

Introduction: The City of Dreams

Of all the changes that nineteenth-century capitalism introduced into the world of Western society, the rise of the modern industrial metropolis involved the most profound alterations in the daily experiences of human beings. Never before in the history of human experience had so many people been gathered together in so fragmented and yet so regulated a fashion. The contrasts that the new metropolis posed for sensitive observers between the old patterns of human settlement and experience and what was unfolding before their very eyes were enormous.

The dislocation and disorientation of these times were the sources of powerful poetic and theoretical insights into the nature of the human condition. At the lyrical level, for example, they led to the lament for a bygone era in the writings of the Romantics. In social theory in the late nineteenth century they led to the writings of a number of theorists such as Marx, Engels, Toennies, Simmel, and Durkheim. In the early twentieth century writers such as Walter Benjamin, Frank Park, Louis Wirth, Max Weber, Georg Lukács, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno directed their attention to the consequences of urbanization and modernization for the human condition.

Some of these writers were directly concerned with the urban experience. Others focused their attention on modernity and capitalist society and therefore unavoidably on the urban experience indirectly. What united all of these writers was their quest for a solution to the alienation they felt in the face of the conditions they encountered. Even in the work of as "scientific" a writer as Max Weber the sense of unease with the modern condition is never far from the surface. In the work of the more romantically inclined such as Walter Benjamin, this unease becomes transformed into a mystical sense of revolutionary possibility for transcendence. Such a utopian sensibility is, of course, at the root of the work of Marx and Engels. Their work can be regarded, particularly in the case of Marx, as a product of the Hegelian dialectic and youthful romanticism.

But even in the work of more conservative writers such as Weber and Durkheim there is a yearning for a world other than what is encountered. Either through charismatic political action as in Weber, or through revolution as in the Marxist tradition, or through evolutionary change as in Durkheim, virtually all these writers sought a better world than what they observed. Some of what they sought they found already as aspects or tendencies in the societies they examined. In certain cases these aspects

were only brief moments of pleasure, exhilaration, sociability, or community in an otherwise degraded world. Yet, their presence served to indicate what might be.

In this book I selectively survey the response of certain of these theorists. My goal in doing so is to better understand what the coming of the modern industrial metropolis has meant for Western society. At the same time, I am interested in exploring the implications of the changes in daily experience that the capitalist metropolis has brought for contemporary urban public policy and politics in general. In a very real sense the roots of many contemporary problems that policy makers face have their origin in the massive changes associated with the rise of the industrial metropolis. But even more fundamentally, one cannot make sense of modern experience without understanding how intricately interwoven it has become with the urban condition.

Most of what we associate with modern industrial society takes place in large metropolises. The majority of us are born in them, live in them, work in them, and die in them. They form the very backdrop to our lives and therefore to our sensibilities. The rush of traffic; the pressure of the crowd; the excitement of our daily encounter with so many strangers; the series of brief encounters we have with people to whom we are attracted; the sensuality of the city—its smells, sounds, colours, vistas, and moods; the canopy of the urban landscape seen from some distant hill or lookout; the eerie calm of the city and its skyscrapers and towers late at night after the crowds have departed from the downtown core and the steel, glass and concrete that soars into the sky, looming like so many abandoned medieval castles—all of these form the sensuous nature of the city in modern times.

The city beckons to the dreamer in us, for in its vastness and diversity lies a world of fantasy, hope, occasional fulfillment and sadness, longing, loneliness, and the lingering possibility for community with our fellow travellers in the mystery of life. It is this place of dreams that unites the writers considered in this book. For each in his own way viewed the modern condition and the predicament of the modern person, above all else his or her estrangement and loneliness and sadness and the quest to transcend this state through community. And for each in a peculiar way, the answer lay in the city. The city became not just a place, but a place of becoming—a "city of dreams."¹

There is a second objective in this book. It concerns the more practical and less lyrical problem of public policy. In order to understand the parameters of contemporary policy making in advanced capitalist societies, one must first understand the socio-economic, political, and spatial environments in which these policies are to be carried out. This approach to policy analysis therefore, of necessity, involves a fairly lengthy journey. For those who are accustomed to more conventional

approaches to policy analysis, this journey may, at times, seem laborious and even bizarre. After all, from a policy point of view, what can such diverse writers as Ferdinand Toennies, Georg Simmel, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Lukács, Karl Marx, and Walter Benjamin have in common?

