

# The Ghost of Patrick Geddes: Civics As Applied Sociology

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## Abstract

In 1904 and 1905 Patrick Geddes (1905, 1906) read his famed, but today little-read, two-part paper, 'Civics: as Applied Sociology', to the first meetings of the British Sociological Society. Geddes is often thought of as a 'pioneer of sociology' (Mairet, 1957; Meller, 1990) and for some (eg Devine, 1999: 296) as 'a seminal influence on sociology'. However, little of substance has been written to critically assess Geddes's intellectual legacy as a sociologist. His work is largely forgotten by sociologists in Britain (Abrams, 1968; Halliday, 1968; Evans, 1986). Few have been prepared to follow Geddes's ambition to bridge the chasm between nature and culture, environment and society, geography, biology and sociology. His conception of 'sociology', oriented towards social action from a standpoint explicitly informed by evolutionary theory. A re-appraisal of the contemporary relevance of Geddes's thinking on civics as applied sociology has to venture into the knotted problem of evolutionary sociology. It also requires giving some cogency to Geddes's often fragmentary and inconsistent mode of address. Although part of a post-positivist, 'larger modernism' Geddes remained mired in nineteenth century evolutionary thought and fought shy of dealing with larger issues of social class or the breakthrough work of early twentieth century sociology of Simmel, Weber and Durkheim. His apolitical notion of 'civics' limits its relevance to academic sociology today.

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**Keywords:** *History of Sociology, Civics, Patrick Geddes, Scottish Generalism, Urban Sociology*

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## Introduction

**1.1** It is exactly a century since Patrick Geddes (1905, 1906) read his famed, but today little-read, two-part paper, 'Civics: as Concrete and Applied Sociology', to the first meeting of the British Sociological Society. Although often referred to as a 'pioneer of sociology' (Mairet, 1957; Meller, 1990) and described by one leading Scottish historian (Devine, 1999: 296) as 'a seminal influence on sociology', little of substance has been written to critically assess Geddes's intellectual legacy for sociology (but see Welter, 2002 and Meller, 1990 for rare exceptions). Much of the literature on Geddes, especially in Scotland, tends towards the hagiographic and borders on the antiquarian. While he may have inspired the founding of the British Sociological Society in 1903, his work is largely forgotten by sociologists in Britain (Abrams, 1968; Halliday, 1968; Evans, 1986). In part, this is a legacy of his mercurial determination to resist classification, except on his own terms as a social evolutionist but more often than not as an unrepentant outsider. In so doing, he 'cast himself and his ideas into the wilderness, where he remains in terms of modern scholarship' (Meller, 1990: 122).

**1.2** Few were prepared to follow Geddes's ambition to bridge the chasm between nature and culture, environment and society, geography, biology and sociology. His conception of 'sociology', oriented towards social action from a standpoint explicitly informed by evolutionary theory, seemed to have little in common with the emerging academic discipline. The centenary of the 'Civics' paper provides an opportunity to revisit Geddes's relevance for sociology. This requires venturing into some of the knotted issues of evolutionary sociology and re-considering the contemporary relevance of Geddes's thinking on civics as applied sociology. It also requires giving some cogency to Geddes's often fragmentary and inconsistent mode of address.

## Geddes: as Sociologist

**2.1** In his own lifetime (1854-1932) Geddes was widely recognised as a polymath who covered a remarkable

number of disciplines and subjects. He is perhaps best known for virtually inventing the scientific study of Town Planning. Yet that hardly begins to do justice to Geddes's range of interests or influence (Stalley, 1972; Mairet, 1957; Boardman, 1979; Meller, 1990; Welter, 2002). For instance, in his historical survey of technology and society, *Technics and Civilization*, Lewis Mumford (1934: 475) acknowledged Patrick Geddes as 'my master' and claimed that Geddes's published work does 'but faint justice to the magnitude and range and originality of his mind; for he was one of the outstanding thinkers of his generation, not alone in Great Britain, but in the world'. An indication of the official recognition of this breadth is that Geddes was appointed to a personal Chair in Botany at University College Dundee (1889-1914) and was later Professor of Civics and Sociology at Bombay University (1919-1923). He was awarded the International Gold Medal for his Applied Sociology exhibition at the 1913 International Exposition at Ghent. He also accepted a knighthood in the last year of his life, (though only after earlier refusing one). However, Geddes was in no way a conventional academic. He never completed a formal degree and failed to be appointed to a number of academic positions, until the Dundee textile magnate (and benefactor to sociology), James Martin White, bankrolled the Dundee College post especially for Geddes (Abrams, 1968; Macdonald, 2000a).

**2.2** For too long regarded as lone 'visionary', Geddes can be better understood as part of the pre-1914 mainstream of European Utopian thought, a 'larger modernism' represented by figures and movements like Bergson and vitalism. Within this version of intellectual modernism scientific rationality was mixed-in with aesthetics, myth and religion (Welter, 2002). Geddes was thus open to the latest cultural and intellectual developments occurring far beyond the national purview of the British Isles. He studied and worked in Paris, Montpellier, Mexico, Palestine and Bombay, as well as in Dublin, Edinburgh, London and Dundee. For Geddes, the sociologist should be a sort of *flaneur*: 'The productive sociologist should thus be of all investigators a wandering student par excellence; in the first place, as far as possible, a literal tourist and traveller' (1906: 126). He greatly valued the specific cultural inheritance he found in India and set himself in opposition to official British imperialism (Tyrwhitt, 1947). Back in Edinburgh he gave refuge to foreign revolutionaries and anarchists (Reynolds, 2004). State boundaries were viewed by Geddes as coercive, arbitrary and artificial and his civic commitment to a notion of 'home' meant for him simultaneous contact with nature, nation and region-city (Smout, 1991; Macdonald, 2005). State-led social citizenship too readily frames a narrow, integral nationalism (Law, 2005a). Geddes's version of civics transcended the limits of state citizenship, integrating an environmental consciousness within an internationalist ethics in what before 1914 he thought optimistically was an emerging 'new age' of a world Society 'of societies of societies' (Geddes, 1888: 16; Bell, 1998; Stephen, et al, 2005)

