CHAPTER 48: CITIES IN TIME*

By Penelope J. Corfield

being the concluding chapter within

Peter Clark (ed.), *Oxford Handbook to Cities in World History*

(Oxford, 2013), pp. 828-46

Building and living in towns was not the first thing that humans did. Yet becoming globally urban is one of our great collective achievements through time.[1] From the start, the characteristic gregariousness of *homo sapiens* indicated an intrinsic capacity to co-reside, in all climes and latitudes. The chapters within this volume provide a rich analysis of the intricate processes, by which villages and hamlets grew into small towns and large cities – and sometimes declined. Problems as well as achievements have been integral to the process. Nonetheless, despite much turbulence, the collective human saga has developed, not steadily but inexorably in the very long term, from the first creation of one 'Babylon' into an urbanized world 'Babylonia'.

No instant theory or single factor explains the waxing and waning of towns and cities. The preceding chapters show that, in terms of their origin, they can be divided into urban centres which grow unbidden and urban centres which are 'planted', whether for political, imperial, military, commercial or other reasons. The distinction, however, tends to become obliterated over time. Once established, all towns and cities have common requirements. They need sustainable resources (including water, food, raw materials and, integral to growth, a stream of population recruits) plus a viable economic role (including the economic functions of administrative and religious centres: see above chs.7, 10). Urban viability also depends upon a complementary rural support system, linked by commercial networks. Trade in turn needs political/societal security to operate successfully. Towns also require a modicum of organisation to sustain settled populations, living in compact areas at relatively high densities. So supportive administrative, fiscal and legal frameworks are essential, as

are favourable socio-cultural belief-systems which accept mass living. These interlocking factors – not only socio/economic but political/cultural - are pluralistic, as are the long-term outcomes.

Major interpretations of urban change therefore avoid highlighting one static causal factor. But, historically, three Grand Narratives (long-term interpretations) have offered classic accounts of urban development through time, which is, of course, integrally yoked with space. The first half of this chapter reviews the strengths and weaknesses of these models, when applied globally. None fits all circumstances. Yet their collective insights point to key features within urban history. Accordingly in the second half, those central elements are recombined into a new and different threefold pattern, again taking an aggregate view of developments over the very long-term.[2]

At the margins, it is accepted that town and countryside often overlap.[3] Yet whenever a substantial aggregation of people dwell in tolerably close proximity, whilst engaging chiefly in non-agricultural occupations and living by non-landed timetables, then an urban centre exists.[4] Furthermore, whenever the proportion of the total population living in towns expands significantly, then a process of cumulative 'urbanization' is in train. Incidentally, that latter process was redefined as the advent of 'the urban' by Henri Lefebvre.[5] He contrasted that historic experience with the earlier existence of 'the city'. However, his usage risks confusion. The terms are commonly used in tandem, not as alternatives. Hence the expansion of the non-rural population as a percentage of the whole is best defined not as 'urban' but as 'urbanization'. That term indicates a cumulative trend, which can also go into reverse.

Over time, socio/economic and political/cutlural changes have promoted a range of specialist places: from 'sin cities' to 'holy cities', via metropolitan regions, capital cities, administrative centres, ports, finance capitals; commercial centres, manufacturing towns, market towns, cities of learning, inland resorts, seaside towns, gambling cities; garrison towns; dockyard towns; dormitory towns; suburban conurbations; retirement towns; and even 'gangster towns', like Al Capone's Chicago in the 1920s. Many unique stories ensue. Yet there is also a collective urban history. (For more on definitions/approaches, see above, Ch.1/sect.1).

Cities in cyclical history

One influential broad-brush Grand Narrative of historical change, which was traditionally but not invariably favoured in rural societies, saw history as a cyclical process. Changes do occur but ultimately revert to their starting-point, as do the cycles of the seasons or the phases of the moon. Notably, cyclical interpretations incorporate not only the rise of cities and their associated 'civilizations' (now generally termed 'cultures', since many so-called 'civilized' societies have behaved in distinctly brutal and uncivilized ways) but also the decline of cities and even their complete disappearance.

Plenty of historical examples confirm the latter point. Ancient Ur of the Chaldees is covered by the sands of southern Iraq. The ruins of Chichen Itzá were long smothered by the jungles in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. And the site of the once-great Alexandrian port of Herakleion lies four miles off-shore, under the blue seas of the Mediterranean. These quondam urban centres survive now as tourist sites, peace-time conditions permitting. Such a cyclical rise and fall from 'dust to dust' might happen anywhere. Thus the historian T.B. Macaulay, writing in Britain's bustling metropolis in 1840, imagined a future traveller from New Zealand, standing on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's Cathedral.[6] His readers were jolted to think about impermanence, although in fact urban centres with a viable *raison d'être* often rally after even major devastations rather than disappear.

Cyclical histories not only accounted for variable urban fortunes but they also attributed great motor force to the urban experience itself. Something had to give spin to the cycle. Economic growth led to towns with concentrations of consumers and wealth, even if assets were unevenly distributed. Yet with riches came luxury – and, with that came physical, political, and cultural decadence. Corrupt and corrupting cities would become vulnerable to attack and eventual decay. In fourteenth-century north Africa, the classic account by Ibn Khaldûn proposed a five-stage cycle: from primitive nomadism; to rural husbandry; to city-dwelling; to great urban-based empires; and then to cultural and civic collapse/death. Then the cycle would restart, from its rural roots. As Ibn Khaldûn explained, the process was organic and inescapable:

The goal of civilization is sedentary culture and luxury. When civilization reaches that goal, it turns toward corruption, and starts becoming senile, as happens in the natural life of living beings.[7]

Another very different author, a Protestant clergyman in mid-eighteenth-century Britain, posited a variant but somewhat similar sequence. He detected nine historical stages which he itemized as: '*rude*; *simple; civilized; polished; effeminate; corrupt; profligate; declension;* and *RUIN'*.[8] Town life, as within Ibn Khaldûn's model, led to the benefits of civilisation and social polish yet simultaneously risked producing luxury, effeminacy and corruption.

