



Illustration by Andrew Bannecker

THE BIG IDEA

A Declaration of Urban Independence

Cities are under assault in the age of Donald Trump. It would be better for the country if they ran themselves instead.

By RICHARD FLORIDA | July/August 2017



ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2016, I MADE WHAT I thought were the final edits to the manuscript of my latest book, *The New Urban Crisis*, and sent it off to my publisher. The next day, my wife and I invited our American friends to come to our house in Toronto to celebrate what we were all but certain would be Hillary Clinton’s election. We pulled out all the stops. We hung up red, white and blue bunting, and dressed our baby and our puppy to match. My wife’s sisters supplied us with life-sized cutouts of Clinton and Donald Trump, which they had literally “muled” over the border from the Detroit suburbs. At 6 p.m., when the polls began to close, we turned on the TV to watch the early returns. By 8:30, the party had come to a crashing stop. I spent

the rest of the night glued to Twitter; I hardly even noticed when the last of our guests departed.

My wife and I, like so many Americans, woke up the next morning in a state of shock. Then she said something that snapped me back into focus: “As terrible as we feel, can you imagine what the backlash would have been if the election had gone the other way?”

Trump’s unthinkable victory, I realized, *was* that backlash. And as emotionally unprepared for it as I was, intellectually, I wasn’t all that surprised.

The divides that propelled him into office were the subject of my book. And I’d already lived through something quite like it before, in Toronto, where I moved in 2007 to head up a new institute on urban prosperity. I had long admired the city for its progressive brand of urbanism. The renowned urbanist Jane Jacobs moved to Toronto in 1968 and grew to love it. The English actor Peter Ustinov once dubbed Toronto “New York run by the Swiss.” And yet in 2010, this bastion of progressivism elected as dysfunctional and retrograde a politician as Rob Ford—best known in America for getting caught smoking crack—as its mayor. “If Ford could be elected in Toronto,” I said at the time, “then more and worse will follow.”

Ford died of cancer in March 2016, eight months before that shocking November night. But like America’s new president, he was a product of our deepening geographic rifts. Toronto—like New York, London, San Francisco, Washington, Boston and other great cities—really is a tale of two cities. As its middle class has declined, it has fractured into a small set of advantaged neighborhoods in and around the urban core and along its major subway and transit lines, where affluent residents work in banking, entertainment and media, journalism, academia and the arts—the people I have dubbed the “creative class.” That first city is surrounded by a much larger and more sprawling second city comprising relatively disadvantaged neighborhoods, most located far from the city’s center in its annexed suburbs, where the hard-pressed small-business owners, factory workers, tradesmen and taxi drivers, large numbers of them immigrants, who made up the “Ford Nation,” still live. Many felt Toronto’s success was passing them by and that Toronto’s first city of “urban elites” looked down on them.

It was the same again with Trump. For all the arguments about the relative effects that James Comey, Russian internet trolls, latent misogyny and racial tensions, and Clinton’s emails and speech fees had on the election, the electoral maps that Trump loves to show visitors to the Oval Office clearly tell the story of a country starkly divided along spatial lines. Clinton’s margin of victory in the most populous, wealthy and progressive blue urban

coastal centers was overwhelming, their large size giving her a decisive edge in the popular vote. But Trump won everywhere else—in the smaller, struggling regions of the Sun Belt and Rust Belt, distressed suburbs, exurbs and rural areas—to earn a narrow victory in the Electoral College.

My wife's words made me realize something else too: As disenfranchised and hopeless as Trump's election had made us feel, his voters had been feeling the same way for a long time. While Trump's victory was partly the consequence of a stagnant economy and growing economic anxiety, it was even more the result of growing resentment against the more open and "permissive" liberal values toward women, minorities, immigrants, and the gay and lesbian community that are characteristic of the country's most prosperous urban regions.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that as disastrous as Trump's presidency was likely to be in many respects, it also presented a unique opportunity. If the GOP-controlled federal government isn't going to help our cities—and under Trump, it is likely to work actively against their economic interests, not to mention the interests of the poor, minorities, women, gays and immigrants who live in them—then our cities will have to do the job themselves.