**2.3** A major difficulty lay in Geddes's propensity for fragmentary details and a lack of focus in his quest to develop a mighty sociological synthesis. Patrick Abercrombie, the influential town planner, later called Geddes 'a most unsettling person' (Kitchen, 1975: 237). His lyrical meanderings were tamed by frequent recourse to peculiar notational diagrams, whose two-dimensional forms Geddes optimistically believed to be visually-arresting 'thinking machines' (Meller, 1990: 45-51; Mairet, 1957: 32-3; Kitchen, 1975: 323-7). As 'sociography', visual forms of classification allow not only for comparison but may also suggest relations between seemingly disparate phenomena in the manner of geometry (Geddes, 1906). What began as a response by Geddes to being blinded temporarily in Mexico was developed to convey complex ideas outside of a linear narrative mode of representation. Mumford (1948: 381) termed this Geddes's 'art of ideological cartography', although later recalled that this became a rigid, infallible and calcified graphic system (Mumford, 1996: 358). For all his emphasis on evolution Geddes's graphic charts were unable to express time in spatial representations.

**2.4** Moreover, as sociology developed into narrowly specialised areas of inquiry, Geddes remained steeped in the Scottish tradition of interdisciplinary generalism (Macdonald, 2000b, 2004, 2005). This provided the basis of the so-called 'democratic intellect' in Scotland, a pedagogic standpoint that rejected rigid disciplinary boundaries between philosophy, science, history, art and social science (Davie, 1961). Into this brew, Geddes repeatedly added the analogy of cultivating a garden, of cultivating the 'buds' of future growth. Geddes has also been claimed as one of the pioneers of modern Scottish nationalism. In the absence of a political nationalist movement in Scotland, Geddes felt instinctively attracted to neo-romanticism and Celtic revivalism, as in the Symbolist art of John Duncan, since it apparently represented the deepest sources of the cultural evolution of Scottish society (Macdonald, 2000: 151-7; Fowle, 2004; Jarron, 2004). If anything, however, Geddes was a cosmopolitan nationalist for the same reason that he was a civic reformer. He developed a peculiar, non-political sense of inter-nationalism:

deliberately rejecting a narrowly nationalist perspective, and adopting as the key to all further development, a paradoxical commitment to cosmopolitanism. The paradox was resolved in that their sense of national identity was built on a perception of place, and it was a romantic sensitivity to place which was the key to cosmopolitanism ... [D]iscussion about the 'Celtic Revival' and Scottish nationalism played an important part in the development of his theory of civics. For Geddes it was a reaffirmation of the importance of place, but given a special

meaning. (Meller, 1990: 100-1).

**2.5** Hence, there is no narrow parochial reason to resurrect Geddes as a 'Great' Briton or Scot. If a case can be made to revisit Geddes it is because his themes - environment, culture, the city, space, place, nation, region, evolution, civics - remain at the forefront of contemporary sociological concerns. Moreover, Geddes's own highly eclectic approach to these issues is a source of stimulating, if idiosyncratic and unsystematic, insight to our current concerns. However, I want to argue here that for all his stimulating leads, the fundamental problem with Geddes remains his reduction of the scope of sociology to an apolitical form of 'applied' civics.

### **Geddes and Nineteenth Century Sociology**

**3.1** Perhaps the primary reason for Geddes's relative obscurity in contemporary sociology, apart from his torturous writing style, graphic numerology and ready digression, was his commitment to an evolutionary model of social development. While studying Darwinian evolution under Thomas Huxley in the mid-1870s, Geddes attended the Positivist Church in London, where he embraced the teachings of Spencer and Comte before warming to Ruskin's social and aesthetic critique of contemporary social conditions. But his unique sociological approach took firmer shape in Paris where, under the influence of Le Play and Demouilins, he was inspired by the progressive possibilities of fusing evolutionary science with social science. Here the sociologist must work from origins, from simple beginnings, and rise through the lineage to the more complex present.

Civics is no abstract study, but fundamentally a matter of concrete and descriptive sociology - perhaps the greatest field of this. Next, that such orderly study is in line with the preliminary sciences, and with the general doctrine of evolution from simple to complex; and finally with the general inquiry into the influence of geographical conditions on social development. (Geddes, 1906: 126)

**3.2** What Geddes envisaged was not a linear development from biological sciences to applied sociology but an intellectual approach framed by the concrete problem at hand - the improvement of the life of the human organism in its most complex setting, the City (Welter, 2002).

**3.3** Geddes counterposed his conception and method of applied sociology to the social abstentionism he found in the 'abstract constructions' of Comte and Spencer. They were too ready to advance unsupported generalisations: 'The simplest of naturalists must feel that Comte or Spencer, despite the frequently able use of the generalisations of biology, themselves somewhat lacked the first-hand observation of the city and the community around them' (1906: 124-5). Geddes reversed Comte's metaphysical emphasis on grand system-building for the logically prior empirical study through a 'return to nature'.

It is the observant naturalist, the travelled zoologist and botanist, who later becomes the productive writer on evolution. It is the historian who may best venture on into the philosophy of history; - to think the reverse is to remain in the pre-scientific order altogether: hence the construction of systems of abstract and deductive economics, politics or morals, has really been the last surviving effort of scholasticism. (Geddes 1905: 83)

**3.4** However, Geddes retained Comte's penchant for abstract typologies, such as his three-stages of history and his four social types of 'people', 'chiefs', 'intellectuals' and 'emotionals'. Each individual was served a moral injunction by Geddes to balance these inner personality types harmoniously with their surrounding topographical and cultural environments.

