Chapter 2

Three Urban Discourses

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In this chapter I want to consider three fundamental discourses of the city: the authoritarian city, the cosmic city, and the collective city. These are ideas of the city as well as urban social relations, intellectual discourses as well as political forces. They are chosen from the many possible, because I feel they have a special resonance at this millennial juncture.

The Authoritarian City

Cities are sites of social aggregation that involve compulsion, order, and discipline as well as freedom, anarchy, and self-realization. In recent years, the latter rather than the former have been stressed. While it is important to see the city as a site of individual and collective emancipation, a tradition that incorporates Marx and Engels as well as Nozick and Milton Friedmann, it is just as important to remember that the city is an imposition and adherence to a series of master narratives. From Rameses II to Frank Gehry, through Baron Haussmann and Le Corbusier the city has been inherently authoritarian, sometimes totalitarian and occasionally fascistic.

All ideas are relational. However, this notion of the urban as discipline is not contrasted to a pastoral freedom. I am not counterpoising a brutal urban with an idealized rural. If comparisons need to be made I draw upon Bruce Chatwin's notion of the nomadic alternative. In a series of essays and particularly in his book *The Songlines* he argued that nomadism was the "natural" human condition (Chatwin 1987). The urban revolution was not a leap forward but a tethering of the human need to move. While Chatwin's biologizing of social relations needs to be treated with extreme care, or we will fall into the reactionary, antimodern lauding of the idealized nomad apparent in the work of Wilfred Thesinger and Laurens van der Post, he raises an important point about cities as places of compunction.

The debate on urban origins has long fascinated me. The traditional view was that the urban revolution was predicated upon the agricultural revolution. Agricultural surplus created cities. An alternative was outlined by Jane Jacobs (1969) who proposed a reversal of the process; urban trade created agriculture. We can think

of an urban–agricultural revolution in which trade played a key role. However, the work of Marshall Sahlins (1972) has convincingly shown that hunting-gathering societies that prefigured this revolution spent less time working than agricultural societies; he calls them the original affluent society. In other words, pre-urban, pre-agricultural societies had more free time, more freedom. The urban–agricultural revolution marks a loss of freedom, a greater work discipline and more time devoted to the drudgery of work and the compulsion of social order. Cities are a Nietzschian will to power. An example.

In the desert South West of the United States, there are remains of an important urban culture. They were called the Anasazi and their independent urban civilization was centered on Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. The traditional rendition goes like this: between the tenth and twelfth centuries the Anasazi culture, based on efficient agriculture, flowered into cities with vast cliff dwellings, and major feats of engineering, architecture, and art. Brilliant pottery, sophisticated irrigation systems, and keen solar and astronomical observations round out a picture of an urban civilization that follows the old precept that cities equal civilization.

There is another interpretation of the Anasazi. The work of anthropologist Christy Turner presents a darker side of Anasazi culture (Preston 1998). It appears that the Anasazi culture was prefigured by the Toltec empire which lasted from the ninth to the twelfth century in central Mexico. This was an empire centered on human sacrifice and cannibalism. Thugs from the Toltec empire moved north into what is now New Mexico and found a pliant population of docile farmers whom they terrorized into a theocratic society. Social control was maintained through acts of cannibalistic terror. The Anasazi culture, so long admired, was a Charles Manson-type social order where the bad and powerful controlled the weak. The great feats of art and astronomy, road building, and city formation were less sparks of human ingenuity and more the mark of organized social terrorism.

An extreme example. But the past is less a fixed reality than a mirror of contemporary concerns. While others would want to remind us of the ingenuity in Çatal Hüyük, I want to remind us of the terror of Chaco Canyon.

The authoritarian project is not always successful. The city is a place of resistance and contestation. And while these have emerged as important topics in recent years, it is well to remember that something is being resisted, something is being contested. There is a structure to all this agency.

Neither am I suggesting that the authoritarian project is always bad. We may agree with the classical liberal theorists like Locke and Hobbes that we need some form of social contract in order to save us from the excesses of the more powerful. The city is the embodiment of the social contract.

Cities have an authority embedded in them. Street layouts, traffic lights, police, the location of things; there is an imposed structuring to our lives, our behaviors, the paths that we trace through time and across space. Whatever the question, Lenin suggested, the answer is always power. The city both reflects and embodies power. Urban society involves an order in time and space, a discipline of space and time. The urban built form is a system of boundaries and transgressions, centers and peripheries, surveillances and gestures, gazes and performances. At a fundamental level there is something inherently fascistic about architecture and urban planning.