I pulled my book back from my publisher to give it a thorough rewrite and revision. Ever so sure of a Clinton win, I had made a sweeping case for a new National Council of Cities made up of mayors and urbanists who would report directly to the president, analogous to the National Security Council or the Council of Economic Advisers. I had argued for turning the Department of Housing and Urban Development into a broader Department of Cities and Urban Development, and for substantially increasing federal funding for affordable housing, urban job improvement and creation, and investments in transit, high-speed rail and other infrastructure to increase urban density and connectivity. Now, none of that could happen.

The problem was even bigger than Trump; it was a byproduct of the very schism that had brought him to power. If urban policy was a dead horse in his administration, how much better would it have fared under Clinton? While we would not have had the deep cuts that Trump is proposing, we would have been unlikely to see anything like the sweeping new set of urban policies that I'd recommended. Barack Obama, ever the community organizer, understood the multiple dimensions of America's urban challenges, yet the country saw few moves on urban policy during his presidency. The stark reality is that our geographic, economic and partisan divides are too deep and too wide to allow for any sort of national consensus to emerge on urban issues.

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It’s time to confront a simple but stunning fact: When it comes to urban policy and much else, the federal government is the wrong vehicle for getting things done and for getting them done right. Whether it is controlled by the left or the right, no single top-down, one-size-fits-all strategy can address the desires and needs of a country as geographically, culturally and economically divided as America. Big cities and metropolitan regions, far-flung exurbs, suburbs and rural areas are very different kinds of places, with vastly different desires and needs.

If we are ever going to rebuild our cities and our nation as a whole, including our suburbs and rural areas, there is really only one way forward, and it does not and cannot start in Washington. It can only come from our many and varied communities, who know best how to address and solve their own problems and build their own economies. And if that sounds like going back to an old-fashioned, conservative conception of how federalism should work—a kind of extreme localism—to address the sorts of issues liberals worry about, so be it. America needs nothing less than a revolution in how we govern ourselves, or we’ll only end up poorer, angrier and more divided.

What brought us to this point?

In 2003, Bill Bishop and I co-authored an op-ed for the *Washington Post* on the “seismic shift that’s taking place in American politics, culture and economics.” (Bishop, a journalist with a sharp eye for spotting national trends before anybody else, would later expand on our observations in his influential book *The Big Sort*.) For most of the 20th century, the great divides in America were between the North and South and cities and rural areas. But now, we wrote, “society is changing at a more molecular level. City by city, even

neighborhood by neighborhood, our politics are becoming more concentrated and, consequently, more polarized.”

Fourteen years later, those trends have only accelerated. Behind the shift is what I call the “clustering force”—the fundamental impetus behind not just the growth of cities but innovation and economic growth writ large. It is no longer natural resources or even great corporations that drive economic progress, but the tight clustering together of diverse, talented people in dense places. The evidence can be seen in the extreme concentration of innovative and economic activity across the world. The world’s 50 largest cities and metropolitan areas house just 7 percent of the Earth’s population but generate 40 percent of its economic activity. Just 40 mega-regions—constellations of cities and metros like the Boston-New York-Washington corridor, or the Bay Area’s San Francisco-Palo Alto-San Jose nexus (which includes Silicon Valley)—account for roughly two-thirds of the world’s economic output and more than 85 percent of its innovation, while housing just 18 percent of its people. The amount of economic activity packed into small spaces within those leading cities is even more astonishing. Just one small sliver of downtown San Francisco, for instance, attracts billions of dollars in venture capital to its tech startups every year, more than any *nation* on the planet, save for the United States.

The great contradiction of capitalism today is this: While this clustering of talent and economic activity powers innovation and economic growth, it carves deep divides into society. As more and more people gravitate toward the places of clustered talent and growth—which in the United States are mostly the deep blue cities of the East and West coasts and the few knowledge hubs in between—many more places fall further behind. That growing spatial inequality registers powerfully in our politics, and Trump is the ultimate result.

On Inauguration Day, when President Trump spoke of the “carnage” in America’s cities, urban liberals were miffed and mystified: Had he not been to a city lately? Our reference points are the urban revivals of cities like New York, Boston, Washington and San Francisco, whose once-gritty streetscapes and working-class neighborhoods are now transformed into bespoke, boutique playgrounds for the wealthy and the creative class. But, the other, forgotten America that Trump spoke about—where “rusted-out factories” are “scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation”—is all too real.

