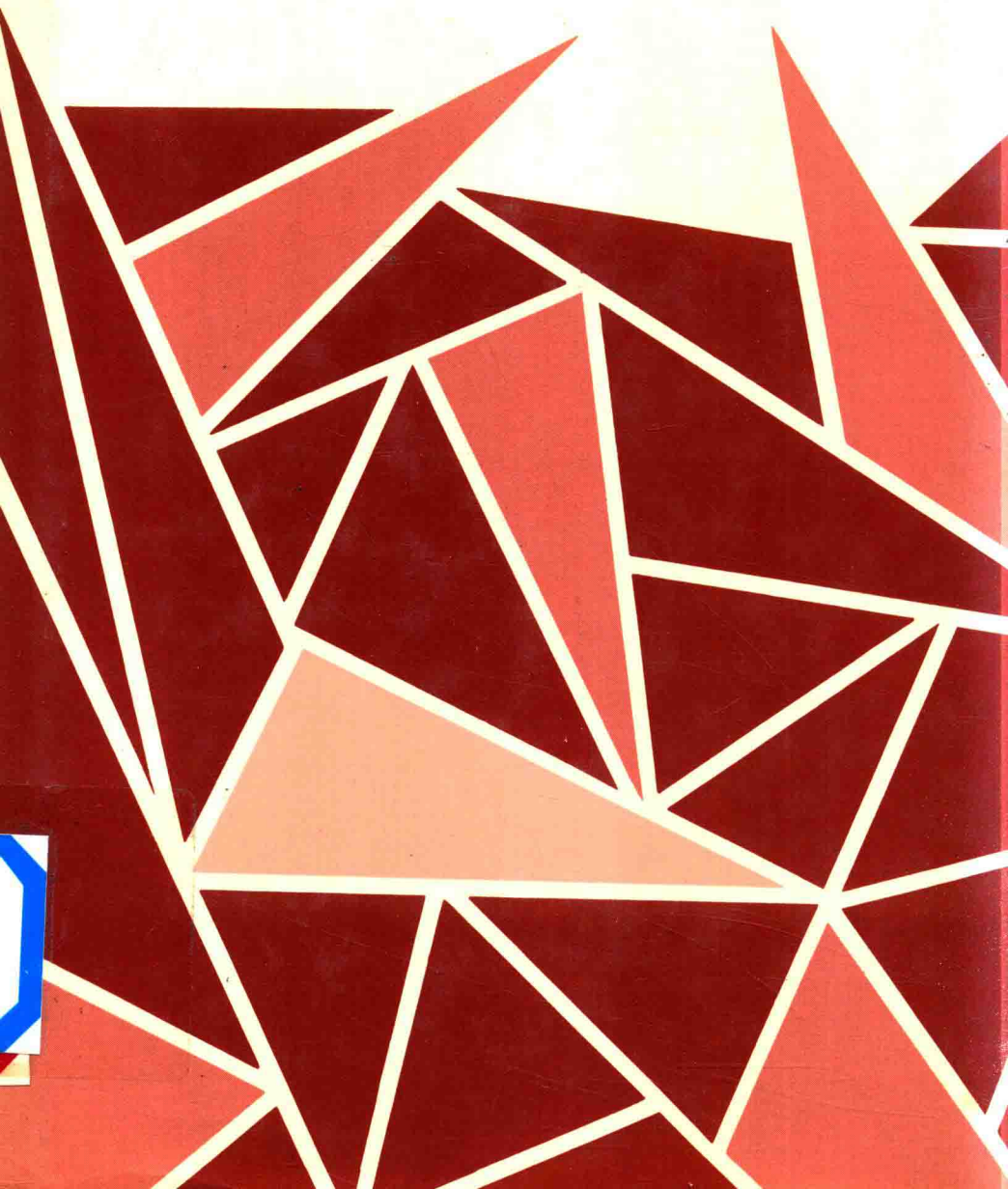


Marxism and the City

Ira Katznelson



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*For Zachary,
and his independence*

'From now on, I'll describe the cities to you,' the Khan had said, 'in your journeys you will see if they exist.'

But the cities visited by Marco Polo were always different from those thought of by the emperor.