The authoritarian city is a useful corrective to the idea of urbanism as a sort of unbound Prometheus breaking through the bonds of tradition and established order, a theme best exemplified by Peter Hall (1998). This has been the dominant rendering of the city for the past two hundred years including the socialist emancipatory project, the gaze of the *flâneur*, modernist sensibilities and a post-modern irony. In recent years it has morphed into a market-driven, so-called neoliberal narrative that has called for loosening planning controls and deregulation. The implied call of freedom has now been attached to the unfettered operation of the market. I want to stress very strongly that this discourse needs to be challenged. Because the city is inherently authoritarian, the calls for less planning and deregulation should be challenged for what they are: struggles over who is doing the planning and what are the redistributional consequences of regulation. Deregulation is always reregulation that reflects economic and political power. And the real question is not whether urban planning is done or not, but who is doing the planning. If planning controls over land use disappear more power is transferred to private interests. When we have a view of the city as the operation of power; then debates become released from the phoney dichotomy of control versus freedom to the more politicized debate concerning the question Who is in control?

Power is a practice, a ritual, a process, wielded by some people over others. It is unevenly distributed and unequally imposed. Work on the authoritarian city such as that of Michel Foucault has revived interest in the practices of power, the operation of discipline, the spaces of exclusion, and the sites of control. An edited book by Nicholas Fyfe (1998), for example, draws together interesting contributions on surveillance and policing, and ties in the *connection between* control and identity in public spaces. These are the more obvious uses of power. Power is exercised in a number of ways from direct coercion through adherence to community standards. At one extreme are the personnel and techniques of the coercive state and corporatist apparatus, at the other the social norms that define what is proper. The nature of the authoritarian city varies from the direct operation of centralized power including imprisonment, punishment, and bodily torture to the individual incorporation of values and standards into a taken-for-granted view of the world. A thumbnail history of the authoritarian city would show a reliance on both but in democratic capitalist societies a greater use of the latter.

The authoritarian city comes in a number of thicknesses. Authority is thickest when everyday practices are overlain with the practice of power and thinnest when power is part of people's desires. Consider the contrasting utopia/dystopias imagined by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell in their respective novels *Brave New World* and *1984*. These are arguably the most emblematic political novels of the twentieth century. Huxley describes a place where order is maintained by sexual promiscuity and easy availability of drugs. Orwell's world is puritanical, harsh, and bitter. Orwell's depicts a thick authoritarian city, Huxley presents a thin authoritarian city.

While the obvious and direct uses of power are worthy of investigation, especially as new more subtle forms of surveillance are introduced and employed, it is also important to realize that the more powerful chains are ones that we impose on our own imagination. When we internalize power relations we become

our own repressive police state. There are connections between *Brave New World* and *1984*.

Excavating previous intellectual debates can be useful, not so much for providing answers but for posing questions. After the First World War when the first flush of the revolutionary impulse had fizzled throughout much of Western Europe, a number of radical thinkers sought to understand how the social order was maintaining itself. The Marxist belief in the the inexorable dynamic of revolution was being shattered by the tenacity of the capitalist system to survive. It was in this context that Gramsci developed his notion of hegemony, the Frankfurt School was developing a critical theory, and in particular Herbert Marcuse (1964), in *One Dimensional Man*, sought to understand the process of introjection in which the values of a capitalist society become embedded into an individual psyche.

A succession of French theorists, rarely seduced by the notion of participatory democracy, have outlined similar ideas. Althusser wrote of an ideological state apparatus, including schools and universities that maintained loyalty to the capitalist order. And Pierre Bourdieu (1998), echoing a theme of Noam Chomsky, argued that social consent is manufactured, representative democracy is an illusion, and that the struggle for domination is less in the marketplace and more in the media place where bourgeoisie culture perpetuates itself.

The very notion of struggle has been displaced. While local struggles over working and living conditions will always occur, we have lost, at least for the moment, the sense of big struggles over the shape of the social order. The real success of capitalism has been to persuade us of its rightness and to embrace us in its working. We are all capitalists now. Through the creation of an all-embracing market mentality, the seductive power of the commodity and the wrapping of fulfillment and desire with purchase and consumption, capitalism has shown itself so infinitely adaptable that even resistance and contestation is commodified and sold. There is now a strong and binding connection between commodities and identity, satisfaction and consumption. A linkage between political economy and psychoanalysis, first outlined by Eric Fromm and Charles Reich, would seem to be an important way for us to unravel some of the strands that bind us to this tenacious social order.

We should be wary, however, of accepting a hermetically sealed connection between order and consent. If consent is manufactured how does radical change come about? How does any change come about? One view is that we are recycling notions: from focus groups come advertising campaigns and media strategies that package our beliefs and fears into commodities, a closed cycle of desire and satisfaction, endlessly repeating itself from dream to commodity back to desire and commodity. But change does occur and it takes place when people interact; when discourse is "real"; and that occurs when people come together, or are brought together to talk, discuss, share, complain; and when individual fears and dreams are shared and shaped by comparison and contrast, empathy and argument. And this takes place most palpably in cities. Taking to the streets is not only an age-old political strategy, it has become a necessary corrective to the imposed media images. Resistance takes place when lived urban space conflicts with the dictates of the marketplace and the commodified images of the media place.