Urban living was thus essential for change and yet inimical to a favourable outcome in the long term. The model dramatised a policy dilemma. Do the urban benefits outweigh the urban disadvantages? Or do the bright lights of Vanity Fair lead but to decadence and Desolation Row? (For different cultural receptions, including praise, censure, and familiarisation: see above chs.27, 46).

Those responsible for municipal governance habitually grapple with the problems in supplying, cleaning and policing great towns, while city dwellers simultaneously vote with their feet – often flocking into towns to provide the net recruitment from the countryside that fuels urban growth.

Yet, either way, outcomes are not cyclically pre-determined. Towns and cities do not always rise to grandeur. Nor do they invariably become corrupt. Nor do they automatically fall, after rising. Plenty of small and medium-sized urban places persist in a comparatively steady-state. Local and regional capitals, for example, are often sustained by enduring local roles. They may not become urban giants but they do not disappear. Alan Everitt dubbed them 'the Banburys of England', taking one attractive small town as an exemplar.[9] Hence cycles of inevitable growth and decay are not universal. Geo-history sustains continuities, alongside or rivalling cyclical patterns. And it also witnesses innovations, as many more new towns, in times of sustained urbanization, join the urban ranks than old ones disappear.

Cities in linear history

A second Grand Narrative proffered an alternative interpretation. In this case, history became developmental, linear. This rival model eventually tended to usurp traditional

4

theories of cyclicality, especially in western thought. And, in the nineteenth century, it achieved its confident apotheosis in the concept of Progress.

Linearity, like cyclicality, incorporated the idea of a continuing journey from a beginning to an end. But the finish was not the same as the starting-point. Christian teaching viewed history as a progressive upwards journey towards a 'shining city on a hill'. The urban metaphor was a beacon of hope for salvation. St Augustine further clarified the model to differentiate the sinful this-worldly 'City of Man' from the virtuous other-worldly 'City of God'. But while believers were alerted to avoid urban snares, they might also revere one holy city, as a symbol of the true pathway. Many religions around the world found, and find, such urban inspiration. For example, sixteenth-century Calvinists looked to John Calvin's Geneva as a godly haven, even though many individual Genevans were religious back-sliders.[10] And today many cities are foci for spiritual and religious worship. This role makes them noted gathering-places for this-world business and settlement, as well as centres of religious administration and/or pilgrimage: not least to Rome; Constantinople/Istanbul; Jerusalem; Mecca; Medina; Qom (Iran); Amritsar and many others in India; Lhasa; Kyoto; and Ife (Nigeria). In earlier periods, to take other examples: the same functions were observable at Heliopolis in ancient Egypt and at the Incan holy city of Cuzco.

From the eighteenth century onwards, moreover, a secularised version of linear change was developed, initially in Europe and north America. It began as Improvement, turning into ebullient Progress. Urban growth was seen as part of a cumulatively benevolent trend. Its components included: spreading literacy, multiplying commerce, technological transformation - and the advent of political liberty. This equation upgraded the old rural dream that 'city air sets one free', invoked by peasants fleeing from feudal landowners. (See ch.26: sect. on medieval Europe) So potentially the urban march of 'Progress' would eventually liberate everyone. The ideal city would also follow – this time, with luck, upon earth.[11]

In 1741, a young recruit to Birmingham showed how individuals internalised this optimism. William Hutton arrived there, aged 18, and recalled his excitement: [12]

> I was surprised at the place, but more at the people. They possessed a vivacity I had never beheld. I had been among dreamers, but now I saw men awake. Their very step along the street showed alacrity'.

Birmingham was still, by twenty-first-century standards, a small town, with just over 20,000 inhabitants at that date. Yet it already differed perceptibly from village society. Furthermore, Hutton's realisation that urban residents tend (by and large) to walk more rapidly than people in rural settlements has been confirmed by later research.[13] So the equation of urbanity with vivacity had some outwards justification. For fans of town life, rusticity meant backwardness and inertia. Rural England was no more than a 'healthy grave', pronounced the clerical wit Sydney Smith in 1838.[14]

There was, however, much irony in that assessment. Many fast-growing towns in Smith's day were actually 'urban graveyards'. They incubated diseases, pollution, congestion, and high mortality – and the larger the cities, the worse the environmental pressures, before improvements in water supply and refuse clearance. Furthermore, analysts feared that the massing of people into towns, free from the traditional ties of village society, would heighten crime, disorder and conflict. The historian Lewis Mumford, generally an admirer of city life, feared a new degradation in the form of 'insensate' industrial cities where hard-faced businessmen disputed with impoverished, 'defective' workers.[15] Urbanization might lead to dystopia rather than utopia. Even today, despite improved understanding of public health needs, there are still unenviable lists of the world's most polluted cities - headed in 2011 by the industrial/mining city-region of Linfen in China's Shanxi province, with its massive population of over 4 million.[16] In other words, linear change might invert from progress to the reverse.

Nonetheless, a single global pathway, whether for praise or blame, is too simple for universal application to all urban places. Even in periods of widespread urbanization, some towns expand while others halt or decline outright (as earlier chapters have shown). Moreover, not all towns become industrial Coketowns. Nor are all manufacturing centres merely 'insensate'. Urban problems can be tackled: Linfen municipality, for example, is beginning a programme of environmental rescue. Thus while linearity is good at identifying cumulative trends – like global urbanization since c.1750 - it underestimates the diversity of outcomes. Linear models also tend to erase medium- and short-term fluctuations, rendering change too smooth and unidirectional. Hence a verdict in one generation might be very different a generation later.

