

Theorizing the European city

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Theorizing the modern European city has gone through waves of change. Whether as an object of destruction, desire, fear, amazement, fascination, hatred, struggle, and admiration or a subject of government, administration, regulation, control, competition and accumulation, the city looms large in contemporary societies and polities. Throughout the twentieth century social and political thought developed certain concepts to interpret and transform the modern city. But these concepts have increasingly come up against the complexities of the city in our own epoch. This chapter reviews the European city in modern social and political thought and provides a glimpse of the direction in which it is heading. I organized it around four themes, which are roughly temporal but overlapping and recurring themes in social and political thought and the city. These themes are autonomy, accumulation, difference and security. I suggest that these themes provided the drive and the background against which the essential concepts for interpreting and transforming the modern city were developed.

Before I proceed, however, I would like to discuss three important issues concerning 'theorizing the city'. First, I would like to insist on a difference between the city and cities as objects of analysis. What I mean by this difference can be articulated in the following way. Whatever happens in those 'places' which we end up calling cities, whether defined by this or that criterion, should be distinguished from the city as such, which is not reducible to, but certainly related to, the specific properties of cities. I am convinced that we cannot arrive at an adequate understanding of the city as such by collecting and collating comparative information on cities with their historical and geographical variations. The city as such cannot be an ideal type or universal concept derived from vicissitudes of cities. This ontological difference between the city and cities is akin to the difference Heidegger insisted upon between being and beings (Heidegger 1996 [1927], 200 [1953]). I have discussed the importance of this difference elsewhere but here I want to emphasize that the proper object of social and political thought is the city not cities, however defined (Isin 2003, 2005). I maintain that the most influential social and political thinkers have recognized this difference and made the city rather than cities as the object of their thought, although, to my knowledge, none expressed this question in terms I am using here (Weber, 1958 [1921]; Mumford, 1961; Harvey, 1973; Castells, 1977; Fustel de Coulanges, 1978 [1864]). What is at stake with this difference? It is true that despite enormous varieties of cities across times, spaces and polities and differences

and similarities they display, it is still possible to maintain an understanding of the city *as such* across these differences. But the city as such is not an ideal type or universal that can be filled with particular properties of cities in different times, spaces and polities. We maintain an understanding of the city as such regardless of these properties and this understanding cannot be reduced to them. Aristotle may well have expressed this understanding when he insisted that the kind of beings we are, are constituted through the city, and are thus of the city (*Politics*, 1253a1, 1253a6). Or, in Heidegger's words, for Greek thought 'The *polis* is the site of history, the Here, *in* which, *out of* which and *for* which history happens' (Heidegger 2000 [1953]: 117/162). As historical beings our understanding of ourselves is of and through the city. This recognition requires that we approach the city differently than an empirical object constituted by facts. The city requires thinking through its unfolding in our *longue durée* experience and understanding of it as such. That understanding unfolds itself only through our work upon ourselves as beings of the city.

The second issue concerns my usage of 'social and political thought on the city'. By that phrase, I do not mean that thought is only produced by 'thinkers' and their practices. Rather, social and political thought on the city includes what Foucault (1972 [1969]) called discursive practices: edicts, directives, proclamations, laws, minor treatises, theories and spatial practices involving thought that constitute the city as its object. Those thinkers with whom I illustrate the main themes of this chapter belong to an order of discourse that is related to, if not embedded in, that order of discourse that takes the city as its object. Yet, theorizing the city is nonetheless irreducible to and distinct from the discourse on the city. While discursive practices aim to produce a practicable knowledge of the city, theorizing the city focuses upon unfolding its essence, which includes an understanding of and orientation towards the practicable knowledge produced by discursive practices but is not reducible to it. Theorizing the city means focusing on the essence of the city, which requires making the distinction between the city and cities as I maintained earlier. Social and political thought on the city therefore includes at least two related but irreducible orders of discourse that have different modalities and functions but related to each other. While the focus of this chapter is the latter – theorizing the city – its relation to the discourse on the city always constitutes its background and material.