The Cosmic City

The city is a religious artifact. For modernists this sentence may seem strange, even incomprehensible. Religion has been too long counterpoised to the continuing enlightenment project of rationality. The city has been so long associated with the modern and the contemporary in the Western imagination that it is read as the site of the irreligious and the secular. But cities have always reflected and embodied cosmologies. The earliest cities mirrored the world. Indeed they were the world. The size, shape, orientation, location, siting, and naming of cities were tied to a deeper vision of the connection between the sacred and the profane. The Athens of Pericles, often depicted as the birthplace of Western rationality, was named after the goddess Athene. She was glorified and worshiped by the citizens and the success of the city was seen as a mark of her benevolence. The Parthenon was dedicated to her and once a year citizens marched in a long procession to the Parthenon atop the Acropolis and presented a sacred garment to the 40-foot-high statue of the goddess made from gold and ivory. The ancient Chinese cities such as Changan and Beijing were laid out on precise rectangular lines orientated to the four points of the compass that embodied the shape of the world and the symbol of order in Chinese cosmology. The Aztec city of Tenochtitlan was also laid out in four equal parts, four being a magical number in Aztec cosmology indicating the completeness of the world. The boundaries of the four quarters of the city met at a central point occupied by the Great Temple and imperial palaces. City layout and building design were a homology with the wider cosmos. In the Hindu city of Angkor Wat each step on the temples marked a stage in the solar cycle, each terrace represented a tier of the world. The earliest cities were marketplaces and living places but above all they were ceremonial sites of religious recollection and cosmic narrative. The site and shape echoed religious cosmology. Even the grid, a seemingly secular form of urban design, contains a fantasy of turning chaos into order, transforming topography into geometry. The very act of founding a city and planning a city was connected to how the wider world worked; human involvement in and responsibility for the world were embodied in city location, city form, and city shape. The city was the cosmos, the cosmos was embodied in the city. This macrocosm–microcosm also extended from city to body. The walled, quartered medieval city was a microcosm of a larger world but also a metaphor for a bounded, divided self.

The urban cosmologies justified (they still do) the social hierarchy. The cities gave substance to the line from the gods to the people through the ruling classes. Through the built form of the city and urban rituals the social hierarchy was sanctified and legitimized. Festivals, ceremonies, and rituals tied the people, the rulers, and the gods together in spectacular urban connections.

The long history of urbanism would reveal a steady secularization of the city, a growing disenchantment. In the West, the advent of the merchant city, the humanist city, and the capitalist city all undermined the city as *the* site of cosmic narrative. Religious observance did not disappear, it often increased in outbreaks of religious fervor, but the city itself lost its religious significance. There were individual churches and religious communities but the city was reduced to a meaningless background for human behavior. The city became illegible as a religious document;

it was no longer a religious artifact, a text for understanding the world; less and less was it a site for taking part in rituals of cosmic significance that tied together people and place, the sacred and the profane. The word "profane," by the way, means "outside the temple." Over time more of the city was outside the temple. The city became part of the God-shaped hole of the modern world.

The market city, based on individual adherence to the power of the market (I am what I consume), provides little in the way of cosmic significance. Consumption- and wealth-display provide only one layer of meaning and little by the way of spiritual depth and resistance to the contingencies of human life and suffering. The market gives us social positioning, not human understanding; social ranking, not communal meaning. At its existentialist bleakest the city becomes a setting for the meaningless passage of the individual through a blind universe, bereft of meaning. One of the more dramatic images is provided in James Kelman's (1994) novel *How Late It Was, How Late*: a man wakes up in jail, blind. He stumbles his way through a Kafkaesque nightmare. There is something heroic about the will to "batter on" but it is tragically heroic, an act of blind individual will in the face of an indifferent, cold world. A meaningless life beyond the will to survive.

This existential crisis is not a global phenomenon. In many non-Western cities, religion has survived; and even in the West many are looking at religions, less as false consciousness – the opiate of the people – and more as acts of collective identity and resistance to globalization. More accurately it is an accommodation with globalization as extended communities around the world shape their sense of themselves through religion. The postcolonial city is becoming the more religious city. Many cities are becoming enlivened by new faith communities, new sites of religious observance; even club culture can be seen as a Dionysian celebration as acolytes orgiastically dance the night away. In the city there are many and varied attempts to fill the God-shaped hole at the center of our materialistic culture. Thomas Moore (1997), for example, writes of the need for, and practice of, more soulful cities. The postmodern city has become the site for a rich variety of religious cosmologies.

