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JUST CITIES

THE CITY IS A JANUS-FACED ENIGMA, at least in the Western political tradition. According to the book of Genesis (4:17), the first city was established by Cain, and all cities partake of the problematical character of this original founder. Archeologists agree that the appearance of cities marked a fundamental transition in the history of human culture as a sedentary society of agriculture came to dominate over the more nomadic existence of hunting and gathering and pastoral husbandry. In historical time, the city has taken on two fundamental, coexisting identities. It is a space of market transactions and the birthplace of individualistic self-identity. It is also the birthplace of politics in the West—in particular the fifth century BCE Greek city-state—which offered a setting of political community, democratic citizenship, and civic virtue. Again, the ancient legacy endures: the city remains democracy’s only and best hope for renewal and its worst enemy, its moral antithesis. Hadley Arkes captures these two faces of the city in a striking way in his book *The Philosopher and the City*:

All about us today urban life is celebrated, but largely for the wrong reasons. When the city is valued, it is valued as the theater of diversity, the center of a cosmopolitan culture, the breeding ground of freedom and tolerance. ...But these virtues are the virtues of the marketplace or of the city as “hotel.” What they leave out, conspicuously, is any sense of the city as a source of obligation—not an arena for pursuing wants, a place for indulging tastes of literally any description, with no governing sense of character, but a place where people learn the lessons of propriety and self-control. ... What is lost, then, in this vision of the city as a shopping center is the sense of a people joined together in a perception of common ends; who found their common life on procedures they regard, by and large, as just, and who cultivate an understanding of justice as morals in one another through

the things they hold up to the community with the force of law. What is lost, in a word, is the sense of the city as a polity (p. 3).

In a similar vein I broach the question of the role of the city in the future patterns of relationship between humans and nature. Some in the environmental and conservation movements have tended to view the world of the city as the antithesis of the natural and sustainable world, a viewpoint understandable in the industrial era of the nineteenth century and not altogether without merit today. But we are living in the midst of one of the most rapid and massive migrations in human history and are headed toward a time when cities—always powerful and influential—will define the terms of experience for the vast majority of people. That may be the key to a human future of justice and responsibility—Arkes’ city as a polity, or what I shall refer to below as “the civic”—or it may bring about a destabilization of meaning (a radical break with traditions of social justice and democratic citizenship), as dire in its own way as the cognate bio-physical destabilization brought about by climate change.

From Fritz Lang’s silent classic, “Metropolis,” to contemporary analyses of the so-called OverCity and UnderCity,

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the prospect of a dehumanizing urban future of elite technocratic autocracy and extreme social stratification awaits those who follow the logical implications of the city under current conditions of global capitalism and neoliberal market ideology. It is essential, then, to rethink the concept of the city, as well as to understand its emerging sociological, economic, and political possibilities. What does the city promise ecologically and morally? What are the potential structures of relationship and places or modes of cohabitation that cities can offer?

Taking the city seriously means focusing on it not only as a “space”—a physical location, a population, a cluster of buildings and streets, or a statistical construct (a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area [SMSA])—but also as a “place”—a way of seeing, thinking, and acting, and a particular form of the human moral and political imagination. The idea of the city denotes a form of life, a state of mind, and a way of being in the world; and the actual lived experience of the city is no less imaginative than it is social and material.

As Fustel de Coulanges points out in his classic book *The Ancient City*, in both Greek and Latin the idea of the city is given two distinct meanings marked by different words. In classical Greek, the terms are *asty* and *polis*; in Latin the parallel terms are *urbs* and *civitas*. Indeed, the concept of the city in the West does offer two imaginative possibilities that are heuristically and conceptually distinct but are in reality often intertwined. These are a market society of competitors and exchangers (*urbs* or the urban) and a moral and political community of equality under law and active pursuit of shared purpose.

An *urbs* is an area of mass assembly: originally a site of religious gathering and ritual, and later a center for commercial transactions and exchange. As it lost its association with the religious or ritual center of the society, the *urbs* became the center of commerce and economic exchange; the *urbs* is where everything and everybody has its price, is for sale, is a commodity. An *urbs* is a market,

and the forms of life there consist primarily in the pursuit of material self-interest and the gratification of desire. In the early modern period the *urbs* also became a new and virtually unprecedented space of individuation, privacy, and anonymity; the city as *urbs* is the dwelling place of strangers; cooperative strangers, to be sure, but strangers nonetheless. The city generically is also the theater for the invention and reinvention of the self. In the *urbs* one's persona is negotiated through instrumental relationships or transactions with others who are engaged in equally calculating strategies of selfhood.

By contrast, the notion of *civitas* or *polis* (“city state”) and *politeia* (“constitution” or “political form”) grows out of the political theory of the ancient Greek oligarchies and democracies and the classical Roman republic. In the *civitas* the persona is shaped by a mutuality of common good and civic virtue. Private individuals reinvent themselves—at least periodically and for important occasions—as public citizens. If the *urbs* is a market of entrepreneurial and strategic endeavor, *civitas* connotes a political and legal community created for the purpose of pursuing the common good. This civic notion of the good is not necessarily essentialist, as in natural law theories, nor

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equivalent to the notion of aggregate net benefit, as in utilitarianism and modern economic theory. Properly understood today, the civic good is a developmental conception—it is not given by a unchanging core of traits or dispositions, but rather is an active life of diverse and resilient flourishing lived in an environment that permits the realization of multi-faceted capabilities and “functionings” or activities. The civic is a structure of citizenship ordered by reciprocity, equity, and just and proportionate laws. It is not content merely to protect the security and person of its citizens (important as those negative rights are) but also seeks to extend positive rights of equal voice, mutual assistance, and a setting conducive to the realization of a broad range of capabilities and a reasonably open future.

