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CHAPTER 8

A Humanist View of the Urban Condition

If you think about cities these days, what comes to mind may be crime, poverty, decay, abandoned housing, racial conflict, schools that don't educate, pollution, poor parking, and high costs. People say "urban problems" as if it were all one word with its two parts inevitably linked together. It is true that cities have always had problems, and urban problems exist all over the world. To cope with traffic congestion, ancient Rome had to keep carts out of the city until after dark. You could smell the stink of 1840s Paris before you were within eyesight of the city. The cities of Tsarist Russia were frequently on the edge of bankruptcy. For crime and prostitution, try mid-19th century New York! There is nothing new about urban poverty. Nor is ours the only country with urban ethnic problems. In Berlin, the tensions are between Germans and Turks who came there as imported labor. In Nairobi the underprivileged minority is Indian. Members of different tribes in African cities scarcely get along.

Urban problems are not perennial. They do get alleviated from time to time, but they are recurrent. Which tends to blind us to the fact that poverty and crime may be even greater in rural areas. And that cities have also often been and still are cradles of civilization.

London had poverty and crime, but it also had Samuel Johnson, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, and many another contributor to its great literary feast. What would be the glory of France without Paris? What would Roman Catholicism have been without the mystique of the City of Rome? Chinese Confucianism was an urban culture, however based it was on the landed gentry. It is difficult to imagine Tsarist Russia without the Russian Orthodox Church and its sacred center, Holy Moscow. In the United States, Thoreau went to Walden Pond, but he was also not unfamiliar with Boston. That lover of Nature, Walt Whitman, worked in New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Brooklyn. Jazz and boogie woogie were developed in cities; so was the opera. Many a new idea came from 1890s Chicago. Many an artist called New York City home.

Up until our lifetimes, most of the world has been agrarian or has lived in some way directly off nature. The links have been strong between city and country. For centuries, wealthy people often were exurbanites at least part of the year. Roman senators had country villas. Newly rich merchants in 18th-century England and America hastened to buy country estates. Most of us in American

cities today have ruralism somewhere in our background. All over the world the urban poor are either directly from rural areas or, as likely as not, just one generation removed from country life. Cities have been important, but urban culture and urban life have rested on a rural base.

Therefore, mankind has not yet come to grips with what it means to be truly, wholly and irrevocably urban. Which is what is happening to us. We try to avoid the issue by living in the suburbs, but remember that Greenwich Village and Harlem were once suburbs of New York City. Montmartre was once a suburb of Paris. Most of modern London was at one time suburban. Anyway, several of the suburbs of cities like Detroit, San Francisco, or Boston have grown to city size with problems similar to those of the center city. The next step of avoidance, for some people, is to move to the deep country, but they take along their televisions [and computers] and subscribe to urban magazines and newspapers and their jobs could not accurately be called non-urban. In advanced industrial countries today, urbanism cannot be avoided by anyone; its reach is everywhere.

Reasons for leaving the city are often economic and social, but there is a deeper ambivalence toward cities, an ambivalence whose roots are in the aspects of human psychology related to religion. Religion has had far more impact on urbanism than most people realize. In his book, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters,* Paul Wheatley argues persuasively that the earliest cities began as tribal shrine centers where surplus grain was also stored. Government, the military, and commerce developed from this base. Medieval European cities often began because Roman Catholic bishops located on abandoned Roman sites. The religious connotations of cities have never wholly disappeared, even in our secular age.

Shrine centers were located at what their founders believed was the axis of the universe—the one place (they thought) where netherworld, earth, and the gods connected. This has been the central idea of the capitals of China and also of Roman Catholic Rome and its would-be successors, Constantinople, Aix-la-Chapelle, Moscow, Vienna, Paris and even Hitler's Berlin. The iconogaphy of urban places derives from religious concern with the universe and man's fate: the square (signifying the world man dominates and helps to create); the circle (universe, eternity); the avenue (power, display, linked to infinity); the fountain (natal fluids, rebirth); and the obelisk, including the skyscrapers and spires (signifying will to power, procreation, aspiration). When a mayor turns the first clod of soil for a new public building, he is following an ancient tradition originating with the rituals of planting but used by the Romans for city-founding. Urban parades and festivals stem from a very old religious pre-Christian tradition. So do games and spectator sports.

Cities borrowed agricultural religious symbols, related to the cycles of the seasons and of planting and harvest. Thus, we "plant" our cities and factories

and hopefully reap their yield. But cities have also been symbols of man's hubris, his will to control the gods or defy them and become his own god in their stead. Many people are uneasy about this hubris, even as they perpetuate and extend it. After all, the cardinal sin of the devil was pride. This uneasiness is an inherent aspect of Christianity; but similar emotions toward cities could be seen in Chinese Maoism. So, in the family, at the hearth, if we have the means we symbolically renew our agrarian roots; no matter how small the patch of lawn, it signifies acceptance of as well as possession of the land, the soil to which we will return some day. Another refuge from our own hubris is to "take to the woods" periodically. In one era in the United States, the parks movement, in another era, environmentalism express our need to gesture at being one with nature. We do not abandon our hubris, but we attempt to disguise it, even to ourselves.

Cities are also places where we must confront the implications of our humanity, the fact that at one and the same time we need other people and harbor animal aggressions toward them. As carnivores, we are not far removed from the urge to kill even while, as domesticated animals, we recognize that our safety and security depend on human interdependence. Cities sometimes repel us when they accentuate that interdependence. They also repel us when they reveal too vividly our aggressive nature. The city is too much of a mirror of human nature. We need to retreat from it periodically to avoid seeing ourselves too clearly.

Cities are wellsprings of creativity and social change. They attract us with their promise of adventure. But we are all at base conservatives, which is to say we all need some measure of continuity and stability in our lives. It is a rare person who does not need occasional balm for his future shock. So again, periodically, we turn away from the action, especially when we can keep in touch with it via television.

Cities are also, for many people all over the world, symbols of hope or refuge. But all too often the actual urban experience is painful and demoralizing. Yet there may be no place left to go, and so the only answer is somehow to make the center city more humane. Which surely is a concern of humanists.

What have cities to do with the humanities? For the reasons I have just given, and for others as well, the answer is: everything. In light of the modern urban circumstance, all the old humanist questions must be re-asked and re-answered: what is the purpose of life? What is the nature of man? What conditions are necessary for the best kind of life on earth? What should be the ranking of our priorities? And so forth. It is time that we faced up to the challenge of urbanism in a deep and thorough way.