Trump beat Clinton handily in these hard-pressed places. He took 61 percent of the vote in rural areas; he won metros with less than 250,000 people by 57 percent compared with 38 percent for Clinton, and those with 250,000 to 500,000 people by 52 percent versus 43 percent. Overall, Trump won more than double the number of metros that Clinton did (259

versus 122). But Clinton took the largest and most economically powerful metros by wide margins. She won 55 percent of the vote in metros with populations of more than 1 million people. She won eight of the 10 largest metros in the United States, which account for more than half of the votes cast in the election. All in all, she carried just under 500 of America's 3,000-plus counties; but those Clinton counties are where more than half of Americans live—and they generate close to two-thirds of America's economic output.

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Clinton's margins were even more overwhelming in dense urban centers. Trump's share of the vote in Manhattan, where he lived and worked until January 20, was just 10 percent. In Washington, his new city of residence, it was just 4 percent. When all was said and done, Trump received roughly 2.86 million fewer votes than Clinton, and his Electoral College victory turned on fewer than 100,000 votes cast in just three states. The voters that gave him his margin of victory could have easily fit in some college football stadiums, with quite a few seats left over.

The “emerging Democratic majority” that writers Ruy Teixeira and John Judis predicted back in 2002 is real. The Democrats really did and still do carry the majority of votes in national elections, powered by their huge margins among fast-growing minority groups. But those votes are concentrated in a relatively small number of blue enclaves; America's electoral map is a virtual sea of red.

Red America not only has an advantage in the Electoral College; the GOP controls a large majority of statehouses and governorships. This is partly due to the Democrats' long neglect of local politics, and partly the result of a deliberate Republican strategy, backed by billions of dollars of dark money, that predates Trump by many years. Those states are uprooting decades of liberal gains by undertaking efforts to preempt local authority on issues dear to progressives, from voting rights to immigration, LGBTQ and women's rights

to gun control, the minimum wage, bans on smoking and unhealthy foods, environmental policies and more.

In 2016, Trump claimed the electoral system was working against him, but the truth is the opposite. Going all the way back to Thomas Jefferson, America has had an anti-urban bias that is deeply ingrained, a seemingly unshakable conviction that big cities are not the engines of wealth generation that they are, but elitist, wasteful and libertine, overrun with crime and corruption, and crowded with unproductive, government-dependent immigrants and minorities. That bias is built into the structures of state legislatures and Congress, which grant disproportionate power to suburban and rural voters—today's Republicans.

Blue America is clearly on the ropes, and the rise of Trumpism threatens many of the key pillars of its success. While Trump's budget cuts and the decimation of Obamacare and the social safety net are likely to fall hardest on his own supporters, deep cuts in scientific and medical research, housing, economic development and social service programs, combined with his attacks on immigrants, add up to a full-blown anti-urban, anti-progress agenda—a kind of policy-inflicted Luddism. Eighteen of America's 20 largest metros include so-called sanctuary cities that Trump has vowed to punish for resisting his immigration crackdown, and these metros account for roughly half of the national gross domestic product.

Yet for all the formidable geographic advantages it enjoys, Red America has been able to enact its agenda only on a piecemeal basis. Some of that is due to the incompetence of the Trump administration; some to the resistance that Blue America has been able to muster. The day after Trump's inauguration, a staggering 3.2 million people, 1 in every 100 Americans, turned out to protest in 400-plus American cities. As Trump's popularity sags to near record lows, and his Russia troubles threaten to engulf him, the Democrats and Blue America have renewed hopes that they can unseat him, or at least retake Congress, and enact their own alternative agenda.

Even if Trump does collapse after one term or less, though, America will remain at a stalemate. Blue and Red America will continue to batter each other for as long as anyone can foresee, and neither side will really get its way. All we can look forward to is our quadrennial low-grade political civil war, and an endless seesawing between Blue and Red teams, neither able to consolidate their power and enact sustainable agendas. "The anger and resentment and hostility has been going up steadily since the '90s and spiking up in the last year or two," the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt told me in February. "It just seems fairly hopeless that we are going to somehow come to understand each other and work together."