Cities in revolutionary history

The 'lumpy' changeability of history prompted in 1848 a robustly different Grand Narrative from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. For them, conflict was central. History developed not in a smooth linear progression but via intermittent revolutionary jumps. Each stage of economic development generated its own inner 'contradictions' or fault-lines. Class conflict then provided the motor force that exploded into revolution. Five core stages, as codified later on the authority of Stalin, switched history from primitive communism (tribal labour); to ancient slavery (slave labour); to feudalism (serf labour); to capitalism (waged labour); and ultimately to the 'highest' stage, true communism (communally shared labour).[17]

Towns were not crucial in the very earliest times. But their growth soon added the grit of conflict into history. Marxist historians saw towns and their associated commerce as central factors in destabilising rural feudalism.[18] The ensuing urban capitalism was ripe for further revolution. Dystopian industrial cities housed masses of resentful and exploited wage-workers, who were generating wealth for others whilst themselves living in squalor. That was the message from Engels in 1844, which was later endorsed by Mumford's critique of 'insensate' Coketowns. Urban revolution would follow. Towns were both solvents of the old and crucibles for revolution.

As a model, the Marxist view was highly schematic. But it allotted a crucial role to economic conflicts, which frequently recur in different guises. Marxism thus seemed grounded in gritty reality. It opposed the smugness of Progress. Furthermore, Marxism as an intellectual system drew elements from both cyclicality and linearity: with the former, it shared the concept of discrete economic stages; and, with the latter, it had an underlying utopianism about the 'end' of history. At the 'highest' stage, conflict would disappear. Hence the state, no longer needed for class rule, would 'wither away'. As Engels declared:

> It [the advent of communism] is the ascent of man [humanity] from the Kingdom of Necessity to the Kingdom of Freedom.[19]

However, when applied to the entire history of the globe, the Marxist stages proved to be insufficient in number and form to encompass historical variety. Even in Victorian Britain, the towns and cities were far more protean than the factory

'Coketowns' invoked by Marx and Engels. Moreover, many initially blighted places had embarked upon reform programmes, albeit with varying results, by the later nineteenth century.[20] Cooperation turned out to be part of history, as well as conflict.

Because the Marxist schema saw urbanity as both problematic *and* potentially transformative, it was not surprising between them the twentieth-century states, established in the name of Marxist communism, displayed great ambivalence about the role of towns. For Marx and Engels, the faults of the 'bourgeois city' did not mean that people should return to what they termed 'the idiocy of rural life'. Noted communist leaders (Stalin; Ceauşescu) accordingly tried to hurry history along its predestined trajectory by herding rural populations into newly built mass towns. Brutalist high-rise apartment blocks were seen as empowering assertive workers to 'punch the sky'. Nevertheless, cities might also foster 'decadence' and 'corruption' - and opposition to one-party rule. Hence other communist leaders (Mao; Pol Pot) forced intellectuals and professional people into the countryside to shed their bourgeois ways. They had to learn from the 'revolutionary' perspective of the unsullied peasantry - and to bow to the historic will of the Communist Party.

Both policies were extremely high-handed. Neither was a success. In communist Russia and eastern Europe, planned new towns without viable business infrastructures could not flourish in the long term. Conversely, communist governments which enforced stark policies of 'rustification' – like China's Cultural Revolution in 1966 – produced not harmony but disaster. Mortality soared; education was disrupted; political disorder spread; output slumped. Moreover, as soon as economic growth was adopted as the new policy objective, the associated processes of hectic urbanization resumed. As a result of this dynamic, contemporary China, which remains under one-party rule with a communist label, has over 600 million townspeople who daily confront the very problems of environmental blight, political exclusion, and social inequality that led Marx and Engels to predict a proletarian revolution in capitalist Britain over 160 years ago. Their logic would predict a mass revolution to come in China, which is supposedly already the flag-bearer of proletarian revolution. Urban history thus defies neat Marxist stages.

Historically, the revolutionary model of history has been given the tribute of a very public testing. Its strong declarations, however, could not encompass all the

varieties and sequences of history in all world regions. The historic stages did not appear in the same sequence everywhere. Nor did communist regimes satisfy their citizens that they were living in history's apogee. In fact, equality, exploitation, and urban blight have appeared and reappeared under many different systems. As in the case of linearity and cyclicality, when but one type and sequence of change is taken as universal, then the model fails. The plurality of outcomes has implications for politicians who may seek to direct the course of urban history. If they rely upon a single slogan or assumption about change (whether enforced urbanization; or, conversely, total deregulation) they eventually find the limits to political will. Cities, like economies, are mass creations that respond to more than top-down directives: '*what is the city but the people?*'

Long-term forces: cities and turbulence

Part two of this chapter accordingly rejects pre-ordained models. Instead, the strong features of these Grand Narratives are recombined in a manner that is intelligible in terms of pluralist processes but open-ended in terms of outcomes. Both linear and cyclical histories stress the role of cumulative long-term trends, occurring gradually over time. Cyclicality further points to the underlying power of continuity, as things revert to their starting-point. Meanwhile, the conflict-based Marxist model of revolutionary history highlights the role of upheaval, as producing the potential for seismic change. Combining these insights, urban history can be reanalysed in terms of the interaction of three distinct features: persistence, micro-change, revolution.[21] Since Part one ended with drastic turbulence, Part two starts by readdressing that theme.

Certainly, cities in history do arrive and disappear, sometimes rapidly. Their populations may also experience radical upheavals; and they themselves may generate or contribute to either positive or negative turbulence, leading to seismic change.

