

Introduction

Our objective is to display the city as a human achievement which appeared, spread and intensified over the last ten millennia. All the most admirable and desirable achievements have been intensified in the city, as have the worst horrors. The limitations of human expression and communication compel me to carve this mass of time and space into manageable, communicable portions, although every dissection violates reality. The theory of modes of production adumbrated by Marx is developed into a scheme of divisions which economically maximizes illumination and minimizes distortion.

The process of writing drummed in cumulatively the overwhelming sense that the fate of the majority of human beings has been continually glossed over and travestied, for the obvious reason that those providing the record had contrary interests which affected their selection and focus. The loftiest minds have thus been compromised.

Our basis of selection was to include all urban cultures which seemed to offer doors to progress in the well-being of humankind. In his sample Toynbee chose only 'some particular phase of each city's history that has been great in the sense that it has made a mark on the subsequent history of civilization' (1967:5). When an urban culture ceases to offer this I cease to follow it. Greek cities offered a new way in which a substantial minority achieved cultural enlightenment. Though it was at the expense of women and the majority of men its presentation offered aspirations to men and women which have never been lost. Christ's ministry is recorded mostly in the countryside, but the culmination and sequel had to be in the city. Song China seemed on the brink of a quantum leap towards new affluence which might have spread more widely, but momentum was lost. Current urban civilization has moved towards unprecedented heights of affluence and freedom for all, but almost at the point of achievement threatens self-destruction.

In this perspective we elaborate the theoretical framework and its dilemmas (chapter 1). Our selectivity focuses on pristine cities, the Asiatic mode of production in its earliest form, in Sumeria, China, the

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Andes and Mexico (chapter 2); on cities of the Ancient mode of production in Greece and Rome (chapter 3); on medieval cities of the Feudal mode of production in Europe (chapter 4); on medieval cities of the Asiatic mode of production in the Sinic, Japanese, Islamic and Indic regions (chapter 5); on colonial and Third World cities as the dynamic bridge between medieval feudal and modern capitalist cities (chapter 6) and finally on the transformation of cities from the Feudal to the Capitalist mode of production in Europe and ultimately the world as a whole (chapter 7).

Emerging more strongly as construction of the book proceeded was realization of the centrality of movement of peoples and of cultural breakdowns to the transformation process in the mode of production, each constituting a change in the context and dynamics of urban life. The movement of peoples and breakdown of socio-cultural systems is documented: from the Asiatic to the Ancient, the Ancient to the Feudal and the Feudal to the Capitalist mode of production.

Though very strongly marked and perhaps more thoroughly studied, this was not distinctively a European phenomenon. The Japanese moved purposefully to borrow the urban culture they envied (though transforming it paradoxically in the process), in a way that the Germanic peoples lacked the organization to do *vis-à-vis* Rome. They thus almost artificially created a situation which led to breakdown and opportunistic feudalism in Japan. The Islamic movement swept away all the regimes and occupied all the cities of western Asia, North Africa and eastern Europe, in contempt rather than envy, but absorbed more from them than they realized. The Mughal Empire drew its urban culture from Iran, but achieved a territorial spread far greater than its source, as also did the European migrants to the Americas. The Europeans moved outwards after the Renaissance and Reformation in the persons of their adventurers and traders, in contempt rather than emulation of the peoples, cultures and cities they found. It was the outward movement which generated the internal breakdown and transformation, here a lengthy rather than cataclysmic process. In the Asiatic to Ancient to Feudal transitions it was culturally less sophisticated peoples who triggered the transition. In the Feudal to Capitalist transition it was, for the first time, a more internal process and more urban based. Movement and breakdown are dialectical complements of each other.

1 'Writing the city under crisis'

Chapter 1 recognizes the deepening urban crisis, rehearsed almost daily in press and media. It images the urban vista of the last ten millennia, the concentration of the best and worst in human potentiality. Major intellectual approaches and the dilemmas of anthropology in studying the city are discussed. The grand theme of the city is introduced and the theory of successive, dialectically related modes of production is spelled out as the chosen framework of presentation.

