To a New Babylon

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‘WHAT MAKES A GOOD LIFE FOR A CITY?’
SEMINAR

Presentation notes

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1. Introduction: Faith and Reason

It’s a great honour to speak today, and especially to follow the presentation of Luke’s Bretherton’s fine paper, ‘Seeking the good enough city’. We were both asked to ponder the question, *What makes a good life for a city?*

Luke’s answer is drawn from the perspective of theology – and presumably from a position of Christian faith. My response emerges rather differently from social science, particularly those parts that have lately pondered what we might term human ecology – the field of knowledge that ponders the mutually constitutive relationship between our species and nature.

Two very different perspectives, historically often at odds, but perhaps like humanity and nature, somehow mutually constitutive: at least in the western cultural tradition. A small but pertinent instance of this may be found in the principal work that influenced my recent book, *The Urban Condition* – this work was Hannah Arendt’s (1958) *The Human Condition*.

In opening his paper, Luke summarises very well the contemporary urban preponderance. It is my postulate that the human condition, which Arendt the committed modernist describes so well, must now be rethought of as the urban condition of a species that has largely freed itself from the grub and toil of rural life – only of course, as Arendt pointed out, to burden itself with new perils and depredations.

Arendt’s book enormously influenced western social science, especially political philosophy. Its most striking conceptual offering for many was that of *natality*, the endless, boundless possibility of human renewal that arises from our urge to interpret and recreate the world we find ourselves in. This is no Whiggish idea of human history driven by bright men with big ideas, but one that binds us back to nature, which locates at the core of our recreations the great wheel of procreation to which we are fixed as natural beings.

Arendt, secular Jew, finds the story of this natality in the scriptures. As Frederick Dolan puts it:

> She characterizes this ineradicable possibility as nothing less than “the miracle that saves the world” from the ruin to which it is otherwise subject. The greatest symbol of this possibility – “its most glorious and succinct expression”, Arendt says – is the Christian Gospels’ announcement of glad tidings”: “A child has been born to us”. It is this Christian figuration of the miraculous through the image of the newborn that gives Arendt the term ‘natality’ (Dolan 2004).
And so, with this in mind, I am not surprised to find in Luke’s paper an account of human purpose that also draws from the scriptures and which can be interpreted, even to some extent supported, by critical social science. Let me state very briefly the points where I think our two expositions of the human condition align and adhere.

First: the injunction of exile that is simultaneously the story of the Christian people and the historical motif of modernity. The Christian story first. Luke finds the former strongly essayed in Augustine’s City of God, which itself draws upon the writings of Jeremiah, the prophet recognised by all three major monotheistic religions.

Jeremiah 29 states that it is the will of the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, that the chosen people will accept banishment to Babylon, the secular city, but as a place of flourishing not deprivation; as a place to be good in, including accepting of authority. For the chosen, the secular city is not to be a place of disconsolation and refusal.

Jeremiah makes this very clear in a quote provided by Luke:

\[
\text{…seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will find your welfare.}
\]

Augustine relives the metaphor of exile a little by describing the people of God as pilgrims residing in Babylon, enjoying its peace and abundance whilst quietly refusing through the witness of faith its worldly failings. Heaven bound pilgrims within the “prideful and sinful earthly city”, as Luke puts it.

The project of modernity, of modernisation, arguably the greatest work of our species, can be similarly interpreted as one of exile. And perhaps also as a great species pilgrimage. Indeed, it commonly has been, and this brings us to the urban question. If nothing else, modernity has been a great project of reterritorialization of our species, a journey from rural to urban, from enchantment to reason, from servility to freedom.

On the face of it, a great project of liberation from “the idiocy of rural life” as Marx and Engels unkindly put it. But digging deeper – as indeed Marx did with the greatest force of insight – it was at the same time a monstrous work of separation, from natural caprice yes, but also from nature itself. In the left tradition, this story was put into verse by Bertolt Brecht.
I, Bertolt Brecht, came out of the black forests.
My mother moved me into the cities as I lay
Inside her body. And the coldness of the forests
Will be inside me till my dying day.