Crises are often disastrous.[22] Cities are blockaded or besieged: most famously, in epic mythology, Troy. Or they are sacked by victorious enemies: imperial Rome faced multiple sackings not only by fifth-century 'barbarians' but also in 1527 by mutinous troops of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. At other times, citizens are massacred or expelled. Or decimated by epidemics. Or cities are burned or razed to the ground, either in wartime or after natural disasters. Or flooded: New Orleans,

notoriously, in 2005. Or they are hit by earthquakes, such as the one that made the fabled walls of Jericho come 'tumbling down'. Such dire impacts are worsened when residential densities are high, and when the crisis arrives unexpectedly.

Ultimate among these upheavals is urban death. Precisely how many places have totally vanished is uncertain, as more 'lost' cities are intermittently found under jungles, sands and sea. Plentiful examples are already known. Thus the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-dara once led their own Indus Valley culture but are signalled now only by ruins and fragments of an (as yet) undeciphered language (see above ch.5). Another case is that of Fatehpur Sikri in Uttar Pradesh. Now a world heritage site, the giant red-stone palace and its associated small town were built by the sixteenth-century Mughal Emperor Akbar. Yet his plan failed within less than a generation, for lack of assured water supply from drying lakes. It was an extreme instance that highlighted the essential urban need for basic resources.

Shocks and crises, however, are by no means always fatal. Both small towns and large cities often rebuild after disasters. This phoenix-like quality has already been noted. It depends upon a continuingly viable economic infrastructure, a supportive political/social context (such as an end to warfare) and enough public will.

Throughout history, there have been many more urban births than deaths, as the total stock of urban centres has risen. Often, the process is gradual, as towns grow from quondam villages. Yet urban birth or renaissance may be experienced as a rapid shock or upheaval. 'Instant' cities acquire new populations at headlong speed. One well-known example occurred in the California gold rush, when San Francisco mushroomed from a homestead of 200 people in 1849 to a boomtown of 36,000 by 1852. In such cases, the advent of orderly town government followed upon the disorderly urban birth. Conversely, planned cities created by political *fiat* begin with 'instant' administrations. Sixteenth-century Madrid, eighteenth-century St Petersburg, and federal capitals like nineteenth-century Ottawa and twentieth-century Canberra, provide counter-examples of places that begin with order and become (comparatively) less decorous over time.

Turbulence is thus part of town life, even if tempered by countervailing forces. In particular, great urban centres often carry a 'shock' reputation for moral and social unruliness. Warning mythologies of 'sin cities' famously include the Biblical Sodom

and Gomorrah, which met with divine destruction for their turpitude. Yet, in reality, many towns live successfully with red light districts and the provision of organised drinking, gambling, drug-taking (whether licit, semi-licit or illicit) and prostitution, provided that such urban services do not drive out other urban functions or lead to serious disfunctionality through policing failures or criminal gang rivalries. Indeed, a mildly raffish image and a reputation for sexual opportunities may lure international tourists and promote commerce (Amsterdam; Bangkok), as well as prompt debates about the ethics of the sex trades. At the same time, concentrated entertainment cities, which lack other economic ballast, remain highly vulnerable to changing fashions in demand as well as to fluctuations in disposable consumer income. Thus Las Vegas (already experiencing a relatively high suicide rate) is facing further problems in the post-2008 global financial crisis, as is Dubai, with a marked exodus of migrant workers and the abandonment of many ambitious building projects.[23]

Hostile assumptions about urban turbulence, however, need to be balanced by its positive role. The radical stimulus generated by quick interactions between substantial concentrations of people, especially when there is no censorship, help to promote innovation, experimentation and the effective transfer of ideas. Again, this effect is variable. Urban innovation is no more guaranteed than is urban breakdown. Other factors are relevant, including the nature of the power structure (whether monolithic or pluralistic – on which see above, chs.9, 26, 43). In addition, the state of education, the extent of creative freedom, the technologies of communication, and cultural expectations play an important part. The general point, however, is that urban populations often themselves generate, as well as experience, structural change. Strikingly, the tag of 'creative cities' has been attached to the world's first cities, which emerged in ancient Mesopotamia. Hence, historically, urban societies – and, even more so, urbanizing societies - are more prone to foster and circulate cultural and technological innovation than are rural communities. (See above Ch.2/p.12; ch.39)

Above all, it is the association of city populations with political revolution or fundamental upheaval that gives them the greatest reputational boost - whether viewed with approval or with horror. Massed crowds have an elemental force, prompting fear, excitement, awe and/or reluctant admiration. Paris in 1789 and St Petersburg (Petrograd) in October 1917 are classic prototypes. In fact, as these examples indicate,

mass urban uprisings leading to the forceful toppling of an entire political system occur relatively rarely. Nonetheless, even the potential threat from determined gatherings of discontented city crowds can, in certain circumstances, force major changes upon collapsing regimes (Berlin 1989; Tunis, Cairo 2011). Masses and cities together generate a frisson of coiled power and, sometimes, that power is awakened and applied. Its elemental component was well caught by Charles Dickens, when retrospectively imagining the Parisian crowd's taking of the Bastille. A massed urban population with a purpose may become as potent as the world's deepest oceans:

> With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France had been shaped into the detested word, the living sea rose, wave on wave, depth on depth, and overflowed the city.[24]

Long-term forces: cities and deep continuities

Dickens's metaphor of the living sea is magnificent, catching the ebb and flow of the urban crowds. Yet the oceans also have their (literally) deep continuities, as do towns and cities. Alongside the upheavals and dynamics, which affect the histories of individual towns, there are persistent factors, which counterbalance and stabilise all urban systems. (For the stark contrasts of urban continuity/rupture, see above ch.21)

Continuity in history tends to be unsung and under-analysed. It lacks glamour and may well foster inertia. Yet renamed as stability, its role provides a key counterpoise to the often bewildering components of change. It is well observed that, after great upheavals, people quickly seek to reimpose continuity. And persistence also operates at a structural level, as seen in continuities within the physical histories of towns and cities and in enduring elements in their social, cultural and political roles.

