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Re-reading *The Culture of the Cities* by L. Mumford

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The excerpt proposed in the following is extracted from *The Culture of Cities* by Lewis Mumford.

The book, published in 1938, is one of the major books from the longstanding activity by Mumford (1895-1990) and is a turning point in his research. The interest in the manuscript is still alive today 80 years after its first publication, thanks to the articulation of Mumford's thought, overcoming the strict boundaries of disciplines. In his research and writings Mumford used the disciplinary approaches of sociology, urban planning, urban history – and geography. His methodology is nevertheless very close to geography. The “regional surveys” (started when Mumford was very young and inspired to the work of his mentor Patrick Geddes) used to be extended walks around the New York metropolitan area during which he would sketch and take notes.

The research upon which *The Culture of Cities* is based, starts from the surveys performed by Mumford in his early years and from the considerations that followed. *The Culture of cities* is nowadays a classic reading in urban studies. The book offers a discussion of contemporary culture and of the crisis of the civilization caused by technological progress. The book is, according to Mumford's introduction, complementary to his

Technics and Civilization, published in 1938.

In *The Culture of Cities*, the argumentation is developed through the analysis of the evolution of the Western cities from the Middle Ages to the contemporary city. While the contents are of sure interest, the book is also an articulated and engaging reading. The opinions by the author on the contemporary city (that will then evolve after WWII adopting a more pessimistic approach) are innovative for the years of its publications but still surprise today's reader for the capacity of Mumford to understand (and maybe anticipate) processes that had to become evident only in the following years. This is the case for his considerations on the evolution of metropolitan urban systems towards the form of the “Megalopolis”, considered to be the fourth stage in a model (inspired by Geddes' works) that would then include a fifth stage (“Tyrannopolis”) and a final sixth stage (“Nekropolis”).

Mumford's point of view represents a first attempt to criticize the metropolitan urban model and proposes a vision of planning intended as a crucial moment for urban renewal. He conceptualizes regionalism and community as key elements for the resolution of social diseases. The region, for Mumford, is a complex concept that includes economic, social, historic elements and is the basis upon which he sees the opportunity for regenerating the local communities towards what we would define nowadays a sustainable development. In his own words “so far from being archaic and reactionary, regionalism belongs to the future”.

The focus on the concept of community in Mumford's thought will make the book popular after WWII. His thought was disseminated

internationally thanks to many editions and translations. In Italy, the book was translated thanks to the interest by Adriano Olivetti and his Edizioni di Comunità: the book was published for the first time in the country in 1953. It is not for a chance that the manuscript was known in Italy thanks to Olivetti: the approach by his Movimento di Comunità emphasized the decentralization of human activities and the role of local community (“Manifesto programmatico di Comunità”, 1953). The concepts explained the Manifesto were coherent with those of regionalism and local community by Mumford.

The text proposed below is extracted from Chapter VI, “The politics of regional development”. The fifth paragraph “Survey and Plan as Communal Education” clearly presents the role that Mumford assigned to the knowledge of the territory as a key determinant for the development of democracy and the convergence between the aims of the individual and those of the community. The extract in his original version discusses the role of the knowledge of the territory as a protection against totalitarian powers such as fascism. The first three paragraphs were not included in the Italian translation published in 1953, partially mitigating the sense of the original text. Despite these discrepancies between the Italian and the original version, the knowledge of the region (“small enough to be grasped from a tower, a hilltop, or an airplane”) is, according to Mumford, a milestone in the education of the citizens. The geographic knowledge is thus valuable for creating an active citizen, provided that it overcomes the mere study of notions and theories. The experience on the terrain and the direct knowledge are essential for the understanding of the processes of regulation in the society and thus for the education of individuals capable to be actively involved in changing the territory. Thus, the survey should not be reserved to scholars and professionals, but needs to become part of every stage of the education of the individual.