Prologue

To write about the city in the mid-nineties is to write under pressure of 'deepening crisis' (in our present day economies and societies) (Braudel, 1985, III:625). For anthropology, to which nothing human is alien, the city encapsulated human achievement and destiny. If the motive of history is to explain the present and the obligation of anthropology to empathize reflexively with the other, the last frontier of time and culture is daring to ask what we have learnt in the city to save our grandchildren from ultimate destruction.¹ The city concentrates the human experience and has taught some lessons although the future is not to be foretold. Braudel read clearly but broke off at the intractability of the social problem. We cannot hope that dominant groups will agree to hand over (Braudel, 1985, III:632). Marx dared to envisage a new human being, without whom his revolution could never succeed. If there is any new element in the situation it is the gravity of the crisis.

In his fascinating *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism* (1977) Braudel unwittingly summed up the anthropologists' view of the people in the city through the ages.

I began with daily life, with those aspects of life that control us without our even being aware of them: habit or, better yet, routine – those thousands of acts that flower and reach fruition without anyone's having made a decision, acts of which we are not even fully aware. I think mankind is more than waist deep in daily routine. Countless inherited acts, accumulated pell-mell and repeated time after time to this very day, become habits that help us live, imprison us, and make decisions for us throughout our lives. The acts are incentives, pulsion, patterns, ways

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of acting and reacting that sometimes – more frequently than we might suspect – go to the beginnings of mankind's history. Ancient, yet still alive, this multi-centuried past flows into the present like the Amazon River pouring into the Atlantic Ocean the vast flood of its cloudy waters. (1977:6–7)

The urban vista

Cities appeared some ten thousand years ago. The first cities had only a few thousand inhabitants, but were, none the less, the largest population concentrations of their time, just as are the metropolitan conurbations of today, with their fifteen to twenty million populations, overlapping into the continuous agglomeration of megalopolis and oecumenopolis. The first cities were all city-states, but very few cities are city-states today.² The dominant urban form is now the western industrial capitalist city, the first to dominate, in a sense, the whole world. But the longest and largest continuous urban cultural tradition is that of China. If there is anything in common between such disparate manifestations, it must be a relative factor. Despite the great diversity of cities in time and space, there is a demonstrable thread of continuity through their dialectical transformations from earliest beginnings till today, as they have played an ever greater part in human life (Toynbee, 1967:13).

All these cities, from the smallest to the largest, the earliest to the latest, have been the greatest points of concentration and of increasing density in their time and space:³ a concentration of women and men and their social relationships; of shelter, buildings and physical plant; of productive resources, goods and services, consumption and exchange activities; of wealth, power and energy; of information, communication and knowledge, intellectual training and even thought; of religion, ritual and ceremonial, of creative, aesthetic sensibility and innovative stimuli, all necessarily correlated with parallel processes of the division of labour, role differentiation and general specialization involving increasing inequality and growth in co-ordination and hierarchy, aimed at increasing efficiency and reduction of friction.

The first cities, and subsequently the greatest cities in any cultural or politico-economic region, have given expression to the best and the worst extremes of human potentiality. As concrete expressions of the concentration of women and men, and always of the largest number of the most creative and powerful women and men, they have displayed the glories of urban art and architecture in temples, tombs and palaces, the magnification of human energy in progressive mastery of the immediate environment,⁴ the splendid vistas of triumphal arches, colonnades and avenues, the grandeur of monumental squares, processions and celebra-

tions, the beauty, utility and convenience of theatres, circuses, baths, markets, fountains and sewers, aqueducts, canals and drains,⁵ but they have also been the scene of violence, crime, terrorism, torture, execution and massacre, the exploitation of urban workers and rural masses, the poor housed in squalid hovels or tenements, ridden with disease and early death, the spoliation of nature and the glorification of war, with resultant devastation.

