A Journal for Greek Letters

Pages on Australian Society

CONTENTS

SECTION ONE

SECTION TWO

SECTION THREE

Joanne Finkelstein
The University of Sydney

THE DEMOTIC CITY
THE CHATTERING CLASSES AND CIVILITY

The city is its people, it is the place of the public, the territory of the demotic and as such it prominently features in the economic, literary, historical and sociological discourses of modernity. The city is less its architecture and more its sentiments. Italo Calvino has described every great city as surprisingly similar; each has its sweeping stone steps leading to a temple, library or star chamber, its moody dividing river and subsidiary canals, its charming arcades of quaint shops and precious art galleries. What distinguishes one city from another are its secrets, the places where memories define desires, and where the conventions conceal undercurrents. Los Angeles, for instance, 'on the bad edge of post-modernity'[1] is characterized by episodic moral panics and destabilizing crime waves. Clues to its secret identity are continuously spewed out with the production of popular culture. Los Angeles is the by-product of Hollywood, it is the underside of the entertainment industries. The mordant critic of mass culture, Theodor Adorno said that the city was where 'the boundary between what is human and the world of things becomes blurred'[2]. The city is a site of meetings and encounters, it is a point of intersection between reality and private imagination. According to Jonathan Raban it is where 'two or more opposed cosmological sets can grow out of the same social earth'[3].

The celebrated Greek polis of the C5 BC is praised in Pericles's famous oration over the dead. He emphasized the value of what they had fought for – the inclusiveness and acceptance that individuals would find in the polis of ancient Athens. It was a city that welcomed strangers, even though it still held itself back from them. While visitors would not technically be citizens of Athens, they would nonetheless be free to enjoy its spectacles and engage in its cosmopolitan practices such as trade and public debate. The latter was particularly important as it was the defining feature which made the polis robust.

Every citizen would be conscious of participating in the collectivity and of measuring one's private actions against those of the common good. The individual without a sense of others was without community and without a sense of historical consequence. Being part of the polis meant that one understood what we now refer to as the political economy of society as well as its spheres of cultural and social capital. Pericles's speech recognized the costs of war but more importantly it gave homage to the idea of civilization and the role of the city as the site where progressive social forms gain their impetus. Aristotle made the same claim when he described community life as the best framework within which we become moral, intellectual and responsible beings[4].

Almost every intellectual giant in the western canon has addressed the city. For Shakespeare, the city was a rumble of people, for Baudelaire it was the site of spectacle, for Frederick Engels it meant estrangement, for Lewis Mumford it was a colossal skeleton of suburbs, ghettos, industrial parks and corporate quarters; for Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud it was a site of modern pathologies where moral weakening took place and abnormal divisions of labour emerged; for Georg Simmel it was the crucible in which the blasé attitude was produced, that practice of calculability essential for the administration of the bureaucratized society. For Janet Flanner, the mythical city of the twentieth century was a blend of Paris and New York; her close analysis of art shows, book launches and political rallies defined the habits of the intelligentsia. From observed moments, such as Pablo Picasso's refusal to shake hands with any Italian after the bombing of Guernica, came the sensibility of the new cosmopolitan[5].

At its simplest and most accessible the city is an encounter with a physically overwhelming aesthetic object. It is a space arranged and blocked out with architectural styles and precincts; it has a central business district, a left bank, an east village, an uptown, downtown, Latin quarter, little China, red light district, old wall, infamous alley, gay ghetto and subversive block. The city is like a canvas or tattooed body that is easily sectioned, highlighted and transformed into a narrative. Yet this mapping of the city does not reveal its nature. The city is always and simultaneously real and imaginary, alluring and repulsive, inspiring and degrading.

THE EMERGING CITY

The city must be understood from different points of view: it is an infrastructure of mechanical features, a closed system of roads, telecommunication links and zoned regions. It is a commercial hub through which goods and services are circulated, consumed and exchanged; it is a passage through which objects and individuals travel on the

way to other states of being. The city cultivates the experiences of freedom by schooling individuals to move across regions, absorb ambiguous sense impressions and resolve the tensions presented by contradictory conditions. To survive in the city requires wit and strength; to understand the city approximates the challenge of understanding the core capacities of the human condition. The city ignites the human imagination; living in it demands physical fortitude. In the city, the private and public domains are regularly collapsed and transgressed. The city is a dynamic space that occupies the temporal world and the imaginary at the same time.