The following themes, autonomy, accumulation, difference and security, are then suggested as ways of understanding the essence of the city in modern European thought, roughly from the end of the eighteenth to the end of the twentieth centuries. Within that span I briefly highlight only those thinkers whose thought, mostly implicitly, focused on theorizing the city as such.

The third issue is about the scope of the chapter. While it is modern European thought and the city, as we shall see, modern thought is unable to reflect on the city without historical allusions and, if I may say so, illusions. Heidegger may well have expressed the reason for this already when he described *polis* as the site of history. The city as the site of history always already constitutes the unconscious of our being as historical beings and our thought cannot reflect on the city without its unconscious that emerged and evolved historically over a long span of time. That is why, despite our focus on modern thought on the city, other forms of the city (e.g. *polis*, *civitas*, occidental, oriental) constantly provide a background, through allusions and illusions, against which the city forms itself in modern thought.

Autonomy

Modern social and political thought placed its greatest emphasis on the autonomous character of the city. Weber's (1958 [1921]) emphasis, for example, on the importance of autonomous

law-making and administration as the distinct hallmarks of the occidental city is well known. Weber thought that the ancient polis and the medieval city were prototypical forms of the autonomous city that provided models for *modern* occidental democracy and citizenship. But this emphasis inherits a paradox: the autonomy of the modern city is inconceivable without the *sovereignty* of the state. While polis and the medieval city evolved as autonomous polities, the modern city is firmly located within the sovereign state. That sovereignty dictates the limits of the possible and impossible in and of the city. In what sense then the modern city has been autonomous? In what sense the polis and the medieval city provide models of democracy and citizenship for the modern city? This question has been one of the riddles of social and political thought. When one compares the autonomous law making and administration of the Greek polis or the medieval city, the modern city is not autonomous at all. In fact, the fundamental hallmark of the modern city is that it lacks such autonomy under the auspices of the sovereign state (Frug 1980; Isin 1992). But when compared with the age of the absolutist state, the modern city is only 'relatively autonomous' (Friedrichs 1995). Therein lies the riddle. By describing the modern city as 'relatively autonomous', modern social and political thought both inherits and legitimizes the sovereign state as the supreme authority in and through which the city becomes a 'level' of government, an extension of the state.

From the 1780s onward, this riddle – in what sense the city can be thought to be autonomous when one recognizes the sovereignty of the state – has bedevilled social and political thought. Liberal thought in the nineteenth century addresses this riddle by considering the city as a space of democracy, a space without which the state would be impossible. That is to say, the city is the space through which subjects become citizens. For modern social and political thought loyalty, virtue, civics, discipline and subsidiarity become the determining elements of the autonomy of the city (Isin 2000). The work of nations unfolds in the city through which subjects become democratic citizens. Yet, this can still not be called autonomy. Eventually, modern social and political thought solves this riddle by interpreting the state as the ancient and medieval city writ large. In other words, the difference between the ancient polis and the modern state becomes not one of kind but of degree, more specifically, of scale. This has two far-reaching consequences. First, all ancient and medieval social and political thought begins to speak the modern language: Aristotle (384–322 BCE) begins to speak about the state, Plato (427–347 BCE) about republic, Augustine (354–430 CE) and Dante (1265–1321 CE) also about the state. All modern transpositions consistently assume the city about which these thinkers speak as synonymous with the state and translate it as the state or city-state (Springborg 1992). Second, the European city becomes a species of the occidental city ostensibly because the oriental city never invented autonomy and thus the state. 'Oriental' thinkers such as Ibn Sina (980–1037 CE), al-Farabi (c. 870–950 CE) and Ibn Rushd (1126–98 CE) are said to be learning about the republic and the state from the occidental thought. As a result, the state for modern social and political thought becomes an innate and teleological end towards which occidental thinkers move even when they may have no conception of it while the oriental thinkers are considered as lacking the conception and learning from the occidental thought. Thus, this peculiar autonomy claims something *sui generis* about the European city as a prototype of the occidental city.