In Brecht’s rendering the prospect of complete sundering is rejected. Nature will be inside us to our dying days. The dual burden of the modern is to carry this species freight, our nature (natality?), together with what Erich Fromm called “the terrible burden of self-strength”. If this can be done, great things are possible. The record shows that we have struggled to recognise let alone sustain the dual weights of modern necessity and possibility.

Glowering within these insights is the danger of alienation. This is the second convergence of faith and reason that occurred to me as I read Luke’s essay. Alienation is the corruption of modern possibility that was central to Marx’s criticism of capitalism. Luke also confronts modern urban alienation – starkly represented in the contemporary gated community – asserting that all citizens must accept that they are “participants in a shared community of fate”.

This works in reason where denial of species being, of sociality, conflicts with any rational understanding of the human condition. It surely also follows from Jeremiah and later Augustine, where the pilgrims must join themselves to the common Babylonian purpose, and by consequence, the inevitability of shared fate. Luke finds the best path towards goodness – never to be realised, but always to be aspired to – in democratic politics, avowing a pluralistic model that privileges community organising.

I don’t doubt that this broadly charts the course to a “good enough city”. (Arendt broadly agreed.) I share the disavowal of earthly urban utopia – another convergence it seems of faith and reason. But I strongly believe that Luke’s account needs filling out to better engage the asymmetries of power, which he recognises as a problem, that plague all possibilities for better purpose in a capitalist urban age.

To state the point in a somewhat vulgar way, what hope has community organising in the face of globalised capital that now sees urban development as a core circuit of accumulation? We may very well need faith and reason joined as counterforce to this dangerous global project.

To complete (or improve) my answer to the question posed today I’d like to now finish my presentation by selecting and connecting some passages from my recent book The Urban Condition. Its fundamental premise is that capitalism has entered its terminal phase, but this does not mean the end of humanity or even modernity. It
may be – to join Luke’s narrative – another stage in the human pilgrimage, to a new Babylon, where the search for the ‘good enough’ city must be renewed.

So…my closing words will be a short act of urban imagination, which sketches The Good City, perhaps a new Babylon. It’s what I think we could build in the ruins of a fallen order. It might be the city that renews the promise of modernity. That promise, so often breached, as explained by Arendt was of human progress guided by the dual modern ideals, reason and its restraining twin doubt.

The new Babylon might commit to what the Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich called the principle of self-limitation – a modernity based on rationality and the search of human realisation, yes, but restrained by an equal commitment to doubt, to self-awareness – what the late German social scientist Ulrich Beck termed reflexivity.

2. The Urban Age and its Discontents

An urban age has been declared by global institutions and in expert commentary. Triumphalism abounds. A rapidly increasing majority of humanity now resides in urban settings, especially the fast growing ‘meso-cities’ of the developing world. Ed Glaeser (Triumph of the City) casts this as a new epoch of human achievement and opportunity. Jeb Brugmann heralds a Welcome to the Urban Revolution. Leo Hollis insists that Cities are Good for You. Indeed, the Metropolis is a Genius.

To be sure, the urbanisation project that has been central to modernisation has reached new heights of species’ significance. It cannot be denied that urbanisation has been the Long March of human improvement (with all of the pitfalls suggested by the metaphor).

And yet, despite the happiness of expertise, the new urban preponderance also marks a dangerous unravelling of human prospect. The testimonies of manifest environmental, social and economic breakdowns struggle to be heard above the chorusing of the urban age. ‘The Horsemen of the Apocalypse’ (Žižek) are the unheeded town criers of an endangered modernity.

Many are declaring an end of Promethean modernity. This term recalls Prometheus, the titan from Greek mythology who scorned the natural order and imagined himself greater than the gods. Industrial modernity has been godless and boundless, without limits. The idea of self-limitation has been regarded as heresy; a primitive notion that conspires against the modern ideal.