'And yet I have constructed in my mind a model city from which all possible cities can be deduced,' Kublai said. 'It contains everything corresponding to the norm. Since the cities that exist diverge in varying degrees from the norm, I need only foresee the exceptions to the norm and calculate the most improbable combinations.'

'I have also thought of a model city from which I deduce all the others,' Marco answered. 'It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. If such a city is the most improbable, by reducing the number of abnormal elements, we increase the probability that the city really exists. So I have only to subtract exceptions from my model, and in whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exist. But I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit; I would achieve cities too probable to be real.'

The Great Khan owns an atlas in which are gathered the maps of all the cities: those whose walls rest on solid foundations, those which fell in ruins and were swallowed up by the sand, those that will exist one day and in whose place only hares' holes gape . . .

The atlas has these qualities: it reveals the form of cities that do not yet have a form or a name. There is the city in the shape of Amsterdam, a semicircle facing north, with concentric canals—the princes', the emperor's, the nobles'; there is the city in the shape of York, set among the high moors, walled, bristling with towers; there is the city in the shape of New Amsterdam also known as New York, crammed with towers of glass and steel on an oblong island between two rivers, with streets like deep canals, all of them straight, except Broadway.

The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyoto-Osaka, without shape.

(Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, 69, 137–9)

Preface

DEFEATED in the East and discredited in the West, and lacking in knowledgeable or popular support, Marxism has broken down as an ideology and as a guide to governance. Why publish a book about it in the early 1990s? And even if Marxism remains an important analytical tool and critical resource in countries that are capitalist and democratic, why treat Marxism and the *city*? Over the time-span of its development as social and practical theory Marxism has had relatively little to say about cities. Moreover, in the late twentieth century the city itself has become more diffuse and imprecise (like the 'cities' on the last pages of the Great Khan's atlas), even, perhaps, to the point of not constituting a meaningful category at all.

The most important reasons I have had for writing *Marxism and the City* pivot on two hunches. The first is that for all its profound and infirming flaws as a total ensemble of understanding and governance, Marxism remains a vital tool for understanding and raising questions about key aspects of modernity. Moreover, in the aftermath of the conclusive triumph of liberal citizenship and markets over competing conceptions, the analytical and critical dimensions of Marxism, albeit in a manner far more modest than Marxists once hoped, may now find a new significance as a source of intellectual and political friction. The second hunch is that some of the key weaknesses in Marxism as social theory can be remedied by forcing it to engage seriously with urban-spatial concerns, particularly with regard to the relationship between structure and agency that is at the heart of all useful social theory. In short, I think this extended speculative essay on Marxism and the city can help produce a more capable, if more limited and modest, contribution by Marxism to the analysis of important dimensions of social, political, cultural, and economic life.

In part, too, my reasons for tackling the manifestly peculiar

subject of Marxism and the city are personal and scholarly. When I started thinking about this book I had finished a volume on American cities and working-class formation. I was dissatisfied with the implicit, unexamined, not very rigorous *Marxisant* qualities of *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States*. That book contributed indirectly to scholarly work on Marxism and the city, and it presented a sympathetic critique of then current work by scholars working on cities within a Marxist framework. The central thrust of *City Trenches*, however, concerned questions about class, politics, and collective action in the United States that are usually condensed under the label 'American exceptionalism', a focus that allowed me the luxury of indirection regarding some key issues in Marxist theory and urban studies.

As it turns out, the invitation to write *Marxism and the City* provided me with a chance to grapple with these questions at just the moment when Marxist scholarship was beginning to engage the city seriously as a constitutive element of social theory for the first time in its intellectual and doctrinal history. The focus from within Marxism on the city was initiated by the pioneering work of Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s. He began with a fundamental critique of the urban field as such, and moved on to various theoretical and empirical studies of the city. In the hands of such talented intellectual craftspeople as Manuel Castells, David Harvey, Chris Pickvance, Doreen Massey, John Lojkin, Sharon Zukin, Christian Topalov, and a host of other geographers, sociologists, historians, and political scientists, the new Marxist studies became the major source of innovation in the urban field. Relative newcomers to the journal collections of libraries—*Space and Society*, the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Antipode*—took a leadership role in something approaching a paradigm shift in urban studies, at least for younger scholars. Today, after a period of robust creativity, the vitality of this scholarly effort has abated, or at least become more diffuse. While it is not entirely clear whether Marxist urban studies have reached a moment of closure or pause, either way this is a good time to take stock.