**3.5** Geddes's analytical approach drew more deeply from the French sociologist Frederic Le Play's triad of *Lieu, Travail, et Famille*. In his monumental (and largely neglected) six-volume *Les Ouvriers Europeens* (*The European Working Classes*), first published in 1855, Le Play carried out comparative studies of the working class family in Europe, taking family income as his critical variable in one of the first sociological studies claiming 'scientific' status in terms of its method and inferential reasoning. Geddes (1906) was especially attracted to the rural basis of Le Play's approach for his own view of the three-stage development of the city: out of 'nature' comes 'rustics' and out of 'rustics' develops urban civics. But instead of Le Play's conservative focus on the family as the primary social group Geddes, ever ready to adopt systems rooted in the number three, revised Le Play's triad into 'Place, Work and Folk', with 'Family' displaced for being too narrow a basis for cultural evolution. 'Folk' was an attempt by Geddes to situate the individual in culture and community. But as a concept it was a much less precise unit of analysis than Le Play's 'Family'. 'Place', for Geddes, was therefore not merely a topographic site but also a 'Work-Place' of productive activity and a 'Folk-Place' of residences.

Work, conditioned as it primarily is by natural advantages, is thus really first of all *place-work*.

Arises the field or garden, the port, the mine, the workshop, in fact the *work-place*, as we may simply generalise it; while, further, beside this arise the dwellings, the *folk-place*. (Geddes, 1906: 72).

**3.6** This had methodological disadvantages for establishing the distinctiveness of 'Folk' as individuals-in-community, which Geddes attempted to resolve by building ever more elaborate conceptual versions of his graphic 'thinking machines'. While Geddes was vehement in his rejection of all abstract and metaphysical systems, his own evolutionary sociology tended towards explanatory closure, particularly his excessive reliance on the Le Playist triad of Folk, Work and Place and the tottering edifices he built upon them for grasping geographical, historical, anthropological, scientific and technological change. All this simply became part of the demiurge of Geddes's evolutionary threesome, an approach inherited from nineteenth century biology's triumvirate of Organism, Function and Environment.

**3.7** Still, Geddes's disdain for formal politics meant that he was left unimpressed by political labels and, on this basis, preferred the approach of the conservative sociologist Le Play to that of the nominally more radical sociology of Comte.

August Comte is popularly supposed to be a radical, a democratic man of modern science. But he makes his contributions to sociology from the standpoint of a hierarchy of feeling and genius, of the aristocracy of action and thought. Conversely, it is Frederic Le Play ... who is popularly supposed even in his own country to make his appeal to capitalist and conservative, to aristocrat and priest, who has really established for us the vital doctrine of democracy ... (Geddes, 1896, in Macdonald, 2004: 89)

**3.8** Geddes saw an anti-democratic spirit at work in Comte, who cast women and the proletariat in the role of 'servants' to the 'Great Men', while Le Play's focus on the working-class family unit corresponded to Geddes's more egalitarian notion of the greatest and more complex arising from the more basic and simplest unit. He further argued that, 'worker and woman unite to form the elementary human family, and from them, not only by bodily descent, but social descent, from their everyday life and labour, there develops the whole fabric of institutions and ideas, temporal and spiritual' (ibid).

### **Civics: as Evolutionary Sociology**

**4.1** Civic action and social service would, for Geddes, remedy social deprivation by the Lamarckian adaptation of 'people' to the conditions of their environment. In turn, this environment would be improved qualitatively, Geddesian-style, by practical artist-intellectuals. However poor or prosperous, everyday life would be improved by evolving to a higher, healthier cultural affinity with an aesthetically enhanced environment. Opulence merely produced degraded material luxuries for the few amidst the physical deterioration of the many: 'our too largely Paleotechnic working-towns with their ominous contrasts of inferior conditions for the labouring majority, with comfort and luxury too uninspiring at best for the few' (Geddes, 1915: 389). Biological reasoning supported the view that organisms in repose were still subject to degeneration since evolution demands adaptive activity. Against the utilitarian view that progressive human action was governed by the pursuit of pleasure, Geddes further argued that physical degeneration and parasitism can itself be experienced as pleasurable. As Helen Meller (1990: 60) puts it: 'therefore the key objective of biological principles of economics was not food and shelter but culture and education'. Education, like cities, is structured by unconscious survivals from past epochs:

the inordinate specialisation upon arithmetic, the exaggeration of the three R's, is plainly the survival of the demand for cheap yet efficient clerks, characteristic of the recent and contemporary financial period. The ritual of examinations with its correlation of memorising and muscular drill is similarly a development of the Imperial order, historically borrowed from the Napoleonic one; the chaotic 'general knowledge' is similarly a survival of the encyclopaedic period; that is, the French Revolution and the Liberal Movement generally. (Geddes: 1905: 84)

**4.2** Geddes goes on to list the historical traces of grammar, spelling, the essay, and so on, through to the humble child's apple and ball as the raw fruit and the ready missile of primeval society. Here the teleological aspect of evolutionary sociology was propounded by Geddes, where the earlier development, an originary *ur*-type, causally determines the form of the later one under changed social conditions.

**4.3** Unfortunately, as part of his idea of a 'return to nature', Geddes invoked the inventor of biometrics and eugenics, Francis Galton. Galton also gave a paper on eugenics at the first Sociological Society conference, which had a much wider popularity than Geddes's paper on 'Civics' was ever to manage. However, Geddes wished to differentiate his neo-Lamarckian vision of eugenics as environmental and cultural nurturing from heredity racist, social Darwinist versions (though see the concessions to Darwinian

eugenics in Geddes 1904). Geddes called this 'eugenics proper, free from those elements of fatalism, of crude Darwinism, if not reactionary sophistry' (1915: 388). Such radically different approaches led to a split in the Sociological Society between the 'civic sociologists' around Geddes, the more statistically-inclined 'racial sociologists' of the eugenicists, who left in 1907 to form the Eugenics Education Society, and the 'social work sociologists' of the ethical philosopher, LT Hobhouse (Halliday, 1968). For Geddes it was not the 'degenerate' individual that was the source of social pathologies but the appalling material conditions of slum-culture in Paleotechnic cities. Civics would work with the grain of 'incipient', morally regenerative evolutionary processes.

