

The City, Redux but Deeply Flawed

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In the mid-19th century, Baudelaire complained that Paris was changing more rapidly than the human heart. Cities are again going through upheavals, in their built environments, their economic activities, and their forms of life. When Baudelaire was writing about Paris, few large cities existed anywhere in the world and only a handful with one million people or more. Today there are over five hundred cities with populations over one million. These are no longer confined to Europe and North America, but also occur in the Global South, especially in Asia [1].

Half a century ago and more, the economies of major cities were based largely on manufacturing. Even the commercial capitals of this lost world, like London and New York, were important manufacturing centers. Traditional manufacturing is now a minor driver of large-scale urban development. Instead, new dynamic sectors such as finance, business services, technology-intensive production, and creative industries, represent the main engines of urban growth [2].

The manufacturing cities of the mid-20th century were marked by a division of labor focused on white- and blue-collar workers. This was then expressed, imperfectly but tangibly, in a spatial division of neighborhoods. As the new sectors have steadily supplanted manufacturing in major cities, a new division of labor has appeared, and with it a changing pattern of neighborhoods [3]. The new arrangements revolve around highly qualified cognitive and cultural workers on the one side and low-wage service workers on the other. The social marginality of the latter group is accentuated by the fact that so many of them are immigrants from diverse backwaters and peripheries. These workers comprise a sort of new servile class in that their labor entails tasks (like child minding, cooking, taxi-driving, janitorial services, etc.) that provide direct and indirect support for the work and life-styles of the upper half of urban society. In the cities of the global South they fade into an extensive underclass of rag-pickers, street traders, and mendicants.

These economic and social shifts are mirrored in the physical appearance of the city. One dramatic illustration of this remark can be found in the architectural transformations occurring in global cities where self-consciously aestheticized monuments to globalized corporate and business power are rising up on all sides. Another is the shrinkage of poor people's neighborhoods in inner city areas as waves of gentrifies upgrade local housing stock [4]. Concomitantly, low-wage families are increasingly relegated to rundown areas in more distant sections of the city and to deteriorated suburbs where cheap housing is available.

Hovering over these complex changes is a deepening social divide separating the top and bottom halves of urban society into two nations reminiscent of Disraeli's England. This concerns not so much the sadly familiar one-percent versus the rest but a more pervasive division between cognitive-cultural workers and the new servile class generally. The observable effect of this developmental model as it has unfolded in the most advanced cities in the twenty-first century is the remarkable contrast between the glamour and extravagance of their most opulent sections and the squalor of their darker underbellies [5].

Yet cities are in the end communities of people who live together,

who are interdependent, who have equal rights to urban public space, and who brush up against one another in the course of their daily activities. In addition, as many urban analysts have demonstrated, the economy of the city itself is deeply marked by symbioses residing in the productivity and innovative effects that are latent in dense clusters of firms and workers. To use a term that is increasingly current today, the city functions in important ways as a "Common," i.e. a resource that belongs to the community as a whole [6]. Even the monetary value of urban land is socially produced. The further paradox of the city, then, is the glaring contrast thrown into relief by the privatization of so many of its benefits while so much of the urban arena as a whole is a public resource.

The recovery of social cohesion and equity together with the consolations and pleasures of community are therefore important desiderata in any reform of the city in the interests of more meaningful and rewarding modalities of urban existence. At the same time, any attempt to augment the competitive advantages of the urban economy calls for policy measures focusing on the symbioses that derive from the collective order of the city [7]. The net deduction from all of this is that deeply-rooted political changes are urgently required if cities are to be diverted from their currently problematical trajectories and set on a new course promising at least a modest degree of prosperity, livability, and conviviality for all.

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