Functioning cities do, after all, have an intrinsic stability in their location, which is further entrenched by communication networks and transport systems. They inhabit their own space, unlike armies on the march. In their locational stability, they share the profound continuity of geo-history, which, in the words of Fernand Braudel, operates at 'a slower tempo, which sometimes almost borders on the motionless.'[25] In practice, even the geographical environment is not immune from change, whether violent or gradual. Nonetheless, it remains steady from moment to moment, which is why the sudden razing of a townscape in warfare causes intense disorientation. Indeed,

the faithful reconstruction of lost buildings (the rebuilding of Warsaw's historic centre after World War II being an example) marks a will to recover a lost normality. In the same spirit, old street- and city-names are sometimes restored, after controversial changes - even after long lapses of time. So St Peterburg became Petrograd (1914) and Leningrad (1924), before regaining its original name almost 80 years later (1991).

Moreover, towns and cities generally stay put – not only because there is an economic/geographic rationale to their original positioning but also because their built environments and established communications networks represent huge amounts of stored overhead capital. In terms of urban longevity, the low-lying Jericho is the historic outrider. It has experienced some 10,000 years of continuous urbanity on the same attractive oasis site, watered by springs and sheltered by palms.[26]

Sometimes, there are cases of localised shifting, as places expand, contract and redevelop over time. For example, Tunis is situated somewhat to the west of the ancestral Carthage, although their joint urban sprawl now links the two centres. In general, however, mentioning the locational stability of towns and cities tends to cause surprise, so much is that factor taken for granted. That fixity remains even when places gain or lose specific functions, such as becoming a capital city (Berlin; Beijing) or losing that status (Istanbul; Rio de Janeiro). Indeed, in deference to the power of traditional expectations, rulers in settled states only very rarely change their choice of capital cities. These are habitually entrenched by history as well as geography.

'Fixity' and continuity can be detected in urban topography and layout too. Great cities with long histories are palimpsests, the developments of one era half-replenishing and half-replacing those of earlier times. Even when some buildings are destroyed, the underlying geological inheritance survives, as often do ancient plot lines, land-use patterns, site boundaries, street contours, other surviving buildings, and the social topography of daily usage. Piazza Navona in Rome (shown in aerial view in Fig. 48.1) is an eminent exemplar. Its elliptical contours reveal precisely the public stadium, built by Emperor Domitian in the first century CE, and itself standing on the site of a traditional recreational area outside Rome's old city walls. The surrounding buildings date from many eras. Some rest on stadium's foundations. Others date from the seventeenth-century Baroque refurbishment. Yet others are more recent. Throughout, the Piazza remained a favoured place for urban entertainment and the

'social parade'. And it retains that role today, as part of a 2000-year-old living history.

48.1 Piazza Navona, Rome – aerial view

Social traditions regularly help to buttress the known and settled. In even the newest of 'mushroom' cities, whether growing in planned blocks or by informal settlement in shanty towns, people negotiate the shock of rapid urbanization. Meeting-places emerge. Information networks provide ways of familiarisation. Popular music vocalises emotions. Social gatherings generate elements of community 'glue'. Experiences at high-density are intense and shared, while the characteristic urban 'churn' of people coming and going provides at once a safety-valve and a mechanism of replenishment.[27] The urban environment is often less chaotic than it seems. Economic opportunities, both formal and casual, are engendered, provided that the urban economy retains its basic viability. And political responses equally promote the ordering of incipient disorder by providing municipal services, educational facilities, welfare networks, and policing, especially the control of under-world crime.

Alongside the much-trumpeted shock of the new, many famous world cities continue today to showcase strikingly the allure of the old. In the mid-nineteenth century, Benjamin Disraeli penned this exchange between a youth and his mentor, an older man of the world:

Coningsby: Ah! But the Mediterranean! What would I not give to see Athens!

Sidonia: I have seen it and more wonderful things. Phantoms and spectres! The Age of Ruins is past. Have you seen Manchester?[28]

The dramatic mix of new wealth, civic culture, factories, smoke and industrial slums made Lancashire's Cottonopolis the 'must-see' city of Victorian Britain. Yet today Athens as a world-renowned historic destination, at least, may smile. Its classical heritage keeps it, with Rome, as the most popular of Europe's many tourist cities, even if precise visitor figures remain hard to gauge.[29] Evidence of urban longevity, encapsulated in impressive monuments, attractive old buildings, and original street layouts, has become a priceless asset. It makes visible, in each unique permutation, the reassuring continuity that renders town life possible. Moreover, historic city centres have an ever greater impact now that so many 'downtowns' risk a bland homogenization through the workings of international business and globalized architecture. Indeed, various places which impatiently discarded their old buildings are now conserving them or even reconstructing. One example is 'gritty' Datong in China's Shanxi province, which is rebuilding its once-magnificent fortified walls.[30]

