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A philosophical idea of the city

What is a city? Posing this question is no mere caprice or intellectual pastime. It may be that the city is not what we thought it was, or even that it has ceased to exist. Not that this would be a catastrophe because it is in the nature of things to be born, to grow and to die. It is difficult for human beings to change their words and there are times when events change faster than words: yet we keep using the same words to describe things that are no longer what they were.

If it interests me to wonder what a city is, it is because I think that the question is closely related with the other question that is implicit in the title of this essay: what is philosophy? There is a fundamental bond between philosophy and the city. It is not just because philosophy was born and developed in the city (or quarter, if you prefer), in ancient Greece but because, without the framework of the city, there would have been no philosophy. Thought, outside the city, did not have either the autonomy or plurality necessary for the constitution of philosophy.

Philosophy is an urban phenomenon and the city is a phenomenon of philosophical relevance. Here, I am painting myself into a corner because, once one comes to the conclusion that the city has disappeared, the next conclusion is that philosophy has also disappeared. This may not be the end of the world but it would mean that some people, myself included, would have a little less fun, and this is sufficient reason to give the matter some thought before we sign the death certificate.

There is no philosophy outside the city. Philosophy is incompatible with the family and with paternal authority, with the tribe and with the powers of the elders, of the priest and of the wizard, and with all the types of discourse that come from outside of, or that precede logos. And there is no city where the dissociative laws of logos do not exist, where the effective truth of things is not recognised. Unity is not the object of the city because the city is pluralism, as Aristotle said. And it is precisely this recognition that constitutes the crack through which the capacity for dissociation is articulated or, in other words, where rational thought is introduced into the organic homogeneity and, with this, the possibility of philosophical thought.

What do I mean when I say that there is no city when the dissociated laws of logos are not present to make philosophy possible? I shall give an example. For me, the Vatican City is not a city. Rome is a city, the Rome of today and that of the sixteenth century too, because the functions of prince and Pope had split, even while they were embodied in a single person. In the Vatican, no such splitting is possible. There is no effective exercise of the dissociative laws of logos. There is no place for the principle of non-belief.

The identity of the city is a non-identity. This is because its only identity is diversity. The idea of the city would then be opposed to concepts of another nature on the validity and the significance of religion, or those that view the nation as a spiritual entity. Anything that is not amenable to philosophical thought because it is strictly assertible or describable would not come under the concept of the city. Religion can be asserted or described in its epiphenomena but it is not to be thought about. It is not susceptible to being submitted to the rigours of philosophical thought unless its most essential parameters are altered.

Once the community of origin between philosophy and city is established, what is it that presently – philosophy being the ontology of the present – makes the question “What is a city?” even more profound? The city is undergoing transformations and mutations that make it difficult to discern what is going on within the intellectual schema we have hitherto tended to adopt in our interpretations. And the fact is that humanity is so naturally conservative that it is difficult for us whenever we have to change our interpretive codes since – as Xavier Rubert notes – we usually look for today’s keys of interpretation in previous generations so that, when events move faster than ideas, we often have the sensation of losing our footing.

The first obstacle we face when considering today's city is a difference in scale. This change of dimension makes the city illegible and unrepresentable in terms of our mentality. There is a city, that of the *flaneur*, or of the passer-by, that we can take in when strolling around, and this determines our idea of the city. But there is a trap in this idea. Let us say we have been in Paris. The fact is, we have only been in the Paris where our legs have taken us, a part of Paris that symbolically represents Paris. Rarely can we approach the city's doors. Paris, the conventional Paris, is a very limited space. The city of the *flaneur* is the one we are able to describe, the one that has representative efficacy. When one wants to represent a city, one always turns to its historic and monumental centre. Historicism continues to be the organising principle of our culture. Yet, we are beginning to realise that this city is not enough. There is another image of the city: the aerial view. This is the first awareness that the city is beyond us. However, this view is limited too because, while the whole can be seen from the air, the detail is missing. Such ambiguity continues to fuel our fear of getting to the bottom of things.

