Alone Together: The City and its Inmates

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The proportion of humanity living in cities has been growing exponentially, along with industrialization. The megalopolis is the latest form of urban “habitat”, increasingly interposing itself between human life and the biosphere.

The city is also a barrier between its inmates, a world of strangers. In fact, all cities in world history were founded by strangers and outsiders, settled together in unique, previously unfamiliar environments. It is the dominant culture at its center, its height, its most dominant. Joseph Grange is, sadly, basically correct in saying that it is “par excellence, the place where human values come to their most concrete expression.”1 (If one pardons the pun, also sadly apt.) Of course, the word “human” receives its fully deformed meaning in the urban context, especially that of today. Everyone can see the modern “flatscape”, in Norberg-Schulz’s terse term (1969), the Nothing Zones of placelessness where localism and variety are steadily being dimin-

ished, if not eradicated.\textsuperscript{2} The supermarket, the mall, the airport lounge are everywhere the same, just as office, school, apartment block, hospital, and prison are scarcely distinguishable one from another, in our own cities.\textsuperscript{3}

The mega-cities have more in common with each other than with any other social organisms. Their citizens tend to dress the same and otherwise consume the same global culture, under a steadily more comprehensive surveillance gaze. This is the opposite of living in a particular place on the earth, with respect for its uniqueness. These days, all space is becoming urban space; there is not a spot on the planet that couldn’t become at least virtually urban upon the turn of a satellite. We have been trained and equipped to mold space as if it were an object. Such an education is mandated in this Digital Age, dominated by cities and metro regions to an extent unprecedented in history.

How has this come to pass? As Weber put it, “one may find anything or everything in the city texts except the informing principle that creates the city itself.”\textsuperscript{4} But it is clear what the fundamental mechanism/dynamic/"principle" is and always has been. As Weber continued: "Every device in the city facilitating trade and industry prepares the way for further division of labor and further specialization of tasks."\textsuperscript{5} Further massification, standardization, equivalence.

As tools became systems of technology — that is, as social complexity developed — the city appeared. The city-machine was the earliest and biggest technological phenomenon, the

\textsuperscript{3}Meanwhile, phenomena such as “Old Town” areas and historical districts distract from tedium and standardization, but also underline these defining urban characteristics. The patented superficiality of postmodern architecture underlines it as well.
\textsuperscript{5}ibid., p. 21
The original monumentalism is still present and underlined in today’s city, with the same dwarfing and disempowering of the individual. Human scale is obliterated by high-rises, sensory deprivation deepens, and inhabitants are assailed by monotony, noise, and other pollutants. The cyberspace world is itself an urban environment, accelerating the radical decline of physical presence and connection. Urban space is the always advancing (vertically and horizontally) symbol of the defeat of nature and the death of community. What John Habberton wrote in 1889 could not be more valid now: “A great city is a great sore — a sore which can never be cured.”

Copán, Palenque, and Tikal were rich cities of Maya civilization abandoned at their height, between 600 and 900 A.D. With similar examples from various cultures, they point a way forward for us. The literature of urbanism has only grown darker and more dystopian in recent years, as terrorism and collapse cast their shadows on the most untenable products of civilization: the world’s cities. Turning from the perpetual servitude and chronic sickness of urban existence, we may draw inspiration from such places as former indigenous settlements on what is now called the Los Angeles Riser. Places where the sphere of life is rooted in subsisting as fully skilled humans in harmony with the earth.

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feature and develop with a relatively sudden force, as if the energy repressed by domestication must burst forth to a new level of its control logic. The urban explosion does not escape some bad reviews, however. In the Hebrew tradition, it was Cain, murderer of Abel, who founded the first city. Similarly, such urban references as Babylon, the Tower of Babel, and Sodom and Gomorrah are wholly negative. A deep ambivalence about cities is, in fact, a constant of civilization.

By about 4000 BC the first cities appeared in Mesopotamia and Egypt, when political means were devised to channel the surpluses created by a new agricultural ethos into the hands of a ruling minority. This development required economic input from wider and wider areas of production; large-scale, centralized, bureaucratic institutions were not long in coming. Villages were pulled into increasingly specialized maximization strategies to produce bigger surpluses flowing to the cities. Greater grain production, for example, could only be achieved with additional work and more coercion. Resistance occurred within this well-known framework, as the more primitive farming communities were forcibly converted into administered towns, such as Nineveh. Nomadic peoples of Sinai refused to mine copper for the Egyptian rulers, to cite another instance. Smallholders were forced off the land into cities; this displacement is a basic part of a familiar pattern that continues today.

Urban reality is primarily about trade and commerce, with a nearly total dependence on support from external areas for continued existence. To guarantee such an artificial subsistence, city fathers turn inevitably to war, that chronic civilizational staple. “Conquest abroad and repression at home,” in Stanley Diamond’s words, is a defining characterization of cities from their very origins. The early Sumerian city-states, for example, were developed with a relatively sudden force, as if the energy repressed by domestication must burst forth to a new level of its control logic. The urban explosion does not escape some bad reviews, however. In the Hebrew tradition, it was Cain, murderer of Abel, who founded the first city. Similarly, such urban references as Babylon, the Tower of Babel, and Sodom and Gomorrah are wholly negative. A deep ambivalence about cities is, in fact, a constant of civilization.