If our country is so divided that neither side can prevail, then can we possibly figure out how to coexist? Can Blue and Red America learn to accommodate their legitimate differences? The only way to do that is to pare back the power of our increasingly dysfunctional nation-state and give it to cities and localities. As a surprisingly diverse mix of figures on both the right and the left are now saying, America needs a devolution revolution.

The late Benjamin Barber was one of our sharpest and most prescient political minds. In his classic 1992 essay in the *Atlantic*, “Jihad vs. McWorld,” he anticipates both the immiserating effects of corporate globalism and the rise of backlash populism, while looking to cities as the most legitimate loci of political sovereignty. In his 2013 book, *If Mayors Ruled the World*, Barber made a powerful case for cities as the source of progressive ideas and mayors as the source of pragmatic problem-solving agendas that transcend party or ideology. And in his final book, the recently published *Cool Cities*, he argued—correctly, as Trump’s exit from the Paris climate accord has since shown—that cities and mayors would have to be the vehicles for advancing the fight against climate change and ultimately for democratic governance around the world.

When I spoke with him this past winter, not long before his death, Barber argued that cities are not just bastions of civil resistance in the Trump era, but form a structural counterbalance to federal power. “There is an institutional and constitutional haven for resistance,” he said, “defined by cities, which have resources, money, citizens and the power to do something. It’s not just ‘He acts, we protest,’” he said. “It’s the confrontation of power with power—of national power with urban power.”

When I asked Barber what would happen if Trump made good on his promise to punish sanctuary cities by withholding their federal subsidies, he proposed a truly radical response: “If that happens,” he said, “Cities ought to begin to withhold their taxes.” He added that the cities that make up the Global Parliament of Mayors—a sort of localist version of the United Nations that Barber founded to allow city leaders to address critical issues like climate change, immigration, pandemic disease, inequality and terrorism—had agreed to provide funding to U.S. sanctuary cities to make up for any cuts the Trump administration might inflict on them. What he was proposing was nothing less than a kind of urban nullification, a rejection of Trump’s assault on cosmopolitan America.

A strikingly similar argument is being made on the right. In his book *The Fractured Republic*, Yuval Levin of *National Review* outlined the need for the devolution of power to

the local level. In a conversation with the *Atlantic's* Annie Lowrey, Utah's Republican Senator Mike Lee noted how federalism was designed to manage our disagreements. "The Constitution already contemplates that there would be vast regional differences geographically, politically, the way people approach government, how they view the role of government, what they want their government to do, what they're willing to entrust the government with and what they're not," he told Lowrey. "When you respect federalism more consistently and faithfully," he said, "you allow more of the people in America to get more of the government they want and less of the government they don't want."

Conservatives, who have been extolling the virtues of devolution for decades, might be inclined to call progressives' embrace of it a kind of "sore-loser federalism." Because liberals lost at the ballot box in November, *now* they're worried about federal overreach? After years of building up Washington?

Indeed, it's the left that has historically been the most in favor of a strong centralized administrative state, largely to provide a safety net and protect hard-won rights for women, minorities, gay and lesbian communities, and other marginalized groups. A century ago, a strong federal government was needed to underwrite the infrastructure investments that were required to build a unified country and overcome the graft and patronage that were still so rampant in big cities. Ever since, the federal government, the presidency and the administrative state have grown and grown in power. As the century progressed through the New Deal, the civil rights movement and Great Society era of the 1960s, the federal government played a vital role in ensuring food and occupational safety; expanding civil rights for minorities, women and gays; establishing the great social programs like Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare that have done so much to improve the lives of our most vulnerable populations; and protecting the environment.

But Trump has turned all of that upside down. Now it is the federal government that is threatening to roll back those rights, and to weaken or abolish those programs. Today, cities are not just our economic engines, but models of pragmatic, effective governance, and our most stalwart guarantors of our basic rights. Which is why a growing chorus of progressives like Laura Tyson, former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers during the Clinton administration, Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institution and Yale Law School's new dean Heather Gerken have been making the case for a new "progressive federalism."