Elements of similarity between widely scattered towns and cities world-wide confirm the persistence of common patterns. It is true that, over time, the scale of urbanization has varied greatly. Whereas two thousand years ago, at the time of the Emperor Augustus, Rome was the world's lone metropolitan giant with one million inhabitants, in 2009 a global count found over 470 urban places of that great size or more.[31] Yet human responses to city life consistently replay a medley of possibilities, fears, hopes and dreams. The allure of urban 'bright lights' is both literal, contrasting with the 'dark' countryside - and metaphorical. This potent imagery recurs widely, across time and space. Ancient Babylonian creation legends hymned the power of the gods: *They shall make bright [Babylon, the first city-shrine].* Light was equally associated with cities in Song-dynasty China, a period of significant urbanization. Lantern festivals drew crowds to town, winning poetic praise: *Lights were as bright as day.* Twentieth-century blues in urban America also pulsed with hardships and hope, ambivalence and admiration. Two lines from a Chicago song in 1953 caught a much-repeated mood: *'Bright lights, Big City/ Gone to my baby's head ...'*.[32]

Long-term forces: cities and trends

Between the contrasting poles of revolutionary turbulence and deep continuity, towns and cities negotiate their histories – whilst, simultaneously, they are subject to slow and incremental modifications. Gradual changes provide gentle momentum. They combat inertia but also cushion or even avert drastic upheavals. 'Slow cities' are especially praised by the *Cittàslow* movement (1999), inspired by Italy's Slow Food campaign. Urban centres are encouraged to resist hectic development and to retain their individuality. In that way, they can resist the 'fast-lane, homogenised world, so often seen in other cities throughout the world'.[33] Either way, all changes, whether fast and slow, generate long-term trends, which shape the contours of urbanization.

Built environments are themselves never completely old or completely new. They are subject to both natural erosion and human adjustments. Resources are recycled between generations – sometimes over great gaps of time. A proportion of the water supply for contemporary Rome travels through classical Roman aqueducts. And today's railway between Lahore and Karachi rests on brick foundations which were salvaged from ancient Harappa. Such borrowings and slow accretions foster interpretations of urban growth as an organic process. An established city is tellingly described as a coral reef: 'a biological masterpiece – [with] millions [of people] teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries'. Or growth may be seen as blight. So William Cobbett denounced metropolitan London in 1821 as an 'infernal wen' – a monstrous tumour, battening upon the body politic.[34] Either way, the process appears irresistible, deep-rooted.

Behind the scenes, meanwhile, it requires much human organisation to keep cities functioning from day to day. Basic municipal administration takes the form of regular cleansing, watering, regulating, and policing. Added to that, the micro-behaviour of residents and visitors impacts crucially, for good or ill, upon every urban environment. Dropped litter, piled rubbish, abandoned vehicles, defaced buildings and vandalised streetscapes signal neglect, which can generate a negative spiral. Hence some experts argue that prompt repairs to all public delapidations, down to mending every broken window, will help to curb urban crime and anti-social behaviour. Needless to say, the realities are not so straightforward.[35] Crime covers many categories, including 'invisible' white-collar crime, which may occur in clean and tidy

cities. Furthermore, patterns of criminality are affected by variant cultural attitudes, as well as by local policing methods. (See above chs.24-5, 41, 45) As a result, not all poor, ramshackle towns are crime-ridden and violent, while not all rich, well-kept cities avoid sectors of blight, poverty, exploitation, illegality, even 'unseen' slavery.

All places, however, are subject to gradual changes, whether as steady improvement or slow decay. Good maintenance is more likely to promote cooperation and positive energy - let alone a thriving tourist industry - than is neglect, especially gross neglect. Hence there is a strong socio-economic case for the authorities to ensure that urban fiscal resources are robust enough to invest in infrastructural urban and environmental welfare. (For related discussions, see above, chs.11, 25, 44-5).

Continual adaptations have the eventual effect of softening the harshness of drastic change. Big land-hungry roads and railways, perimeter shopping malls, and central high-rise blocks, despite their tricky wind-channelling effects and blank street frontages, have their advocates. But others prefer low-rise housing, mixed land-use, in-town shopping, local parks, and pedestrian-friendly streets. A song about Dublin 'in the rare old times' became an instant classic in the 1970s, as it lamented how: 'The great unyielding concrete makes a city of my town'.[36]

Nevertheless, even brutal intrusions into established cityscapes are eventually assimilated, adapted, or even removed. Imaginative renovations can find alternative uses for past novelties that have become obsolete, such as defunct railways, factories and wharfs. Time's whirligig blends multiple forms of change and continuity. And, indicatively, urban centres with the most aesthetically pleasing mixes of old and new are regularly listed among the world's most beautiful cities: Udaipur ('the Venice of the East'), Rome; Prague; Paris; Isfahan; Budapest; Bangkok – especially when an old/new cityscape is offset against the perennial sea: Venice; Vancouver; Sydney; Stockholm; St Petersburg; San Francisco; Rio; New York; Istanbul; Cape Town.

Cumulative small adaptations, protracted over time, generate not only individual outcomes but also collective trends. Despite occasional examples of 'instant' cities, the aggregate pace of urban change tends to be gradual. Specific places rise, hold steady, or fall. Even highly urbanized societies may see a marked economic reorientation of cities whose original *raison d'être* is eroding, as in Rustbelt America's steeltowns (Pittsburgh; Cleveland; Detroit). Yet such places tend to mutate their roles

rather than to disappear completely.[37] The sum of many mixed experiences produces both the gradual appearance – and sometimes the disappearance – of urban cultures around the world. Stark disruptions and challenges, such as warfare, diseases, famines, natural disasters, political confrontations, disrupt the flow. But micro-changes and small adjustments work to smooth the curves, whether of growth or decay. As a result, long-term trends in urban history take the form not of sharp zig-zags but, in the apt words of Peter Clark, a flowing 'roller-coaster' (see above, Ch.1/II/14).

