A DREAM OF URBANITY

As etymology constantly conspires to remind us, civilisation and the city are closely linked concepts: there can be no urbanity outside the *urbs*, no civility without *civitas*. *Politismos* (civilisation) itself is inconceivable before the appearance of the *polis*. For the ancients, living in cities was the essential prerequisite of civilised life; beyond the walls, life was nasty, probably brutish, and above all uncivil. The development of the classical Greek city-state represented the first serious attempt at an ideological vindication of the urban lifestyle whose theoretical ideal was to become fourth-century Athens; once the interests of a ruling class came to require the collaboration or at least tolerance of a highly concentrated population, to the urban advantages of discourse with one's fellows, commercial opportunity and the safety of numbers was added the very tangible one of relative freedom from oppression – even, now and again, the chance for certain social categories to participate in one form or another of democratic debate.

A polarity thereupon developed between city and countryside, a polarity immediately seized upon by moralisers, political theorists, poets, comedians and other intellectual riff-raff: the time-honoured knockabout double act of country bumpkin and city slicker, already fully fledged in the comedies of Aristophanes, keeps resurfacing irrepressibly through the ages, whether in Roman eclogues, Byzantine satires, medieval Latin drinking songs, Jacobean tragedy or Bollywood films. If at first the balance of opinion among intellectuals (who were, by definition, free citizens) favoured the city as a free, exciting and sophisticated arena, it didn't take long for an antithetical stance to develop, one which regarded cities as the source of all evil; not surprisingly, perhaps, it can be found in abundance in the essentially pre-urban Old Testament, particularly among the minor prophets from Nahum *("Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not")* to Zephaniah *("Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!")*.

The maledictions of Old Testament prophets were echoed, fashionably and more elegantly, by the Roman poets of the golden and silver ages. For Horace and his imitators, flight from the city was identified with a return to the purity and simplicity of ancestral virtues: *Beatus ille, qui procul negotiis…* ("Happy is he who far from vulgar commerce, tills his own fields with his own oxen, like the olden race of men…"). Interestingly, however, while a literary tradition of lauding the countryside at the expense of the city flourished for many centuries, it is significant that few if any of its eulogisers actually practised what they preached to the extent of fleeing their townhouse or garret for a cottage; when business, necessity or exile drove a Roman or Elizabethan poet from town, his complaints were heartrending indeed. After all, it had early become apparent that with very few exceptions, the promotion of a literary or artistic career far from the city was impossible.

Rather more significant than literary convention has been the city's political role. Time and again, cities have taken on the role of protectors or promoters of liberty; the Greek cities of Ionia contrasted their independence, chaotic and bloody as it often was, with the despotism of

the King of Persia, the free Italian cities of the Renaissance constantly fought to avoid falling under the sway of the Emperor, the Pope or the Dukes of Milan, while the English civil war pitted the City of London and the developing commercial centres of the Midlands against the Crown and its supporters in the more isolated and conservative fringes of the country. A frequent source of riot, strife and civil commotion, cities have usually been regarded with profound suspicion by most governments, if only because of the very high concentration of potential malcontents. Not without reason did Louis XIV move his residence from Paris to Versailles; having as an infant been driven from Paris by the Fronde rebellion, the Sun King was determined never again to place himself at the mercy of his loyal subjects.

On the basis of such contrasts both real and imagined, it is possible to draw up a table contrasting what have traditionally been regarded as the characteristic virtues and vices of the city with those of the country; whether in their positive or their negative connotations, these characteristics invariably cluster around the basic polarity of open/closed:

	CITY		COUNTRY	
	Positive	*Negative*	*Positive*	*Negative*
	Liberal	*Radical*	*Conservative*	*Reactionary*
	Democratic	*Anarchic*	*Paternalistic*	*Authoritarian*
	Cosmopolitan	*Decadent*	*Traditionalist*	*Obscurantist*
	Agnostic	*Atheistic*	*Pious*	*Sanctimonious*
	Mercantile	*Corrupt*	*Pastoral*	*Rustic*
	Multi–cultural	*Mongrelised*	*Mono–cultural*	*Inbred*
	Tolerant	*Chaotic*	*Principled*	*Despotic*
	Nonconformist	*Recusant*	*Reverent*	*Fundamentalist*
	Vital	*Hysterical*	*Serene*	*Stagnant*