In the exhibition "Cities from Balloons to Satellite" it was possible to see the mid-nineteenth-century city, just before the walls came down and the great expansion began, a city that still maintained its mythical character with regard to what was representative because its image, in great part, corresponded to the historic centres that symbolise each city today, and this was contrasted with the great urban sprawls – from Philadelphia to Boston, for example – captured by satellites in a world undergoing an intensive process of urbanisation. This obliges one – as we see with Françoise Choay – to question the relations between *urbs* and *civitas* and to wonder whether they have been definitively split asunder.

And if the change of scale is disconcerting, we are even more disconcerted if, following the lead of Javier Echevarría, we assume a city removed from the idea of territory – virtualised, in this sense – where the links or bonds between different groups are no longer streets or squares but information highways.

Is this a city? If we raise this question it is because we have an idea of the city that we realise is under threat, an idea that we want to endure through processes of change that, as we know full well, are unstoppable. One cannot put doors on the countryside. Only rigid thinkers, conservatives of all hues (right, left, and from top to bottom) might make the attempt. What is there in common between the idea of our city and the one that has resulted from the recent mutations?

Here, we might return to some of Françoise Choay's reflections. Over time, the city has been in the process of becoming bi-fronted. It is bi-fronted in the sense that there is a city that benefits some, an effigy of the ideology of progress, a ferment of social life, a place that is open to one's finding anonymity among the crowds, and thus a space of freedom and this, in fact, is the city of the architects. Then there is the city that is bad for others, the synonym of chaos, indigence and ugliness. Among all the arts, cinema is the one that has given this city most coverage. Here, the aforementioned rupture between *urbs* and *civitas* has occurred, the split between territorial occupation and the cultural, social and moral fact that we call public-spiritedness. In recent decades, a general process of urbanization has been occurring throughout the world: urbanized space is ever-greater, and ever-greater too is the number of people who live in urban territory but, inevitably, these spaces are not acquiring recognition as an entity that we would call a city. Again, we have the disappearance of the other element that once defined the urban world: the rural world. In some countries like Catalonia, the rural world is, strictly speaking, an extension of the city and a real rural culture no longer exists.

Can the city continue to be defined without the existence of a rural world? Hegel said that the city is the heartland of the industrial bourgeoisie, of reflection doubled back on itself, individualizing itself. It is a factor of individualization. The country, meanwhile, was the locus of ethical life, based on conformity with the natural order and the family order. One way of expressing the reiterated idea of the city as a locus of individuality, of singularity and of freedom is in contrast with the country as a space of what is organic, of what people have in common, of the collective, where

freedom is subject to the rigid laws of nature, where the hand of man still lacks the strength to free himself from such exigencies.

If the rural world, one of the two poles of the relationship, has disappeared Choay wonders if it still makes sense to insist on the existence of the other pole, the city. Some, Mel Weber, for example, speak of the "post-city age". When one can only resort to using the prefix "post-", it is clear that one is unable to identify what one wishes to describe with a new name. Weber speaks of a non-located urban space. It is curious to recall the etymology of utopia: "no-place", from the Greek, *ou* (not) + *tópos* (place). Are we thinking of the city in utopian terms when it is more of a dystopia than ever?

Urban phenomena are occurring outside city limits, going beyond our concept of the city. What concept of the city? Let us go back and look at the categories and features that I have used so far to classify the city: the city as a factor of singularization, as a space of freedom, as the locus of the pluralist dissociation of logos, and as an expression of the fracture that occurs in culture with the irruption of rational thought.

To go a little further, the best way to approximate the idea of the city is to start with a negative question: why is the city being destroyed? Why do the powers-that-be of this world (or beyond this world, if we recall the rage of Yahweh being visited upon Sodom and Gomorrah) feel the need to destroy the city? To resort to an example that, while beginning to be a little cliché, does have identificatory power, what was it in Sarajevo that they wanted to destroy? Machiavelli was very clear about what it was that needed to be destroyed in cities when he writes, "And he who becomes master of a city accustomed to freedom and does not destroy it, may expect to be destroyed by it, for in rebellion it always has the watch-word of liberty and its ancient privileges as a rallying point, which neither time nor benefits will ever cause it to forget. And whatever you may do or provide against, they never forget that name or their privileges unless they are disunited or dispersed, but at every chance they immediately rally to them ...". Machiavelli knew perfectly well why it was necessary to destroy cities: to destroy memory and freedom.