The theme of autonomy that runs through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries becomes not only a perspective from which to see the city at present but also to interpret the city in history. As I said, when compared with its Greek or medieval 'counterparts' the modern city appears anything but autonomous and yet when compared to its absolutist, early modern counterpart, modern city indeed resembles the cradle of democracy as that which is declared. But it becomes the task of modern social and political thought to render these

differences palatable and claim the Greek polis as its progenitor as an act of inheritance. Theorizing the European city becomes impossible without seeing it somehow as part of a great series that originates with the Greeks, runs through the Romans, gets reinvented through Renaissance and climaxes in modern Europe. That is to say, a chain that has been constituted through polis, civitas, Christianopolis and metropolis (Isin 2002). What is astonishing about this chain is that while it presents itself as forward, that is to say it begins with origins and evolves, it is actually backward, that is to say, it begins with the state and traces itself back to its origins. The modern city forms itself in thought as teleological rather than genealogical. It is remarkable to see this chain in Fustel, Weber and Mumford with a relentless focus on the ostensible autonomy of the city. The essence of the occidental city becomes its autonomous character and is written back into its historical forms to differentiate it from the oriental city. Fernand Braudel, for example, thought that history always featured a struggle between the city and the state and that during the medieval period the city was triumphant while it was the reverse in the early modern period (Braudel 1988: 511). This is the same teleological instinct mentioned earlier where even when the concept or reality of the state does not exist, it is said to be defeated and incipient (see also Hansen 2000). Yet, ostensibly the modern period reverses this epic relationship and the city becomes, if not triumphant, that is to say, sovereign, it becomes autonomous. Thus, the sovereignty of the state and its problem of government always call into question this fantasy of autonomy of the modern city.

The question of autonomy of the city then gets incorporated into the question of its government, that is to say, 'local' government. The modern city primarily becomes a question of government of the state and its citizens. Throughout the twentieth century the government of the city – its powers, administration, jurisdiction, resources – become the problem of the government of the state and its ability and capacity for legitimate domination so much so that the city gets even renamed as 'the local state' (Loughlin, 1996).

It is significant to see how this riddle plays itself out in the formation of new Europe in the twentieth century. The project of Europe, as a project of states and their negotiated 'federation' has been unable to propose or generate an alternative image of the city and its autonomy. Being unable to imagine the city such, it replicated the image of the city as 'government franchise', an image that represented the city as cradle of a new Europe. By doing so, all it could do was to reinforce the image of the city as a space of accumulation to which we now turn.

Accumulation

The accumulation of different forms of capital in and through the city or, rather, the city as a space of accumulation is also a strong theme of modern social and political thought on the city. In the nineteenth century, interpretations of the city already become aware of the distinct role that the city plays either hindering or accelerating accumulation of capital. Already in the 1840s, Engels and Marx recognize the city as both a space of struggle against and liberation of capital (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848], Marx 1976 [1853]; Engels 1993 [1844]). Marx and Engels see a division of labour between the city and its countryside, which is also the source of an antagonism. In fact, the essence of the modern city is its triumph over the countryside (Saunders 1981: 19–20). How does the essence of the city become expressed as accumulation of capital? Marx sees the city as a space of capital where its concentration or deconcentration determines the modes of its accumulation (Katznelson 1992). The city is therefore crucial for accumulation of capital not only because it concentrates means of

production but also it concentrates relations for production. Again, this becomes the essence of the occidental city and the European city as its prototype. By contrast, the oriental city lacks spaces of accumulation either for the underdevelopment of its productive forces or inability of its artisans and merchants to free themselves from landowners and clergy. This concentration of means and relations of production sharpen certain inherent contradictions in the occidental city. Thus the city as a space of accumulation is undergirded by these contradictions, which continuously fissures interests and stakes in its investments (Harvey 1985a, 1985b).

The laws of accumulation of capital recognize the importance of the city also in terms of production and reproduction of labour. The concentration of both the means and relations of production in the city bring the two antagonistic classes together and apart. The city is thus also a space of struggle and this struggle and accumulation cannot be conceived independently of each other (Harvey 1985b: 25–27). This is one of the reasons why Marx's expectation that those very laws would engender the demise of accumulation and the hegemony of bourgeoisie would not materialize. At least this appears as one of the conclusions when the urban becomes a question in the middle of the twentieth century (Castells 1977). The city is then considered a space of collective consumption precisely because it makes possible the reproduction of labour power to accumulate capital. Thus the city is not only a space of production but also of consumption. That is to say, the state is not merely an executive for the bourgeoisie but a broker, though a biased one, between the bourgeoisie and the working class. As such the city as a space of accumulation not only liberates accumulation but also blocks its possibilities.