Understanding the city requires a trained eye. When the cultural historian Roger Darnton (1984) recounted the tale of the great cat massacre in Paris in the mid eighteenth century he was also describing the function of the city as the crucible in which the mighty groans and heaves of the civilizing process were both contained and aired in public. The great cat massacre began on the rue Saint-Séverin, when local apprentices and journeymen rounded up the cats of Paris, dressed them in miniature garments imitative of the French aristocratic style, with velvet capes and tiny hoods, and then put them to death in a public massacre. The episode has been read as a symbolic precursor to the French Revolution, even though it has been dated (not without contested debate) to the early 1730s, half a century before the reign of terror. This urban tale has retained its significance as an illustration of how the secrets of a city are preserved in folklore. Paris, the heartbeat of the French revolution, can be regarded like Athens as a city of the people, a demotic city.

Across the Channel, in London, a city of almost seven hundred thousand people in the mid eighteenth century, new arrivals were migrating at the rate of eight thousand per year[6]. They were coming to a metropolis in the throes of transformation. London was seething with opportunities and vices; it was 'the epicentre for hustlers, bawds, pimps and whores alike and a gentleman was just as likely to have his pocket picked as to have his lusts gratified'[7]. The painter, William Hogarth, in 1732, captured some of the more debauched and lascivious antics of Londoners as a record of the times. In *A Harlot's Progress*, *Plate 1*, Hogarth depicted the recruitment of fresh-faced country girls into the practice of prostitution, and four images later, *A Harlot's Progress, Plate V*, he showed her death from the pox[8]. Estimates of the numbers of prostitutes and pimps who made a living from sexual services in London are as high as two per cent of the city's population. In every ale-house, there was a back-room set aside for sexual transactions, and the number of brothels, molly-houses and specialist bagnios was well into the hundreds. Yet from this cesspool of vice and crime, there emerged modern parliamentary democracy, colonial expansion, the affluent middle classes and the bureaucratic civil service.

MODERN TIMES

Conventionally, the city is regarded as a nineteenth century phenomenon defined by its degree of urbanization. Before the 1850s, few societies could be described as urbanized – the definition being any location where seventy per cent of its population clustered into a confined geographic area. By the turn of the twentieth century, Great Britain could be seen as the first largely urbanized society. Its spectacular economic growth during the previous century had brought hundreds of thousands of people into cities in search of work and opportunities. This migratory trend toward the city suggests that its most obvious definition is a place where money is made and capital accumulated. At a fundamental level, this holds true. In the twenty-first century, the size of cities makes them mega-constellations and huge trade and capital centres. Tokyo holds twenty-six million people, Mexico City nineteen million, Bombay eighteen million and Shanghai seventeen million. Alongside these conglomerates are immense tracts of sub-standard housing and degraded land. Sanitation and water contamination create biological time-bombs that threaten to produce outbreaks of infectious diseases like cholera, typhoid and tuberculosis. The infra-structure of the contemporary mega-city is vulnerable to both old and new viruses such as Ebola and Hepatitus C that pose public health problems with global consequences. So while the city generates capital as a global life force, it also produces the fissures of its own disintegration.

Life in the city has always been associated with danger in terms of health as well as adventure and misadventure. In the mid-nineteenth century, the average life expectancy in London was thirty-six years of age and even less in the industrial city of Liverpool where it was twenty-six years, while in rural England and Wales the life expectancy was forty-one years. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the death rates in urban areas in Great Britain were thirty-three per cent higher than in rural areas, and birth rates were also lower in the city than in rural regions. Despite these statistics, the city was not just a source of disease and pathogens, it also emanated a strong allure. Early modern commentators such as Ferdinand Töennies and Werner Sombart emphasized its negative and anti-human qual-ities but also its promise for creating wealth and opening up unimagined possibilities. Their respective ambivalent viewpoints were antidotes to the idea of the city as a death trap.