In the past, the urban poor, like the rural poor, were taken for granted, as part of the divine plan. This is no longer so, but the poor are still very much with us, as Christ prophesied. Furthermore, widely influential urban theory has suggested that urbanization now threatens all whom it envelops, both rich and poor, with the danger of increasing impersonality and anomie. I reject this simplistic unilinear theory, along with the modernization theory which parallels it. Urbanization must refer to both the human as well as the material and technological aspects of the process, in their interaction. While the material and technological aspects of urbanization do threaten impersonality, the human components defend themselves vigorously against this, and could, in principle, even turn technological development away from this direction. However, in the Capitalist mode of production even the human use of technological development, especially in the electronic and communication explosion, threatens to increase exploitation and mask hegemony.

Intellectual approaches

There is no escape from the fact that our intellectual resources for analysing and understanding cities are predominantly recent and Euro-American, however much lip-service may be paid to Bottero, Vico and Bodin, to Ibn Khaldun and Ssu-ma-chi'ien. A major effort is required to transcend even unwitting ethnocentrism. The primary emphasis of history on detailed events entails unmanageable problems of bulk, the result of which is that western historians who attempt to focus outside the western world become locked in specialized regional blocs, as Orientalists, Sinologists, Islamicists, Africanists and so forth, subject to their own ethnocentric myopia. The Euro-American domination of world scholarship has to be accepted, for the moment, as an unfortunate but ineluctable counterpart of the parallel development of the material power and intellectual resources of the western world. But its dangers need to be recognized and constant attempts made to transcend them.

Anthropology is a suitable vehicle for such an effort, because it has always given a higher priority to the transcendence of ethnocentrism than any other discipline. Anthropological interest in cities is recent, but

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profound, though still not widely recognized or adequately theorized. The conventional restriction of anthropological interest to small-scale, isolated non-western and usually pre-state societies was both intellectually and practically untenable. In principle, anthropology has always claimed an interest in all things human, frequently invoking the Roman poet Terence in support.⁶

To fulfil this mission, anthropology has to bridge the gap which at present constitutes an irrational hiatus at its heart, between the knowledge of the beginnings of cities provided by anthropological archaeology, and the knowledge of what may be the end of cities as hitherto known, provided by contemporary urban anthropology. This hiatus of some three thousand years has been the province of historians, and anthropologists can only hope to bridge the gap by beginning to tackle the tremendous task of respectfully using historians⁷ as anthropological informants and putting historical data to their own use.

We must not exaggerate the influence of cities in history, but seek to understand the varying part they have played as human concentrations in different periods, regions, cultures and political economies. Cities cannot be reified like actors on a stage, nor can comparisons be made by lifting cities out of context, or by lifting aspects of urban life out of context of the city as a whole. The history of cities is an integral part of the history of human affairs as a whole (Toynbee, 1967:14). The recent form of city, which has expanded so enormously, is reaching the end of the process of concentration as hitherto known, since the current information and communication revolution opens the possibility that the actual physical concentration of human bodies and of face-to-face relationships in dense urban agglomerations of ever vaster size may be becoming superfluous. For 99% of their history, cities have been walking cities for most people. Then for a brief century, more and more rapid means of bringing our bodies and their social interactions into proximity with one another were invented. Now even that may become increasingly superfluous as the remote transmission of sight and sound is substituted for that of bodies. But this has become the latest mechanism through which capitalist exploitation is maintained and increased.

The electronic explosion has carried the accelerating evolution of communications to a new dimension, from the rapid transport of physical bodies, which made feasible cities eighty miles across instead of the previous eight, to the transmission of voices and images almost instantaneously round the world. Rationally speaking, therefore, it is no longer people's bodies that have to be moved into central points of concentration, but only their voices and the images of their faces and actions, which suffice to concentrate their relationships on a new dimension at a higher

density than before. This rational possibility may, however, be rejected, if political leaders, business executives and culture brokers insist on having hands to shake and secretaries to touch. Corporations are already banishing their production, distribution and bookkeeping activities to long, low, windowless buildings far from city centres, where land is cheap, yet continue to build ever denser clusters of the high rise, skyscraper headquarters of management and symbolic domination in downtown areas.