Marxism and the City is not principally a review essay,

however. The subject-matter of Marxism and the city holds out other promises. Cities have always been condensations of their civilizations. If their density distorts, so it also reveals. By focusing on cities as points in space, as places with determinate forms, and as *loci* for human activity, it is possible to illuminate from this vantage-point key aspects of history and the adequacy of alternative social theories. I think it possible to contribute towards an evaluation of Marxism's analytical capacities by focusing on the ways it can help explain the development of modern Western cities, and on how it can incorporate cities and city space into its analytical framework. I attempt to show how Marx's principal analytical projects are enhanced by incorporating an urban-spatial dimension; and, in turn, how some subjects of urban research and our understanding of cities are illuminated by their engagement with Marxism. At the same time, the encounter of Marxism with the city helps clarify some central issues of Marxist theory.

The character of *Marxism and the City* has been shaped by the lively scholarly climate at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, New York, where colleagues have reminded me that scholarly work is balanced between private and collective acts. For reading an early draft of the manuscript and providing telling criticism I am especially indebted to Janet Abu-Lughod, Jeffrey Goldfarb, David Gordon, Norman Fainstein (now at the City University of New York), Anwar Shaikh, and Charles Tilly. For other contributions based on seminar discussions of chapters at the Center for Studies of Social Change and the General Seminar of the Graduate Faculty, I am grateful to Andrew Arato, Jerome Bruner, Eric Hobsbawm, Robert Heilbroner, Sonia Kruks (now at Oberlin College), Claus Offe, Ross Thomson, Louise Tilly, and Aristide Zolberg.

Outside the New School, Steven Lukes's valuable editorial comments prodded me to improve the manuscript. Shmuel Eisenstadt kindly took time out during a sabbatical visit to the Russell Sage Foundation to comment on draft chapters. My week-long stay at the A. E. Havens Center for the Study of Social Structure and Social Change at the University of Wisconsin proved particularly helpful. Its director, Erik Olin

Wright, and David Ward, Ivan Szelenyi, Rogers Hollingsworth, Julia Adams, and other members of the collegium provided me with an extended and immensely stimulating chance to test my arguments at a particularly important juncture in the making of this book.

Raymond Williams, one of the two editors of 'Marxist Introductions', died before *Marxism and the City* was finished. I first read his work and heard him lecture when I was a student at Cambridge University in the late 1960s. Ever since, like so many others, I have held him in great regard, and I have been instructed by his marvellous writing. I was pleased to have had the chance to discuss my plans for this book with him at the outset, and I feel privileged to participate in a series graced by his co-editorship.

I.K.

The Graduate Faculty, New School for Social Research

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1 Marxism and the City?

VENICE, Amsterdam, and Danzig (Gdansk) are canal towns built on or near the sea. Lucerne, Geneva, and Zurich are located at the end of a lake astride a river that drains into the lake. In what sense are all of these cities comparable objects of analysis? In what ways do each of these triplets, which I draw from Lucien Febvre's discussion of towns,¹ compose meaningful clusters of cities? How shall we understand similarities and divergencies in their character and personality?

Possible answers are self-evident only if we restrict ourselves to a classification and analysis of cities with respect to their natural locations. Writing about the city in 1898, Vidal de la Blache proposed that the central problems of urban geography were twofold: 'Nature prepares the site, and man organizes it in such fashion that it meets his desires and wants.' Febvre, citing this formulation, hastens to observe that at a minimum we need also to distinguish the genesis from the growth processes of towns to make sense of their development. Thus the physical location of cities must be considered a contributory factor to their founding, but immediately upon their formation, towns begin to develop divergent histories; for these, 'the physical peculiarity in question must have yielded place, in the development of these urban organisms, to factors of quite a different nature and of infinitely more importance: to factors of growth or . . . of enlargement'.²

¹ Lucien Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1932, 338–41. Febvre opens his discussion of towns by appreciating the various typologies and classifications of geographers, but then moves quickly to question their depth and meaning: 'Not every comparison is valuable in itself,' he cautions, 'and to class the kings of France as fat and thin, tall or short, is not to contribute very effectively to a knowledge of their reign or character' (339).

