

Cities

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Introduction

A city is less its architecture and more its sentiments. Italo Calvino has described every great city as surprisingly similar; each has its sweeping stone steps leading to a temple, library or star chamber, its moody dividing river and subsidiary canals, its charming arcades of quaint shops and precious art galleries. What distinguishes one city from another are its secrets, the places where memories define desires, and where the conventions conceal undercurrents. Los Angeles, for instance, 'on the bad edge of postmodernity' (Calvino, 1979, p. 23) is characterized by episodic moral panics and destabilizing crime waves. Clues to its secret identity are continuously spewed out with the production of popular culture. Los Angeles is a by-product of Hollywood, it is the underside of the entertainment industries. The mordant critic of mass culture, Theodor Adorno, said that the city was where 'the boundary between what is human and the world of things becomes blurred' (Adorno, 1981, p.262). The city is an intersection between material fact and private imagination.

The rise of the city is commonly associated with commerce and industry. Port cities are the obvious site for trafficking in goods, adventures, people and politics. Much of the allure of the city lies in a wide range of surprises it offers. Indeed, the value of the city is its challenge to the individual. In the noisy and busy streets of the city, the individual will be tested; s/he will encounter a haphazard mix of ideas and people who will resist being ordered. If the individual survives in the city, then s/he is equipped for life.

The past century has been one of increasing urban growth, migration and population changes. Cities have emerged from wastelands, been reclaimed from the sea and built in the desert; Brasilia, Singapore, Dubai are all remarkable architectural and engineering achievements that successfully house millions of people and businesses. Almost every intellectual giant in the western canon has addressed the city. For Shakespeare, the city was a rumble of people; for Baudelaire, it was the site of spectacle; for Frederick Engels, it meant estrangement; for Lewis Mumford, it was a colossal skeleton of suburbs, ghettos, industrial parks and corporate quarters; for Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud, it was a site of modern pathologies where moral weakening took place and abnormal divisions of labour emerged; for Georg Simmel, it was the crucible in which the blasé attitude was produced that in turn supported the modern, bureaucracy-driven metropolis. For Janet Flanner, the elegant writer of *The New Yorker*, the mythical city of the 20th century was a blend of Paris and New York; her close analysis of the habits of the intelligentsia and the rising middle classes defined the sensibility of the new cosmopolitan (Benstock, 1986, pp. 101, 131-3).

At its simplest, the city is an encounter with a colossal art installation. It is a space arranged and blocked out with architectural styles and precincts; it has a central business district, a left bank, an east village, an uptown, downtown, Latin quarter, little China, red light district, old wall, infamous alley, gay ghetto and subversive block. The city is like a tattooed body that is easily sectioned, highlighted and transformed into a narrative. Yet this mapping of the city does not always reveal its nature. The city is both

real and imaginary, alluring and repulsive, inspiring and degrading. The mythologies of the city mix with the noise of its everyday pulse. To survive in the city requires wit and strength; to understand the city requires an analysis of the human condition. The city ignites the imagination and requires physical fortitude. In the city, the private and public domains are regularly collapsed and transgressed.

The Emerging City

The city must be understood from different points of view: it is an infrastructure of mechanical features, a closed system of roads and zoned regions, and commercial activities. For the individual, the city is a site of the unexpected. Amidst the order, there is always the possibility of disorder, of crime, chaos, disruption and scandal. When the cultural historian Roger Darnton (1984) recounted the tale of the great cat massacre in Paris in the mid-eighteenth century, he was also describing the function of the city as the crucible in which the mighty groans and heaves of the civilizing process are both contained and aired in public. The great cat massacre began on the rue Saint-Séverin, when local apprentices rounded up the stray cats of the city, dressed them in miniature garments imitative of the French aristocratic style, with velvet capes and tiny hoods, and then burned them to death in a public massacre. The episode has been read as a symbolic precursor to the French Revolution, even though it has been dated (not without contested debate) to the early 1730s, half a century before the reign of terror. This urban tale has retained its significance as an illustration of how the secrets of a city are preserved in folklore. Paris, the heartbeat of revolution and political reconstruction, is a city with a tale or two.

