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Urban Scenes and Unseens

I

Celebrated already in Plato and Aristotle, the city seems a symbolic solution to one of philosophy's most central problems – the many and the one. This problem is at once metaphysical and epistemological, as well as ethical, political and aesthetic: the unity of substance in change, of truth in the manifold of appearance, of the self in plurality of action, of the unified polis with its many citizens and households, of beauty as unity in variety. The city symbolizes the embracing of multiplicity and diversity within a single unit, often concretely represented by their collection within city walls. Rather than dividing the city (as in Berlin), such encompassing walls aimed at asserting the city's integrity as a clear unit with definite limits, distinct from the indefinite sprawl of the surrounding countryside. The Greeks saw definite limits as essential to the values of clarity, rationality, and beautiful form. But when modern urbanization overwhelmed the old city-walls, the charm and power of the cities was not thereby destroyed. For romantic thought intervened to privilege the infinite and unlimited. Though poets like Blake and Wordsworth attacked the city (in their poems on »London«) for its grimy grid of oppressive political limits, the small-minded greed of narrow »chartered« streets in contrast to Nature's vast bounty, the city could nonetheless be valorized as a site of unlimited growth, endless activity, boundless variety, and infinite possibilities. Logically, a town or village would lose its status by growing too large and thus becoming a city. But the city, at least in principle, knows no limits to growth and variety.

All the world, it seemed, could be experienced in the single city. Its dense wealthy population enabled the bringing of even the most remotely produced and costly products to the city shops and museums. Too vast and varied to be captured or viewed from a single main street or square, the city's promise of ever new discoveries through its seemingly endless web of streets, set the *flâneur* in constant motion. Huge parks and zoos provided the modern metropolis with varieties of even country and jungle life, while urban commuter trains showed that the city could also allow its residents to travel extensively without ever having to leave the city at all. Circumscribed infinity is a

powerful, though paradoxical image. So thoughtful theorists of city life, like Georg Simmel, insist that part of the city's distinctive liberating power is in transcending its physical boundaries, thus providing not only a means but a symbol of boundless freedom.

It is not only the immediate size of the area and the number of persons which ... has made the metropolis the locale of freedom. It is rather in transcending this visible expanse that any given city becomes the seat of cosmopolitanism. ... The sphere of life of the small town is, in the main, self-contained and autarchic ... The most significant characteristic of the metropolis is the functional extension beyond its physical boundaries.¹

Simmel's solution to the logical problem of city-infinity is thus by appeal to what is absent from the physical site with which the city is identified and has its center; it is only »in transcending this visible expanse that any given city becomes the seat of cosmopolitanism« (ibid.).

Urbanists like Simmel were, however, not concerned with the logic of infinity. They were preoccupied by the concrete problems resulting from city plenty, where overwhelming quantities of people, products, and activities could overstrain and endanger the very quality of human experience, of personal and social life. This painful paradox of more meaning less is a leitmotif in urban criticism from Friedrich Engels, through Baudelaire, Valéry, Simmel, Benjamin, and Mumford, and still extending into the postmodern hip-hop of Grandmaster Flash, whose 1983 classic »New York, New York« bears the blunt refrain: »Too much, too many people, too much!«

Such critics did not deplore the multitudinous variety of city life per se; they relished it. What they instead attacked was the threat of disorientating, dehumanizing, shocking chaos (symbolized by the formless crowd) which resulted from the enormous urban bustle of quantities, complexities, and diversities overwhelming our human powers of assimilation. In Benjamin's terms we thus have the fragmented shock of *Erlebnis*, something lived through, rather than the funded, ordered, convergent assimilation of experience. The urbanist's aim is not to decrease the rich bustling variety of city life, but to order it so that it would no longer be threateningly overwhelming and unmanageable. The problem, then, is one of *Ordnung*, as other German urbanists would concur.

Friedrich Engels, for example, marvelled at London's vastness and achievements but found »the bustle of the streets« »distasteful« and »abhor-

¹ George Simmel, »The Metropolis and Mental Life«, *The Sociology of George Simmel*, Free Press, New York 1950, p. 419.

rent to human nature« through its lack of structuring social relations. The only redeeming relation, he (perhaps ironically) notes, is a tacit one of ordered non-contact: »that everyone should keep to the right of the pavement, so as not to impede the stream of people moving in the opposite direction.«²

Developing the ancient trope that contrasted the city as developed *mind* to the less conscious, more corporeal country *body*, Simmel regarded the complex multiplicities and sensory intensities of city life as the stimulus that necessitated »a heightened awareness and predominance of intelligence in metropolitan man«. To protect his psyche, he »reacts with his head instead of his heart«, with intellectual order rather than spontaneous feeling. Though this weakens affective social bonds, it is a »necessity ... brought about by the aggregation of so many people with such differentiated interests, who must integrate their relations and activities into a highly complex organism«. Otherwise, Simmel warns, »the whole structure would break down into an inextricable chaos«.

