

Patholopolis

Description

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The ***metropolis*** is about as good as a city can get. As â??the mother cityâ?•, it combines the best of its predecessor types: the family-based village community (***eopolis***), and that mutually supporting defensive community known as the ***polis***.

The *metropolis* is that stage in the evolution of the city where labour skills divide. Specialist workers band together encouraging long-distance trade and invention. The city accepts outsiders who introduce â??the shock of fresh habits and ideas: challenges to old waysâ?• [288].

Iâ??m quoting here from Lewis Mumfordâ??s (1895-1990) book *The Culture of Cities*. Mumford was an influential US urbanist, sociologist and philosopher of technology. Heâ??s of interest to me on several counts. Not least, he and the media theorist Marshal McLuhan were at odds on the subject of technology. I have drawn on McLuhanâ??s influence on digital culture in several places. My second attraction to Mumford is his confessed intellectual debt to the Edinburgh urban theorist Patrick Geddes (1854-1932). They corresponded and Mumford adopted some of Geddesâ??s ideas about the growth and decay of cities.

In *The Culture of Cities* Mumford claims to incorporate two phases in the life of cities identified by Geddes into his own schema. These are *parasitopolis* and *patholopolis.* As far as I can tell these ancient-sounding neologisms donâ??t appear in Geddeâ??s published writings but are listed in a correspondence between the two scholars. They crop up in a brief paragraph in one of Geddesâ??s letters.

> â??Polis, the City (Place) > Metropolis (Work) > Megalopolis (Place) > Parasitopolis (Folk) > Patholopolis (Work) > Necropolis (Place)â?• [163]



Parasitopolitis

Parasitopolis and *patholopolis* sound particularly interesting in the current condition where whole cities are under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For Mumford, the decline of cities begins when cities reach the phase of the *megalopolis*. The *megalopolis* is an oversized city dominated by power elites, exploitation and raw quantification.

> â??The owners of the instruments of production and distribution subordinate every other fact in life to the achievement of riches and the display of wealthâ?• [289].

But the parasitic element exerts its effects at the next phase in the decline of the city, the ***tyrannopolis***:

> â??Extensions of parasitism throughout the economic and social scene: the function of spending paralyzes all the higher activities of culture and no act of culture can be justified that does not involve display and expenseâ?• [290].

Mumford wrote this in the 1950s, when the effects of fascism in Europe and elsewhere were still being worked through, though the *tyrannopolis* looks familiar even now.

> â??Development of predatory means as a substitute for trade and give-and-take: naked exploitation of colonies and hinterland: intensification of the cycles of commercial depression, following over expansion of industry and dubious speculative enterprise, heightened by wars and war-preparations. Failure of the economic and political rulers to maintain the bare decencies of administration: place-hunting, privilege-seeking, bonus-collecting, favor-currying, nepotism,

> grafting, tribute-exacting become rife both in government and businessâ?• [290-291].

Whereas by most readings Karl Marx absorbed the sources of exploitation into the apparatus of capitalism, Mumfordâ??s philosophy had no such constraints. Were he alive today, in US politics he may well have named names.

> â??Domination of respectable people who behave like criminals and of criminals whose activities do not debar them from respectabilityâ?• [291].

The final phase in the cityâ??s decline for Mumford is that of the ***nekropolis***: â??the city of the dead: flesh turned to ashes: life turned into a meaningless pillar of saltâ?• [292].

Fresh habits

As a consequence of all the corruption â??War and famine and disease rack both city and countrysideâ?• [291]. Thatâ??s a common cultural trope. Cities destroy themselves due to their decline in morals and their corruption. The â??pillar of saltâ?• reference recalls the biblical destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

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Since Mumford, city scholars recognise the fraught nature of cities and their resistance to neat classification. We are also less inclined to attribute floods, famines and epidemics to moral turpitude. Nor are we that keen on urban teleologies suggesting monolithic epochs of ascent and decline.

Contrary to a valorisation of the ideal city (the *metropolis*), we are more likely to seek out the parasitical and pathalogical as jarring us into â??the shock of fresh habits and ideas: challenges to old waysâ?• [288]. One meagre consolation from the current pandemic is that it prompts us to view the city and social life through a different lens, or an otoscope, reviving old ideas about the rise and fall of cities and empires.

Mumfordâ??s account of the decline of cities suggests that the agency of so-called natural disasters comes from within the city. Thatâ??s reasonable enough, as we think of human culpability in climate change, overcrowding, social inequalities, global tourism and other epidemic agents.

References

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Note

- The image is of the town of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, an indicator of urban decline for some, but a symbol of community, hope and enterprise for others.
- Reference to the comedy-drama *Parasite* (2019) would be appropriate here, in illustrating the urban contrasts between rich and poor, their pathological symbiosis, overlaid with natural disaster.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. cities
2. covid-19
3. pandemic

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