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Alone Together: The City and its Inmates

John Zerzan

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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 local-

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¹Joseph Grange, *The City: An Urban Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. xv.

ism and variety are steadily being diminished, if not eradicated.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.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.”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.”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 culmination of

²Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Ltd., 1976), p. 6.

³Meanwhile, 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.

⁴Max Weber, *The City*, translated by Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), p. 11.

⁵*ibid.*, p. 21

vation 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.”²⁸ Or as Kai W. Lee replied to the question whether a transition to sustainable cities is imaginable: “The answer is no.”²⁹

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 hannony with the earth.

²⁸John Habberton, *Our Country’s Future* (Philadelphia: International Publishing Company, 1889), cited in Clapp, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

²⁹Kai N. Lee, “Urban Sustainability and the Limits of Classical Environmentalism,” in *Environment and Urbanization* 18:1 (April 2006), p. 9.

the division of labor. Or as Lewis Mumford characterized it, “the mark of the city is its purposive social complexity.”⁶ The two modes in this context are the same. Cities are the most complex artifacts ever contrived, just as urbanization is one of the prime measures of development.

The coming world-city perfects its war on nature, obliterating it in favor of the artificial, and reducing the countryside to mere “environs” that conform to urban priorities. All cities are antithetical to the land.

Certeau’s “Walking in the City” has rather an eerie quality, given its subject and the fact that it was written in 2000. Certeau saw the World Trade Center as “the most monumental figure” of Western urbanism and felt that “to be lifted to (its) summit is to be carried away by the city’s hold.”⁷ The viability of the city has entered its inevitable stage of being doubted, accompanied by an anxiety heightened — but not created — on 9/11. The deep ambivalence about urban life, felt throughout civilization’s reign, has become much more pronounced.

Domestication made civilization possible, and intensified domestication brought forth urban culture. Primary horticultural communities — settlements and villages — were superseded by cities as massified agriculture took hold. One enduring marker of this shift is megalithic monumentally. In early Neolithic monuments all the qualities of the city are found: sedentism, permanence, density, a visible announcement of the triumphal march of farming over foraging. The city’s spectacular centralization is a major turning point in human cultural evolution, the arrival of civilization in its full, definitive sense.

⁶Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), p. 6. For all of the valid historical content, Mumford can also lapse into absurdity, e.g. “the city should be an organ of love...” in *The City in History* (New York, Harcourt. Brace, 1961), p. 575.

⁷Michel de Certeau, *The Certeau Reader*, edited by Graham Ward (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 103.

There have been civilizations without cities (e.g. the early Maya civilization), but not many. More often they are a key 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.⁸ 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 ori-

⁸Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1974), p. 7.

metropolis. And some of us remain there in order not to lose contact with what we feel compelled to understand, so we can bring it to an end. Certainly, there are those who struggle to humanize the city, to develop public gardens and other amenities, but cities remain what they have always been. Most of their inhabitants simply accept the urban reality and try to adjust to it, with the same outward passivity they express toward the enveloping techno-world.

Some try always to reform the unreformable. Let’s have “a new modernity”, “a new attitude about technology”, etc. etc. Julia Kristeva calls for “a cosmopolitanism of a new sort...”²³ Such orientations reveal, among other things, the conviction that what are widely considered essentials of social life will always be with us. Max Weber judged modernity and bureaucratic rationality to be “escape-proof”, while Toynbee saw the Ecumenopolis, as he called the stage of gigantism succeeding the stage of the megalopolis, “inevitable”.²⁴ Ellul referred to urbanization as that “which can only be accepted.”²⁵

However, given today’s urban reality, and how and why cities came to be in the first place and continue to exist, what James Baldwin said of the ghetto fully applies to the city: “(It) can be improved in one way only: out of existence.”²⁶ There is a strong consensus among urban theorists, by the way, that “cities are newly divided and polarized.”²⁷ That the poor and the indigenous must be urbanized is another primary facet of colonialist-imperialist ideology.

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 depri-

²³Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 192

²⁴Toynbee, *op.cit.*, p. 196

²⁵Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 43.

²⁶James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York, The Dial Press, 1961), p. 65.

²⁷Peter Marcuse and Ronald van Kempen, editors, *Of States and Cities: the Partitioning of Urban Space* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. vii.

tence 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"¹⁹; 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.²⁰ 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.²¹

Civilization, as is clear from the word's original Latin meaning, is what goes on in cities.²² 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 diversion, in the

¹⁹Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York, Vintage, 1973), p. 479.

²⁰A typical and apposite work is Richard Harris, *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900–1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

²¹Very pertinent is Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000).

²²This is not only true in the West. In Arabic civilization, for example, *madaniyya*, or civilization, comes from *madine*, which means city.

gins.⁹ The early Sumerian city-states, for example, were constantly at war. The struggle for stability of urban market economies was an unremitting matter of survival. Armies and warfare were cardinal necessities, especially given the built-in expansionist character of the urban dynamic. Uruk, the biggest Mesopotamian city of its time (ca 2700 BC), boasted a double-ring wall six miles long, fortified by 900 towers. From this early period through the Middle Ages, virtually all cities were fortified garrisons. Julius Caesar used the word *oppidum* (garrison) to denote every town in Gaul.

The first urban centers also consistently reveal a strong ceremonial orientation. The movement away from an immanent, earth-based spirituality to emphasis on sacred or supernatural spaces receives a further deformation with literally awe-inspiring, mighty urban temples and tombs. The elevation of a society's gods corresponded to the increasing complexity and stratification of its social structure. Religious monumentality, by the way, was not only an obedience-inducing tactic by those in authority; it was also a fundamental vehicle for the spread of domestication.¹⁰

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."¹¹ 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,

⁹*ibid.*, p. I.

¹⁰Andrew Sherratt, *Economy and Society in Prehistoric Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press., 1997), p. 562.

¹¹Arnold Toynbee, *Cities on the Move* (New York: Oxford University Press 1970), p. 173.

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.”¹² 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.”¹³ The pervasive weight of urban existence penetrated even the most outwardly vi-

¹²Nicolas Chamfort, quoted in James A. Clapp, *The City, A Dictionary of Quotable Thought on Cities and Urban Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1984), p. 51.

¹³Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 355.

tal 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 emotion 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 The urban languor and impo-

¹⁴Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: the Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), p. 23.

¹⁵Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (St. Albans: Panther Press, 1969), p. 75.

¹⁶Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* v. 2 (New York, Vintage, 1963), p. 141.

¹⁷Waller Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zahn (New York, Schocken Books, 1969), p. 174.

¹⁸Kurt H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: The Free Press, 1950), p. 413.