Feminists would immediately point out that they are all men and therefore share a common, if somewhat blinkered, perspective. Perhaps. Had the history of Western society and social theory been different undoubtedly there would not be such a sexist bias to the writing. Perhaps even the concern, one might say obsession, for community is a subconscious expression of the alienation men must feel because they cannot give birth. Certainly the experience of women in cities is not the same as that of men.² The yearning for community may thus be sublimation of this absence of the capacity to give birth in men. But perhaps also this yearning simply grows out of the gregarious and social nature of human beings, whatever their gender. I cannot explore these issues at any length in this work. I simply take note of them and leave it to others to explore these questions and to criticize my own conclusions in this area.

Beyond the fact that they were men, what all of these writers shared in common was their response to the enormous social, economic, and political changes that the industrial metropolis introduced into modern society. For certain of these writers, some of these changes occurred quite literally during their lifetimes. For others, some of the changes were barely a century old when they came to intellectual maturity. A century may seem a long time, but in the sweep of human history it is, in reality, a very short period of time—literally a lifetime and a few decades. Indeed, the current era of human history is no older than the lifetime of our great-great-grandparents—only four lifetimes ago. Before that time period the phenomenon of the great metropolitan centres that figure so powerfully in our lifetime was largely unknown. For example, London, the great metropolis where I now write this introduction, had a population of about half a million people as recently as the late seventeenth century. Today its population is about seven million.

A journey through town on the London underground will bring one into contact with literally thousands of people from all over the world: languages, sensibilities, skin tones, styles of dress, social classes, of all descriptions and types. One is immersed into the swirl of consciousness and energy of a major world metropolis in a matter of a simple journey. From the tranquillity and stability of the seventeenth century to the tumult of the twentieth century is a journey of vast proportions. It is, of course, the journey into the modern world.

It is the shared response, then, to the extraordinary changes that metropolitan capitalism has imposed upon daily experience in a period of little more than a century that links the writers I consider in this book.

In particular, their response revolves around the apparently greater alienation and atomization that prevails in modern metropolitan society as compared to previous eras in Western history. It does not really matter whether or not this response was rooted in a misplaced nostalgia for a mythical time gone by or was grounded in a very real historical situation, for the response was authentic and therefore deserves consideration in its own right.

It may well be that a significant part of this response is rooted in the phenomenological alienation of the human condition whose overcoming requires the very transcendence of what it is to be human. In other words, we are born of a mother, we leave the womb, and from that time on our life is a constant quest for the sheltered warmth of our origin. It is a quest that we of necessity pursue alone. In the end, some of us through the experience of romantic love and partnership or religious faith come to accept our condition of estrangement and even to an important degree overcome it. But many of us continue the search all our lives and in the wisdom of age come to understand the inescapable solitude of the human condition. Our quest often leads, as it led so many before us and will lead so many after us, to the battlefield of politics and political commentary and action.

It is in this particular channelling of the drive to overcome estrangement that one finds a peculiar kind of place for many of the writers I consider here. This does not devalue what they write. On the contrary, the poignancy of their quest and the passion of their writing often reveal a rich and creative insight into the human condition in the modern world.

It has become fashionable in recent years to view many of these writers from the perspective of "post-modernism." A number of works in literary criticism, architectural and social theory have proclaimed the ecumenical value of all radical writing and, at the same time, its delusory nature. While there is clearly something to the post-modern argument, particularly as the tarnished shrine of socialism implodes from within, it is a bit too neat and nihilistically smug to accept this version of events uncritically. I prefer to understand these writers and their quest for community as part of the classical tradition of the intellectual quest for the good life. There are undoubtedly illusory aspects to this tradition. But the response of some of the post-modern interpreters smacks a little too much of success hunting conformism in the scholastic tradition to be totally convincing.

One of the most interesting of recent works that are critical of the modernist tradition is Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*. Berman's discussion of Marx and the metropolis explores themes that are close to those in this book. Berman interprets Marx as a modernist *par excellence*. Much like Dr. Faust, Marx seeks the keys to understanding the universe and to controlling it. In the end, Marxism becomes in Berman's

reading this book, the history of social theory and the city in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is truly the history of the "city of dreams."

NOTES

1. The expression "city of dreams" is one of the chapter headings in Walter Benjamin's *Das Passeng-Werk*. See Chapter 9 below.
2. See Mary O'Brian, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983). See also Caroline Andrew and Beth Milroy, eds., *Life Spaces: Gender, Household, Employment* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988).
3. See Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1978) and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).
4. Bakunin predicted that if Marx's ideas were ever implemented they would result in the concentration of authority and power in an unprecedented manner, which could only corrupt the body politic. See M. Bakunin, *Collected Writings. Oeuvres*, 1, J. Gillaume and M. Nettlaw, eds; see also E. H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1937), "Marx versus Bakunin," pp. 441 ff. and p. 356 where Carr quotes Bakunin as follows: "I hate communism because it is the negation of liberty and because humanity is unthinkable without liberty. I am not a communist, because communism concentrates and swallows up itself for the benefit of the state all the forces of society, because it inevitably leads to the concentration of property in the hands of the State. . . ."

politan settlement for the purposes of enhancing the powers of social control of the ruling class.