The modern city as a space of accumulation is therefore also a *sui generis* aspect of the occidental city and European city is its prototype. The contradictions the city as a space of accumulation embodies, struggles it engenders, exploitative dangers it contains and emancipating possibilities it affords become aspects of the European city and its modernity. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this interpretation of the European city holds sway as its claim to being uniquely occidental, that is to say, European. The oriental city is that which cannot become a space of accumulation. More precisely, the oriental city becomes that city which cannot become autonomous because it cannot become a space of accumulation and it cannot become a space of accumulation because it cannot become autonomous. Modernity of the occidental city not only as a corporation with its autonomy but also with its operation as a space of accumulation define its uniqueness and sets itself against the background of the oriental city with its lack of autonomy and absence of accumulation.

Yet, the contradictions of capital accumulation, struggles it engendered and spaces it created in the city would take an entirely different interpretive inflection towards the end of the twentieth century. While Marx always insisted on the international circulation of capital and its accumulation, it was the emergence of the modern city as a 'global city' that prompted a new inflection on that old insight. The city then appears as a space of concentration of means and relations of production and consumption on a global scale. The city does not only concentrate regional and national but also international circuits of capital and becomes the space of concentration of command and control of the operations of accumulation processes and, in turn, such command and control means dominating ever broadening circuits of capital with globalization. Hence a new image of the city as a global city emerges where its role is increasingly defined as a node of accumulation through these international circuits of capital (Sassen 1991). Accumulation of capital and production and reproduction of labour means that the state not only brokers between the bourgeoisie and working class and their various factions but also between national and international circuits of capital and the city, perhaps the global city, becomes a strategic space for this negotiation and struggle.

The internationalization of the circuits of capital that were always inherent in modern accumulation thus becomes unbound and its concentration or deconcentration makes and unmakes spaces of the modern, global, city. The global city becomes a space of accumulation of new kinds of capital and labour (Sassen 1999). The concept embodies a possibility of interpreting the city beyond occidental or oriental claims to uniqueness. If indeed the global city is defined by the concentration and deconcentration of various forms of capital and their trajectories, what differentiates various different cities and their claims being global cannot depend upon their oriental or occidental histories. The ground therefore on which theorizing the European city imperceptibly shifts towards its specificities rather than universal characteristics. There is nothing universal about the European global city that would make it inherently different than a non-European global city. Rather, the differences would lie in specific trajectories of various forms of capital that concentrates or deconcentrates. A genuine opportunity presents itself perhaps for the first time in modern social political thought to articulate the essence of the city without setting it against the oriental city that ostensibly lacks its qualities. Whether this opportunity fulfils its promise is yet an open question and theorizing the city is not much aided by taxonomic studies of global cities, focusing on variations, vicissitudes and permutations rather than the essence of the global city. Theorizing the global city also presents an opportunity to understand the inherent character of struggles that define the city. If early in the century the focus of struggles that define the city revolves around political and social rights of working classes, with the accumulation of new forms of capital (social, cultural, symbolic) and labour, struggles increasingly take on recognition of difference as well as struggles of redistribution.

Difference

That the city, especially the modern city, was the gathering together of different social groups and the successful, that is to say, democratic, negotiation of their differences is amongst the most enduring but also recent themes of theorizing the city (Kahn 1987; Fincher and Jacobs 1998). But modern social and political thought on the city did not always work through the issues of domination, heterogeneity, assimilation, integration and cohesion in the same way or manner. Whether these social differences are conceived along class, ethnic, gender, or more broadly cultural terms, difference has been a dominant concern for thought in quite different ways.