What would such a nightmare be, for Simmel the urban *Ordner*? »If all clocks and watches in Berlin would suddenly go wrong in different ways, even if only by an hour, all economic life and communication of the city would be disrupted for a long time ... [and] long distances would make waiting and broken-appointments result in an ill-afforded waste of time.« »Metropolitan life« he concludes (with apparent disregard of Naples, Marseille, or Marrakech) »is unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule« (412-13).

This means suppressing the individual's personal inclinations which threaten the clockwork unity of the whole: Hence »the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without« (412-13). Yet despite this impersonal order, the city for Simmel remains the site of the greatest »personal freedom« and »personal subjectivity«; indeed it becomes so through the very factors that necessitate its impersonality (413, 415). The deepest principle of order that permits this paradox, one which Simmel only faintly recognizes and fails to name, is the economy of absence, which also underlies the urban aesthetics of Benjamin and Baudelaire.

Before considering how the ordering economy of absence works in their theories, let me note its role in American urbanist Lewis Mumford, whose

² Friedrich Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, cited in Walter Benjamin, »On Some Motifs in Baudelaire« in *Illuminations*, Schocken, New York 1988, p. 167.

vision of the city can be usefully contrasted with Simmel's.³ Mumford's »principles of urban order« insist on picturing the city in more humanly biological, affectively social, and aesthetic terms. Rather than Simmel's view of the city as »a social-technical mechanism« with its model of mechanical clockwork unity and its images of »punctuality, calculability, and exactness« suggesting that social connections are best modeled on rigid, time-efficient train connections (409, 413), Mumford speaks of an anti-mechanical »bio-technic« approach emphasizing the dynamic »flexibility« of »organic plans« that can better cope with change so as »to create a new biological and social environment in which the highest possibilities of human existence will be realized« (381, 478, 492). This is symbolized by the dynamic unity of aesthetic experience.

The city, he argues, is »an esthetic symbol of collective unity«; it not only fosters art by creating a complex, demanding stage for personal expression (as Simmel also notes) but the city also »is art« (480, 492). As art is communicatively social, »social needs are primary in urban planning; rather than the physical plant or transport system, »the social nucleus [is] the essential element in every valid city plan: the spotting and inter-relationships of schools, libraries, theatres, community centres« (483). If the traditional undifferentiated social bonds of the small town are lost, one should seek a more multi-form cable through the weaving of partially linking bonds to produce »a more complex and many-colored strand«. Urban planning's aesthetic »aim is the adequate dramatization of communal life« so that individual and group activity become more meaningful (481, 485).

Whatever the practical viability of Mumford's program, certain interesting conclusions are suggested by the logic of his biological and aesthetic metaphors. First, life and aesthetic experience imply the need for change and conflict as well as harmony. Without space for change and conflict, there can be no human growth nor aesthetic drama. The flawless regularity of clockwork mechanism does not provide this; its smooth-running harmony would stultify. The planning of urban aesthetic unity thus requires its spots of absence: its disharmonious conflicts its disruptions, what today Richard Sennett calls its »discontinuity and disorientation«.⁴ As pragmatist and postmodern, I would add that the city, like art and life, also needs spots of contingency, absences of the planned and predetermined, gaps for us to interpret and fill with significance.

Another conclusion to be drawn from analogy with biological organ-

³ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1971.

⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*, Knopf, New York 1990, p. 225.

isms and artworks is the limitation of city size. Deploring the bloated, suburb-swallowing megalopolis, Mumford insists that good city life requires respecting and nurturing what lies outside it. This absence is essential to the city not simply as structuring other and breathing space, but as source of new resources, different attitudes and ways of life that can both challenge city ideas and enrich them through incorporation. Mumford's key unit of planning is not simply the city but the region, in which the city functions as a nucleus which respects its limits, neither overwhelming the space nor functions of its enviroining cell. Even within the city, Mumford advocates functional gaps or absences to balance density. Hence rather than an urbanism of dense, centralized spreading, he favors a poly-nucleated city of distributed functions that involves spacing and gaps. In urbanism as in regionalism, Mumford calls this logic »spotting«; and it suggests the functional play of presence and absence that gives life greater meaning and aesthetic power, while also making it more manageable.⁵

⁵ Another crucial use of absence as a tool of order for coping with urban complexities should here be mentioned: the use of empty forms or matrices as a way of organizing, rationalizing, and so better managing the city's variety and complex flux. The rectangular street-grid is one such empty form for ordering; so is the individual street format, so salient in Berlin, of parallel strips respectively devoted to the pedestrian, the cyclist, the dog in need of a line of trees to do his business, and the motorist lanes for parking and travel. This format of empty, parallel ordering strips defining the types of movement and their limits can also be seen in the layout of concentration camps like Sachsenhausen with the distinctions between prisoner walking space (including a lane marked for the work of testing shoe durability through ceaseless walking), the »no man's land« danger strip, and the wall and patrol areas.

