

Extracts from
WRITINGS ON CITIES

Henri Lefebvre

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PHILOSOPHY AND THE CITY

Having contextualized the ‘cavalier’ attitude mentioned at the beginning, particular aspects and problems concerning the urban can now be emphasized. In order to take up a radically critical analysis and to deepen the urban problematic, philosophy will be the starting point. This will come as a surprise. And yet, has not frequent reference to philosophy been made in the preceding pages? The purpose is not to present a *philosophy of the city*, but on the contrary, to refute such an approach by giving back to the whole of philosophy its place in history: that of a *project* of synthesis and totality which philosophy as such cannot accomplish. After which the *analytical* will be examined, that is, the ways fragmentary sciences have highlighted or partitioned urban reality. The rejection of the synthetic propositions of these specialized, fragmentary, and particular sciences will enable us – to pose better – in *political* terms – the problem of synthesis. During the course of this progress one will find again features and problems which will reappear more clearly. In particular, the opposition between *use value* (the city and urban life) and *exchange value* (spaces bought and sold, the consumption of products, goods, places and signs) will be highlighted.

For philosophical meditation aiming at a totality through speculative systematization, that is, classical philosophy from Plato to Hegel, the city was much more than a secondary theme, an object among others. The links between philosophical thought and urban life appear clearly upon reflection, although they need to be made explicit. The city and the town were not for philosophers and philosophy a simple objective condition, a sociological context, an exterior element. Philosophers have thought the city: they have brought to language and concept urban life.

Let us leave aside questions posed by the oriental city, the Asiatic mode of

production, 'town and country' relations in this mode of production, and lastly the formation of ideologies (philosophies) on this base. Only the Greek and Roman antique city from which are derived societies and civilizations known as 'Western' will be considered. This city is generally the outcome of a *synoecism*, the coming together of several villages and tribes established on this territory. This unit allows the development of division of labour and landed property (money) without however destroying the collective, or rather 'communal' property of the land. In this way a community is constituted at the heart of which is a minority of free citizens who exercise power over other members of the city: women, children, slaves, foreigners. The city links its elements associated with the form of the communal property ('common private property', or 'privatized appropriation') of the active citizens, who are in opposition to the slaves. This form of association constitutes a democracy, the elements, of which are strictly hierarchical and submitted to the demands of the oneness of the city itself. It is the democracy of non-freedom (Marx). During the course of the history of the antique city, private property pure and simple (of money, land and slaves) hardens, concentrates, without abolishing the rights of the city over its territory.

The separation between town and country takes place among the first and fundamental divisions of labour, with the distribution of tasks according to age and sex (the biological division of labour), with the organization of labour according to tools and skills (technical division). The social division of labour between town and country corresponds to the separation between material and intellectual labour, and consequently, between the natural and the spiritual. Intellectual labour is incumbent upon the city: functions of organization and direction, political and military activities, elaboration of theoretical knowledge (philosophy and sciences). The whole divides itself, separations are established, including the separation between the *Physics* and the *Logos*, between theory and practice, and in practice, the separations between *praxis* (action on human groups), *poiesis* (creation of 'oeuvres'), *techne* (activities endowed with techniques and directed towards product). The countryside, both practical reality and representation, will carry images of nature, of being, of the innate. The city will carry images of effort, of will, of subjectivity, of contemplation, without these representations becoming disjointed from real activities. From these images confronted against each other great symbolisms will emerge. Around the Greek city, above it, there is the *cosmos*, luminous and ordered spaces, the apogee of place. The city has as centre a hole which is sacred and damned, inhabited by the forces of death and life, times dark with effort and ordeals, the *world*. The Apollonian spirit triumphs in the Greek city, although not without struggle, as the luminous symbol of reason which regulates, while in the Etruscan-Roman city what governs is the demonic side of the urban. But the philosopher and philosophy attempt to reclaim or create totality. The philosopher does not acknowledge separation, he does not conceive that the

world, life, society, the cosmos (and later, history) can no longer make a Whole.