² *Ibid.*, 340–1. See also Febvre's discussion of historical and politi-

2 Marxism and the City?

Without a sustained and systematic consideration of such 'factors of quite a different nature', the city must remain an elusive object of study. If we think of the city, as Lewis Mumford does, as 'the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community',³ then the study of cities is no less than a particular kind of study of human civilization and its large-scale processes (such is the case even if the empirical range under consideration is limited in time and place, as it is with this book whose focus is oriented mainly to post-sixteenth-century cities in Western Europe and North America).⁴ From this perspective, 'a city is a concrete

cal factors on p. 348. Lacking in this discussion is attention to the design of cities as a craft, and the connections between urban design and large-scale social processes. It is quite obvious that the design of the medieval town makes no sense without a focus on the role of religion, for example, or the 19th-century town without a consideration of the role of factory-based industry.

³ Lewis Mumford, *the Culture of Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938, 3. Whether cities are the hope or negation of civilization is a debate that has raged down through the ages. Each of these competing images is based on the shared view that cities, for good or ill, are particular kinds of condensations of human civilization.

⁴ This limitation is not without costs. Through my omission of urban development in East and Central Europe and the Soviet Union, *Marxism and the City* reproduces the failure of recent Marxist work on the city to deal seriously and comparatively with patterns of urbanization in non-capitalist societies. This decision, which I have made both for reasons of focus and expertise, makes it more difficult to demarcate precisely the differences *capitalism* has made to post-feudal urbanization in contrast to other causes. As Murray and Szelenyi have put the point, 'The main weakness of the neo-Marxist position is that it lacks a theory of urbanization under socialism. As long as the new urban sociology will not provide us with a comprehensive theoretical explanation of the nature of urbanization under actually existing socialism it will always be doubtful to what extent they have the right to claim that the contradictions they discover in western cities can actually be related to the capitalist character of these societies.' Pearse Murray and Ivan Szelenyi, 'The City in the Transition to Socialism', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 8 (Mar. 1984), 93. This is an important point, but it is not as fundamental a criticism as this strong prose suggests because it accepts the mode of production as the basic tool for explicating history and composing units for comparative analysis.

manifestation of general social forces; but its identity stems from being a particular accommodation to them'.⁵

Given the immense scope of the project of urban analysis, it is hardly surprising that there is a vast array of definitions and typologies of the city, and a host of specifications of the objects of urban studies. Are cities agglomerations of population over a certain size, specific functions concentrated in space, juridical units, bounded enclaves, or all of these and more? Even in the hands of as brilliant a student of cities as Mumford, whose working definition of the city is a useful guide-post, definitional discussions of the city are studded with an extraordinary range of analytical, allusory, and metaphorical formulations: The city is the 'product of the earth', 'a product of time', 'a fact of nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel, or an ant-heap', 'a conscious work of art', the expression of 'man's social needs'.⁶

And yet, more than any I know, Mumford's summary discussion of the 'sociological concept of the city' provides a useful grip on the subject, even as it justifies and commands a range of inquiry as broad as that of the study of human civilization:

Once this critical judgement is made (itself, of course, open to question), the matter of how to conduct a research programme, and which comparative strategies to use, are important, but second-order questions. For many, perhaps most, of the questions raised by the engagement of Marxism and the city, comparisons with the Soviet and East European experiences are not germane; for others they are. Ivan Szelenyi has been both insistent and influential in widening the scope of urban inquiry to include the socialist experience. Three papers published in the early 1980s have been especially important in setting the agenda for his later work and that of others: Ivan Szelenyi, 'Structural Changes of and Alternatives to Capitalist Development in the Contemporary Urban and Regional System', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 5 (Mar. 1981); Szelenyi, 'Urban Development and Regional Management in Eastern Europe', *Theory and Society*, 10 (Mar. 1981); and Murray and Szelenyi, 'The City in the Transition to Socialism'.