Healthy life is completeness of relation of organism, function and environment and all at their best. Stated, then, in social and civic terms, our life and progress involve the interaction and uplift of people with work and place, as well as place and work with people. (Geddes, 1915: 392).

**4.4** Geddesian biologism also included sweeping assumptions about gender. In their bold study *The Evolution of Sex* Geddes and Thompson (1889) argued in line with the contemporary commonplace that gender was biologically-determined but that women's nurturing role was of the utmost importance for shaping the whole environment for civilised cultural evolution. And while they were prepared to run the risk of explicitly detailing birth control methods they refused to admit any political role to women. Geddes was generally contemptuous of politics anyway and felt that women were 'naturally' better suited to non-political civics. Geddes and Thompson (1889: 267) notoriously argued that 'What was decided among prehistoric protozoa cannot be annulled by acts of parliament'. Women were biologically best placed to lead society into civilised life. Geddes contended that 'cultural evolution' would be nurtured along by women as the ultimate goal of 'progress' as something that transcended the political contest between capitalism and socialism.

**4.5** From microbiology Geddes felt that the observational scientific method could be applied productively to society in its most concentrated formation, the city (Welter, 2002). He applied the German biologist Ernest Haeckel's distinction between ecology, ontogeny and phylogeny to the city. Ecology has passed into common usage to refer to the study of 'the environment' but for Haeckel (and Geddes) it meant the study of the *relationship* between environment and organism. Ontogeny refers to the study of embryological development while phylogeny concerns the study of evolutionary descent. For the study of the city, Geddes took ontogeny to recapitulate phylogeny, with any specific city containing within it in embryo all the evolutionary developments of the city in general. Geddes insisted that social traditions were collectively transmitted by being inscribed into concrete spatial relations. But he uses the terms inheritance, heritage and tradition in special ways. Following biology, Geddes limited 'inheritance' to the transmission of organic capacities, 'bodily and mental', and stripped it of its common sense meaning of economic capacities of material wealth, which he called 'heritage', while for 'tradition' he reserved immaterial, social capacities: 'The younger generation, then, not only inherits an organic and psychic diathesis; not only has transmitted to it the accumulations, instruments and land of its predecessors, but grows up in their tradition also' (Geddes, 1906: 74).

**4.6** In the city cultural evolution thus fused the temporal moment and the spatial form. Civics is centred on the city since it alone represents nature's drive to balance free individuals with the propagation of the species. Geddes called this human evolution towards a cultured relationship with nature 'geo-technics' in contrast to the rationalisation of emerging disciplines such as geography or town planning. From his grounding in evolutionary science Geddes understood that urban development depended on a grasp of environmental context and historical and cultural tradition. Unlike Haussmann's mid-nineteenth century boulevardisation of Paris, or the later full-scale, slash and burn approaches of twentieth century town planning, for Geddes the built environment should be carefully altered by a process he called 'conservative surgery' (Tyrwhitt, 1947; Mairet, 1957). In this way the cultural traces of the past could be preserved while adding a further layer of architectural material to the city without an artificial geometric order being forcibly imposed on urban space. By improving the built environment in this way Geddes hoped that new generations could be trained in 'civics' and 'applied sociology', the two terms were interchangeable in his mind, to value the accumulated historical and cultural legacy and to progressively improve upon it.

## **Sociology: as Civic Activism**

**5.1** Geddes did not merely theorise about urban planning. He was actively involved in the physical renovation of Edinburgh and laid out plans for Pittencrief Park in the historic Scottish town of Dunfermline (Geddes, 1904). This latter scheme left such a deep impression on Lewis Mumford that he later tried to adapt Geddesian principles to US conditions. Geddes's method followed the scientific observational model of survey, diagnosis and plan. Before undertaking any demolition work, a detailed survey of past, present and future alternatives was necessary to meticulously log the condition of the buildings and to set them contextually within their historical significance and cultural meaning within local traditions and customs. In

India, Geddes looked to preserve the historic traces of the thirty or so towns he surveyed even as rapid urbanisation began to take hold (Tyrwhitt, 1947). He did not share in the Eurocentric contempt for the temple cities of South India but saw them romantically as the most complete integration of culture, history and urban form (Meller, 1990: 217). Geddes's reverence towards indigenous culture informed his plans for civic reconstruction of urban India. For instance, by retaining ancient city walls the traditional heart of the temple city could be preserved and the growing volume of traffic banished from it.

**5.2** Practically-oriented civic activism seems a far cry from the contemporary concerns of academic sociology. Tracing Geddes's thought to Plato's notion of the good life, Welter (2002: 49) argues that 'Civics is Geddes's contribution to the contemporary late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debate about citizenship'. In his Sociological Society paper on Civics, Geddes attempted to clarify both the intellectual and practical aspects of his idea of sociology applied to the city for a sympathetic audience of social reformers. The British Sociological Society was founded with money from Geddes's admirer Victor Branford (Mumford, 1948) precisely to promote Geddesian ideas of civic reformism, after the failure to establish a Scottish Institute of Sociology in Edinburgh. Abrams (1968: 102) described the type of sociologists attempting to institutionalise sociology in the Edwardian period as either 'wealthy amateurs with careers elsewhere, academic deviants or very old men'. Geddes was neither wealthy nor 'very' old but might be considered an archetype of the gifted deviant-amateur that supposedly populated the upper echelons of Edwardian British institutions.

**5.3** Initially, the Sociological Society was the centre of public debate about social issues (Halliday, 1968). This was in the political context of Chamberlain's Social Imperialism and the emergence of a more active labour movement determined to resist the consequences of the 1901 Taff Vale judgement. Geddes (1905: 86) aimed to steer a middle course between philanthropic or punitive reformist interventions and the disengaged spectators, who, he argued, stood 'outside of the actual civic field, whether as philistine or aesthete, utopist or cynic, party politician or "mug-wump"'. He argued for what might be called a public sociology where 'the inquirer into sociology and civics may most courageously of all take part in the propaganda of these studies' (Geddes, 1915: 316). Only by communicating sociological arguments to others might some 'progress' be made.