A city exerts a particular influence over its inhabitants as if it had a character that loomed large like Hobbes *Leviathan* or Batman and Robin's *Gotham City*. The city makes its inhabitants. New Yorkers, Londoners, Moscovites, out-of-towners, Berliners and Parisians, appear to have personal qualities that are obvious to any sharp observer. Yet these characterizations are part of a city's mystique and not generally sustainable when put to rigorous empirical scrutiny. In the twenty-first century, the qualities of the

Londoner, Athenian, Roman, Berliner and New Yorker converge around sites of socio-economic similarity rather than topographical influence. The diverse literature about the city bears this out. City dwellers have attributes in common but they are drawn together as cosmopolitans and not as inhabitants of particular spaces.

Simmel, Weber and Freud were great analysts of the city who also recognized the negative as well as the positive elements of its character. In his essay, *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), Georg Simmel described the problems of the city as closely tied to the incipient disorganization generated by industrial capitalism and the shifting political climate. In Europe, at the close of the nineteenth century, this sense of destabilization was overlaid with a simmering nationalist fervour. As traditions faded and disintegration triumphed, the individual was tipped into a crisis of identity. The flight from tradition and the drive to democratization produced an atmosphere in which individuals could have both an optimistic sense of freedom as well as a nagging sense of uncertainty and disorientation about where they actually belonged. As the class strictures which regulated sociality weakened, individuals grasped the opportunities for upward mobility and reinvented themselves. Wittgenstein (1980) described the problem as a sense of confusion produced by the 'strange demands' of everyday life[9]. Ordinary common sense was no longer sufficient; new tactics had to be invented. To be modern meant that one lived as if the world were always a puzzle in need of solutions; society was much less predictable, as a result every individual lived in a state of permanent anxiety. Social life was like a game of strategy in which individuals made claims for social position by demonstrations of acumen. Social opportunity was often the result of a chance encounter; as the city increased the possibility of such accidents, individuals needed to be self-consciously primed to accept the vagaries of fortune. At the same time, there was an opposite tension; the city produced a strong ethic of calculation – time, place, cost, opportunities were constantly being measured and compared. The modern city was an instrument in synch with an increasingly economic ordering of capitalist life.

Simmel noted of metropolitan life that the physical scale of the city, with its plethora of entertainments, corruptions and rank diversions, created a cacophony of noise that literally swept the individual into a moral and aesthetic vertigo. Within such a charged atmosphere, where political, social, moral and sexual relations were rapidly changing, the individual was induced to use visible markers such as material possessions as emblems of position and authority. Thus, the metropolis, with its marketplace and over-production of goods, increased the confusion over the value of possessions by making them function in new ways, as expressions of character and personality.

Kafka like Simmel recognized the emerging modern society as a new world order. He represented the modern condition through the palpable presence of laws and regulations

that had the effect of confusing and intimidating the individual. In Kafka's world there was no easy access to the governing instrumentalities of society, there were no rules or courts of appeal to which the individual could confidently apply. The new world was a place of implacable and absurd legalities where there was little hope of discovering the rules by which the game was being played. This was also the era of busy intellectualism when new visual styles were being demonstrated through the works of Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele and the architect Adolf Loos; it was a period of new music from Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg, and new ways of looking at one another, following the radical insights of Sigmund Freud and the re-defined human interior. These diverse intellectual innovations paralleled, in some sense, the profound changes taking place in the politics and history of central Europe.

The city was the site of adventure and misadventure. Its romance and allure resided in what might happen; the individual was increasingly aware that opportunities were always unfolding and routines could easily be set aside. Charles Baudelaire, often referred to as the poet of capitalism, described the city as a panorama through which the flâneur, the quintessential figure of modernity, could wander at will and encounter by chance the spectacular events that the city harbored. Yet the mysteries of the city were also its pathologies. Crime in the city was its ungovernable underbelly. It was a new kind of jungle where mysterious figures like *The Phantom* prowled the streets setting all manner of wrongs to rights, and the Pinkerton Detective Agency, formed in Chicago in 1850 came to embody modern principles of detection and surveillance that found their way into the literary and cinematic figures of the romantic private eye (Potter, 1986). These new agents of modern morality revealed the hidden world beneath the obvious. They were agents in the invention of new ways of seeing, they could isolate clues and identify trouble where others saw nothing. The city became organic and the omniscient, phantom-like detective was its attendant physician.