Through the medium of the theorists I have chosen to analyze and through my own argument, I explore how the modern metropolis, in a manner consistent with the universal or totalizing nature of modern capitalism, increasingly exhibits the imprint of capital accumulation. In the symbolic power and monumentalism of its core architecture, in the hierarchical and spatially segregated arrangement of its neighbourhoods, and in the rhythms of its daily experience, the modern metropolis has acutely altered social interaction. It is the extremely creative way in which these theorists have responded to these changes that offers the foundations for a new theory of urban politics and public policy.

The changes in daily life that the modern metropolis introduced largely destroyed the basis of working-class community at the urban level. Furthermore, they reinforced the tendency toward anomie and alienation that was implicit in the metropolitan formation in the first place. Thus, it came to pass that people were concentrated together in an unprecedented manner and yet became largely isolated and estranged from one another. The destruction of the organic nature of pre-capitalist society by the progressive forces of capital accumulation and spatial centralization appears to have eroded the foundations upon which a progressive restructuring of capitalist society could occur. The conservative lament for the loss of community ought to find, therefore, a sympathetic hearing from those interested in the problems of both progressive urban public policy and politics, which these theorists identified in late-nineteenth-century cities. These tendencies seem to have gathered force most strikingly in twentieth-century North American cities. It would seem that in North America the residues of pre-capitalist urban culture are largely lacking, and the power of capitalist dynamics operates unimpeded at both the spatial and socio-economic level.

At times, the material presented in the individual chapters that follow may seem diffuse and even oddly juxtaposed. The reader will be assisted if she or he bears in mind at all times my principal concerns. What does this theorist contribute to an understanding of modern metropolitan life? What does this theorist contribute to an understanding of the development of class consciousness at the metropolitan level? What implications do the conclusions that this theorist reaches have for a theory of public policy making and politics?

Finally, it is the nature of social theory to be imaginative and speculative. In this sense it resembles the work of the artist who strives to interpret reality, both subjective and objective, through the prisms of his or her experience, individual imagination, and vision. In this sense the very best social theory always has a dream-like quality that distinguishes it from the practical politics of power. As I hope the reader will agree after

the modern metropolis, and spatial laboratory, as it were, in which the original theory of class consciousness developed. If this is so, what precisely is there in the nature of the modern metropolis that contributed to this blocking of consciousness, and what sort of progressive politics can metropolitan culture sustain that is consistent with mass society? Furthermore, if indeed class consciousness is blocked in metropolitan life, what consequences does this blockage have for both politics and public policy at the urban level?

Even those readers who do not share my interest in the problem of class but are interested in the problems of public policy making will discover the relevance of this blockage of class consciousness to these questions. For paradoxically, the very qualities that are ingredients in the formation of class consciousness appear also to be ingredients in the successful implementation of policy and the healthy functioning of society. This insight may seem odd, but during the course of this book I hope to demonstrate that the need for a sense of community well-being and social responsibility that is the basis of social stability is also the environment out of which class consciousness and progressive politics can develop.

Any theory of policy making in modern urban environments is forced to confront this need for a sense of community and responsibility for others as the critical ingredient in effective public policy. In the absence of such a sense of community among metropolitan citizenry, particularly in capitalist societies, attempts to solve policy conflicts in areas such as housing, urban transportation, pollution, crime, social services, urban planning, and urban finance are not likely to be successful. Because of the absence of overwhelming centralized authority, itself highly problematic in democratic societies, policies that require individual sacrifice, compromise, and co-operation will be resisted and challenged because of their interference with private and essentially competitive patterns of consumption and accumulation. Furthermore, those social reformers and policy advocates who premise their strategies for social change upon the existence of a politically conscious electorate organized along class lines are likely to be similarly disappointed.