The Collective City

Cities are sites of collective provision, collective consumption, and the workings of civil society. They are shared spaces, a place of parallel and sometimes intertwined lives, joint projects, externalities, and neighborhood effects. The organization of this collective project has varied over time and across space. I will examine briefly two issues: collective goods and services, and the notion of civil society.

The city is a site for the provision and consumption of collective goods and services. Two basic divisions can be identified in the organization of collective goods and services: private or public provision, and private or public consumption. The resultant fourfold division provides a basic anatomy of the city. Take the case of transport, which can be either provided by the market or by the state. In most cases the large, capital investment projects, such as highway construction or mass transit systems, tend to be handled by the state. The market shies away from such big, long-term risky projects. The work of David Harvey (1982) has pointed to the connections and tensions of this public/private split in the production and configuration of the capitalist space economy. The consumption can vary from the more private, such

as the automobile, to the more public, the subway or bus. Around the world the shift has been from public to private consumption and it is tied to trends of individualism and the decline of civic engagement.

These divisions are more than just alternative ways of providing or consuming goods and services – they have become the epicenters of fundamental debates about the social contract. In recent years there has been an assault on the notion of the public provision of the collective. Collective provision and consumption has been associated with the discredited Left. Socialist cities were meant to take away the power of the market to influence social and spatial outcomes. The defeat of communism, the decline of the Eastern bloc and the apparent failure of the socialist agenda to garner mass support has meant a withering away of the collective ideal. To be sure this has not prevented the state from assuming huge influence and spending power. In the US, for example, critics of big government and government spending see no apparent paradox in their demands for less government, but call for more government spending on "defense" and on giving the the power of capital punishment to the state. Governments cannot be entrusted with providing basic human services but seemingly they can be given carte blanche to spend billions of dollars on armaments or to take human life.

Collective goods are described less by fiscal realities and more by social and political power. Subsidies to corporate interests, corporate welfare, are less discussed than income support to low-income households. Subsidies to home owners are seen as less destructive to the social order than subsidies to the unemployed. One is legitimized, the other is delegitimized. The big debate about political control of the market is made most vivid in our discussions on collective goods and services. There has been a decline of the Keynsian city and a withering away of the socialist city. At this millennial juncture we are in the process of a fundamental shift in the collective organization of the city. Civil society has emerged from the set of rules and practices established in the shared space of the city. The first cities were gated communities and notions of a public good or civic order were slow to develop, always it seems, able to be undermined by family and group loyalties.

There is now a great deal of interest in civil society, social capital, and all those interstitial areas between the realm of formal politics and the marketplace. Civil society operates between the state and the market. The decline of the Keynsian state has undermined reliance on the state, while the operation of the market creates inequalities in social and spatial outcomes. For a number of commentators civil society has now become a terrain of social opportunity providing one of the few possibilities of maintaining an emancipatory project. A number of commentators have stressed the positive forms of civil society. Robert Putnam's (1993) notion of social capital, for example, refers to the ability of civil society to transcend family and group ties; and John Friedmann (1998) has written on the possibly emancipatory connections between civil society and urban planning.

While civil society is important we should be careful of seeing it as a panacea. Janet Abu-Lughod (1998) reminds us that civil society contains the Michigan Militia and Ku Klux Klan as well as chess clubs and benign neighbor groups. Moreover, underlying many of the debates concerning civil society and the state is a Greek notion of the polis, a small, almost homogeneous, community. The contemporary city, however, has always been a problem for the workings of democracy. Growing

heterogeneity, suburbanization, and the fragmentation of city governments have undermined the urban community. The Greek polis was small and unitary. The contemporary city, in contrast, has a metropolitan fragmentation that separates out center from edges, cities from suburbs, blacks from whites, rich from poor.

A number of years ago, Kenneth Galbraith (1958) wrote of the growing disparity between private affluence and public squalor. In many cities around the world the disparity seems to be growing. As the city becomes balkanized, architecturally into gated communities, and politically into exclusive suburbs and abandoned inner cities, simply calling for civic engagement, a major chord in social commentary on the city, is to miss this wider structural context. To be actively involved in your all-white suburban neighborhood may be public involvement, but it is not civic engagement.

The city has always been full of paradoxes: affluence with squalor, civic obligations with individual needs, and public duties with private actions. The precise mix has varied over the years. The cities of classical Greece, almost two-and-a-half millennia ago, combined public affluence and private squalor, private actions were circumscribed with civic obligations, and the marketplace did not dominate over the temple or the agora. Contemporary cities are marked by the power of the market over the polis and the temple, private affluence (of a minority) with public squalor and the lauding of individual rights over civic obligations. It will be interesting to note the changing balance of this urban equation over the new millennium, with the city center stage of the evolving, contested social order.

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