Philosophy is thus born from the city, with its division of labour and multiple modalities. It becomes itself a specialized activity in its own right. But it does not become fragmentary, for otherwise it would blend with science and the sciences, themselves in a process of emerging. Just as philosophy refuses to engage in the opinions of craftsmen, soldiers and politicians, it refutes the reasons and arguments of specialists. It has totality as fundamental interest for its own sake, which is recovered or created by the system, that is, the oneness of thought and being, of discourse and act, of nature and contemplation, of the world (or the cosmos) and human reality. This does not exclude but includes meditation on *differences* (between Being and thought, between what comes from nature and what comes from the city, etc.). As Heidegger expressed it, the *logos* (element, context, mediation and end for philosophers and urban life) was simultaneously the following: to put forward, gather together and collect, then to recollect and collect oneself, speak and say, disclose. This gathering is the harvest and even its conclusion. 'One goes to collect things and brings them back. Here sheltering dominates and with it in turn dominates the wish to preserve . . . The harvest is in itself a choice of what needs a shelter.' Thus, the harvest is already *thought out*. That which is gathered is put in reserve. To say is the act of collection which gathers together. This assumes the presence of 'somebody' before which, for whom and by whom is expressed the being of what is thus successful. This presence is produced with clarity (or as Heidegger says, with 'non-mystery'). The city linked to philosophy thus gathers by and in its *logos* the wealth of the territory, dispersed activities and people, the spoken and the written (of which each assumes already its collection and recollection). It makes *simultaneous* what in the countryside and according to nature takes place and passes, and is distributed according to cycles and rhythms. It grasps and defends 'everything'. If philosophy and the city are thus associated in the dawning *logos* (reason), it is not within a subjectivity akin to the Cartesian '*cogito*'. If they constitute a system, it is not in the usual way and in the current meaning of the term.

To the organization of the city itself can be linked the primordial whole of urban form and its content, of philosophical form and its meaning: a privileged centre, the core of a political space, the seat of the *logos* governed by the *logos* before which citizens are 'equal', the regions and distributions of space having a rationality justified before the *logos* (for it and by it).

The *logos* of the Greek city cannot be separated from the philosophical *logos*. The *œuvre* of the city continues and is focused in the work of philosophers, who gather opinions and viewpoints, various *œuvres*, and think them simultaneously and collect differences into a totality: urban places in the cosmos, times and rhythms of the city and that of the world (and inversely). It is therefore only for a superficial historicity that philosophy brings to language and concept urban life, that of the city. In truth, the city

as emergence, language, meditation comes to theoretical light by means of the philosopher and philosophy.

After this first interpretation of the internal link between the city and philosophy, let us go to the European Middle Ages. *It begins from the countryside.* The Roman city and the Empire have been destroyed by Germanic tribes which are both primitive communities and military organizations. The feudal property of land is the outcome of the dissolution of this sovereignty (city, property, relations of production). Serfs replace slaves. With the rebirth of cities there is on the one hand the feudal organization of property and possession of land (peasant communities having a customary possession and lords having an 'eminent' domain as it will later be called), and on the other hand, a corporate organization of crafts and urban property. Although at the beginning seigniorial tenure of land dominates it, this double hierarchy contains the demise of this form of property and the supremacy of wealth in urban property from which arises a deep conflict, basic to medieval society. 'The necessity to ally themselves against the plunderer lords associated themselves together; the need for common market halls at a time when industry was craft, when serfs in breach of their bondage and in competition with each other were flooding to the increasingly rich cities, the whole of feudal organization was giving birth to the corporations (or guilds). Small capitals, slowly saved by isolated craftsmen, their numbers stable in the middle of a growing population, developed a system of journeymen and apprentices which established in the cities a hierarchy similar to that of the countryside' (Marx). In these conditions theology subordinates philosophy. The latter no longer meditates on the city. The philosopher (the theologian) deliberates upon the *double hierarchy*. He gives it shape, with or without taking conflicts into account. The symbols and notions relative to the *cosmos* (spaces, the hierarchy of matter in that space) and to the *world* (the actualization of finished matter, hierarchies in time, descent or fall, ascension and redemption) erase the consciousness of the city. From the moment when there are not two but three hierarchies (feudal landed property, guild organization, the king and his State apparatus), thought takes again a critical dimension. The philosopher and philosophy find themselves again, no longer having to choose between the Devil and the Lord. Philosophy will not however recognize its link to the city, although the rise of rationalism accompanies the rise of capitalism (commercial and banking, then industrial), and the development of cities. This rationalism is attached either to the State or to the individual.

For Hegel, at the height of speculative, systematic and contemplative philosophy, the unity between the perfect Thing, that is, the Greek city, and the Idea, which animates society and the State, this admirable whole, has been irremediably broken by historic becoming. In modern society, the State subordinates these elements and materials, including the city. The latter, however remains as a sort of subsystem in the total philosophico-political