**5.4** Though not merely on the basis of the better idea or more rational case. This wasn't to be a scholastic version of positivism. Like his acquaintance Bergson, Geddes maintained that some allowance always needed to be made for the role of intuitive understanding and was insistent that the most significant issue for sociology was its relationship to practical life.

We learn by living ... let us be at home in the characteristic life and activity, the social and cultural movements, of the city which is our home ... Our activity may in some sense interrupt our observing and philosophising: indeed must often do so ... Indeed with all sciences, as with most ideal quests, the same principle holds good: we must live the life if we would know the doctrine. Scientific detachment is but one mood, though an often needed one; our quest cannot be attained without participation in the active life of citizenship. (Geddes, 1915: 317-8)

**5.5** Not scientific detachment but praxis, for Geddes, brought theory and practice into an ongoing, unfinished dialogue, 'thinking things out as one lives them, and living things out as one thinks them': 'action can never wait till theory is complete - nay, theory only clears itself as action progresses' (Geddes, 1888: 22, 13). This meant becoming immediately entangled in practical cooperation for the tasks that are nearest to hand. Given Geddes's uncertain academic status he was always ready to laud the autodidact and the craft knowledge of practical work, which even highly codified and specialised academic disciplines retained:

For we cannot understand, say Pasteur, save primarily as a thinking peasant; or Lister and his antiseptic surgery better than as a shepherd, with his tar-box by his side; or Kelvin or any other electrician, as the thinking smith, and so on. The old story of geometry, as '*ars metrike*', and of its origin from land-surveying, for which the Egyptian hieroglyph is said to be that of rope-stretching, in fact applies more fully than we realise ... In short, the self-taught man, who is ever the most fertile discoverer, is made in the true and fundamental school - that of experience. (Geddes, 1906: 79).

**5.6** To get beyond over-generalised conceptions of social life and the separation of 'the educated classes' from the 'life and labour of the people', Geddes extended the need for active sociological dialogue necessary for civics. Civic sociologists ought to learn by living and working alongside the working class: 'to have shared the environment and conditions of the people, as far as may be their labour also; to have sympathised with their difficulties and their pleasures, and not merely with those of the cultured or governing classes' (Geddes, 1915: 319). When Geddes moved into a run-down tenement block in Edinburgh it was with the goal of imparting by the proximity of his example his own, rather eccentric, cultural values to

his plebeian neighbours.

### **Civics: as Applied Sociology**

**6.1** This background seemed to give Geddes the ideal credentials for the public role that the fledgling Sociological Society wanted to play. He was therefore invited to read his paper 'Civics: as Applied Sociology' at its first two conferences in 1904 and 1905. But, disappointingly for Geddes, while his papers on civics led to the setting-up of a Civics Committee of the Sociological Society, the general reception of his argument was decidedly cool. Geddes spent the best part of the second paper answering his critics by attempting to clarify the multi-faceted nature of his vision. Instead, his argument became more complex and confusing as he built further layers of analysis upon the foundations he set down in the first part. He tried to stimulate interest in civic sociology by advocating the value of Civic Exhibitions as instructive tools for educating and encouraging reflective civic action among the citizenry. But he provided neither postivistic quasi-scientific certainties nor magical quick-fix panaceas for the appalling social conditions of urban Britain. Instead, he offered a full-blown regional survey as a prelude to social action based on a philosophical commitment to inductive reasoning and a scientific commitment to evolutionary thought. His abiding objective was to combine the seemingly incompatibles of, on the one hand, to socialise individuals into a common civic activity based on a universal method of social survey, diagnosis and practical action, and, on the other, to stimulate regions into developing according to their own deeply-embedded, internal cultural tradition so that communities would become more individualised and differentiated from each other.

**6.2** While he agreed that the social survey method of Booth and Rowntree had proved invaluable for shedding light on the scale of the problem they had invited the view that large-scale public intervention was the only remedy. For Geddes, this was anathema. First, any social survey of the city needed to set it in its regional, historical and cultural context and to build modestly by small-scale, localised efforts out of the bodily and psychic inheritance, built heritage and cultural tradition that social evolution had bequeathed. Only careful study, sensitive to local conditions, would reveal which 'buds' could be self-consciously developed for a future in keeping with the environmental distinctiveness of city-regions. In trying to capture the minute methodical stages necessary to realise Geddes's vision of applied sociology he pragmatically built-up a confusing picture for his audience, which was not helped by his capacity for making unexpected connections, digressing from the main point and relying on highly particularised examples, such as Geddes first-hand knowledge of the renovation and conservation of Old Edinburgh or his survey and plans for a park in Dunfermline.

**6.3** In his more careful formulations, Geddes pre-figured the components of what today is called uneven development, where the surviving layers of past historical moments shape and re-combine with the contemporary layering to create unique but historically patterned places. More usually, however, Geddes (1905: 87) argued that since modern developments often lacked historical consciousness they became the unconscious prisoner of the past: 'for since we have ceased consciously to cite and utilise the high examples of history we have been more faithfully, because sub-consciously and automatically, continuing and extending later and lower developments'. Geddes placed too much stress on unconscious embryonic forces working behind the backs of even the most radical modern disciplines. Even Hausmann's clearance and reconstruction of post-1848 Paris was viewed as expressing the deep cultural and historical traditions of the long, straight riding paths through the forest used by mediaeval hunters. Hence one critic, Israel Langwill (in Geddes, 1905: 121), was led to despair: 'That Haussmann in reconstructing Paris was merely an unconscious hunter and woodlander, building as automatically as a bee, is a fantastic hypothesis; since cities, if they are to be built on a plan at all, cannot avoid some unifying geometrical pattern'.

