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## ANOTHER LOOK AT 'THE CITY IN HISTORY'

RICHARD C. WADE\*

It must be clear by now that Lewis Mumford has written an important book. Most reviewers have praised it lavishly; and those who questioned its main themes did so only after due flattery. This extraordinary reception has recently been crowned with a Pulitzer Prize. I have elsewhere joined this parade of acclaim, lauding 'The City in History' for its breadth of learning, its enormous sweep, its glittering prose and its engaging audacity. In short, within a year of its publication this book has been put on the shelf on modern classics.

Yet a second reading raises problems that were curiously obscured in the excitement of discovery which accompanied the first reading. What initially seemed persuasive, indeed compelling, seems less so now; what was once quite clear appears fuzzy; what looked like a pat case becomes more tenuous under further scrutiny. To be sure, Mumford's position is as plain as before, and the logic with which he pursues its implications is still forceful. But what is lacking is relevance. This may seem a strange indictment of a volume which was intended, at least in part, to be a tract for the times. To the extent, however, that this book is about cities and history, and not about modern man and the imminence of nuclear destruction, it is not very satisfying; to the extent that it is a guide to meeting the problems of renewing urban life, it is even less so.

This is not to say that *The City in History* is not a valuable book. It is; it has many very considerable merits. A large number of conventional views are decisively dismissed; and nowhere is the recent scholarship on ancient cities so well summarized and utilized. Urban beginnings are embedded in religious as well as economic motivations, and these origins are pushed back to a very early time. More than half the book is devoted to the various transformations of the metropolis before the Baroque period, providing a useful corrective for those who, like so many Americans, believe urbanization to be a relatively modern phenomenon. The disturbing impact of industrialization on the historic city is graphically detailed; the growth of the suburb and its almost immediate despoilment is tearfully told; and, of course, the destructive capacity of the automobile becomes a central concern.

These themes are not new; in fact, Mumford himself explored many of them in 1938 in *The Culture of Cities*. But they are here expertly and eloquently handled. The author's basic thesis is that the contemporary city, unlike its historic predecessors, is growing "inorganically,

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indeed cancerously, by a continuous breaking down of old tissues, and an overgrowth of new tissues" (the biological analogy, incidentally, is Mumford's favorite—and least persuasive—device). The old urban container has been shattered, and what was once an orderly environment has become disorganized and aimless. Though men might still be able to control the shape of the metropolis and hence the texture of their lives, it is doubtful if they have either the will or the institutions to do so. Yet if they do not, the city will disappear amidst a meaningless sprawl and a "boundless conurbation. . . . At that point the stage will be set for 'Post-Historic Man.' "

This fate is tawdry enough, but Mumford's grim analysis suggests the possibility, even the probability, of an even worse one. He contends that presently we live in a "metropolitan regime" where all the immense scientific energy and destructive human capacities are centered in the city. In the process of urban disintegration, the chances of nuclear war and racial obliteration are greatly magnified. "Never before," he writes, "has the 'citadel' exercised such atrocious power over the human race. . . . The metropolitan regime now threatens to reach its climax in a meaningless war, one of total extermination, whose only purpose would be to relieve the anxieties and fears produced by the citadels' wholesale commitment to weapons of annihilation and extermination. Thus absolute power has become absolute nihilism." In this way, Mumford places on the city the whole burden of our times, the choice between life and death for civilization.

This conclusion, baldly stated, seems extravagant for it posits a clear and direct relationship between "the citadel" or metropolis and the making of national decisions in both West and East. Of course, this is not the case. Yet the proposition stems from Mumford's contention about the essential nature of the city. He asserts that Plato made a "simple fact of observation" when he wrote in "The Laws" that "every city is in a natural state of war with every other." Moreover, the author himself states that from the very beginning "war and domination, rather than peace and co-operation, were engrained in the original structure of the ancient city." And had not Patrick Geddes long ago pointed out that "each historic civilization" began with "a living urban core, the polis," and ended "in a common graveyard of dust and bones, a Necropolis, or city of the dead: fire scorched ruins, shattered buildings, empty workshops, heaps of meaningless refuse, the population massacred or driven into slavery"? The modern metropolis can expect little better, though Mumford heroically attempts to rescue contemporary man from this historic vice by exhorting him to take the future into his own hands.

