

Washington University Law Review

Volume 1962

Issue 3 *Symposium: The City in History by Lewis Mumford*

January 1962

Some Observations on Lewis Mumford's "The City in History"

David Riesman
Harvard University

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview



Part of the [Land Use Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

David Riesman, *Some Observations on Lewis Mumford's "The City in History"*, 1962 WASH. U. L. Q. 288 (1962).

Available at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview/vol1962/iss3/2

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Washington University Law Review by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON LEWIS MUMFORD'S 'THE CITY IN HISTORY'

DAVID RIESMAN*

For a number of years I have not had any time to undertake book reviews but I feel so keenly the importance and excitement of Mumford's work, and my own personal debt to that work, that I wanted to contribute to this symposium even if I could not begin to do justice to the task. What follows are my only slightly modified notes made on reading selected chapters of the book—notes which I had hoped to have time to sift and revise for a review. I hope I can give some flavor of the book and of its author and invite readers into the corpus of Mumford's work on their own.

1. Lewis Mumford correctly says in the book that he is a generalist, not a specialist; indeed until recently he has not had (or perhaps wanted to have) a full-time academic position. There are generalists *faute de mieux*, who cannot make the grade in a specialty; there are other generalists, of whom Mumford is one, who transcend the specialties—indeed whose legacy is often one of more specialties. Mumford was one of the early rediscoverers of Herman Melville; one of the first to write critically and thoughtfully about founders of American city planning; one of the revivers of utopian thought, not yet a specialty (just as there are no professors of the future, a category Mumford has helped pioneer); a synthesiser in urban ecology; and now a prophet of arms and the man—warning that the combination of nuclear techniques and civilized deracinations may change not only the face of the earth but its very course and possibilities. Mumford is one of those rare men of letters who is not, in C. P. Snow's sense, confined to the literary culture; one of those not so rare social scientists who is a humanist; and one of those rare humanists who knows a good deal about man as a biological and tool-using species and not only about man as a symbol-making and record-keeping one.

2. The early sections of *The City in History* give a wonderfully evocative sense of the shift away from masculine pursuits of hunting and killing, in which the tools were blunt or sharp chipped instruments, to the more feminine techniques of neolithic village agriculture, where the tools took shape as containers: as houses and ditches, jars and cisterns, and villages themselves (with old men the containers of oral wisdom). With encyclopedic knowledge, Mumford shows the growth of nurturance and cooperation as devices of survival for family and

* Henry Ford II Professor of Social Sciences, Harvard University.

group. In his preferences here and elsewhere in the book, I am reminded of Thorstein Veblen. The latter also admired what he called the epoch of savagery, when peaceable men and women lived in harmonious settlements close to nature. Forty years ago as an editor of *The Dial*, Mumford was succoring and defending Veblen, and the latter's work has some of the same historical sweep and grandeur that Mumford's has. But Veblen, as we would say today, identified with the aggressor: he threw in his moral lot with the engineer and technologist, with the city as against the village, the dynamic (one of the "plus" words of science and society today) against the static, the "hard" fact against the "soft" wish. Mumford, a more resilient man and thinker, has not done that. He can value the past even while he records its overthrow; indeed he sees to how large a degree it has survived—in fact, for instance, that man with all his inventiveness has not domesticated any new species since neolithic times (including himself) and virtually no new plants. And yet it is quite wrong to say, as many now do (Jane Jacobs in her brilliant polemic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, being among the latest) that Mumford is a romantic, opposed to cities and to their vital disorder. Mumford's work is protean: it cannot be summed up by saying he is "for" or "against" cities. Mumford does not regard his hopes and his fears as any less real than the world that exists physically (and which may be destroyed at any moment); unlike Veblen, he does not conceal his aspirations nor turn his criticisms into veiled mocking irony.

3. To continue the comparison of Veblen and Mumford, the former's mechanistic view led him to regard ritual and ceremonial as mere waste, and indeed to look with a jaundiced eye on all human institutions other than those geared directly to production and distribution (he made an exception for the academy and for pure research). Mumford is more catholic: he is not, like some modern writers, a lover of irrationality and waste, but he regards institutions in a more ambivalent and complicated way than Veblen did, seeing always man's need for mediation, for consensually shared meanings and mythic understandings, and drawing the distinction between rationality and irrationality in terms of what is life-enhancing in historical and cross-cultural perspective, rather than in terms of parochial American and Western canons of efficiency; he sees efficiency itself as a myth and a very dangerous one.