A radical theory of social change premised upon the development of class-conscious politics at the urban level requires that a sense of community and shared purpose exist among the majority of urban citizens. If so, then modern metropolitan capitalism represents a contradictory picture. It was this contradictory picture that confronted the theorists discussed here. On the one hand, the unprecedented concentration of population in limited geographic areas at high levels of technological development appeared to offer tantalizing prospects for social reform and political progress. Indeed, it was the very fear of radical political unrest aimed at social revolution that inspired major alterations in the pattern of metro-

in London. From the crowded commuter trains to the subterranean tubes, from the grand avenues to the narrow alleyways, from the small local neighbourhood shops to the elegant department stores, from the exquisite Royal parks to the squalid rows of decaying tenements—all of the great metropolis of London reflects the themes of this book. But in reality the experiences of most of the great industrial capitalist metropolises of our time are not very different.

Public policy making at the urban level for some offers the possibility of promoting progressive social change. By progressive social change, I mean policies that advance the interests of the majority of citizens and not just those that benefit a small minority or that value economic growth and wealth creation above justice or equity. Indeed, progressive policy making can be linked to the question of greater democracy in contemporary society. This may involve both greater access on the part of ordinary citizens to the policy-making process, as well as more equitable sharing of resources in the society at large.

For a long time there was a belief that such progressive political changes were more likely when the majority of ordinary citizens recognized the class nature of the society and their own place in the prevailing class structure. Recent events and a maturing of those of us who held such hopes rather naively during the 1960s now teaches us how utterly simplistic, misleading, and ultimately damaging this kind of vulgar Marxist class analysis can be. This does not mean, of course, that one must embrace neo-conservative logic. Quite the contrary. I am interested in helping to develop a pragmatic and liberal non-Marxist social democracy that can escape from the dangerous illusions of dogma.

Of course, I am aware of the enormous complexity of the problem of economic and social class in contemporary capitalist societies. I am also aware of the ambiguous legacy of the historical response of citizens in advanced societies to the impulses of class formation, class consciousness, and elite domination. Nevertheless, it does appear that, at least in part, because of the apparent eclipse of class-conscious politics in Western societies, the progress of modern Western society from an equity and ecological point of view has reached a critical sticking point. In the communist world there are a number of hopeful developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In China, on the other hand, recent events can only depress all those interested in the construction of a humane and just society.

The apparent closure of the possibilities for class-based politics in the West raises a number of important questions that form the backdrop to this book. If class-conscious working-class politics has neither developed nor appears feasible, nor perhaps even desirable, in Western societies—in particular, in North America—what is the explanation and what are the progressive alternatives? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the nature of

eyes a modernist project of control and expansion much like the capitalist industrialism it seeks to displace. As such, it is doomed to failure like modernism itself. There is definitely something to this argument, as we shall see. It is an argument taken up by a number of writers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno and more recently Jean Baudrillard.³

But my own difference with this approach lies not so much in its assesment of Marx, which I find convincing, all the more so in the light of recent events in communist countries such as China and in Eastern Europe. In this respect it must be remembered that Marx's contemporary, Bakunin, predicted as much in his critique of Marx about a century ago.⁴ Rather, I differ in asserting that one can still ultimately assess the relative worth of some sets of values as preferable to others from a humanistic point of view. In the end there is more to history than the simple triumph of power. The pessimism that pervades the post-modern approach to political and social theory is not really new. It has occurred in history before and it will undoubtedly occur again. Indeed, the writings of a number of the theorists that I consider were influenced by a similar kind of pessimism that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century.

In addition to their concern for the alienation of metropolitan modernity—a condition about which some of the writers I consider are more optimistic than others in seeing the possibility of transcending—these writers shared another concern. This concern relates to the question of in whose interests the changes associated with metropolitan development had occurred. For a number of these writers the answer is best framed in class terms. For others, it is a question that can only be answered in broader human terms. In the latter case, capitalism becomes transformed into the anonymous forces of modern technology and the abstractions of the money economy. However they chose to answer this question, the fact that they all posed it in their work is a common unifying theme.

Much like the writers I have chosen to discuss in this book, my own approach to the issues of urban alienation and public policy comes as a response to my own experience. All my life I have lived in cities. Beginning with life in the comfortable *Gemeinschaft* of north-end Winnipeg, spending two years in the vast metropolis of London, England, and later four years in the cold materialism of Toronto on the rise and seven years in the warm beauty of Montreal in decline, and now again in London, my experience with the urban condition has taught me never to underestimate the diversity, complexity, drama, beauty, unpredictability, and ugliness of the city in modern times. No kaleidoscope of coloured glass could offer more in this respect than the modern metropolis.

It is entirely appropriate that I finish this book in London where I got the original inspiration for it almost twenty years ago. Much of what these theorists of the city and modernity write about can be seen on a daily basis