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Anti-Urban Currents in Modern Urbanism

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Introduction

I wrote this book from discontent with urban redevelopment as it currently occurs, which is in service to global capital, against the interests of social justice and political accountability. It is an obvious argument but I also wanted to remember that cities might be where human potential is most likely to be realised, in an ambience of mobility, among people of different backgrounds, which produces an enhanced sense of self and a capacity for agency. But this is precisely what most redevelopment schemes deny, constructing compounds for elites and empty investment opportunities. Each new centre turns adjoining areas into margins, and the underlying concept of the City is manipulated as a scene of waterfront vistas and steel-and-glass corporate towers. Again, this is familiar, and well covered in the critical literature of urbanism (beside critiques of the notion of a creative city as a defence of gentrification). All this represents a policy failure, and a political malaise. Meanwhile, with the hollowness of representational politics, there is a rise in non-violent direct action, which has a growing literature. My aim was not to add to that, nor to the literature of urban redevelopment; it was instead to ask if there are underlying flaws *within* the idea of the modern city which limit its potential for well-being, and need to be addressed. This is historical, and questions the basis of how cities are imagined and designed.

I identify two such flaws: the enchantment of a rural idyll, especially in English culture since the sixteenth century; and an attraction to self-contained systems in European thought from the seventeenth century.

The first begins with an aristocratic dream of timeless bliss as reaction to the intrigues of the court and the onset of modernisation. Its price

includes land enclosures, the dislocation of villagers, and violent enforcement. The second is a revolution in thinking in René Descartes' *Discourse* of 1637, which expresses an almost desperate search for certainty, looking to un-changing systems such as geometry and mathematics, written during the Thirty Years' War.

Taking these two critiques, I argue that the potential for city living—being among people with different dreams, being able to act as a citizen—is limited by a fear of conflict which leads to compartmentalisation; hence the projection of a rural idyll, the spread of suburbia, and in another way, the dehumanising functionalism of modernist planning and design. This is complex, and this short book is a modest contribution to its understanding. But I hope the connection between the rural idyll and the city-as-machine will provoke discussion. I hope, too, that readers will ask themselves what else is possible.

I focus on Europe because, in a short book, I cannot adequately offer worldwide scope; and because I write from my own experience, when possible about places I can visit. It is more than ten years since I took a long-haul flight (for environmental reasons). Besides, I regard myself as a European.

Throughout the book, I try to explain rather than mask complexities, but also allow myself nuances. I enjoyed a day in the landscaped park at Rousham, and I happen to like Descartes' writing, for instances, but am critical of what they mean. Perhaps ambivalence is a writer's occupational hazard, while critical insights emerge on an axis of creative tension between the polarities which define an argument.

In the end—except it is never an end because effects become causes and causes similarly become effects—it is the means which count. These are often local and ephemeral; yet, facing modernist urbanism's ruinous instrumentalism, they begin to create an alternative urban imaginary.

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CHAPTER 1

Colliding Utopias

Abstract This chapter argues that the concept of the City—distinct from specific cities—is idealised, in part in reaction to industrialisation and cultural representations of inner-city dirt and crime. This negativity denies the benefits of freedom from rural ties to the land and kin, favouring nostalgia for imagined pasts. Yet the conditions of city life – living among people from different backgrounds, social and geographical mobility, and the agency of citizens—are liberating. The chapter reflects on the meanings of the terms 'city' and 'urban'; and on the contradictory term urban village. It observes the rise of suburbia, and the search for stability in refusals of the contingencies of city living. Finally, it turns to sociology, and a gap between a regressive nostalgia and a recognition of engagement in city life's perpetual changes.

Keywords City • Urban • Urban village • Community • Society • Suburb

Words carry baggage. Their meanings are mediated between the rules of a language and its everyday uses within the social, cultural, economic and political conditions of a society. One aim of this chapter is to draw out different meanings and associations which indicate how the concepts 'city' and 'urban' are understood, and might be questioned. Another is to suggest that certain conditions found in cities, such as a high density of

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population, or a diversity of people and interests, may be either threatening or a means to a liberating way of life which is not possible in smaller settlements. In the next chapter I examine the allure of village life, as mythicised in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arguing that it undermines the potential for liberation in cities. Here, I begin by looking at words, then move to conditions and the range of representations which shaped how conditions are apprehended.