Yet, historical differences through which difference itself has been constituted in theorizing the European city is important. The manner in which the difference is constituted, understood and expressed show remarkable historical discontinuities. It is noteworthy to observe, for example, how, within a few decades, understanding of difference in the city shifts quite radically from the manners and habits of the working classes in the 1840s to the manners and habits of immigrants in the 1920s. It is not that the categories 'immigrants' and 'working classes' are mutually exclusive or interchangeable but discourse in the 1920s decisively shifts to racializing and ethnicizing those who arrive in the city in a manner that was inconceivable in the 1840s. As is well known, the concern with dangerous classes in the nineteenth century is inflected through a bourgeois morality that enacted itself through the morals of the working classes. Yet, by the 1920s, while concern with the dangerous classes still present, the focus decisively shifts towards the compatibility of new immigrants into the morals of the working classes thus constituted. What partly accounts for this is the arrival of different 'religious', 'ethnic' and 'racial' groups in the city and the problematization of their fit, that is to say,

assimilation into the host, that is to say, dominant bourgeois, cultures of the city. Perhaps Louis Wirth's theorization of the city not only as a relatively dense and large settlement but also a heterogeneous settlement signal as much as accelerates this shift in thought (Wirth 1938). Wirth was almost alone in imagining that group differences could exist without being assimilated into the dominant bourgeois culture (Wirth 1964 [1945]). But most of his contemporaries thought otherwise. Thus, throughout the twentieth century the question of difference remains as the question of the city but mostly articulated as the assimilation of the other. The problem of the government of the city as the problem of the government of the state transforms itself into essentially the question of the assimilation of the other into the city. Both the European city and American city become prototype of the occidental city where oriental subjects are acculturated and assimilated into bourgeois morality and they become citizens only insofar as they succeed in this assimilation. In other words, the city becomes the essential space and mechanism through which nationalism enacts itself. Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries the work of nationalism gets done in and through the city: imagining the nation ethnically, racially, and linguistically, cultivating subjects to imagine their selves as members of that imagined nation, coercing subjects into transforming their ways of being and disposition to conform with that imaginary, creating symbols, practices, icons, ideas and routines that participate in the creation of an imagined nation was all done in and through the city. The nation is not only imagined but also assembled and held together in and through the city. (An important issue amazingly overlooked in studies of nationalism.)

Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, imagining and urging nationalist assimilation become ever more difficult, if not impossible, and posing the question of the government of the city in terms of assimilation ever more problematic. That is to say, difference increasingly transforms itself from a pathos signifying afflictions of the city to an ethos underlying the promises of the city. As differences pluralize and proliferate, difference becomes a profound question as to how the city is to understand, accommodate and, depending on perspective, recognize it (Young, 1990; Fincher and Jacobs 1998; Sandercock 1998). Within a few decades the city is no longer theorized with assimilation as its civilizing mission, but with hospitality as its refuge (Derrida 2000 [1997], 2001). More remarkably, this ethos of pluralization also becomes the quintessential character of the European city and its history is written as a history of its cosmopolitan ethos. It is almost as if the modern city recovers or discovers its cosmopolitical essence as cosmopolis; xenophobia that mobilizes assimilation transforms itself into xenophilia that mobilizes difference. An ironic consequence of this is that while the oriental city was charged with absence of coherence and unity in the early twentieth century, especially by Weber, now thought constitutes the European city as that space which always cultivated diversity and difference and the oriental city as that space which lacked diversity and imposed sameness and unity (Hourani 1970; Stern 1970; Abu-Lughod 1987). Be that as it may, that very process that mobilizes xenophilia carries within it a number of aporias that lead back to xenophobia. Theorizing the modern city with its cosmopolitan ethos cannot manage to forget its history of nationalist assimilation and xenophobia, and with the increasing appearance of oriental or Islamic others within the city, shows its strength and persistence often enough and remains always within view and reach.

Security

The kind of risk that autonomy, accumulation and difference imply for security, which was symbolized by the dangerous classes, is fundamentally different than the kind of security that

becomes a concern in the twenty-first century. The dangerous classes of the modern city were those who could not be disciplined for temporal, spatial and health habits that were conducive to productivity and prosperity of the state. But those who could not conduct themselves properly, who slip in and out not only of different identities but also of abode and jobs, constituted dangerous classes precisely because they were inassimilable but not unreformable. These dangers were internal to and inherent in the city. Thus discourse on dangerous classes thoroughly believed in its capacity to reform the dangerous classes and transform them into appropriate (acquiescent, amiable, productive) working classes.