The words by Mumford, written before the Second World War during the years of the consolidation of totalitarian regimes, could be reconsidered today according to different perspectives. Seen from the point of view of territorial planning, the thoughts by Mumford

sustain a concept of education of the active citizenship that overcomes the expanding role of technicalities that characterize today’s participatory processes. According to Mumford, a citizen who is informed on her/his regional context will naturally be an active citizen. Mumford argues that “the regional survey will not merely be a mode of assimilating scientific knowledge: it will be a dynamic preparation for further activity”. This will, in turn, also limit the power of the government and of the technocracies. The text provides also insights on the concepts of region, regional identity and political power. When citizens have a deep knowledge of their territory they are able to understand the ongoing processes, even the complex ones, and is an effective defense from political bias. For Mumford, understanding the local enables the comprehension of the global. This is still interesting today as we see the expansion of populist discourses, based on a localism very far from the concept of region proposed by Mumford.

The Culture of the Cities¹

Lewis Mumford

Chapter V - The Politics of Regional Development

5: Survey and Plan as Communal Education

The party politics of the nineteenth century was as remote from the thick tissue of actual life as were its pecuniary canons of success. A voter might loyally cast his vote every election without touching on a single issue that concerned his immediate life, without an intimate knowledge of a single phase of political administration, from taxes to the school system, and without affecting for the better a single aspect of his working life or his daily environment. The system “worked” in an atmosphere of windy ignorance.

The new totalitarian states profess to regard the liberal politics of the nineteenth century with scorn; but in fact they carry on the same traditions in an even more costly way, with the further disadvantage that their political wind must be kept at high pressure in order to divert attention from the human sterility of the power state’s achievements. The fascists go through the forms of voting without having the privilege of even casting a negative vote; they go through the forms of sounding out public opinion without daring to hear more than one side: even more than the most imperialist states of the nineteenth century they endeavor to wipe out local differences, local preferences, local pressures. The totalitarian state has but two important functions: to prepare for war and to keep power in the hands of the governing party. This is not in the least a new form of politics: it is merely the old form, shamelessly reduced to its naked reality.

The fascist state may be defined as the war dictatorship of the power state frozen into a permanent form: opinion governed by war censorship, action governed by military

coercion, all law converted, openly or implicitly, into martial law. In a sense, any fool can govern such a community; but only a fool would mistake such a process for government.

None of the attributes of an advanced civilization can be maintained in a permanently cowed and servile population: the delicate initiatives, the fine co-operations, the deeper loyalties toward truth and rational judgment upon which our civilization depends cannot be preserved in governments that know no law, even in the spiritual life, except the whim of the dictator or the command of the party. If the totalitarian state still shows the surface characteristics, here and there, of our common civilization it is only because it still lives on the going energies of the more civilized generation that preceded it; so far as fascism succeeds, these energies will wane, and barbarism will progressively rise to the surface, whether hastened by war or not. Such peoples will sink to the level of ancient Sparta - at whose very “bravery” the ancient world sometimes smiled. Toynbee’s interpretation of this possibility in the third volume of *A Study of History* is extremely suggestive.

The real alternative to the empty political patterns of the nineteenth century lies, not in totalitarianism, but in just the opposite of this: the restoration of the human scale in government, the multiplication of the units of autonomous service, the widening of the co-operative processes of government, the general reduction of the area of arbitrary compulsion, the restoration of the processes of persuasion and rational agreement. Political life, instead of being the monopoly of remote specialists, must become as constant a process in daily living as the housewife’s visit to the grocer or the butcher, and more frequent than the man’s visit to the barber. If the leisure that man has been promised by the machine counts for anything, it must count for the extension of the privilege of being an active political animal. For every phase of group activity, industrial, professional, educational, has its political aspect: each activity raises special problems of power, organization, control, and discipline-problems that cry for intelligent and orderly solutions.