Words and Places

The words city and urban allude to large human settlements, but with different associations. In English, urban is rarely used before the nineteenth century,[1] but urbane, from the same root, means courteous or educated, linked to living in a city with institutions of learning and an elite able to develop ideas of taste. This may seem to be of interest to philologists but not much help in ordinary life yet words and meanings exhibit frames of meaning which are ingrained but not fixed. The idealism attached to the concept of the city derives in part from the Greek word *polis*, which means the democratic city, informing the English word political. But idealism reveals its undercurrent here, too, because the policy of classical Athens was the preserve of around 5% of its population, all wealthy, free-born men. The political is a matter of power relations—who is included or not in determining the future, and the image, of a city—while the interests of different groups may be not only oppositional, but also overlapping. As political scientist Margaret Kohn argues,

> Urban space is often characterised by contrasts and contradictions that exist side by side; rich and poor; production, consumption and reproduction; decay, renewal and reappropriation. Their juxtaposition in space is a glaringly visible reminder of the impossibility of achieving complete control, order and homogeneity. It is the quality that makes urban space at once threatening, fascinating and haunting.[2]

Kohn cites critical theorist Seyla Benhabib's discussion of the term actuality to denote, not a situation as it is but, 'what it could be but is not.'[3] In 1960s Paris, the Situationist group of students and artists made unplanned detours in the city to find sites of revolutionary pasts, and, 'a poetry made by the communal appropriation of the past in the present.'[4] Today, in not dissimilar detours, urban explorers transgress spatial and legal boundaries to find what might be equivalent traces in derelict

interiors, underground passages and de-industrialised sites. For geographer Oli Mould they, 'defy the prevailing narrative' of late capitalism to see signs of alternative pasts and futures.[5] I return to this in Chap. 5.

To return to the terms urban and city, sociologist Richard Sennett writes of three kinds of space in medieval Paris: the *cité* included the royal palace and Cathedral; merchants lived and traded in *bourgs* on both banks of the Seine; everyone else lived in *communes*, with no defensive walls. Outside the *cité*, buildings were separated only by the space necessary for circulation. The pathways of one commune did not link to those of another. Shop-keepers used hired thugs to attack their rivals' customers. Street life was vicious.[6]

Sennett's realist picture of medieval city life contrasts with the idealised picture of cities in, say, late medieval and early Renaissance art: white towers and crenelated walls adorned by brightly coloured pennants; and stone gates to protect the city from the world outside. But the prevailing idea of a city—or *the* city, like a citadel—is shaped by such representations, a legacy of the culture of a privileged class which retains currency as a vehicle for projection of how cities might be, of what would be nice.

For geographer Edward Soja, city plans are determined by, 'mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate and decide to act.'[7] Interpretive grids become ingrained but the role of academic work is to interrupt this, rupturing any generalised notion of what a city is in favour of investigation of the specific conditions and experiences of what cities (plural) are. For Soja, this questions a convention that villages came first, and grew into towns, then cities. He shows that this was not always the case by citing archaeological evidence from Çatal Hüyük, Anatolia.[8]

In Çatal Hüyük, communication was by rooftops reached by ladders from courtyards. As its population grew the city expanded by building outward. Exterior walls had no windows or doors, and might be reinforced. But this *ad hoc* expansion was not informal but orderly, as archaeologist James Mellaart writes, using standardised house plans, brick sizes, doorway heights, and measures of a human hand (8 cm) and foot (32 cm).[9] As cultivation and herding spread in a widening belt around the city, shepherds built huts for overnight stays, which were the first villages.

Çatal Hüyük is unlike a modern Western city in both form and trajectory but contributes to an understanding of cities as sites of high-density dwelling, division of labour, and a specific spatial practice. The rest is a matter of negotiation, which is also what cities are about.

Representations and Narratives

In sharp contrast to Çatal Hüyük, classical Athens is said to express the democratic ideal. As noted above, this is illusory. Athenian society relied on slave labour and foreign conquest; it had a limited democracy which excluded women, foreigners and slaves, leaving 5% of the population, all free-born, wealthy men, to participate in the assembly (*pnyx*), where political decisions were made. In the *agora*, a marketplace surrounded by booths for administrative purposes, a colonnade where citizens of sufficient leisure could converse offered debate. Yet there were few public events in the *agora* and the myth of Athenian democracy persists because that is how this history was written, by a class for whom the presiding image was convenient.

Other prevailing images are informed by medieval sites, such as Sienna, or San Gimignano in Tuscany. Geographer John Gold notes that Cumbernauld in Scotland, built in the 1960s as a series of concrete structures on a ridge, has, 'the symbolic appearance of a medieval Italian hilltop citadel.'[10] Life in a medieval citadel was, as in Paris, more violent than that expected in Cumbernauld; and Gold makes the point critically, not to affirm the idea. But myths of the city are persistent. Industrial cities conjure smoke and grime; but Sennett writes that, in the *bourgs* of Paris, 'the economy promised to set [citizens] free from the inherited dependence embodied in the feudal labour contract.'[11] For an emerging bourgeois class a *bourg* was free from feudal ties. Merchants formed trade networks, such as the Hanseatic League of ports around the Baltic Sea, and negotiated terms with ruling dynasties. On their gates, these ports displayed the message, 'city air makes one free' (*Stadt Luft macht frei*).[12] As Sennett writes, 'Profit lay on the horizon of the possible, in the land of perhaps, toward which one travelled as often as one could, from which one often failed to return.'[13]