'Any society which has in it what we call "towns" or "cities" is in *all* aspects an urban society . . . "rural" refers only to a set of specialities of an urban society characterized by being linked (under any technology known) to specific geographical spaces' (Leeds, 1980). Recognizing the essential truth of this, one might have reservations about so absolute a claim, for earlier times, but it is becoming entirely true today. Not only is concentration no longer technologically necessary, nor is it sociologically necessary, in the technical sense. In late capitalist economies the influence of the city penetrates the remotest places to such an extent that they become in a sense urban and thus the antagonism of town and country seems to be transcended in the final absorption of the latter by the former. The deepest 'rural' countryside is now, in its primary function, an urban playground for the urban consumption of leisure, while the productive activities of agriculture, formerly considered by definition rural, have been mechanized, industrialized, monetized and commoditized and thus also urbanized.

No wonder that the 'urban question' has arisen, with the study of urban phenomena approximating the study of complex societies as a whole and the city losing its distinctness as an object of theoretical study and basis of disciplinary focus. Urban sociologists have also been much exercised by doubt as to whether any coherent body of problems and theories really exists which can properly be called urban sociology, just as urban anthropologists have constantly worried because their studies seemed to be *in* the city by purely common sense, conventional definitions of what the city is, rather than *of* the city in any viable conceptual and theoretical sense. Saunders concludes that 'a distinctive urban sociology cannot be developed in the context of advanced capitalist society . . . The city in contemporary capitalism does not itself constitute a theoretically significant area of study' (1986:15). Weber, Durkheim and Marx and Engels 'all came to the conclusion that the city in contemporary capitalism was not a theoretically specific object of analysis'. Saunders supposes that it was for this reason that urban sociology pays so little attention to what these founders actually said about cities, and pays attention rather to other parts of their work.

Although Castells played a major part in the downfall of theoretical

urban sociology, he has subsequently attempted a bizarre resuscitation. Jettisoning his previous Marxist stance he has swung to the opposite extreme of substituting meaning for material causation in the context of total cultural relativism. 'A city', he says, 'is what a historical society decides a city will be. "Urban" is the social meaning assigned to a particular spatial form by a historically defined society' (1983:302). This is a redundant truism, necessarily known in all societies. It involves the abandonment of all comparison, although Castells himself seems still to indulge in it. It reverses the old adage 'actions speak louder than words'. Material relations are transmogrified into meaning, class struggle into experience. Medieval merchants did not struggle for urban freedoms, they simply *declared* the city a free space and *defined* the city as a market (1983:303). Yet he is not prepared to abandon the materialistic conflict, for he denounces social movements aimed at transforming meaning without being able to transform society. His pessimism is justified, but after promising a new theory of society, he arrives at a conclusion which can only be described as magical (Southall, Nas and Ansari, 1985:12–16). Though not a theoretically significant area of study, or specific object of analysis in the capitalist era, the city was none the less central to Marx's theory, for 'the foundation of every division of labour that is well developed, and brought about by the exchange of commodities, is the separation of town and country. It may be said that the whole economic history of society is summed up in the movement of this antithesis' (1967:352). In fact, Marx specified a different relation of the city to the society in each mode of production. It is this changing relation of city and society that I take as justification for the study of the city, and of urban anthropology.

Urban anthropologists have not realized that these dilemmas indeed express the theoretical conclusion that there are by common consent tumultuous happenings *in* the city, but no longer distinctive processes *of* the city, because urban life and events are conditioned and determined by processes and forces generated in the political economy and culture far transcending any urban or even national limits. The attempt to define the urban leads to contorted tautologies (Plotnicov, 1985:50–1). The unity lies in the wholeness of the total human experience of it, bounded at the beginning by the temporal immensities of the pre-urban era and at the end by the still impenetrable mysteries of the post-urban age. Cities have never been seriously and comprehensively looked at as a whole, so the nature of their unity has never been fully explored or perceived.