4. Among other things, this is a book of history: a history of the city, and I want to indicate something of Mumford's qualities as an historian. Most historians, like some anthropologists, are nationalists, though not always bounded by their own nation; they divide their subject matter by space and time. Mumford's boundaries are more universal, less localistic; moreover, in studying the city, he studies not

only its artifacts and layout, but its moral and religious qualities—unlike many evolutionists, he does not undervalue the role of religion in human affairs. But unlike Toynbee with whose boundary-crossing freedom and interest in religion Mumford can be compared, the latter seems to me to do less violence to the biological and ecological aspects of existence; Mumford's gift of metaphor and categorization seldom gets out of control, seldom works sadism on the materials of his craft as an historian, and yet provides fresh re-examination of what was thought to be familiar ground.

Like Toynbee, Mumford writes always with an eye on our present predicament, interpreting the past to widen our consciousness but also our conscience and responsibility for continuing the human story. He stresses, for example, what we might learn from reflecting on the period around 3000 B.C. when cities on the plain "invented" the possibilities of man as a machine guided and organized in huge masses by priests and kings and overseers as an aspect of the new technologies made possible by agricultural fertility and the man-power and power over man this made possible. The result was an enormous increment of human achievement and at the same time of the dangers of exploitation, cruelty and hubris—all too minatory of the opportunities and dangers we confront today: "The totalitarian states that seek ruthlessly to impose control are as much the victim of their clumsy brakes as the seemingly freer economies coasting downhill are at the mercy of their runaway vehicles."¹ With many modern worshippers of the past, the monuments, including the social organizations, erected by kings and priests are impressive in the way that modern big powers are impressive: to the historical victor belong the records and the plaudits. Mumford differs. No narrow functionalist of the simple life, he is prepared to recognize the achievements of kings and hunters. But he can distinguish grandeur from grandiosity and he sees history as cumulative, not requiring us to evaluate in the same way an early Pharaoh and Stalin, the inventors of the fortified castle and Edward Teller. Like a magnet, Mumford's moral and metaphorical vision organizes the filings and fragments as well as the larger schemes of other investigators, but unlike empire builders, early and late, he does not mistreat the parts for the sake of the monumental whole.

5. In showing how the explosive combination of kingship, male dominance, and priestly ideology led cities repeatedly throughout history into aggressive war (or defense against other cities or peasants seeking revenge), Mumford suggests that a process of selective breeding has tended to promote an aggressive social character and to create a collective unconscious which believes that "only by wholesale human

1. P. 34. [References are to pages of *THE CITY IN HISTORY*.]

sacrifice can a community be saved.”² No doubt, cities accumulate a sufficient “critical mass” for many human potentialities to become actualities, including the most maniacal, power-mad, and vindictive ones. These qualities may then be transmitted, culturally though not biologically, in particular strata—and then only ordinarily to the men-folk. Hence, I regard the concept of a collective unconscious as unnecessary to explain what we find, just as Mumford correctly insists that the concept of natal or instinctive aggression is unnecessary to explain the historical record, and actually is incapable of explaining the relatively peaceable quality of village life throughout history. At the present time, peoples, including urban peoples, who have suffered from modern total wars do not seem eager for collective human sacrifice: the Russian people do not appear eager, nor the Japanese, nor the British, nor the metropolitan French. The tough talk of many Americans who want a military show-down with Communism reflects, among many other factors, a history of relatively successful wars; but even in this country, wars such as the Civil War lasted longer and turned out more miserably than the provocative entrepreneurs envisaged, most of whom would have been satisfied with sacrifice at retail, but in the event could only get it wholesale. I think it would be more just and more in consonance with Mumford’s own material to suggest that modern urban communities have become more peaceable and civil at the same time that the nations which enclose them have become more menacing. It does not take many people, often in tacit cooperation across national boundaries, to prepare modern war and to give it justification, appealing to the conformist in man rather than to the sadist or the sacrificial, to the need for belonging and not the need for blood. The very fact that modern wars in general must all be sold as defensive indicates that war has been democratized and in some respects gelded.

6. Through Mumford’s vivid, empathic account of what it was like to live in the cities of the Fertile Crescent three or four thousand years ago and of what is the same, similar, and different in city life today, we recapture “the uses of the past” of which Professor Muller has spoken so feelingly, succumbing neither to the brilliant determinism of Spengler nor yet escaping a feeling of tragic kinship with the lot of city dwellers everywhere.

7. When, however, we jump over millennia and come down to the present American scene, I am inclined to think that Mumford’s fellow feeling with the average American suburbanite is replaced by understandable frustration that these men, so near the gates of affluent and civilized ease, despoil the quality of life and landscape in so many

2. P. 45.

obviously stultifying ways. Mumford shares with the present reviewer a view of the private car, the truck, the bus, and the bulldozer as the weapon of the city's self-destruction. In the city where this *Review* is published, a magnificent railroad station testifies to a vanishing age of varied and efficient transport—and a modern air terminal, miles from anywhere on a boring highway, is a supplement but no substitute.³ Even so, I believe that Mumford tends to undervalue the freedom that the automobile has brought many previously imprisoned individuals: consider the young to whom the car has brought a greater mobility and freedom (and all the accompanying hazards); the Negro, especially in the South, who is freed by the car from Jim Crow or from vestiges of racist attitudes; or the housewife who is no longer so cooped up. The freedom of the driver has been bought at an excessive and for many Americans still invisible price, but Mumford, like many critics of mass culture, underestimates the importance of this freedom for the previously deprived.