Richard Sennett, who notes the city grid's »logic of emptiness«, relates it to the temporal emptiness of mechanical time »an empty volume« through which time could be made objective and visual thus allowing diverse activities to be more easily ordered. Like Simmel he sees the invention of the mechanical clock in the Renaissance as central to the emergence of the modern metropolis, and he remarks that often old buildings were torn down so as to allow distant vision of the city's central clocks (Sennett, 176-180). Here, as it were, an abstract form of absence creates a concrete one.

This seems a good occasion to insist that in describing the varieties of absence and its uses in urban life, I am not insisting that there is any substantive essence common to them all or that there must be a fixed meaning to the concept of absence for it to be usefully used in theoretical discourse like mine.

II

Absence as a tool for urban coping centrally structures Simmel's case for the unmatched personal freedom of city life, though his argument lacks clarity and stumbles in many details. One major axis of argument is that urban freedom comes through greater intellectualism. Modern urban life is praised for sharpening mental faculties and higher consciousness, because this is required for coping with the greater »intensification of nervous stimulation« resulting from the city's distinctive richness of sensory stimuli, jolts, and irregularities. But don't we also find this jostling overload of stimuli in a bedouin camel market, a suburban amusement park, or a savage jungle – the paradigmatic trope of the fearful complexity and sudden, violent jolts of city life? Moreover, if dealing with complexities of vivid sensory stimuli helps improve our mental powers, why then should Simmel posit perfectly smooth-functioning order posited as the ideal of city organization? Wouldn't its realization dull the minds of city dwellers? Whose consciousness is lower than the urban subway rider, who in daily hypnotic habit takes the same train and makes the same connection, whose disciplined habit of muscle memory leads him mindlessly *to* work just as an assembly line could lead him mindlessly through it?

Leaving these troubling questions aside, we note that Simmel describes the higher urban consciousness in two related ways. First, by curbing »irrational, instinctive ... impulses« and »emotional relations«, it constitutes a more intellectual attitude of »calculability«, »exactness«, and »quantitative« values that Simmel relates not only to the system of money but to »the universal diffusion of pocket watches« (411-13). Secondly, urban mentality is characterized as »the blasé attitude«. This attitude, which Simmel says is »unconditionally reserved to the metropolis«, results from the same »rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves« that promote cold urban intellectualism. The nerves are so spent that they fail »to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy«; »the essence of the blasé attitude consists in the bluntness of discrimination ... the meaning and differing values of things and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and gray tone; no one object deserves preference over any other« (414).

Here again Simmel seems confused. First, physiologically speaking, contrasting stimulations tire and blunt the nerves far less than sustained identical sensations. More importantly, the blasé type attitude of levelling indifference can be found outside the bustling sensorium of the metropolis. In fact, one classic site for its emergence is the empty desert. As an intelligence officer

long stationed in the Sinai, I had to alert myself and my soldiers to this danger, diagnosed by the Israeli medical corps as »apathia«. The term is instructive: absence of feeling, absence of affective investment, leads to lack of discrimination; we do not see or react to differences because we simply don't care; we mentally withdraw ourselves in pathological disinterest; we are absent.

For us reluctant desert dwellers, absence of affective investment derived from the absence of things to care about in the landscape. But in the metropolis, the absence of feeling in the blasé attitude becomes a necessary withdrawal of feeling, since there are too many people, products, and activities to which our heart would instinctively turn. (Just think of the dozens of beggars or buskers that one must learn to coldly pass by in everyday city life.) This protective taking of distance, of affective absence, is the deep logic common to Simmel's urban intellectualism and *Blasiertheit*.