Key requirements for incremental urbanization, as shown in earlier chapters, are other correlated long-term factors. These include: reliable agricultural surpluses, good trading networks (especially long-distance trade), commercialization and/or financial transfers. Often also: industrialization, technological adaptation, supportive political structures, and plentiful population recruits, to counteract high urban mortality. The types of factors are similar to those needed for basic urban existence – but multiplying and intensifying upon a mass scale to promote variegated patterns of growth. (See above, chs.22, 38) Yet urbanization is not merely the product of other trends. Urban populations contribute to their own growth. They promote commerce, industries, services, political organisation, cultural (including religious) identities – and innovation. (See above, chs.38, 39)

Meanwhile, many of the major social trends that accompany gradual urbanization are themselves characteristically gradual. An element of literacy and numeracy was commonly required among historic urban rulers and administrators. Then as cities grew, these centres fostered some widening access to literacy and education, while mass urbanization has the same impact on a mass scale. The spread of literacy thus constitutes both an effect and a further cause of urban growth. Emblematic public buildings in city centres signal this widening cultural access. Traditional focal points might include palaces, temples, shrines, churches, mosques, theatres, stadiums, gymnasia, and famous libraries. In today's urbanized world, every substantial civic centre has an array of schools, universities, museums, art and cultural institutions, community meeting places, diversified sports facilities, and a plethora of government buildings, whether local, regional, national or international. These places offer access to a massive urban knowledge grid, which is fuelled by both public and private input. So urban networks have the dual effect of conserving the urban

experience and constantly renewing the urban capacity for innovation.

Implicitly, too, diversity within towns has the potential to erode social barriers based upon class, caste, gender, or ethnicity, although the pace of change varies with the cultural context. In particular, the majority presence of women in many, if not most, urban centres is generally under-appreciated. Even outwardly macho places like garrison- and dockyard-towns have sizeable female populations, reflecting the relatively higher demand for female labour in towns and for male labour in the countryside. Not everywhere fits this pattern. In early twenty-first-century Dubai, women comprise only 25 percent of all residents, among a population of migrant male labourers. But this 'strange arrival' is the dramatic urban exception to prove the rule.[38]

Incremental urbanization gradually 'liberates' women from rural occupations, and, in democratic urban societies, it provides the basis for a slow expansion of female participation in civic life. (See above for comment on that effect in African cities, ch 37) Ethnic mixing also tends to be promoted, especially in urban centres that are sited on major migrational pathways - unless there are countervailing cultural, religious or political pressures. There is also the potential for cross-class relationships within towns that are not highly regulated. Admittedly, democratic cities often retain steep social *in*equalities alongside formal political equalities. So the pace of cross-class (as opposed to inter-ethnic) mingling tends to range from slow to glacial. Yet a trend remains a trend, even if not a rapid one. Towns and cities are meeting-places and hence mixing places. They have the capacity to liberate human potential. So gradual change continually mediates between tradition and upheaval – in its steady cumulative style. (For global rise/falls of urban societies, see above chs.2-6, 12-20, 22-4, 29-37, 40-4; for long-distance contacts, chs.12, 28, 47; for migration/ethnicity, chs 8, 23, 40).

Conclusions

Currently, world urbanization contributes to a trend that began in the eighteenth century.[39] It promotes economic specialization and diversity of urban roles - and thence collective inter-dependence and macro-connectivity. And it is doing so globally. Thus Africa, historically the least urbanised world-region, now has a new mega-city in the Nigerian port of Lagos, which is second only to Cairo as Africa's most populous conurbation.[40]

Viewed globally, more planetary terrain than ever before is devoted to urban living. On the other hand, the spatial densities of towns and cities (even allowing for their sprawling suburbs) means that the world's teeming population is highly clustered rather than evenly spread. The planet is not covered in concrete. There are undoubted and quantifiable economies of scale.[41]

That factor means that, in terms of sustainability, there are gains as well as losses. The energy consumption of the world's urbanizing economies is contributing to global warming via harmful carbon emissions. And effective remedies can follow only if city populations become convinced of the need to adapt.[42]

Clearly, there is no guarantee. Traffic management remains a major problem, bringing conflicts with individual aspirations for mobility. Yet the phoenix-like history of urban resilience, currently demonstrated by the city of Sendai after Japan's 2011 earthquake/*tsunami,* suggests that positive responses will eventually forthcome, even if not as rapidly as climatologists are urging. Urbanized societies do not appear (or disappear) at random. They embody sustained trends, fortified by deep continuities. They are also primed to respond to the challenge of crises. Indeed, the whole process of urbanization marks a historic shift to sustained micro-change, generating adaptive urban populations on a global scale.

Ultimately, therefore, answers will not be found by quitting cities but by harnessing their will to find solutions. The iconic image of George Grosz's *Metropolis* (Fig. 48.2) depicts the great city as both threat and promise. It is a great human achievement - pulsing with creative organisation and disorganisation – and alive.

Fig. 48.2 *Metropolis* by George Grosz (1917)

ENDNOTES:

*   With gratitude to Peter Clark for his skilled editorial midwifery as well as to all fellow contributors for intensive discussions, Ben Wilson for great questions, Peter Jones for 'Bright Lights', and Tony Belton, as ever, for constructive criticism.

---

[1]   See E.L. Glaeser, *The Triumph of the City* (London: Macmillan, 2011), 1-15, 268-7; P. Wood and C. Landry, *The Intercultural City; Planning for Diversity Advantage* (London: Earthscan, 2008), esp. 25-65; and, polemically, J. Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Random House, 1969), 6-48.