Here in this slide Prometheus, symbolising man unchained, is juxtaposed with Isambard Kingdom Brunel the great 19th century British engineer who did more than most to inspire the industrial imagination with his great works.
We might ask the question in an increasingly dangerous urban age, has the Promethean order finally run its course? Has nature put chains on us again? This time around our necks? Back to the urban age...

A danger to human prospect is the increased decoupling of urbanisation from its modern work of species liberation, captured in the old German refrain *Stadt luft macht frei*. More and more it seems urbanisation is connected to the imperatives of accumulation, not humanisation.

The compact city ideal of progressive urbanism has been redeployed to the work of (vertical) accumulation. In western cities we see an urbanism that is a hyper intensive, hyper accumulative but strangely impoverished. Cities are being driven to higher density by the dictates of power and capital not sustainability.

In so called developed cities austerity governance and a relentlessly growing security state increase their hold. We are in fact, from the point of view of democracy, witnessing a reversal of the development cycle in western states. The politics of representative democracies, including urban politics, is largely quiet and impotent. They have no model to offer an anguished world. Models of human survival I suspect will come from non-western countries and cities. Much of the rest of the world is consigned to what Mike Davis has called a *Planet of Slums*. And here intensifying urban capital is hideously mocked in South American cities by the rise of vertical favela.

As Davis shows, much of the developing world’s urbanism is marred by blight, social disparity and violence. Žižek (2010) believes that the slums of the South are restive with radical, even violent, revolutionary potential. This contrasts with the ‘revolution’ (meaning, ‘innovation unleashed’) forecast by urban enthusiasts (e.g. Brugmann 2009).

The bright mood of popular urban commentary contrasts with the terrible outlook facing much of the human species; now reconstituting itself as *homo urbanis*. As the late Ulrich Beck (2012:161) observed, “It’s no wonder that the business in hopelessness is flourishing.

3. The Black Sun

The urban age is a melancholic era. The new individualism celebrated and prosecuted by neo-liberal globalisation has come at enormous psychic and emotional cost to the species. It is most starkly registered in a sweeping decline in human mental health.

Mental health failure appears to be the new human malaise, at least in the West where it is dethroning the ‘emperor of all maladies’, cancer. The World Health
Organisation has predicted that depression will be the second most devastating disease in the world by 2020.

Julia Kristeva, analyst of melancholia, observes: “The periods that witness the downfall of political and religious idols, periods of crisis, are particularly favourable to black moods”. Kristeva hears in the keening of human lament, “The Blank Rhetoric of the Apocalypse”.

Kristeva links rising human psychosis to the depletion of politics, and the depleting influence of neo-liberal consensualism:

> Today’s milestone is human madness. Politics is part of it…Politics is not, as it were for Hannah Arendt, the field where human freedom is unfurled. The modern world, the world of wars, the Third World, the underground world of death that acts upon us, do not have the civilised splendour of the Greek city state. The modern political domain is massively, in totalitarian fashion, social, levelling, exhausting.

And yet, paradoxically, enforced consensualism is shadowed by mounting uncertainty and declining trust.

The hideous and massive spectres of global warming, resource depletion and species loss betoken a crisis before which the individual is impotent and spectral: unseen and unspoken. Nowhere is this paralysis before the storm more acutely felt than in the city, where natural agency is most diminished, externalised, given over to the work of resource systems and technology.

Arendt warned of the consequences of modernist alienation, which might be summarised as an outbreak of human stupidity. The “almost infallible signs of alienation from the world” would be, “A noticeable decrease in common sense in any given community and a noticeable increase in superstition and gullibility…”. The waning of human common sense is perhaps powerfully registered in climate sceptics and the misty eyed enthusiasms for pre-modernity that have declared a ‘New Age’. Both, in very different ways, are ‘denialist’ movements, retreating into mysticism in the face of awful human endangerment.