Have we come to the end of the form of the city and must we now discover – or give name to – something new that is now replacing it? And can we really believe that there is continuity between an idea of the city with which we feel identified, and the future city, that has gone beyond the critical mass that made the familiar concept of the city possible for us? To put the question another way, is there some factor that would permit one to say that places as different as Mexico City, Khartoum, Chicago and Barcelona, for example, are cities and that, in some recondite corner, they have something in common?

In such cases, when it becomes difficult to keep resorting to an outworn concept, there is a tendency to pronounce its death. There is a professional in this domain, Jean Baudrillard, who has spent years proclaiming the death of art, philosophy, politics, the masses, and the individual, of death itself, of everything under the sun. Such exercises end up being rhetorical games that do not tell us anything about real phenomena. What we have are three elements: a perfectly rational concept that, at some points in this epoch, has been nourished by the traditions of architecture and town planning; the city that is symbolically under the control of politicians; and the other city that has burst at the seams, and is now thrust before our eyes by reality. And somewhere between these three elements, two that are over-controlling and one that has escaped our control, there is a frontier space, and that is where practical philosophy must move.

Are we witnessing some irreversible breakdown in the *urbs-civitas* marriage, and can this idea of the city remain viable in the future city even beyond a precise territorial ascription? One does not have to be excessively Hegelian to see that the step from quantity to quality is very easily made. There are questions of distance, or size that have qualitative relevance. And the experience of the city is the experience that people make of contact, of movement, of the possibility of relating, of camouflage, of walking around, and of moving from one point to another. Our experience of a city has this direct dimension and there are thus phenomena of transformation in the contemporary city to which we might attribute anthropomorphic consequences. Is a city, whose limits or off-limits are

determined by telematic contact, or by distances that are difficult to appreciate by means of our sensorial references, a city or is it not a city? I believe that, in trying to understand contemporary society, it is very helpful to take note of what has replaced our utopias after the failure of what was once highly promising discourse. I refer to the great literary dystopias, with writers like James G. Ballard or Ray Bradbury in mind. *Crash* and *The Concrete Island* by Ballard are faithful black-and-white portraits of the reality proclaimed in the Technicolor in which we live. In *The Martian Chronicles*, one of Bradbury's characters, a Martian who is nearing Earth, picks up the first television signals and begins to exclaim that his journey is over, he is home and he has reached his city. It is a clearly extraterritorial recognition. For him, arriving in a city is not the moment of setting foot in its territory, but that of receiving the familiar sensorial message that he identifies with his hometown as he enters the space now reached by messages transmitted from the city. Bradbury's character can no longer do what my friend from Madrid does. This ultimate urbanite, returning from holidays after an intolerable month among cows and green spaces, is so delighted to find himself again on his home-patch of asphalt that he gets out of his car and kisses the ground. Bradbury's character can only blow a kiss into the air. These images bear two implicit ideas of the city.

If there is an idea of a city that might endure, it would probably come under the concept of articulation. Once the direct *urbs-civitas* overlapping is renounced, *civitas* may perhaps move on to become a network rather than something that is settled, solid and referential or, in other words, the city represented by its historic centre, a cathedral and a few modern skyscrapers. This city will tend to melt away and to become articulated as the network of links is created. The possibility of the idea of the city enduring beyond its critical mass may perhaps come about through a proliferation of centres and points of reference, by way of an articulation of already-existing urban spaces. The new city would be a city of cities, to take to an extreme the Aristotelian dictum that asserts that unity is not the aim of the city because the city is pluralism.

The new city, as a city of cities, is a way of bestowing existence on the proliferation of the centres and points of reference that remain outside those points that have historically borne all the symbolic weight. This multiplicity must be a multiplicity where the parts are in communication, in relation, because otherwise we might be heading for a consolidation of ghettos and fragmentation, or something even worse that has already started in the United States, closed cities, bunker spaces bringing together people chosen for their beliefs, race, attitudes or condition. And these are not cities because they violate the principle that unity and the city are incompatible. The Freemen of Oklahoma, who live locked away in their enclosure, cut off from the world, not meeting their obligations as citizens of the State, and living in their own autarchy, are not an isolated phenomenon. In the United States, we are beginning to see the proliferation of the idea of closed towns, places whose inhabitants repudiate their surroundings while, in South America, many of the rich already live like this, in bunker cities. These are not cities. The multiplication of centres should not be a mere juxtaposition of closed cities but a network of communication open to the exchange of ideas and things. Future forms of communication and mobility will have to favour such an evolution. The inherited territorial structure and the capacity for forming relations beyond whatever the physical limits might be, will have to find points where mutual fertilisation can occur.