Essentially, it is this quality of emancipation and receptivity which has been the city's most abiding attraction, even when the openness turns out to be little more than a mirage. Openness to new ideas, to economic betterment, to escape from stifling tradition, or simply to a better life than that of one's parents and grandparents. Aspirations which seem far beyond reach in a hamlet or small market town, both fixed apparently forever in their ancestral rut, can become probabilities in a city. From wherever you care to stand, it seems that cities, for better or worse, are where the action is; at the end of the day, the prevailing view has been that to turn one's back on the city is tantamount to stepping outside history.

Which is not to say that for many of their inhabitants, cities from Babylon to Sydney have not proved to be a greater source of misery than could ever have been imagined in the ancestral village. The end of the twentieth century finds the reputation of cities at a dismally low ebb, with parts of certain American cities acquiring an almost emblematic identity as a paradigm of hell on earth. The contemporary crisis of cities appears to stem from two different causes, depending upon whether they are in the first or third (fourth, fifth…) worlds. In the first world, crisis has come about largely because of the social polarisations directly provoked and even pursued by a succession of ideologically motivated conservative

administrations, particularly in Britain and the USA. In the third world, many cities are suffering from a lack of resources, collapsing infrastructures, a mushrooming population and corrupt or incapable administrations – to most of which problems it could be argued that the economic policies of advanced capitalism have to some extent contributed.

Politically, perhaps the most important recent development in western cities has been the dramatic shift of power in favour of centralising, conservative administrations. Taking advantage of Britain's lack of constitutional safeguards, Margaret Thatcher's attack on the cities began with the legislative disenfranchisement of London, now the only European capital without a unitary city government, and continued with the passage of the infamous Poll Tax, whose principal purpose was the removal from the electoral rolls of those members of the urban proletariat and sub-proletariats least likely to share her political beliefs. In the United States, the increasing segregation of the urban population into haves and have-nots has been graphically described by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz*: "Welcome to post–liberal Los Angeles, where the defense of luxury lifestyles is translated into a proliferation of new repressions in space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous 'armed response'. This obsession with physical security systems, and, collaterally, with the architectural policing of social boundaries, has become a zeitgeist of urban restructuring… Images of carceral inner cities (*Escape from New York, Running Man*), high–tech police death squads (*Blade Runner*), sentient buildings (*Die Hard*), urban bantustans (*They Live!*), Vietnam–like street wars (*Colors*), and so on, only extrapolate from actually existing trends. Such dystopian visions grasp the extent to which today's pharaonic scales of residential and commercial security supplant residual hopes for urban reform and social integration."

And yet, despite everything, people everywhere in the world continue to vote with their feet. Neither in reality nor metaphorically have the pavements of any city ever turned out to be paved with gold, but the great shift of population from country to city has continued unabated over the centuries; the few examples of reverse migration were the result not of choice but of force of circumstance (total war, famine or plague), and invariably proved temporary. Within a few years, probably before the millennium, the majority of the world's population will for the first time be housed in cities and megalopolises, while cities such as Manila, Djakarta and Shanghai will grow beyond all imagining. Nobody believes these giant conurbations will be places of ease and urbanity.

In the face of such grim reality, how have cities retained their magnetic attraction? The answer is that mankind has always succeeded in simultaneously holding in mind two contradictory images of the city, whereby the unsatisfactory reality is sustained by the Platonic ideal of what a city should be, perhaps even might one day become. Every inhabitant of a city has his or her dream of urbanity, for without it life would be barely tolerable. Such dreams are of course endlessly diverse; for the intellectual it might be an ideal of free and informed discourse, for the recent immigrant it could be simply freedom from fear and want. Always, whether or not formulated in such terms, above all the diverse individual aspirations of its teeming inhabitants lies the great overarching metaphor

of the city as ultimate incarnation of human society, from the *Civitas Dei* of the medieval scholar to Le Corbusier's *Citée Radieuse.* And so when St. John the Divine looked for a metaphor with which to bring the Book of Revelations to its final, triumphant close, he had no need to seek far: *"And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband… The street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there."*