They further betray the waning of social confidence in the modern ideal, entangled in contradictions and dreadful legacies. Beck on species angst: “What worries people nowadays is the premonition that the anthropological certainty of modernity is founded on quicksand”.

No such concern in the accumulative economy which clings to burning cities. The economist Kahn assures us in his book *Climatopolis* that “cities will thrive in the
hotter future”. Though he notes *en passant* a time of horror and destruction for the low lying southern megacities.

4. **To the Next World**

It is the age of crumbling empires. And yet, despite overwhelming and increasingly painful testimony of its failure, we seem unwilling to indict capitalist modernity and set about its replacement. In the maw of inaction, the advocates of the dying order assert new certitudes as means for delaying its end, and the termination of its endowments on the powerful and the vested.

The new urban commentaries, like *The Triumph of the City* (Glaeser 2011), serve this cause of obfuscation and delay, if largely unconsciously, by prosecuting the cause of doomed modernity. Innocent perhaps, yet dangerous; they are part of a broader ideology of denial that works to ‘normalise the apocalypse’.

On the other hand, the catastrophism of some radical perspectives would join cause with reaction by asserting an end to human history, certainly its modern phase. As John Barry makes clear, “…a view of the inevitability of collapse can and does lead to de-politicized or even anti-political responses”.

Predicting a postindustrial dark age for humanity, Howard Kunstler sees history superannuated to *The Long Emergency*; centuries of starvation, disease, and civil disorder. In this schema, we moderns will return to ‘reechanted lives’. To use a metaphor from the Bible, we’ll be banished back to Eden. Both conservative reaction and progressive catastrophism refuse in different ways the work of species transformation which lies before us.

Perhaps we should not fear terminal social crisis, because, like death itself, it is part of the human condition, the necessary prelude to rebirth of prospect. As Arendt made clear,

> Life is a process that everywhere uses up durability, wears it down, makes it disappear, until eventually dead matter, the result of small, single, cyclical, life processes, returns to the over-all gigantic circle of nature herself, where no beginning and no end exist and where all natural things swing in changeless, deathless repetition.

We are learning painfully that, contra the Promethean delusion, human society is fastened to the ‘deathless repetition’ of ‘natural things’. For us, natural recurrence surely means co-evolution with the planetary order, which has brought lately the urban age. The city is simultaneously our principal act of realisation, and our greatest disturbance of the natural order. From this costly
plateau of achievement we must conceive and commit to a more settled path of planetary evolution.

This would be the miracle of which Arendt speaks. If we defy the odds which seem stacked against us, then a place of safety if not tranquillity lies beyond the storms of the present crisis. This is a destination that the species itself must choose not anticipate through an enormous and unprecedented act of collective will. The practicalities are not a mystery. Massive decarbonisation and resource restraint are necessary steps towards a safer place.

They will be all the harder to achieve as we suffer the injuries of a failing world order. Retrenchment of capitalism will not present a straight path back to ecological moderation. Its death agonies will likely generate many wild quests for salvation or morbid indulgence through vulgar resource exploitation.

These deathly misadventures are prefigured in the contemporary lust for Arctic exploitation, the fracking rush in the new worlds, and the enthusiasm for newly unlocked carbon, such as Canada’s tar sands.

If Arendt is right, however, we should accept the miraculous possibility of the new, and of species restoration, even in this gravest hour of human peril. What is the ‘miraculous course’ we must commit to? Where is its end place? To be washed up, as castaways, on the desperate shores of survivalism? No. We should reconceive and replot our exit from industrial modernity as quest for a new human plentitude.

Freed from the diktat of accumulation, our species could discover fresh forms of realisation in things without ‘value’, at least as presently conceived. A post-accumulative political economy is the premise for a new urban modernity.

