THE FUTURES OF DENSITY


DOUG SAUNDERS, ARRIVAL CITY (NEW YORK: PANTHEON, 2010)

ALAN EHRENHALT, THE GREAT INVERSION (NEW YORK: KNOPF, 2012)

By Terrence Doody

In *The Triumph of the City*, Edward Glaeser argues that the city has triumphed because it has made all of us richer, smarter, greener, healthier, and happier. Glaeser is a Harvard economist who writes the “dull science” with unusual enthusiasm, and he surveys the city’s success and the historical reasons that produced it. If there is a single urban quality essential to this progress, he suggests that it is density, a complex condition with many possible effects, both good and bad.

Density is at the core of Doug Saunders’ *Arrival City*, his account of “How the Largest Migration in Human History Is Shaping Our World.” Saunders is a British journalist, and his argument is that the world’s rural poor are leaving the countryside in such numbers that population growth will soon end and, in the near future, we will be able to create “a permanently sustainable world.” This is a very large claim, one that trumps the advantages of being merely richer, smarter, and happier.

What’s happening in the American cities that the political writer Alan Ehrenhalt studies in *The Great Inversion* is that people are moving back into city centers on a scale that is much more than mere gentrification. He claims that this shift will make our older cities more like the great capitals of the nineteenth century—Paris, London, Vienna—than the cities they were before manufacturing shrunk, the suburbs grew, and Americans began to marry later and live in better health for a much longer time.

All three books are optimistic toward the future, but the most difficult avenue into that future comes through Saunders’ *Arrival City*. “Arrival cities” are the great slums that metastasize at the edge of big cities, especially in the Third World, and pack the migrant population into unimaginable squalor. But for Saunders these places are actually dynamic mechanisms of transformation that connect villages and cities to the advantage of both. The money the migrants send home makes a great difference in the quality of village life, and they can make...
Arrival cities fail not when more poor arrive, but when governments impose policies to regulate them. In China, for example, there are millions in a “floating population” whose papers identify them with their original villages and not the cities they live in “illegally,” places where they are denied rights and services.

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