### **From Geo-technics to Neo-technics**

**7.1** Influenced by his own semi-rural childhood and the regional perspective of the French geographer Elisee Reclus, Geddes (1905a) thus came to favour 'regionalism' as a way to extend the heterogeneity of cities to a broader, more diverse and self-regulating unit. Reclus had been active in the Paris Commune of 1871. In exile, he adopted a Proudhonist form of anarchism and helped found social geography as an academic specialism. Reclus refused to validate academic geography where it failed to address the three core anarchist issues of 'class struggle, the quest for equilibrium, and the sovereign struggle of the individual' (Reclus, in Ross, 1988: 101). From evolutionary theory, Reclus drew not on the idea of an eternal struggle for the survival of the fittest but on that of spontaneous social solidarity. Geddes (1888: 9) adopted this approach to critique Malthusian neo-Darwinism: 'Since, then, it is not hunger and struggle for existence, but love and association in existence, that mainly move and mould the living world, we have a new scientific basis for economics'.

**7.2** Analytically, Geddes was attracted to Reclus's idea of the 'regional valley section' as a coherent unit for research-informed action. In the image of a river flowing through a valley, the region represented for Geddes an ideal unit of analysis and practice for studying the 'geotechnics' of environment and culture. It also

allowed Geddes to read the city derivatively as only the latest stage of earlier rural processes. Unlike the bounded city, the city-region encompassed the broadest range of elemental activities in different natural environments. A regional division of labour, centred around a regional city, would also provide a pacific alternative to the competitive militarism enshrined in the national politics of capital cities, a wholly different conception of region from that of Mackinder's Imperial geography. In Scottish towns, for example, Geddes (1905: 80) discerned the inner connections of regional geography, history and social psychology in how 'the long isolated peninsula of Fife' towns like Kirkcaldy and Largo produced prototypes of self-help individualism in denizens like Adam Smith and Alexander Selkirk (of Robinson Crusoe fame).

**7.3** His privileged example of a geotechnic city in Part II of 'Civics' is Glasgow. In the 1880s William Morris explained to Geddes the pre-eminence of Glasgow as the leading city not only in Scotland but in the UK as a whole. This was rooted in the craft knowledge that went into shipbuilding, which, Morris argued, surpassed even that of the mediaeval cathedral-builders. For Geddes (1906: 106-08), the incipient 'buds' of the future geo-technic society based on the city-region model were already emerging in Glasgow since its river, the Clyde, combined the various facets of advanced industrial and social organisation which other cities like London dispersed onto geographically specialised quarters of the city. Glasgow was also pre-eminent intellectually in the applied sciences and political economy.

**7.4** Geddes situated his example of Glasgow within a historical schema adapted from the Scottish Enlightenment theory of social evolution and his anarchist friend Peter Kropotkin. From John Millar's 1771 *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* Geddes, who possessed a first edition, could build on the Scottish Historical School's 'four stages theory of society' (Meek, 1967). In Millar's early modernist social theory, economic development passes through the stages of hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce. All of the basic elements are present for the 'natural occupations' in Geddes's valley section - miner, woodsman, hunter, shepherd, peasant and fisher - culminating in the city whose occupations are later derivatives of these rustic 'natural occupations'. Paralleling his neglect of social class in favour of archetypal 'occupations', Geddes simply ignores modern urban occupations like office work that fail to fit his schema (Welter, 2002: 63-5).

**7.5** Kropotkin saw the twelfth century rise of free, self-governing units like guilds and parishes ended only by the rise of the authoritarian absolutist state in the sixteenth century (Reynolds, 2004; Hall, 1996). This system, in turn, would decline as modern technological sources of energy like electric power presaged a new decentralisation of economy, government and society. Geddes called the earlier centralisation of industry and government the 'Paleotechnic age' and the modern evolution he discerned towards decentralisation he termed the 'Neotechnic age'. In its blind drive toward industrialisation and accumulation for its own sake, the Paleotechnic age wasted natural resources, material and energy on a huge scale only to create mass levels of misery and impoverishment and a catastrophic relationship to the environment (Glendinning, 2000). Geddes (1915: 74) called this situation a 'Kakotopia', in contrast to the emerging 'Eutopia'.

As paleotects we make it our prime endeavour to dig up coals, to run machinery, to produce cheap cotton, to clothe cheap people, to get up more coals, to run machinery, and so on; and all this essentially towards 'extending markets' ... But all this has been with no adequate development of real wealth, as primarily houses and gardens, still less of cities and towns worth speaking of: our industry but maintains and multiplies our poor and dull existence. Our paleotechnic life-work is soon physically dissipated: before long it is represented by dust and ashes, whatever our money-wages may have been.

This Paleotechnic city is recognisable in the urban landscape today (Law and Mooney, 2005a).

**7.6** The transition to the ennobled Eutopian city made possible by electric energy was thus likened by Geddes to a sharp break in the historical path of industrial, social, civic evolution. Geddes positioned his image of the Eutopian city at a point 'like the mathematician's zero', somewhere between the grim reality of the industrial city as Dante's 'Inferno' and the wholly abstract conception of the Utopian city. The potential of the Eutopian city was rooted in actual social, technological and natural conditions but its realisation was dependent on social and civic action. Just as a flower can only express itself in the process of its own flowering (Hall, 1996: 146), so the Eutopian city can only be expressed by the many-sided flourishing of an environmentally-sensitised civics.

**7.7** To better express the development of vast city-regions devouring small towns and boroughs, spreading analogously like a huge amoeba swallowing up microscopic plants, Geddes (1915: 34) minted another new concept, 'conurbation', to join his other neologisms, such as megalopolis, paleotechnic-neotechnic and Kakotopia-Eutopia (Mumford, 1948). Such conurbations were dispersing populations across a uniform expanse of roads and buildings, cumulatively adding without rest 'street upon street, and suburb upon suburb'. Geddes solution, to bring green spaces into the city and to halt the expansion of the metropolis



into the countryside, however, was opposed the neat orderliness of anti-urban Town Planners. Geddes urged an active, reciprocal interaction with the natural and built environment. Even city parks, which Geddes (1915: 97) considered among the best achievement of municipal civics, betrayed the ideological standpoint of the city fathers, (and something of his own social Darwinian gender biases):

Like the mansion house parks they often were, with their own ring fence, jealously keeping it apart from a vulgar world. Their lay-out has as yet too much continued the tradition of the mansion-house drives, to which the people are admitted on holidays, and by courtesy; and where little girls may sit on the grass. But the boys? They are at most granted a cricket-pitch, or lent a space between football goals, but otherwise are jealously watched, as potential savages, who on the least symptom of their natural activities of wigwam-building, cave-digging, stream-damming, and so on - must instantly be cheived away, and are lucky if not handed over to the police.