A transition from the medieval and Renaissance to the modern city occurs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with industrialisation and rapid urban expansion. In England, the process began in the seventeenth century when an emerging class of merchant-investors in London established production sites across the country, taking risks and gaining rewards (or losses). Such changes in social and economic patterns mould changes in a prevailing image of the city, a signifier floating above the material actualities of cities. For geographer James Donald the questions is whether, 'If the city is an imagined environment, and modernity is an attitude more than it is an epoch,' dominant images and metaphors which determine how the modern city is mediated can be identified.[14]

In nineteenth-century England, the rise of industrialisation—from machines in agriculture which produced evictions of rural populations, to factories in the towns and cities to which those populations migrated—the urban image was dark. The negativity is present today in an alignment of inner-city areas to crime, and the privileged status and high property values of non-industrial districts. Of course, negativity reflects real abjection; but it is also an image which colours future development. Donald cites two kinds of evidence for urban negativity: Friedrich Engels' account of housing in Manchester in the 1840s,[15] and photography, as in Jacob Riis' pictures of New York, and Eugène Atget's of Paris.

Social research and culture intersect in Charles Dickens' novels. He sets part of the action of *Oliver Twist* (1837) in the high-density housing, called rookeries, of central London, affirming that such sites breed crime but inserting a humanity otherwise overlooked; he writes of the marginal life of the Thames mudflats, where people live by fishing corpses from the river, in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864); and represents a northern industrial city in *Hard Times* (1854) as a smoke-drenched wasteland which is, not unconnectedly, a location of mechanistic learning—facts not feelings—in schoolmaster Mr. Gradgrind's regime. Later, in the work of Arthur Conan Doyle and Joseph Conrad, villains inhabit dark, narrow, twisting alleys shrouded in fog, plotting crimes, betrayals, or the end of civilisation.[16] The dark alleys become aligned to a primitive past, as if a modern city should open them to light and civic order. The fog is not primordial, however, but the real by-product of fossil-fuelled industry.

Reports arising from social research and a Royal Commission on housing in 1884–85 led to liberal reformism: the improvement of material conditions for the poor as a way to increase productivity and prevent insurrection. The rest is fiction. But it lingers in public imaginations while literary representations outlast the conditions they reflect. For social historian Oswald Spengler in the 1920s, a generalised, received negativity becomes universal decline attributable to the city. Literary historian Richard Lehan summarises Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1926) as an organic theory of society:

> … each culture follows a biological pattern of growth and decline, vitality (stemming from the land) and decadence (spreading from the city). As one moves away from the natural rhythms of the land, instinct is replaced by reason, nature and myth by scientific theory, and a natural marketplace (barter and exchange) by abstract theories of money.[17]

Spengler, then, constructs a meta-narrative of entropy, in which the city is civilisation's fall, itself the protagonist, rather than Conrad's spies and criminals. For Spengler, 'the whole life blood of broad regions is collected [in cities] while the rest dries up.'[18] Spengler constructs a city–province dualism, and presents this as a universal, inevitable, a-historical narrative from which there is no exit: from an enchanted land to wasteland, then darkness. Something not unlike this narrative, but in a more complicated form, pervades T. S. Eliot's epic poem *The Waste Land* (1922).

Urban planners do not make decisions based on their readings of Spengler or Eliot, yet an a-historical narrative may appeal in times of discontinuity. For example, the Chicago school of urban sociologists and planners in the 1920s and 1930s saw the city—based on Chicago with a central business district, transitional zones for migrants, and rings of suburbs of increasing affluence—as moulded by a logic as inevitable as Spengler's; and used a biological metaphor of plant growth for urban change. This universalised and de-politicised the city on the model of Chicago because, it seemed, politics was disagreement between factions, while expert or technocratic knowledge could resolve conflict, as if neutrally. So, if Spengler and Eliot, and the Chicago urbanists, inscribe a neutral model from fear of social breakdown, they do this to undermine contesting claims made by diverse publics. Another product of fear of conflict is the so-called urban village.

The Urban Village

The words village and urban have opposite associations, one with an imagined countryside and the other with everyday city life. Developers use the label urban village to market inner-city redevelopment schemes. Usually these consist of housing compounds for new elites but Paddington Urban Village, under construction in Liverpool in 2020, is a knowledge quarter—quarters are also popular with developers, lending a feeling of an old city—between the city centre and one of its universities. The appeal of the label urban village rests on the myth of lost contentment, its currency deriving from an idea of community. A hoarding outside the demolition site which was once the Heygate Estate in Southwark, London, proclaims:

> Be part of it
> The Life
> The Heart
> The Elephant