Others have been more caustic. In a mock letter to red-state America in the *New Republic*, the historian and novelist Kevin Baker, channeling the bitterly satiric spirit of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," proposed a "virtual secession" or "bluexit." "We give up," he wrote. "You win. From now on, we'll treat the animating ideal on which the United States

was founded—out of many, one—as dead and buried. ... We'll turn our back on the federal government in every way we can, just like you've been urging everyone to do for years, and devote our hard-earned resources to building up our own cities and states. We'll turn Blue America into a world-class incubator for progressive programs and policies, a laboratory for a guaranteed income and a high-speed rail system and free public universities. We'll focus on getting our own house in order, while yours falls into disrepair and ruin.”

While I don't agree with these thinkers on everything, I do believe we have allowed the administrative state and the imperial presidency to become far too powerful—and that, in general, we have concentrated far too much power in the nation-state. It's partly why the stakes feel so high every four years: Because the central government has so much impact on our daily lives, it matters more than ever who controls it.

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Right after the election, I reached out to my chief critic and sparring partner Joel Kotkin, a fellow at Chapman University, to co-author an op-ed for the Daily Beast on the need for devolution and local empowerment. Kotkin has been writing about the need for increased localism as a counterbalance to what he calls the top-down “neo-feudalism” of the progressive agenda, while I come from the more progressive camp. Still, we agree that devolution and local empowerment hold the key to overcoming our political divides, respecting the very real differences between urban, suburban and rural areas, and enabling local communities and local leaders to address their opportunities and challenges on their own, unconstrained by federal interference. The fact that erstwhile enemies like Kotkin and I were able to come together on this issue and become genuine colleagues, collaborators and friends signals that this is an area where real bipartisan consensus is possible.

By lowering the stakes at the national level, devolution is perhaps the only conceivable way Red and Blue America can respect one another's differences and coexist. Want lower taxes? Fine, but you'll have to live with fewer services too, because blue cities will no longer subsidize you. Don't like Obamacare? Fine, you don't have to take it. But the uninsured that live in your red states will know who is to blame for their plight. Don't like transgender

people having the right to use the bathroom of their choosing? Fine, make your red cities and towns bastions of transphobism—but don't impose your intolerance on the rest of us. We can agree to disagree, as long as both sides are willing to live with the consequences. Liberal cities will keep their tax dollars at home and spend them as they see fit.

Many, especially on the progressive left, will find this a hard pill to swallow. But some red Southern states are already rolling back women's and minorities' rights, anyway—shutting abortion clinics and enacting strict voter ID laws. Proponents of progressive federalism believe that local protections and local initiatives, not national policy, are the keys to safeguarding such rights, noting that in nearly all instances the struggle for such rights began at the local level, with cities and localities guaranteeing them before they were ratified in federal policy.

A half-century ago, the economist Charles Tiebout proposed that we vote with our feet, essentially selecting the communities that best serve our wants and needs. Does this mean devolution will only exacerbate our already gaping spatial inequalities, widening the gaps between winner and loser places? The fear, naturally, is of a race to the bottom. Devolution will almost certainly lead to further geographic sorting, as large employers relocate from red places to blue, so they can continue to attract the best talent from around the world. But over time, this kind of competition will force many jurisdictions to up the ante to attract investment, build stronger economies and add to their tax coffers. This is the power of the “competitive federalism” outlined by thinkers like Jenna Bednar, a political theorist at the University of Michigan, and Michael Greve, a professor of law at George Mason University. Devolution, they argue, encourages competition for talent and investment and spurs innovation in policy and economic development.

And it goes in both directions: While blue cities and metros go the high-cost, high-tax route, more sprawling Sun Belt metros, Rust Belt metros and exurban areas can use their cost advantages to compete as well. Large, dense blue cities have higher rates of innovation, productivity and wages, but they also suffer from higher housing costs and higher tax burdens. Sprawling red cities benefit from lower housing costs and an easier path to the American dream of home ownership. As of 2014, for example, housing costs were almost twice as high in deep-blue markets as in red communities—\$227 versus \$119 per square foot. Over time, perhaps collations and networks of cities can begin to pool their resources and make the kinds of investments that can narrow those gaps.