In the early 5th century in the wake of a collapsed world, that of the Roman empire, Saint Augustine wrote a book, The City of God. Luke has described its theological significance very well. From the secular view, it strikes me an attempt to rise above destruction and imagine a new social order, but one with its roots in the old order. It was a great act of urban imagination. Arendt was surely influenced by this Augustinian ideal, locating the political work of human recurrence, natality, firmly within the bounds of the polis.

What values, designs and strategies should guide a new urban modernity committed to a new human ecology of self-limitation and care? Put differently, what lies beyond the ruins of the present? It surely depends upon what we learn from the current terrible transition and how we use this knowledge in quest for human reconstruction. I believe that this means renewing not rejecting the ideals and possibilities of modernity.
To close if not to answer: a short imaginative, perhaps fanciful depiction of what city we might make in the beautiful wastes of post capitalism. This is an exercise in desire perhaps; evidence, as Freud would assert, that the human libido will survive the passing of any social order. How might we think the unthinkable?

5. The Good City: a Meditation on Post growth Urbanism

The good city will not be a society of pilgrims not saints. As Max Weber made clear, loss of certitudo salutis was a price to pay for modernisation. (Freud said the cost was guilt.) Nor will it embrace secular ideals of perfection – the dour market town of chaste liberalism, the consuming circus of neo-liberalism. It will not be the roughhewn utopia of twentieth-century socialism; cabbage queues and watchfulness.

The good city will transcend industrial modernity to realise a new modern possibility. It will replenish and extend our hard won gains of civil and personal freedoms. This will be a thoroughly modern polis that values doubt and refuses to give unrestrained play to reason. It will cherish and practise the Arendtian ideal of civilised science – of rationality, restrained and strengthened by reflexivity.

The good city will preserve our power to transform nature to free us from material necessity. This will be put to a better end than money chasing money. The obsession with organising things to accumulate more things will have passed away. Care will be an ordinary thing, but still hard work. Power will be an ordinary thing, dispersed to communities, but still our greatest venality.

The good city will be a better place than now. Not for its virtue; this will wax and wane. Goodness will emerge from a new project of coevolution between humanity and nature. We will care for this city and it for us. This will mark a new landfall of human achievement. We will have survived the slaughter of value that we knew as industrialism. The great trial that followed will, eventually, have ended well. In making an exhausted way to new shores, we will have finally learned to see the earth again. We will have done everything the hard way, via humanis.

The new world we re-inherit will be, in the words of the late Australian musician David McComb, a ‘beautiful waste’. We should not fear it terribly. Our extraordinary capacity for making convivial things, including from ruined cities and spoiled landscapes, will remain undiminished.

Ivan Illich, maverick priest, radical philosopher, prophesised the looming demise of promethean capitalism, inviting us to: “…imagine the children who will soon play in the ruins of high schools, Hiltons, and hospitals” (1977:23). This was not the Dark Age intoned by catastrophism, however, but the opening scenes of a
‘convivial modernity’, of children celebrating through play the downfall of the modern pretender, Prometheus.

With the fall comes exposure of the tyrant’s fraudulent claim on modern identity. Illich stated: “Prometheus was not Everyman, but a deviant”. The miracle of modern recovery that awaits us is, as Arendt explained, our inborn ability to endlessly produce the new...against the odds.

The Promethean dream is reaching its improvident end. We wake in a time of vast possibilities. Something awful is being born, but also something new. The odds, if we take them, are in our favour. Glaeser maintains that “...our urban future remains bright” (2011:268). From this vantage point, released from the hopes and delusions of a dying economic order, we might be inclined to thoroughly agree.

I began with Brecht and can’t resist the symmetry of an ending by him. I think we mustn’t be afraid of dissolution and we must, as Arendt insisted, have faith in natality and in new human possibility, even in the worst of times. With this in mind, I close with his paean, you may call it a prayer, to modern urban possibility in dark times.

In the earthquakes to come, I very much hope
I shall keep my cigar alight, embittered or no
I, Bertolt Brecht, carried off to the asphalt cities
From the black forests inside my mother long ago.

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