The second important element is that the city should continue to take shape as a space of political articulation. In this, Europe could be seen as a pioneer: a Europe of cities as an alternative to a Europe of fatherlands. The human being is a subject that needs to belong to something, but this need has some peculiar characteristics that make the fact of belonging to a city somehow inadequate, a delegated kind of belonging. A city as not a country, as Choay rightly observes. A city generates much less patriotism than a nation does, because the city supposes the introduction of this dissociative element of logos, which means a certain distancing from basic atavistic elements. The heterogeneity of urban life and the notion of change governing it ensure that any fundamental hypothesis related to what goes beyond human creations, this element of continuity between nature and culture that marks ethnic, patriotic, sentimental, etc., relations, will be subject to the

scrutiny of relativity. If democracy in Greece was born in urban districts, a democratic Europe might come about in the articulation between the large districts-become-cities that are its settlements today. This would include whatever the second lay revolution might mean. After the separation of State and Religion, we might now be able to succeed in separating the State from ethnic groups, languages, cultures and ideologies.

I should like to outline, very synthetically, the nine philosophical categories around which the idea of the city is articulated. And, for each one of the nine, there is an opposite that reinforces its definition.

The first basic category is that of change. The city is never a final form but one undergoing constant change: change in contrast with immobility.

Second, is what I have mainly referred to, plurality, in contrast with the idea of identity.

Third, is necessity, in contrast with determination. Since man is socially unsociable (Kant's unsociable sociability), a being that is both social and autonomous, he makes of the city a necessity that is open, in contrast with the idea of complying with pre-established plans, whether they are determined by divine will, or by nature or imposed by history.

Fourth, is freedom, where the city is a space of freedom inasmuch as it offers the possibility of camouflage, of escaping from the domains where natural dominion holds sway in other spheres of coexistence, in particular in the original social form of the family.

Fifth, is complexity: simplicity is no friend to the city, which is complex by definition, and any attempt to homogenise a city means creating forms of apartheid and reserves that are incompatible with the idea of the city.

Sixth is representativeness, the city as the locus of symbolic representation. Its space can never be homogenous, anomic and lacking the expression of singular elements. Monumentality is urban. And where such powerful symbolic expression exists so does the city.

Seventh is meaning, the city as a creator of meaning. "God makes the country and man makes the city", goes the old saying. The city is a space for humanity as opposed to the space of the divinity. The city is a cultural space as opposed to the natural space.

The eighth category is transformation in contrast with immutability. It is folly for man to try too hard to mould the city because there is a certain autonomous logic in its evolution. And often there is the temptation to destroy it, to do away with it. The great contemporary utopian urban projects have the face of destruction lurking behind them. I was very impressed by Dessau, which should be the symbol of modern urban planning. The Bauhaus building is, however, surrounded by a sea of ugly and defective housing blocks, like a huge Bellvitge (in Barcelona), with flats that are even smaller and of worse quality. And this too is a creation of the modern movement: the exercise of reason produces monsters. There is a seed of destruction in the city that, beyond certain limits, becomes lethal. In the city, the – anonymous – ego meets up with the "us" and becomes public-spirited. The city is the street, the square, the public space where we are all different but where we also recognise the right to be different.

Finally, and summarising the other categories, we have the city as a sphere of what is singular, faced with the community. The city is the domain of the "I" while the community is that of the "we". And I am among those who are convinced that each time a shift is made from the "I" to the "we", each time an individual speaks out in the name of "we", freedom is fractured a little more.

In a beautiful story called "The City Coat of Arms", Kafka speaks of the Tower of Babel, saying that the essential aim of the enterprise was to construct a tower that would reach the sky. There was a single, final project, common to all. It failed. The tower collapsed. And from the caving in of the tower arose diversity, the city. The Tower of Babel was not a city, but its ruins are a city. This is the city that I should like to defend, although at times it seems to be flying in the face of the evidence of things, against the patent fracture between *urbis* and *civitas*.

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