Such absence also constitutes the mechanism of Simmel's other main argument for the greater personal freedom of city life: the dissolution of traditionally strong social bonds which, though constructing and empowering the individual, also greatly constrain him. The wider circle of urban life involves too many different people in too many different, quickly changing relationships for the forming of strong affective bonds with fellow residents to be psychologically healthy or even possible. Hence, an attitude Simmel calls »reserve« and »indifference« arises, which frees the urbanite from social obligations of courteous concern (and socially entrenched prejudices) that centripetally »hem in« the narrower circle of »small-town« life. This reserved attitude, argues Simmel, is »never felt more strongly« than in the individual's »independence [and loneliness] ... in the thickest crowd of the big city ... because the bodily proximity and narrowness of space make the mental distance only the more visible«, and psychically necessary (418). This withdrawal of the self through mental distance underlies the crucial point of urban absence I have been stressing: its redemptive role in coping with the bursting saturation of city presence, a cure not immune from possible unhappy side-effects – as the threat of urban loneliness and callousness makes clear.

Absence is also the motivating fulcrum of Simmel's final argument for the personal freedom of urban life. Having robbed the individual of traditionally subjective spontaneity, affective impulse, and personally meaningful social bonds, the overwhelming organization of city life threatens the utter extinction of personality, reducing the individual (in Simmel's words) to a »quantité négligeable«, a »mere cog« in the enormous municipal machine. Spurred by this personal void and fear of total nullity, the individual responds by »summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization, in order to

preserve his most personal core« (422). The modern metropolis thus provokes a new model of personal freedom: not mere individual independence from oppressive social bonds, but »the elaboration of individuality« as »qualitative uniqueness« so as to survive the conformist pressure of city crowds where individuality and qualitative difference are drowned (423).

We see here the Baudelairian figures of the *dandy* and *flâneur* who try to defy the utilitarian uniformity of urban life. For Walter Benjamin and his political vision of the »streets ... as the dwelling place of the collective«, the *flâneur* is especially important in defining himself not only against but *through* the conformist crowd and the city streets they share. Benjamin is more careful than Baudelaire to distinguish the *flâneur* from »the man of the crowd«. Resisting the »manic behavior« of »metropolitan masses« hectically bent on their practical pursuits, the *flâneur* distances himself from the crowd by his absence of practical purpose and urgency. He demands his »leisure« and »elbow room«, so as not to be »jostled« and overwhelmed by the crowd. But in contrast to provincials and fastidious aristocrats, the *flâneur* could also enjoy »the temptation to lose himself« in the crowd, to savor a momentary absence of selfhood's pressures.⁶ Linked to the crowd yet somehow absent from it, the *flâneur* is like the streets of Baudelaire's verse whose beauty derives from suggesting the crowd yet providing a deserted expanse for free movement and exploration. The same strategy of aesthetic absence can be seen in those photos of Prague's enchanting empty streets, whose magic dissolves once the streets are actually brimming with the city's swarming crowds.

Neither at home in the bustling crowd nor »in an atmosphere of complete leisure«, the *flâneur* of Benjamin is characterized by being essentially »out of place« (172-3). This absence of proper place or purpose keeps him moving through the city streets, resisting the seductive presences that could arrest him, driving him on toward the ever more distant places and possibilities that the metropolis promises endlessly to offer. Consider the defining absences in the following description of Benjaminian *flânerie* from the *Passagen-Werk*:

An intoxication comes over the person who trudges through the streets for a long time and without a goal. The going wins a growing power with every step, Ever narrower grow the seduction of the stores, the bistros, the smiling women; ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street corner, a distant mass of foliage, a street name. Then comes the hunger. He desires to know nothing of the hundred possibilities to still it. Like an ascetic animal, he strides

⁶ Walter Benjamin, »On Some Motifs in Baudelaire«, pp. 162, 172-3.

through unknown quarters until finally in his room, which strange to him, lets him in coldly, he collapses into the deepest exhaustion.⁷

Absence of goal, a preference for the unseen »next street corner« and »distant mass of foliage« over those present to hand, direct the *flâneur's* movement; the mere »name« of a street, signaling new spaces to explore, thus draws him more than the actual charms of stores, bistros, and women on the present street. The *flâneur's* defining hunger marks the presence of an absence that he does not wish to fill, for it provides its own intoxication; so does his lack of reassuring knowledge of the »unknown quarter« of his *flânerie* as well as his ever waning energy. Even his own room is defined by the absence of familiarity and warmth that characterize one's home.

If Benjamin's *flâneur* seems a modern symbol for the mythical utopian quester, searching the nocturnal urban wasteland for a vision of an ideal city forever unseen but ever inspiring, we must ask if this figure is by now as altogether dated and *aufgehoben* as Benjamin's Paris. Does the unseen still hold the aura of utopian promise or merely offer a relief from the painful ugliness of the city seen.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1983, vol. 1, p. 525.