world cities that offer particular goods and prevent other competitors from challenging their primacy in niches of world economy (Scott, 1997). It does so internally, as with the emergence of a 'business privilege' in urban policy-making (Sydney and Barcelona being but two of many cases), but also externally, as it reflects on the entrepreneurial shifts of city diplomacy at both city and city network levels. This shift is not, as I argued before, always necessarily negative. Yet, it flags one final core consideration for this issue and for the study of 'city diplomacy' more in general: should cities, i.e. local governments, always be the leaders that drive global 'urban age' agendas, or should we instead admit that these are frequently catalysed by other (private, multilateral or community) actors and re-think the purpose of city leadership in our time? Is it time to temper some of the boosterism about how mayors might "rule the world" (Barber, 2013) and rather focus more explicitly on understanding the interdependency and interplay of cities and other international actors? Or, to put it simply, is it now necessary to see no city as an island, and put them in context when speaking about their global relevance? Evidence on the ground might perhaps say so.

Note

1. See for instance Gobry, P.M. (2015), "Why the World Needs More City States", *The Week*, 15. juni, available at: http://theweek.com/articles/560112/why-world-needs-more-citystates

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