Across the Channel, London's eighteenth century population of almost 700,000 people was being increased by new arrivals who were migrating at the rate of 8,000 thousand per year. They were coming to a metropolis in the throes of transformation. London was seething with opportunities and vices; it was 'the epicentre for hustlers, bawds, pimps and whores alike and a gentleman was just as likely to have his pocket picked as to have his lusts gratified' (Peakman, 2004, p. 2-3). The painter, William Hogarth, in 1732, captured some of the more debauched and lascivious antics of Londoners as a record of the times. In *A Harlot's Progress, Plate 1*, Hogarth depicted the recruitment of a fresh-faced country girl into the practice of prostitution, and four images later, *A Harlot's Progress, Plate V*, he showed her dead from the pox. Estimates of the numbers of prostitutes and pimps who made a living from sexual services in London were as high as two per cent of the city's population. In every ale-house, there was a back-room set aside for sexual transactions, and the number of brothels, molly-houses and specialist bagnios was well into the hundreds. Yet from this cesspool of vice and crime, there emerged, in the next century, modern parliamentary democracy, colonial expansion and the commonwealth, the affluent middle classes and the bureaucratic civil service.

The Killer City

Conventionally, the city is regarded as a 19th century phenomenon. Before the 1850s, few societies could be described as urbanized. With industrialization came spectacular economic growth that brought hundreds of thousands of people into cities in search of work and opportunities. In the 21st century, the size of cities makes them mega-constellations of trade and capital. Tokyo holds 26 million people, Mexico City 19 million, Bombay 18 million and Shanghai 17 million. Alongside these conglomerates are often immense tracts of sub-standard housing and degraded land. Sanitation and water contamination create biological time-bombs that threaten to produce outbreaks of infectious diseases like cholera, typhoid, SARS and tuberculosis which pose public health problems with global consequences. While the city generates capital as a global

life force, it also produces the poisons of its own demise.

Life in the city has always been associated with danger in terms of health as well as misadventure. In the mid-19th century, the average life expectancy in London was 36 years and even less in the industrial city of Liverpool where it was 26 years. In rural England and Wales, the life expectancy was 41 years. In the first decade of the 20th century, the death rates in urban areas in Great Britain were 33% higher than in rural areas, and birth rates were also lower in the city than in rural regions. Despite these statistics, the city was not just a source of disease and pathogens, it also emanated a strong *life force*. Commentators such as Ferdinand Töennies and Werner Sombart emphasized its negative and anti-human qualities but also its promise for creating wealth and opening up unimagined possibilities. The city was a death-trap but also a source of human invention.

A city exerts a particular influence over its inhabitants as if it had a character that loomed large like Hobbes' *Leviathan* or Batman's *Gotham City*. The city makes its inhabitants. New Yorkers, Londoners, Muscovites, out-of-towners, Berliners, Singaporeans and Parisians, appear to have personal qualities that are obvious to any sharp observer. City dwellers have attributes in common; they are drawn together as cosmopolitans more than inhabitants of particular places.

Lost in the City

The rise of industrial capitalism and the shifting political climate at the close of the 19th century produced a sense of dislocation in Europe that was overlaid with a simmering nationalist fervour. As traditions faded and disintegration triumphed, the individual was tipped into a crisis of identity. The flight from tradition produced an atmosphere in which individuals were free but at the same time, lost and dislocated. Opportunities for upward social mobility created a nagging sense of uncertainty. Wittgenstein (1980, p. 27) described the problem as a sense of confusion produced by the 'strange demands' of everyday life. To be modern meant that one lived as if the world were always a puzzle in need of solutions; society was much less predictable and, consequently, every individual lived in a state of permanent anxiety. The immense physical scale of the city, with its numerous entertainments, corruptions and diversions created a cacophony of noise that literally swept the individual into a moral and aesthetic vertigo. Within such a charged atmosphere, nothing seemed stable, everything seemed possible, and knowing how to behave and what to expect from others became a daily problem. The irony was that while the new capitalism demanded regular office hours, time keeping, schedules and formal appointments, at the same time, it created the circumstances of disorder and upheaval. The city dweller was always doing business with strangers who had different customs and value systems. It was impossible to assume similarity, to regard certain actions or gestures as having a taken-for-granted meaning. Every transaction was a potential source of conflict, confusion and anxiety.

A growing metropolis is amoebic; it is like a large thrashing beast trying to gain a toe-hold. Crime in the city is ubiquitous; it is its ungovernable underbelly. The city of the modern world, emerging from 19th century industrialism, was a new kind of jungle where mysterious figures like *The Phantom* prowled the streets setting all manner of wrongs to rights, and the Pinkerton Detective Agency, formed in Chicago in 1850, came to embody modern principles of detection and surveillance that found their way into the literary and cinematic figures of the romantic 'private eye' (Potter, 1986). These new agents of modern morality revealed the hidden world beneath the surface. They treated the city as an organic body with mysterious habits and inherent pathologies.