**7.8** Geddes also shared his anarchist friends contempt for social reform through state intervention, preferring instead practical works in the local here and now, and was greatly impressed by the 'five per cent philanthropy' of housing reformers like Octavia Hill. While the most influential middle class reformers of their age, Fabian socialists like George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, had a mild respect for Geddes, they preferred to ignore him, objecting to his repeated stressing of the need for social theory and method. Geddes, in turn, regarded Wells as an 'intellectual Cockney', trapped by metropolitan prejudices produced by 'the false self-sufficiency of the city-dweller' (in Stalley, 1972: 46).

### **Geddes: as Conservative Radical**

**8.1** In the idea of autonomous, self-sufficient city-regions Geddes was drawing on the nineteenth century French traditions not only in social science but also anarchism. For this reason Geddes remains an inspiration to some latter-day anarchists and community activists (Ward, 1976). In France, Geddes was exposed to the Proudhonist case against large-scale industrial concentrations and centralised state power. Instead, Proudhon advocated the cooperative 'mutualism' of decentralised and free exchange between small producers (Hyams, 1979). Marx (1975) pilloried Proudhon as caught-up in the Charybdis and Scylla-like moral and intellectual dilemmas common to his class position as a petit bourgeois situated between the proletariat, on the one hand, and the bourgeoisie, on the other. Marx makes a similarly harsh judgement of post-Proudhonist figures, among whom Geddes might be counted:

He is a living contradiction. If, like Proudhon, he is in addition an ingenious man, he will soon learn to play with his own contradictions and develop them in circumstances into striking, ostentatious, now scandalous, now brilliant paradoxes. Charlatanism in science and accommodation in politics are inseparable from such a point of view. (Marx, 1975: 187)

**8.2** Evolutionary theory could be made to correspond to Proudhonist forms of mutualism. It was Geddes's exposure to the Proudhonist tradition in France that helps explain his receptiveness towards Le Play's sociology, less so Comte's, and not at all Marx's. However, there were important differences between Proudhon and Le Play. As the conservative sociologist Robert Nisbet (1970: 70) commented:

Between Proudhon and Le Play there is an affinity that does not exist between either and Marx, and it is an affinity that extends over the structure of the family. Here indeed, Proudhon appears more traditionalist than Le Play, for it is the patriarchal family that Proudhon espouses.

**8.3** For the even more unconventional Geddes, the family is of considerably less relevance than individuals operating cooperatively in the community. Filtered by the Communard geographer Elisee Reclus and the anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin, Geddes (1905a) imbibed the libertarian philosophy that history is a voluntarist struggle for individual liberty and cooperation. Cooperation among individuals on a localised scale was counter-posed by Geddes to large-scale state intervention to alleviate desperate social conditions.

**8.4** For Reclus, however, widely-based class solidarity and cooperation made the working class morally equipped to lead society to a higher stage of development while an internally competitive, degenerate and atomised bourgeoisie led the world only to violence and destruction on an unprecedented scale (Fleming, 1979; Steele, 2003). Geddes shared the view that laissez-faire capitalism had by the late nineteenth-century run its evolutionary course. In terms of economic development, Geddes (1888) believed that in beginning from consumption he could retrace the 'natural history' of economic evolution contained in the final product. By proposing that consumption determines production Geddes gave an evolutionary twist to what would later become known as consumer sovereignty. Here again he deploys ontogenetic and phylogenetic analysis to arrive backwards at economic origins.

**8.5** But for all his distress about the direction that capitalist modernity was taking, Geddes balked at embracing Reclus's moral imperative of working class solidarity. Indeed, he claimed that 'the extremes of capitalism and anarchism have far more in common than they seem' (Geddes, 1888: 20). Geddes stayed aloof from class-based commitments, preferring the vague humanitarian notion of love, not struggle, as the basis for social solidarity. For a reformer so determined to scientifically and practically detect the future promised in the immanence of society's 'buds', Geddes's utopianism often fell prey to wishful thinking. Even from a prescient analysis of the decline of laissez-faire capitalism he could read-in an emerging harmony among well-meaning individuals where 'the essential aims of the philanthropist and reformer of yesterday, the co-operator and socialist of today, the citizen and humanist of tomorrow, despite all errors and wanderings, are beginning fairly to converge and even combine' (Geddes, 1888: 17). With artist-intellectuals in charge of the cooperative movement, capitalism and socialism could be fused into a higher cooperative unity:

our modern tragic antagonism - of capitalism, with its sadly unideal practice, and socialism, with its sadly unpractical ideals - must alike steadily rise and merge into a truly practical - yet nobly idealised - everyday life of true, that is, full and developed, Co-operation. (Geddes, 1888: 24)

**8.6** Geddes thus shared anarchism's radical conservatism, only without the class politics of Proudhonist anarchist socialism. He advocated social change at the micro-level of daily activity and eschewed large-scale political programmes of social reform or revolution as expressed by socialism. Politics were largely irrelevant, if not counter-productive, to the more practical business of adapting people and environment as the civic solution to the higher spiritual needs of cultural evolution. Geddes's objections to socialism lay in its refusal to undertake practical cooperative work 'until everything and everybody is ready for the millennium' (in Kitchen, 1975: 95). He also rejected 'the central dogma and panacea' of socialism that Marx had resolved all questions and compared this to religious fanaticism:

If you indicate doubt of either the final completeness or the initial practicality of these, you might as well be a bourgeois at once, and a speedy alternative between the sword or 'Das Kapital' is the best that can be promised for your soul's health. (Geddes, 1888: 18)