But what if concentrating too much power in mayors' hands encourages greater incompetence and corruption at the local level, guaranteeing more Rob Fords? I tend to think that the distribution of mayors and local leaders follows the form of the bell curve:

You have a few total incompetents on one end, a few superstar mayors like John Hickenlooper, Michael Bloomberg, Michael Nutter or Mick Cornett on the other end, and a big middle of relatively competent mayors. I'd take a dozen or so corrupt and incompetent mayors, even a Rob Ford as mayor of my own city, over a dysfunctional and incompetent president like Trump any day. Mayors can't start nuclear wars.

Even on the domestic level, though, the modern-day presidency is crazy when you think about it: Why would a nation of 300 million-plus people, 50 states, 350-plus metro areas, 3,000-plus counties, and thousands and thousands of cities and communities choose to vest so much power in one person and one office? If there were any doubt about it before, we now know for a certainty that our current governance system, with its packing of humongous power in a unitary executive, is vulnerable to catastrophic failure. In addition to our well-understood horizontal separation of powers among the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, the vertical separation of powers among the federal government, the states and the local level provides a further set of safeguards and protections that we can and must use better. As a number of large corporations have discovered, devolving decision-making from executive suites to work groups on the factory floor drives huge productivity gains.

Local governments are not only less ideological than national and state governments; they are more pragmatic and stable, and less prone to partisanship and ideological excess. Trust in the federal government is at a historical low, falling from roughly three-quarters of all Americans in the 1950s and '60s, to roughly 20 percent today, according to surveys by Gallup and Pew. But trust in state and especially local government has stayed consistently high, currently between 55 and 65 percent for state government and between two-thirds and three-quarters of people who express trust in their own local government.

There are no one-size-fits-all solutions: What New York and San Francisco need to grow denser and more affordable is far different from what Houston or Phoenix need to rein in sprawl, or what Detroit and Cleveland need to rebuild their economies. Diverse, clustered, geographically uneven countries like ours have the best shot at succeeding when local communities can create their own policies and strategies that best address their unique needs and challenges. Cities are the places where the rubber of economic development policy hits the road—and thus where they are tested and modified and honed. They are our true laboratories of democracy.

Devolution is not simply a matter of taking power from the federal government and handing it over to cities. It means making the best use of the complex separation of powers between the federal, state and local levels. It means finding the best possible alignment

between the nature of an economic issue or policy area and the appropriate level of government and scale of governance that is required to address it. Transit and transportation investments, for example, could be overseen by the networks of cities and suburbs that make up metropolitan areas, or even the groups of metropolitan areas that make up megaregions. Housing investments, whether publicly funded or channeled through public-private partnerships, can be tailored to local conditions—detached houses and garden apartments for more spread-out places; high-rise rentals for denser and more urban locations.

Unfortunately, America is falling behind the rest of the advanced world in how it governs cities. A couple of years ago, a blue-ribbon panel of British business leaders, policymakers, economists and urbanists proposed shifting significant decision-making and taxing authority from the national government to cities and metros. Others have argued for establishing a British Parliament of Mayors to represent cities at the national level. This May, the United Kingdom elected a new system of metro mayors in six regions including Manchester and Liverpool, which have been given funding and powers devolved from the central government over transport, housing, planning, jobs and economic development. Given the gains that come from local clustering and local decision-making, over time, the places that unlock the economic engines of their cities and urban areas the most will gain significant advantages in innovation and economic competitiveness.

This vision of a new localism might have looked like a pipe dream even a month ago, but Trump's appalling decision to pull the United States out of the Paris agreement on climate change may be just the spur that was needed to put things into motion. As I am writing in June 2017, at least 298 mayors representing 60 million Americans, as well as 13 governors, almost 300 college presidents, and more than a thousand businesses and investors have joined coalitions to adopt and uphold the goals of the Paris climate agreement. Just as Trump has brought together the countries of Europe, he is bringing together cities and mayors in ways I've never seen. Could this group evolve into a broad, bipartisan body that could contest the U.S. government for sovereignty on this and other issues? It surely looks more likely today.

It may be hackneyed to say a crisis is a terrible thing to waste, but Trump's presidency provides both a defining crisis and a real opportunity to recast both our urban and our national governance. During the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt forged a new kind of partnership between the federal government and the cities. It's time to do so again, but this

time on a wider scale and in reverse. It may be the only thing that can save us from ourselves.