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9ibid., p. I.
24Toynbee, op.cit., p. 196
The urban languor and impotence expressed in T.S. Eliot’s early poetry, for example, helps fill in this picture of reduced life. The term “suburb” was used from Shakespeare and Milton onwards in very much the modern sense, but it was not until the onslaught of industrialization that the suburban phenomenon truly emerged. Thus residential development appeared on the outskirts of America’s biggest cities between 1815 and 1860. Marx referred to capitalism as “the urbanization of the countryside”\(^1\); suburbanization really hit its stride, in its contemporary meaning, just after World War II. Refined mass production techniques created a physical conformity to match and magnify social conformity.\(^2\) Depthless, homogenized, a hothouse of consumerism fenced in by strip malls and freeways, the suburb is the further degraded outcome of the city. As such, the differences between urban and suburban should not be exaggerated or seen as qualitative. Withdrawal, facilitated by an array of high-tech devices — iPods, cell phones, etc. — is now the order of the day, a very telling phenomenon.\(^3\)

Civilization, as is clear from the word’s original Latin meaning, is what goes on in cities.\(^4\) More than half of the world’s population now lives in cities. McDonaldizing non-places like Kuala Lumpur and Singapore that have so resolutely turned their backs on their own rich contexts. The urbanizing imperative is an ongoing characteristic of civilization.

A certain perverse allure still obtains for some, and it has become so hard to escape the urban influence zone anyway. There is still a flicker of hope for community, or at least for


\(^4\)This is not only true in the West. In Arabic civilization, for example, *madaniyya*, or civilization, comes from *madine*, which means city.

But the real rise to dominance began not only with intensified agriculture — and the appearance of writing systems, as Childe, Levi-Strauss and others have noted — but with metallurgy. Succeeding civilization’s initial Neolithic stage, the Bronze Age and even more so, the Iron Age brought urbanization into its full centrality. According to Toynbee, “If the increase in the size of cities in the course of history is presented visually in the form of a curve, this curve will be found to have the same configuration as a curve presenting the increase in the potency of technology.”\(^5\) And with the increasingly urbanized character of social life, the city can be seen as a container. Cities like the factories that are already present, rely on containment.


Cities and factories are never at base freely chosen by the people inside them: domination keeps them there. Aristophanes put it well in his 414 BC creation. *The Birds*: “A city must rise, to house all birds; then you must fence in the air, the sky, the earth, and must surround it by walls, like Babylon.”

States as we know them already existed by this period, and powerful cities emerged as capitals, the loci of state power. Political domination has always flowed from these urban centers. In this context, peasants leave behind one known and hated servitude for new, initially undisclosed forms of bondage and suffering. The city, already a site of local power and war, is an incubator of infectious diseases, including plague, and of course greatly magnifies the impacts of fire, earthquake, and other dangers.

For thousands of generations humans rose at daybreak and slept after the sun went down, basking in the glories of sunrise, sunset, and starry skies. Half a millennium ago, city bells and clocks announced an increasingly ordered and regulated daily life, the reign of urban timekeeping. With modernity, lived time disappears: time becomes a resource, an objectified materiality. Measured, reified time isolates the individual in the force-field of deepening division and separation, ever diminishing wholeness. Contact with the earth ebbs, as urbanization grows; and as Hogarth depicted in his mid-18th century images of London, physical contact among people lessens dramatically. At this time Nicolas Chamfort declared, "Paris is a city of gaieties and pleasures, where four-fifths of the inhabitants die of grief." In *Emile* (1762), Rousseau put it more personally; "Adieu, Paris. We are seeking love, happiness, innocence. We shall never be far enough away from you." The pervasive weight of urban existence penetrated even the most outwardly vital political phenomena, including the French Revolution. Crowds in revolutionary Paris often seemed strangely apathetic, prompting Richard Sennett to detect there the first pronounced modern signs of urban passivity.¹⁴

In the following century Engels, in contrary fashion, decided that it is in the city that the proletariat achieves its “fullest classic perfection.”¹⁵ But Tocqueville had already seen how individuals in cities feel "strangers to the destinies of each other."¹⁶ Later in the 19th century, Durkheim noted that suicide and insanity increase with modern urbanization. In fact, a sense of dependence, loneliness, and every kind of emotional disturbance are generated, giving rise to Benjamin’s perception that, "Fear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it."¹⁷ The technological developments in the areas of sewage and other sanitation challenges, while required in burgeoning metropolis, also enable urbanization and its further growth. Life in cities is only possible with such continual technological supports.

By 1900, Georg Simmel understood how living in cities brings about not only loneliness, but also the reserve or emotional numbness that exacerbates it. As Simmel saw, this is very closely analogous to the effects of industrial life in general: "Punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence."¹⁸