[2]   P.J. Corfield, *'POST-Medievalism/Modernity/Postmodernity?' Rethinking History*, 14/3 (2010), 379-404; and idem, 'Historians and the Return to the Diachronic', in G. Harlaftis, N. Karapidakis, K. Sbonias and V. Vaiopoulos, eds, *New Ways of History: Developments in Historiography* (London: Tauris, 2010), 1-32. Relevant studies include Peter Clark, *European Cities and Towns, 400-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Gilbert Rozman, *Urban Networks in Russia, 1750-1800, and Premodern Periodization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[3]   T. Champion and G. Hugo, eds, *New Forms of Urbanization: Beyond the Urban-Rural Dichotomy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 365-84.

[4]   E.L. Jones, *Towns and Cities* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), esp. 1-12; Max Weber, *The City* (1921; Eng. transl. 1958; repr. New York: Free Press, 1968); Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938); and Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in D.N. Levene, ed., *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324-39.

[5]   Henri Lefebvre, *La révolution urbaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), transl. R. Bononno as *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2003), 1-8.

[6]   T.B. Macaulay, 'Ranke's History of the Popes', in *Selections from Macaulay's Essays and Speeches*, 1 (London: 1851), 5.

7   Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, transl. F. Rosenthal; ed. N.J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 288.

8   Anon. [John Brown], *An ... Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London: 1758), 5.

9   Alan Everitt, 'The Banburys of England', *Urban History*, 1 (1974), 28-38.

10   E.W. Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (New York: Wiley, 1967); J. Witte and R.M. Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage and Family in John Calvin's Geneva* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2005).

11   See R.W. Liscombe, *The Ideal City* (Vancouver: Vancouver Working Group, 2005); H. Rosenau, *The Ideal City: Its Architectural Evolution in Europe* (London: Methuen, 1980); J.H. Bater, *The Soviet City: Ideal and Reality* (London: Arnold, 1980).

12   W. Hutton, *The Life of William Hutton ... Written by Himself* (London: 1816), 41.

13   M.H. Bornstein and H.G. Bornstein, 'The Pace of Life', *Nature*, 259 (1976), 537-9; and P.J. Corfield, 'Walking the City Streets: The Urban Odyssey in Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of Urban History*, 16 (1990), 132-74, also available at www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk.

14   N.C. Smith, ed., *Selected Letters of Sydney Smith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 170.

15   Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 143-222.

16   'The World's Most Polluted Places', *Time Magazine,* 5 April 2011: *on-line*.

17   Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (1848), in David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 221-47; codified in Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1939), 32.

18   Rodney Hilton, *English and French Towns in Feudal Society: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

19   Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian* and *Scientific* (1882), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, 2 (Moscow: 1962), 153.

[20]   Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* (London: Weidenfeld, 2004); and essays by B. Luckin, C.G. Pooley, P. Scott, A. Beach and N. Tiratsoo, all in Martin Daunton, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Vol. 3, 1840-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 207-28; 429-66; 495-524; 525-50.

[21]   P.J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), esp. 18, 122-3, 211-16, 231, 248, 249-50.

[22]   G. Massard-Guilbaud, H.L. Platt and D. Schott, eds, *Cities and Catastrophes: Coping with Emergency in European History* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Lang, 2002).

[23]   Alan Balboni, *Beyond the Mafia: Italian Americans and the Development of Las Vegas* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1996); Yasser Elsheshtawy, *Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[24]   Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859; London: Collins, 1953), 243.

[25]   F. Braudel, 'Histoire et sciences sociales: la longue durée', *Annales: E.S.C.*, 4 (1958), 725-53; republ. in his *On History*, transl. S. Matthews (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), esp. 33.

[26]   Charles Gates, *Ancient Cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East* (London: Routledge, 2003), 18-20.

[27]   Esther Charlesworth, ed., *Cityedge: Case Studies in Contemporary Urbanism* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2005).

[28]   Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby: Or, the New Generation,* ed. S.M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 101. See also G.S. Messinger, *Manchester in the Victorian Age: The Half-Known City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

[29]   W.F. Theobald, 'The Meaning, Scope and Measurement of Tourism', in idem, ed., *Global Tourism* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), 5-24.

[30]   I. Mohan, *The World of Walled Cities: Conservation, Environmental Pollution, Urban Renewal ...* (New Delhi: Mittal, 1992); and Datong in 'Chinese City's Bid to Revive Glory of Imperial Past', *BBC News*, 3 May 2010.

31   Thomas Brinkhoff, 'The Principal Agglomerations of the World', US Census Bureau, www.world-population.com.

32   E.A. Wallis Budge, *Babylonian Legends of the Creation* (London: British Museum, 1921), 60; Ouyang Xiu, 'At the Lantern Festival' (eleventh-century) in www.lantern-festival.com; Jimmy Reed's 'Bright Lights, Big City' (Chicago, 1961), for whom see P.H. Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 187.

33   See www.wikipedia.org/wiki/cittaslow.

34   Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006), 5; William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (1830; London: Penguin, 2001), 285, 362.

35   Contrast G.L. Kelling and C.M. Coles, *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities* (New York: Kessler Books, 1996); with B.E. Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001).

36   'Dublin in the Rare Old Times' (c.1975), by Pete St. John [Peter Mooney].

37   Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rustbelt, 1969-84* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

38   2005 United Arab Emirates census: www.tedad.ae/english/population_results.

39   See Eric E. Lampard, 'The Nature of Urbanization', in Derek Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe, eds, *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London: Arnold, 1983), 3-53; and E.L. Birch and S.M. Wachter, eds, *Global Urbanization* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

40   For Cairo (c.15 million) and Lagos (c.13 million) in 2010, see Brinkhoff, 'Principal Agglomerations'; and Lagos in www.citymayors.com/statistics/urban_growth1.

41   For a physicist's calculations of generic urban resource implications, see www.santafe.edu/news/item/west-intelligent-infrastructure-event.

42   E.L. Birch and S.M. Wachter, eds, *Growing Greener Cities: Urban Sustainability in the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).