In the twenty-first century the danger comes from elsewhere. This elsewhere-ness of the danger embodies at least two meanings. Those who now constitute a danger are clearly from elsewhere. They are from elsewhere not because they are not from here (which would have been the case around the turn of the twentieth century) but because they are from those spaces that have been constituted as its oriental other. The anxiety about the danger constituted by those who had been arriving from elsewhere was accumulating throughout the latter part of the twentieth century but the early twenty-first century becomes a turning point. The city becomes gripped by its anxiety of the radical other who arrives from elsewhere. The second meaning of elsewhere concerns those who are not only inassimilable but also unreformable. The discourse on the city then turns on the question of not assimilation or reform but security and safety against the danger posed by those who are from elsewhere. Combined together, these two meanings constitute the precise meaning of security of the modern city. The discourse that securitizes the city focuses on elimination, defence, eradication, dissolution, suppression and obliteration of the danger and purification and sterilization of the city.

Thus, the securitization of the city encounters the ethos of pluralization and valorization of difference. A significant part of anxiety, hence insecurity, of the city owes to the fact that precisely its securitization has yet to find an ethical way to deal with difference. The discourse on security presses the European city to define itself by fundamental values of Europeanness. The more the city is pressed into its civilizing mission by asserting fundamental values; it generates fundamental values that counter it. Thus, security produces insecurity; the city oscillates between hospitality and hostility. While on the one hand it embraces the other, on the other hand, it repels it. While the city attempts to allay its insecurities from without, it fails to recognize its sources within. The securitization of the city no longer involves building encircling walls but labyrinths of distrust, suspicion and doubt of the other because the other is deemed as a threat to its fundamental values. As mentioned earlier, towards the end of the twentieth century, it becomes obvious that the city itself is increasingly securitized: fences, gated communities, surveillance cameras, tracking systems, security guards, risk zones assemble together to create defensible spaces and zones ostensibly deterring crime. But this fortress mentality that thrive under an illusory and unattainable will to absolute security is itself a symbol of absolute insecurity brought on the inability and unwillingness of the dominant groups in the city to recognize their others as others (Davis 1990). It is almost as if the dream of the city as a cosmopolitical space of strangers, of *hostipitality*, as Derrida would imagine it, comes to an end (Simmel 1971 [1903]).

The course of events that the early twenty-first century inaugurates seem to confirm the inner insecurities of dominant groups in the city, which increasingly recognize difference as a problem to be eliminated rather than seeing it either as a pathos that needs a cure as in the early twentieth century, let alone an ethos that defines the city as in the late twentieth century. How is, then, social and political thought to theorize the city?

Conclusion

The four themes I have outlined are neither mutually exclusive nor chronologically sequential aspects of theorizing the European city. These four themes dominated social and political thought on the European city precisely because they constitute elements of its modernity so much so that modernity of the city even interprets its own history through those elements. Autonomy, accumulation, difference and security remain aporias of the modern city. The autonomy of the city comes up against its accumulation drives; its valorization of difference comes up against its drive for security; its accumulation drive engenders difference; its difference desires autonomy; its autonomy engenders indifference; its indifference produces dependence; its dependence generates sameness; its sameness desires security. Out of these tensions that the aporias of the city generates, the city is made and remade, in its own image and of the other. If it appears to thought that these four themes have always been dominant elements of the city in history it is because that thought belongs to an epoch, which has understood the city that way. That is to say, it belongs to an epoch, which understood the city in its own image. But that does not mean that theorizing the city cannot question that image and see these themes as much a diagnosis of the essence of the city as an assemblage of images that organizes our understanding of the city. In fact, theorizing the city must mean just that, if anything. Otherwise, thought remains hopelessly within the shadow cast by its understanding of the city and its possibilities, without being able to think differently about its autonomy, accumulation, difference and security.

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