Other views of the city recognized its rational and orderly qualities. For Karl Marx and Max Weber, the city was the site of new capitalism; the mechanics of production, namely, the factory and the marketplace, required a context of order and routine. The working day, beginning at a fixed time, the lunch break, the change of shifts in the factory, the regular hours of operation, created a routine into which individuals had to be inserted. Businesses required standard hours of opening, appointments had to be made and kept, bookkeeping needed to be recorded, in short, an infrastructure of calculability was imposed over the city and its inhabitants. Underneath this veneer of orderly routine, there were other social forces at work. Durkheim inquired into the nature of social relations and sense of community, Freud wondered at the imaginative refusal of the natural individual who struggled against the repressive forces of civilization. Simmel

identified the blasé individual who was required to inhabit the busy, noisy, intrusive city without succumbing to its over-stimulation. The blasé individual developed a smooth carapace that signaled to others a kind of nonchalant removal from social engagement, but, at the same time, it also masked a subterranean anxiety generated by the intense stimulation of the crowded, noisy metropolis.

RE-DISCOVERING THE POLIS

In the early nineteen seventies, when global travel was becoming *de rigueur* for twenty-somethings, when student travel and backpacking were developing as an industry, and when new pockets of the world were opening up to young tourists, a sub-genre of travel writing also developed. This genre not only included the new style of guidebook such as Lonely Planet and Rough Guides, but also the more literary works of Bruce Chatwin (*In Patagonia*), Vikram Seth (*From Heaven Lake*) and Jonathan Raban (*Soft City*). These works expressed a view of the city that was both nostalgic and critical. Raban explicitly drew on a rich tradition of literary and sociological commentators that included Max Weber, Charles Dickens, Lewis Mumford and Mary Douglas in order to remind the reader that the city had a history not always conducive to humanitarianism and material prosperity. The point of convergence between the various textual approaches to the metropolis however was the experience of the city as a lived space, as an intersection between reality and private imagination. At this location the city became more than a concrete monolith, it entered the human imagination as a source of excitement, danger and optimism.

The origins of the modern notion of community are generally traced back to social thought in the late eighteenth century, and then to the classical period and the Athenian polis. The late eighteenth century was a time of growing industrialization and urbanization, and a time when traditional ways of feudal and rural life were changing substantially. Almost all of the important European social philosophers of the time were concerned with the notion of community, and they all shared a central thesis which was the growth of capitalism, industrialization and urbanization had profoundly altered relationships between individuals directly and between individuals and society at a more abstract level.

Ferdinand Töennies was one of the most important commentators on the city; he wrote, in 1887, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, about the opposed cultures between the provinces and the city. The term Gemeinschaft referred to a type of community which was based on associations of mutual aid and trust. Gesellschaft referred to the more urban

society characterized by instrumental exchanges based on individual self-interest. Töennies (2001) noted a growing hostility toward the impact and implications of urbanization. This hostility, however, was interpreted at the time as indicative of potential political revolution by the masses. It was feared that freed from the social control of community, the urban masses would rise up and threaten the social order. The rupture of ties to village, family, church and guild were the 'dark side' of the industrial revolution that threatened the stability of the larger social order. It would take more time to recognize that other consequences and benefits flowed from these social changes.

In concert with these cultural changes, the actual physical world was also transforming, becoming more crowded with people as well as ideas (Le Rider 1993). Between 1860 and 1910, the population of Simmel's Berlin rose from under half a million people to more than two million; Paris increased from more than one and a half million to nearly three million, London from under three million to four and half million, and Vienna from a population less than a million in 1869, to almost two million in 1910[10]. The sudden growth of the city as a physical form made it a crucible in which transformations of human experience took shape often driving the individual toward 'the wild pursuit of competition' (Simmel 1900). Everyday encounters were inevitably filled with challenges from other people who looked different, and whose culture, religion, values and aspirations were highly varied. In such circumstances, society became like 'a huge arithmetical problem' in which the individual needed to be increasingly calculative[11]. The orderliness and regulations of the city, such as timetables for public transport and the regular work hours for factories and shops, produced a superficially stable context. However, this orderliness was easy to shatter with chance events that introduced chaos such as traffic accidents, mechanical failures and unexpected social encounters.