So, too, I cannot entirely share Mumford's position that today's suburbia, typified by Los Angeles in its dispersion, is a more impoverished environment than the denser city that preceded it. Undoubtedly Mumford is right that the well-to-do railroad suburbs of the Victorian era protected their privileged inhabitants against both the dirty city and the dreary suburbs of our own time, but I am less sure that the working-class and lower-middle-class families who have chosen to live in the suburbs today are worse off than they once were. Recent investigations by the sociologist, Herbert Gans, who has lived successively in Park Forest, Illinois, the West End of Boston (now undergoing what is euphemistically called redevelopment), and Levittown, New Jersey, strengthen my doubts about such comparisons, suggesting that the move to the suburb—and the car—has for many families brought greater freedom of choice, more opportunity for friendship and community activity, greater space and amenity, closer family ties. Even the omnipresent television, against which Mumford like many intellectuals contends, may arguably be slightly less vacuous than the idle sitting or bar room brawling that it has replaced. I'm not suggesting a rosy view of the new suburbanites (here I differ somewhat from Gans who takes a more relativistic view). But my criticism is not based on the view that we have fallen away from higher or more appropriate styles of life, but rather that, with so much greater ca-

3. See particularly Mumford's section, "Railroad Line, Greenbelt, Motor Sprawl," *THE CITY IN HISTORY*, pp. 503 *et seq.*; and see for the reviewer's suggestions as to why the auto has attained such hegemony, Riesman and Eric Larrabee, "Autos in America: Manifest and Latent Destinies," in *Consumer Behavior: Research on Consumer Reactions*, Lincoln H. Clark, Ed., New York, Harper and Brothers, 1958, pp. 69-92.

capacity and so much greater knowledge of what could be done, we have used our resources so calamitously and with such little foresight in terms of the general quality of life in America. If one can make such overall judgments—and Mumford and this reviewer both try to do this—and I do not think we are worse off in any absolute sense.

But the fact that we have made such a mess of our cities and our countryside, turning both increasingly into low density chaos dependent on the private auto, may heighten the sense of anarchy that we also feel in our international relations: in both cases our instruments of destruction—the gasoline engine in the one case, and the missile or the vanishing bomber in the other—have outrun our political instruments of control. Thus I fully share Mumford's despair about the gap between what we might be doing and what we are doing. Where I differ is in a possibly slightly kindlier judgment of the life the average person leads in comparison with what he once led.

8. What I've been dealing with is a marginal difference, a question of emphasis. To illustrate it further, I can see a value to the urban heterogeneity and crowding and even neon signs of Tokyo whereas Mumford might consider these features out of human scale, ugly and harmful. And even here I would want to know what these features mean to the residents of Tokyo before I passed a judgment from outside—though I wouldn't be bound by their judgment either. Mumford is not a Puritan in any conventional sense: he is alive to the sensuous, the latent, the juicy; but he cannot see these qualities at all in mass culture, and he tends to assume, as do such British writers as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, that mass culture replaced something that was better and less sterile and alienated. To repeat: my difference from him is that I would prefer to judge mass culture from the point of view of the potential future we both see rather than from the point of view of the somewhat romanticized past.

9. America has not had much use for prophets who have not also been politicians—as Henry George and even Bellamy tried to be politicians. Mumford is primarily a prophet: he points the way, with lessons from the spacious past and the inventive present, to the future we might all inhabit. But he does not suggest the actual political groupings that might accomplish the renewal that seems so near and yet so far, so hopelessly far. His weapons are not a call to the working class nor cagey counsels to adept city planners, nor yet hope in the reform of realtors. His weapons are as old as the story he tells: reason, exhortation, imagination and faith. Reflecting on all the massed irrationalities and inertias, and the massed rationalizations that have been built up on their behalf, that stand in Mumford's way and in man's way, I was reminded of the passage in Spinoza where he dis-

cusses how the Biblical prophets attempted to assure themselves of certainty:

For instance, Jeremiah's prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem was confirmed by the prophecies of other prophets, and by the threats in the law, and therefore it needed no sign; whereas Hananiah, who, contrary to all the prophets, foretold the speedy restoration of the state, stood in need of a sign, or he would have been in doubt as to the truth of his prophecy, until it was confirmed by facts. "The prophet which prophesieth of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known that the Lord hath truly sent him."⁴

4. *THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPINOZA*, edited by Joseph Ratner, Modern Library, 1927. P. 51.