Modern Times

Other views of the city emphasized its rational and orderly qualities. For Karl Marx and Max Weber, the city was the site of the factory and the marketplace. It was a place of order and routine. The working day, beginning at a fixed time, the lunch break, the change of shifts in the factory, the regular hours of operation, created a routine into which individuals had to be inserted. Businesses required standard hours of opening, appointments had to be made and kept, bookkeeping was meticulously recorded, in short, an infrastructure of calculability was imposed over the city and its inhabitants.

Simmel described the *blasé individual* as the new citizen who was required to inhabit the busy, noisy, intrusive city without succumbing to its over-stimulation. The blasé individual developed a smooth carapace that signaled to others a kind of nonchalant removal from social engagement, but, at the same time, this carapace masked the underlying anxiety generated by the intense stimulation of the crowded, noisy metropolis. The rupture of ties to village, family, church and guild were the 'dark side' of the industrial revolution that threatened the psychological well-being of the individual.

Between 1860 and 1910, the population of Berlin rose from under half a million people to more than two million; Paris increased from more than one and a half million to nearly three million, London grew from under three million to four and half million, and Vienna enlarged its population from less than a million in 1869 to almost two million in 1910 (Le Rider, 1993). The sudden growth of the city as a physical form made it a crucible in which transformations of human experience took shape: individuals became acutely aware of competition and the survival of the fittest. Everyday encounters were inevitably filled with challenges from other people who looked different, and whose culture, religion, values and aspirations were highly varied. The city was like 'a huge arithmetical problem' in which the individual needed to be always calculative (Simmel, 1900, pp. 482-490). The orderliness and regulations of the city, its timetables for public transport and regular work hours for factories and shops, did not belie its undergirding fragility. The city's orderliness was easy to shatter with chance events such as traffic accidents, mechanical failures, crime and the unexpected social encounter.

City dwellers learned the language of place; they developed systems for reading their surroundings - fashionable dress, physiognomy and speech style were all clues to the identity of the other people they encountered on the street. Being able to read the stranger, to decode their character and intentions from their outward appearance, was an important skill for surviving in the city. Popular crazes for phrenology and palmistry were used to decipher the character of business associates and casual acquaintances (Raban, 1974, p. 30). Instruction manuals on how to 'read the stranger' became best sellers. Most bookstalls offered cheap pamphlets on graphology and quasi-scientific disquisitions on the relationship between body-shape and moral character. These were the forerunners of the 'how to succeed' books that still remain popular today. The vast market for these cranky guides to 'person-spotting', now available in every train station and airport bookshop, continue to demonstrate the perceived complexities of urban living.

Yet this heightened attention to analyzing and assessing the character of the modern urban dweller had the ironic effect of creating a disturbing sense of interior emptiness as if there were a vacuum at the centre of every individual being. The daily habits of doing business which required a sense of distance, calculation and the exercise of indifference also produced in the individual a repertoire of defense mechanisms that appeared as forms of coolness and reserve. Thus the successful city-dweller was constantly oscillating between a 'secret restlessness' and sense of helplessness that

was just 'below the threshold of consciousness' (Simmel, 1900). These opposing tensions held the individual and the mass society together in a tangle of strange demands created by new forms of sociality. They reinforced a sense of interior emptiness and at the same time sustained a constant yearning for security supported by community.

Modern Tourism

In the early 1970s, when global travel was becoming *de rigueur* for *twentysomethings*, when student travel and backpacking were developing as an industry, and when new pockets of the world were opening up to young tourists, a sub-genre of travel writing also developed. This genre not only included the new style of guidebook such as *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guides* but also the more literary works of Bruce Chatwin (*In Patagonia*), Vikram Seth (*From Heaven Lake*) and Jan Morris (*Venice*). These works expressed a view of the city that was both nostalgic and critical. They wrote of the city as having a history not always conducive to individual happiness or material comfort. The city was a lived space, an intersection between reality and private imagination and, at this intersection, the city became more than a concrete monolith, it entered the human imagination as a source of excitement, danger and optimism.

The city has been a potent motif in western intellectual and cultural histories. It is seen as both the site where experiments in living have taken place and the origins of major problems in the contemporary social order. Throughout history, the city has acted as a magnet for all manner of activities and spectacles, and in this capacity it is the crucible in which experiments in social living are conducted. Despite the dangers and difficulties it presents, despite its uneven history and complicated demands on the individual, it has the capacity to engage and amuse us, to keep us enthralled. As such, whether the city is over-crowded, frail, corrupting or crumbling, it is the site where we either fail or else prove ourselves to be civilized.

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