City dwellers learned the language of place; they developed idiosyncratic systems for reading their surrounds including the use of fashionable dress, physiognomy and speech style as clues to the identity of the stranger. Being able to read the stranger, to decode their character and intentions from their outward appearance was an important skill for surviving in the city. Raban reminds us of the value accorded to the ability to size up others – he describes the popular crazes for phrenology and palmistry that accompanied the industrialization of the city (1974 p. 30.). It was possible to purchase primers in these skills from almost any bookstall; pamphlets on graphology and quasi-scientific disquisitions on the relationship between body-shape and moral character were best-sellers of the day. There was a vast market for cranky guides to person-spotting as the best method for grappling with the complexities of urban sociability.

Yet this heightened attention to analyzing and assessing the character of the modern urban dweller had the ironic effect of creating a disturbing sense of interior emptiness as

if there were a vacuum at the centre of every individual's being. The daily habits of association, which required a sense of distance and the exercise of indifference, also produced in the individual a repertoire of defense mechanisms that appeared as forms of coolness and reserve. Thus the successful city-dweller was constantly oscillating between a 'secret restlessness' and sense of helplessness that was just 'below the threshold of consciousness'[12]. These opposing mannerisms held the individual and the mass society together in a tangle of strange demands created by new forms of sociality. They reinforced a sense of interior emptiness sustained by the fleeting revelations from what Walter Benjamin would call 'dead data' – the sounds, scraps and loose gestures of the milling, moving crowds[13].

The city has been an important motif in western intellectual and cultural histories. It is seen as both the site where experiments in living have taken place and the origins of major problems in the contemporary social order. Scientific and communication technologies (television, the internet, mobile phones) have altered relations between individuals and continually destabilized the public domain. They have intensified the instrumental nature of communications and at the same time extended the methods for exchange. Throughout history the city has acted as a magnet for all manner of activities and events, and in this capacity it is the crucible in which experiments in social living are conducted. Yet despite the dangers and difficulties presented by the city, its capacity to engage the individual is entirely in accord with the value attributed to it by early commentators such as Thucydides, Demosthenes, Pericles and Aristotle – as the crucible of civility.

NOTES

1 Italo Calvino (1979) *Invisible cities*. Pan: London.
2 Theodor Adorno (1981) Notes on Kafka, in *Prisms*. MIT: Mass.: p. 262.
3 Jonathan Raban (1974) *Soft city*. Hamilton: London p. 69.
4 Aristotle (1995) *Politics*. Clarendon: Oxford.
5 Shari Benstock (1986) *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940.* University of Texas Press: Austin pp. 101, 131-3.
6 Julie Peakman (2004) *Lascivious bodies: a sexual history of the eighteenth century*. Atlantic: London p. 2.
7 ibid p. 3.
8 passim p. 21.
9 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980) *Culture and value*. Trans. Peter Winch. Blackwell: Oxford 2e p. 27.
10 Jacques Le Rider (1993) *Modernity and the crises of identity*. Polity: Oxford.

11 Georg Simmel (1900) *The philosophy of money*. Trans Tom Bottomore (1990) Routledge: London.
12 ibid p. 484.
13 Walter Benjamin (1982) *Gesammelte schriften V: das passagen-werk*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp p. 525.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Chatwin, Bruce (1977) *In Patagonia*. London: Cape.
Darnton, Roger (1984) *The great cat massacre*. N.Y.: Basic.
Potter, Dennis (1986) *The singing detective*. London: Faber.
Seth, Vikram (1983) *From heaven gate*. London: Chatto & Windus.
Toennies, F. (2001) *Community and civil society*. Cambridge: CUP.
Wittgenstein, L. (1980) *Remarks on the philosophy of psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.