I deliberately use this illustration because it is at the very heart of the book. Throughout runs the theme of impending disaster. Unless

bold steps are taken, man will inexorably move toward violent destruction. This may be true, and hence very much worth saying. Yet the precise connection of the city with such an event is not presented. Since we live in a civilization precariously close to annihilation, and that civilization is largely an urban one, Mumford assumes an exact correlation of the two. But that relationship is never worked out in any important way. Arthur Koestler once observed that the trouble with the Marxist analysis was that it created an economic substructure and an intellectual superstructure, but there were no stairs joining the basement and the attic. Mumford leaves us with a similar void between the city and nuclear war. We are thus without the evidence at the crucial point of the argument.

Nor is this an isolated instance. The volume is filled with similar stated relationships between "the city" and great historical movements; many are convincing, others are not. But in either case, the proposition is asserted and seldom proved. Once underway, Mumford prefers to rely upon an internal logic rather than continuous empirical evidence. This permits him to choose his own periods for emphasis and to neglect others. Hence the Renaissance gets only cursory treatment, while the Middle Ages receive much closer attention. The technique also allows sharper contrasts, the fuller uses of black and white, in place of the subtler shadings that a persistent narrative would require. Greek cities can be considered on the whole quite good; Rome, on the other hand, was dreadful. Yet we know that Athens was not that good, nor Rome that dreadful.

Mumford's judgments, then, are not drawn from traditional evidence, nor are they embodied in the conventional narrative. They are not, however, capricious for he has stern standards of what makes an ideal city. It should be relatively small to keep a human scale; it ought to have an intimate relation, an organic one, with the surrounding countryside. Inside, the metropolis must bring together "within relatively narrow compass, the diversity and variety of special cultures: at least in token quantities all races and cultures can be found here, along with their languages, their customs, their costumes, their typical cuisines; here the representatives on mankind" will meet "face to face on neutral ground." In grander scope, the city should foster "the maternal, life-nurturing functions, the autonomous activities, the symbiotic associations. . . . For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities is the care and culture of men."

Against these exacting standards historic towns and the present metropolis are measured. Few do very well. Athens, some mediaeval places, Amsterdam, Venice get high marks; so do the suburbs of Bath and Riverside, Illinois. But most, even the frequently admired cities like Paris, New York and San Francisco, have overriding deformities. These urban disfigurements, he argues, stemmed from the general

social and political malaise of which the cities were merely the highest expression. Rome and Paris at the apex of their power personified the absolutism of empire. American metropolises have embodied the commercialism which is at the center of a capitalistic society. In the modern epoch, the disease is "sprawling giantism" which afflicts urban life throughout the world; hence, virtually no contemporary city can get the author's approval.

It is this Utopianism which raises the question of relevance. Today's cities are large and they will get larger. Even before the modern period one of the most significant aspects of the metropolis was its size. To be sure, urban growth since 1800 has been extraordinary, and the very scale of expansion has frustrated attempts to establish control over town life. Yet ancient Rome was much too large for Mumford's taste; so too, probably, were many non-Western cities. The "slavery of large numbers" which he denounces with such eloquence and conviction is endemic to the whole development. Indeed, the central tendencies in urbanization run against the grain of Mumford's requirements for the good city. It is the separation of the metropolis from the countryside, not its intimate or "organic" connections, that is most characteristic. Large numbers are essential under almost any historical circumstance to get variety and diversity, at least for any length of time. 30,000 people, the figure he often cites favorably, is simply insufficient to create and maintain a rich urban mixture even in "New Towns" or suburbs.

If this prejudice against size mars Mumford's argument about historic cities, it is even more crippling when the discussion involves suggestions for future policy. Since he believes the metropolis is already too big, much of his criticism of contemporary practice is irrelevant to the problems of urban leaders and planners who are desperately trying to order and shape tomorrow's growth. Inveighing against the automobile, "metropolitan monopoly," "universal conurbation," etc. is not much help to those who presently have to make day-to-day decisions. It is true that private property and generally unrestrained competition make comprehensive planning difficult, and in some instances almost impossible. But does anyone believe that the system is likely to change soon enough to give the metropolis the power over individual choices which Mumford thinks necessary to re-establish human control over the whole process? There is no evidence that we are on the verge of any such far-reaching institutional re-arrangement.

In short, if one disregards the contention about impending nuclear warfare and global destruction, and concentrates on the view of the metropolis past and present, Mumford's book is essentially an appeal for a kind of city that, in the nature of things, cannot be, erected in the image of historic cities which, in hard fact, never were.