**8.7** While that may be an apt description of small Marxist groups like the Social Democratic Federation, Geddes, despite his wide-ranging studies, which included economics as well as history, philosophy and sociology, showed little grasp or interest in Marx's own work, just as he preferred the largely forgotten work of Le Play to the pioneering work of his own contemporaries Simmel, Weber or even Durkheim, with whom he was personally acquainted. Geddes also paid scant attention to the class structure of society or the titanic struggles to unionise unskilled labourers in the 1880s or the Great Labour Unrest of 1910-1914. Instead, he adopted the humanist rhetoric of an undifferentiated 'people' who could be made to cooperate in the daily activities under the civic example of middle class activists like himself. As Welter (2002: 44) argues in his stimulating study of the city, *biopolis*, Geddes:

rejected a Marxist notion of class in favour of an idea of cooperation influenced by the thought of Peter Kropotkin. But with his rejection of the idea of class, Geddes robbed himself of the opportunity to explain the shaping of a City - understood as a synonym for a human society - as rooted in the diverging and competing interests of the various classes ... Rather than following a line of inquiry similar to Weber's, Geddes focussed on the individual's interaction with the environment, arguing that the consonance between an individual's action and that of a larger social group would cut across social classes, even going beyond them.

**8.8** Here Geddes's brand of evolutionary sociology depended on mysterious forces to cement the individual in society and was quite uninterested in the systemic structuring of societies into social classes with clashing interests and unequal access to material necessities. While the 'concrete and practical' cooperative movement dealt with 'real wages' in making what workers purchase go further, the 'slow progress' of the trade union movement is put down to their bargaining over money wages, a 'strictly nominal object':

so long as the workman who strikes readily for a rise or against a fall of wages submits patiently to the increasing wholesomeness of his material surroundings or resents all outlay on their amelioration, it cannot be said that the realities of wealth have as yet been really discerned behind their symbols by either capitalist or labourer. (Geddes, 1888: 12)

**8.9** Class conflict is explained away as the neo-Lamarckian 'misadaptation' to the environment of individuals coalescing in occupational groupings. Civics would supplant politics by better adapting organism and environment.

## Conclusion

**9.1** Sociology for Geddes, then, represented the pre-eminent synthesis of knowledge as the basis for civics. Intellectuals, though more broadly-based, would still form an elite of community-based leaders. Only an elect few of Geddesian acolytes could be trained as 'bud hunters' guiding the rest of humanity. For an ambitious social reform programme, let alone a curriculum of advanced study, Geddes needed to recruit aesthetically sensitive, intelligent individuals that shared his evolutionary standpoint as the most advanced knowledge of its day. This proved an impossible task. His brand of civics was soon eclipsed within sociology by eugenics and social administration.

**9.2** If Geddes's sociology was influenced by French anarchist socialism its feint echo was passed on in a much-diluted form through Lewis Mumford to the radical Regional Planning Association of America. Starting with Geddes, then Mumford and the RPAA, through to the commonplaces of modern Town Planning, the more diffuse anarchist planning became the less it retained its radical edge. As Hall (1996: 137) put it, 'the truly radical quality of the message got muffled and more than half lost; nowhere on the ground today do we see the true and remarkable vision of the Planning Association of America, distilled via Geddes from Proudhon, Bakunin, Reclus and Kropotkin'. Thus, Geddes, the pragmatic radical, is seen, mistakenly, by many as anticipating and endorsing more recent developments in Town Planning and even the Scottish Executive's (2003) 'Partnership Agreement' between New Labour and the Liberal Democrats (Grieve, et al, 2004)! But, if Geddes had gone so far to distance himself from the class-based 'socialist' half of 'anarchist socialism' as Proudhon, Kropotkin and Reclus understood it, then what was left of its radical message in the first place and how useful is it now?

**9.3** Civics meant something quite different for Geddes to the kind of patriotic citizenship education that often goes under the name 'civics' today. It has come to represent a kind of democratic minimum, from neighbourhood watch schemes to anti-discriminatory social inclusion programmes. In this version, civics chimes well with classless Third Way sociology. Civics in the form of 'social capital' is something that elites need to engineer to catalyse democratic participation, which is supposedly being degraded by the influence of the mass media (Putnam, 2000; Law and Mooney, 2005). In the face of today's intensely mediated environments, Geddesian civics may have a rather quaint and anachronistic feel about it. Yet, even here, calls for a 'media civics' are being made, which perhaps Geddes would recognise:

Media civics, crucial to citizenship in the twenty-first century, requires the development of a morality of responsibility and participation grounded in a critical engagement with mediation as a central component of the management both of state and global politics and that of everyday life: both of the system and the lifeworld. (Silverstone, 2004: 448)

**9.4** The creation of a civic morality, where elites manipulate the many, is found in Malcolm Gladwell's (2002) pop-epidemiological argument, *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell makes the neo-Geddesian assumption that small-scale local actions based on entrepreneurial intuitions can reconstitute the environment in more positive ways.

**9.5** Like Geddes, current boosterist calls for civics in the form of 'social capital' are de-classed attempts by elites to remoralise the poor (Das, 2004; Law, 2005). Unlike Geddes, few advocates of civicism are steeped in applied sociology, let alone the advanced evolutionary sociology to be found, for instance, in W.G. Runciman's (1989) magisterial theorising of social power, *Treatise of Social Theory: Volume II*. While sociologists have no monopoly on radical democratic participation, Weinstein (2003) traces an elected affinity between applied sociology and democratic civics, from the Scottish moral philosophers to the 1960s radical Students for a Democratic Society. To these might be added the sociologist Commandante Marcos, leader of the Zapatista movement, the broad anti-capitalism movement (Callinicos, 2003), and the call by Habermas and Derrida (2003) for a new counter-hegemonic European civics to emerge from the millions of anti-war protestors on 23 February 2003. However, misguided his own approach may have proved, Geddes would have at least expected sociologists not to abstain like 'mug-wumps' but to muster a radical intervention in such matters as the environment, the city, war, and poverty.

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