The opposite of tyrannical compulsion is not

¹ The excerpt is extracted from the 1970 *A. Harvest/HBJ Book* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, edition.

unconditional “freedom” but the systematic practice of rational discipline through education and co-operative service: through education the curve of the individual career may be ultimately harmonized with that of the community, not by a mere restriction of response to that desired by a governing despot, but by a widening of personal scope and opportunity, in those spheres of rational understanding and administrative action which are properly the concern of the citizen and the polity. That human conduct is full of irrational residues does not lessen this need: for what is true of human beings in the mass is equally true of self-elected rulers and leaders: in any case, the problem is to increase the area of rational judgments and rational political activity, and to divert or sublimate those forces which are inimical to co-operation. To the extent that political power becomes rationally conditioned and successfully directed by education, the individual citizen will be reluctant to sacrifice his own initiatives and his own judgments to the terroristic monopoly of dictatorship. The impotence of the many is the power of the few - and vice-versa.

Where shall this return to political realities begin? Where better than in the region? All rational politics must begin with the concrete facts of regional life, not as they appear to the specialist, but as they appear first of all to those who live within the region. Our educational systems are only beginning to make use of the local community and the region as a locus of exploratory activities: but before the resources and activities of a region are treated as abstract subjects they should be understood and felt and lived through as concrete experiences. Beginning with the crawling of an infant in his home, the systematic contact with the environment should broaden out until it includes the furthest horizon of mountain top and sea: in a bout of sailing, fishing, hunting, quarrying or mining every child should have a firsthand acquaintance with the primitive substratum of economic life: the geography and geology of the textbook should be annotations to these experiences, not substitutes. So, too, with work in the garden, the vegetable patch, the hayfield and the grain field: here is the very substance of regional life, and no system of education, no urban environment, can be considered even

remotely satisfactory that does not include these experiences as a vital element. Child labor, as Karl Marx pointed out, will be an essential part in all education once the element of exploitation is removed from it.

The next step toward a rational political life - note how different this process is from the military automatism of the fascist - is the hitching of these concrete experiences to local surveys, more systematically undertaken. The soil survey, the climatic survey, the geological survey, the industrial survey, the historic survey, on the basis of the immediate local environment, are the next important instruments of education: this is a process of grasping in detail and as a whole what has hitherto been taken in through passive observation in city and countryside. All these local surveys, taken together, become the focus for a more general regional survey. Already such surveys have come to play an important part in English education: indeed the land utilization survey, completed recently in England, was carried out through the co-operation of the school children in every locality.

Such surveys, if made by specialist investigators alone, would be politically inert: made through the active participation of school children, at an appropriate point in adolescent development, they become a central core in a functional education for political life. It is in the local community and the immediate region, small enough to be grasped from a tower, a hilltop, or an airplane, to be explored in every part before youth has arrived at the period of political responsibility, that a beginning can be made toward the detailed resorption of government - an alternative to that half-world of vague wishes, idle dreams, empty slogans, pretentious mythologies in which the power politics of the past has flourished. The scientific approach, the method of intellectual co-operation, embodied in the regional survey, are moralizing forces, and it is only when science becomes an integral part of daily experience, not a mere coating of superficial habit over a deep layer of uncriticized authority, that the foundations for a common collective discipline can be laid.

Most of our educational routine, as built up

during the past century, has reflected the dominant political and economic institutions: it has substituted mere paper counters for reality. The elimination of concrete views and concrete experiences has reduced rather than widened the sphere of effective education: finally, we arrived at the age of extreme specialization, the present age, when the amount of specialized knowledge, often accurate, often extremely refined, has far outstripped our capacity to make use of it as part of a consistent whole. The remedy for this is not to be found in any mechanical combination of specialisms: we might digest the contents of an encyclopedia without achieving anything more in the nature of unity than a headache. The cure lies rather in starting from the common whole - a region, its activities, its people, its configuration, its total life - and relating each further achievement in specialized knowledge to this cluster of images and experiences.