I base my approach to the city on the idea of concentration, but extend it beyond mere population to include its more profound social, cultural

and politico-economic implications, since these are even more highly concentrated. I previously defined these on the basis of role relationships (1973:106), which are far more highly concentrated in cities than population as such, but the notion applies differentially to different general domains of role relationships, such as kinship, religious, political, economic (production) and recreation (consumption) – concentration applying in its most extreme form to the latter two. Concentration of social relationships in general defines the most fundamental characteristic common to cities in all time and space. The purpose of studying cities in this sense is to understand how the relationship of those concentrations to the rest of society has varied over time and space, and how these variations reflect the changing organization of urban concentrations and the organization of production and society as a whole.

Dilemmas of anthropology in studying the city

This runs counter to a very influential emphasis in current anthropology: the privileging of the short term over the long term. This is curious at a time when there is more serious anthropological interest in history than ever before, but it has been intrinsic to social anthropology for most of the century, since the fieldwork revolution began. The previous armchair anthropology was deeply concerned with longer issues, but in such a flawed manner as to make us still afraid of contamination, although those long-term issues will not leave us. The synchronic fieldwork thrust of anthropology is its most distinguished contribution and the fundamental perspective for all other problems, and it might surprise any anthropologist to be accused of short-sightedness when the dominant reflexive paradigm demands sensitive awareness of the situation of others in its racial, ethnic, gender, economic and political world context, whose historical dimension is manifestly ineluctable. 'Our past is present in us as a project' (Fabian, 1983:93). But the intense and in itself worthwhile concentration on problems of the person marginalized long-term issues, although the very debate on degrees of individualism and self-consciousness in the still western anthropologist and her and his various worldwide others cannot avoid the world context of basic inequality and injustice, colonialism and exploitation, with their very long histories. Because their attention and interest are not focused in this direction, very sophisticated anthropologists often perpetuate astonishingly naive statements. Thus it is suggested that social theory since the nineteenth century treated self-consciousness as an aberration (Cohen, 1992:221–41).

The problem of diachrony

Exploring and imparting meaning to any human phenomenon with a long history involves the differentiation of significant moments or ages in its diachronic unfolding. No descriptive account can include more than a minute percentage of the multitudinous stream of acts, events, occurrences through which a phenomenon has been manifested. Unless the basis of such severe selectivity is clarified, the validity of the account cannot be assessed. A descriptive account soon becomes unmanageably bulky and self-defeating, therefore inevitably incomplete and partial. A more systematic selective account is more meaningful and no more dangerous if the basis of selection is made clear. Any division into periods is artificial in magnifying discontinuities into clear-cut breaks, suggesting a nomothetic absoluteness where a polythetic relativity is a more plausible approach to reality (Needham, 1975). With this proviso accepted, comes the question of identifying the relative discontinuities deemed most significant.

All cultures possessed of means of recording (as well as others), have indulged in uncomplimentary characterization of those around them, involving notions of temporal as well as spatial differentiation. Thus when the Chinese some millennia ago arranged the human world in concentric squares (imperial domain; domain of nobility; domain of barbarian Sinification; domain of barbarian allies; and wild domain) they conflated space, time and politico-economic status. In the third domain the barbarians were in *process* of Sinification. The barbarian allies were clearly expected to graduate into this state, with wild barbarians following behind. When Tylor says few would dispute that the sequence Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian is the right order of culture, he does not even specify what period is in question. The vague categories of Savagery, Barbarism and Civilization and the Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages held sway from the eighteenth through the nineteenth century till elaborated to the point of absurdity by Morgan and thus retained by Engels, then ultimately refined by White, Sahlins and Service, the latter becoming the last standard bearer of the 'Band-Tribe-Chiefdom-State' formulation till he too succumbed to unanswerable criticism, by Morton Fried and others, taking refuge in the simple dichotomy between Egalitarian and Hierarchical, ironically echoing the original Primitive-Civilized pair.

The theory of modes of production worked out by Marx and Engels from the 1840s onward brings us on to a different level of thought, knowledge and analytical precision. Perhaps no theory has ever been subjected to such intense critical debate for so long, yet, as Thompson remarks, Marx is always in the process of being judged wanting, but always return-