⁵ Eric Lampard, 'The History of Cities in the Economically Advanced Areas', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 3 (Jan. 1955), 84. Marxism represents one kind of working out of this relationship.

⁶ Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, 3–6.

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The essential physical means of a city's existence are the fixed site, the durable shelter, the permanent facilities for assembly, interchange, and storage; the essential social means are the social division of labor, which serves not merely the economic life but the cultural processes. The city in its complete sense, then, is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an esthetic symbol of collective unity. On the one hand it is a physical frame for the commonplace domestic and economic activities; on the other, it is a consciously dramatic setting for the more significant actions and the more sublimated urges of a human culture⁷

In the face of such an encompassing, decentred subject, the vast majority of studies of the city divide it into manageable parts, studying this or that aspect of urban life: its architecture, its economics, its politics, its collective action, its life-styles, its symbolism. Virtually every review of scholarship in urban geography, urban sociology, urban politics, and urban economics laments this disorder and division. Well they should. For, as we will see in a moment, this fragmentation is rooted not only in the immensity of the subject, but in the theoretical grounding of most twentieth-century urban studies in a model of cities and society that underscores the real and perplexing complexity of modern industrial societies. Ever since the explosion of cities in the West since the middle of the nineteenth century, even social theorists who have tried to apprehend more than partial elements of the city have done so within an approach that treats modernity in terms of differentiation. If we are to understand the potential contribution of Marxism to urban studies, I believe it is with an understanding and critique of this tradition in social theory that we need to begin.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 480.

⁸ The fragmentation and growing sub-area specialization of disciplinary urban studies continues unabated. In a 1985 review essay, geographer J. W. R. Whitehand took note that 'within the English speaking world urban geography is showing further signs of separating into a number of specialisms: retailing, offices, residential mobility, public service provision and morphology'. A year later, he continued to discover ever 'increasingly specialized research, with precious few efforts that go only a small way towards linking individual strands of research'. J. W. R. Whitehand, 'Urban Geography: The City as a

Before moving to this consideration, however, there is a prior issue to be taken up. The immense variety of urban subjects, theories, classifications, and methods is symptomatic of a lack of certainty not only as to whether the social sciences possess the tools necessary to analyse cities, but as to whether the city, as both an empirical and a theoretical construct, constitutes a coherent entity to be studied.⁹

Philip Abrams argued influentially that it is precisely because 'the city is *not* a social entity' that urban analysts frequently fall victim to a misplaced concreteness; thus we should not be surprised that empirical studies in the various fields of urban studies 'have proved graveyards of actual generalizations about the town'. The central issue, he insisted, is the focus on urban entities as such:

the town is a social form in which the essential properties of larger systems of social relations are grossly concentrated and intensified—to a point where residential size, density and heterogeneity, the formal characteristics of the town, appear to be in themselves constituent properties of a distinct social order.¹⁰

Place', *Progress in Human Geography*, 9 (Mar. 1985), 85; Whitehand, 'Urban Geography: Within the City', *Progress in Human Geography*, 10 (Mar. 1986), 103. Likewise, Shefter has noted the diversity of conceptions of the city within political science. The city has been variously apprehended as a community, as a business, and as a competitive market; its content has been treated in diverse kinds of imagery: as a system, as a mechanism of social control, as an internal colony, as a seat of political chaos. Martin Shefter, 'Images of the City in Political Science', in Robert M. Hollister (ed.), *Cities of the Mind*. New York: Plenum, 1984.

⁹ In part this fragmentation reflects the growing specialization and technical sophistication of the various disciplines, but I think this is a secondary feature. If one reads the various reports on subfields in geography, for example, that appear in the journal *Progress in Human Geography*, one is immediately made aware of the absence of coherence not only by the sheer number of such subfields (industrial geography, social geography, cultural geography, and so on), but also by how much the emphasis of what is significant in a given subfield varies from year to year and from author to author. This is the case especially for urban geography.

¹⁰ Philip Abrams, 'Towns and Economic Growth: Some Theories and Problems', in Philip Abrams and E. A. Wrigley (eds.), *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology*.