Here and there this organic approach to knowledge, as one with life, and to life as a constant function of knowledge, has been made in education: beginning at the lowest stage in the new nursery school. But the fact is that education, instead of rising above this unifying attitude, must keep it at every later stage, along with the element of deliberate play and art.

What is needed for political life is not mere factual knowledge: for this by itself is inert: what is needed are those esthetic and mythic impulses which open up new activities and carve out new forms for construction and contemplation. When the landscape as a whole comes to mean to the community and the individual citizen what the single garden does to the individual lover of flowers, the regional survey will not merely be a mode of assimilating scientific knowledge: it will be a dynamic preparation for further activity. The Boston Metropolitan Park System of Boston, one of the most varied and comprehensive in the world, owes its existence to just such regional surveys as practiced by Charles Eliot in his schoolboy rambles about the region. The Appalachian trail, again, owes not a little to the extra-curricular activities of Benton MacKaye, making as a mere youngster a systematic exploration of the environment of Shirley Center.

Once this more realistic type of education becomes universal, instead of being pieced into the more conventional system, we will create a whole generation that will look upon every aspect of the region, the community, and their personal lives as subject to the same processes: exploration, scientific observation, imaginative reconstruction, and finally, transformation by art, by technical improvement, and by personal discipline. Instead of an external doctrinal unity, imposed by propaganda or authoritarian prescription, such a community will have a unity of background and a unity of approach that will not need external threats in order to preserve the necessary state of inner cohesion. Science has given us the building stones of an orderly world. We need the further utilization of science, through the regional survey, regional exploration, and regional reconstruction if we are to increase the area of political rationality and human control. Visual synthesis provides a foundation for unified creative activity.

Once the human scale is overpassed, once the concrete fact disappears from view, knowledge becomes remote, abstract, and overwhelming: a lifetime's effort will not provide sufficient grasp of the environment. The more people who are thrust together in a limited area, without organic relationships, without a means of achieving an autonomous education or preserving autonomous political activities in their working and living relations, the more must they become subject to external routine and manipulation. The resorption of scientific knowledge and the resorption of government must go hand in hand. We must create in every region people who will be accustomed, from school onward, to humanist attitudes, co-operative methods, rational controls. These people will know in detail where they live and how they live: they will be united by a common feeling for their landscape, their literature and language, their local ways, and out of their own self-respect they will have a sympathetic understanding with other regions and different local peculiarities. They will be actively interested in the form and culture of their locality, which means their community and their own personalities. Such people will contribute to our land-planning, our industry planning, and our community planning the authority of their own understanding, and the

pressure of their own desires. Without them, planning is a barren externalism.

At present, we have inferior forms of life because our metropolitanized populations throughout the world are both witless and wantless: true cannon-fodder, potential serfs for a new totalitarian feudalism, people whose imaginative lives are satiated by shadows, people whose voices are dimmed by loud-speakers, people whose will is capable of response only under mass stimuli and mass pressures, people whose personalities, instead of being represented by an integer, can be represented as but a fraction - one one-millionth of a voting crowd, a war-crowd, a drill-crowd.

The task of regional survey, then, is to educate citizens: to give them the tools of action, to make ready a background for action, and to suggest socially significant tasks to serve as goals for action. Ultimately, this becomes the essential duty of every vital school, every responsible university. In this concrete sense - and not in any vague hope - education is the alternative to irrational and arbitrary

compulsion. The opposite of this is the reduction of education to drill and cram, and the reduction of the body politic to a corpse that is galvanically brought to some semblance of life by the application of external stimuli from the center. Such a state may create "heroes": it can never create a wide society of true personalities, men and women who have learned the arts of personal and communal living, who neither renounce the will-to-order nor seek to create it on a single monotonous pattern. Without such a broader cultural foundation, regional planning can have but a minor political significance. Once the cultural base is achieved, however, regional planning becomes one of the essential attributes of a progressive civilization; and every effective economy it introduces tends to further the capacity for association and to widen the field of significant action.