The distinction between the civic and the urban provides a vocabulary for comprehending the ethical and practical difference between commonality and cooperation—that is to say, the difference between a genuine mutuality of, and commitment to, common rules and restraints and a strategically self-interested acceptance of rules and restraints, sometimes called “enlightened self-interest” or “self-interest, rightly understood.” Commonality is a shared self-governance that has intrinsic meaning and value to its participants because it is rooted in an appreciation of underlying interdependency. Cooperation, as I am using it here, is a self-governance that has instrumental meaning and value to its participants, which is always calculated and provisional because it is rooted in an aspiration of individual interest and control.

What we might call a just ecological city will revitalize the sense of civic place and return us to founding roots of the city, which are communal in ways that embrace diversity, mobility, and self-discovery, and just in ways that empower parity of participation and voice. In his book *All Over the Map*, urban designer Michael Sorkin argues that we need to invent a new kind of city:

one that builds on thousands of years of thinking about and making good cities,

one that recognizes a radically reconfigured urban situation as its inescapable site, one that takes the survival and happiness of the species as its predicates, one that finds and defends numerous routes to meaningful difference, and one that advances the project of freedom. There is intense need for research and speculation into what the forms and agencies of these cities might be (p. 375).

That needed research is philosophical as well as architectural and sociological. Theories of community and justice do not always embrace these aspects of the city as *civitas*. Community can press the values of stability and conformity rather than dynamism and experiments in living. Justice can emphasize a rational distributional pattern and paternalistic planning from the top down rather than the praxis of democratic discourse and participation. But through community that is alive and justice that is a practice, the contemporary city provides a ground for a dynamic, differentiated, and democratic political and moral sensibility. Can this be precisely the sensibility we need in order to motivate a new kind of human relationship to the natural world?

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It is essential not to let this opportunity for ethical and political reconstruction in the city as *civitas* slip by. Why? Because the strategic pursuit of competitive interests in the urban marketplace has corroded community, and the rational persons who are supposed to design and run institutions governed by principles of impartiality, merit, and fairness are nowhere to be found among the leadership elites of nations and international affairs today. New senses of community and interdependence can emerge from a recognition of our dire ecological and planetary situation, and new forms of just democracy can emerge in the context of cities (even very large ones) more readily than in the context of the nation state. These fundamental possibilities are explored by thinkers such as Susan Fainstein in *The Just City* and Benjamin Barber in *If Mayors Ruled the World*. For Barber cities are well positioned to articulate global community with local participation—to be “glocal,” as he puts it. Finally, the city as *civitas* may prove to be a place equal to the task of transforming justice and democracy still further into an ecological democracy that respects the integrity and resilience of nature and that respects and preserves, as matters of solidarity, justice, and right, the capabilities of future generations of human beings.

As I read them, the essays in this issue of *Minding Nature* are looking for a new consciousness and will to curb humankind’s destructive economic and ecological behavior in a city of civic commonality rather than in a city of urban self-interested cooperation. Heaven knows, there are powerful reasons of enlightened self-interest that by their own logic should lead to the steps required to limit the damage we are doing to the climate system and the other fundamental planetary systems of life (biodiversity, nitrogen load, fresh water, and so on). And yet look at what is happening and what seems likely to happen. Consider, for instance, a recent report from an interdisciplinary team of leading scientists providing evidence that further delay in drastically reducing atmospheric carbon (through both reducing emissions and

enhancing natural sinks) will have long-term lag effects that are much more severe than previously recognized.¹

Hence, self-interest rightly understood is not cutting it. Apparently, the reasons of enlightened self-interest are weaker than the logic of competitive advantage in market economics and market politics, and our institutions of governance are so constructed that they are overwhelmed by more short-term, short-sighted forces. As dangerous as flirting with Ecotopia may be, embracing the ideal of the city as a civic commons and enacting shared rules and restraints based on an understanding of the good of human and natural flourishing may be the only way out. The good news is that we don’t have to make this stuff up as we go along. These alternative understandings have been available for centuries, and the history of their interpretation and philosophical refinement is there to guide us. The city as a place of civic democracy—a place beyond the market society—is very old, but that antiquity can also be its novelty, its vitality, its future relevance.

No one should underestimate the stakes or the difficulty of the conceptual and the practical work—the moral and the political work—ahead. In his important book on climate change *A Perfect Moral Storm*, Stephen Gardiner outlines

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three significant challenges that the city of the future will have to meet if it is to be the institutional venue to overcome the monumental ethical failure of our time.

First, can we achieve global justice? It is those of us in the developed parts of the world, (North America, Europe, and now India and China) who have brought about—and are now bringing about—the carbon emissions leading to destabilizing global warming, while those in the less developed areas are going to bear the brunt of the dislocations. The distribution of these benefits and burdens is clearly unjust, and this injustice piles on top of the long-standing injustice of the distribution of global wealth and income and of health and welfare. The old paradigm of development economics—growth through the dissemination of carbon intensive energy use and technology—won't work. That rising tide will swamp all boats. Can we find a way to share wealth and power more equitably in a world of lower growth?

Second, as difficult as the challenge of practically meeting the requirements of contemporaneous global justice may be, the problem of intergenerational justice is even more perplexing. The task of getting the rich to recognize the rights and common humanity of the poor is common to both problems of justice, but it is complicated in intergenerational justice by the issue of the moral standing of persons who only exist statistically and probabilistically, not individually and concretely. Can we find a place for those yet unborn in a new global social contract of justice and governance?

Third, can we overcome the temptations of self-deception that are reinforced by powerful reasons of interest and powerful emotions of denial? This is a challenge that goes beyond the ethical recognition of obligations and what we owe others, to an altered worldview or an ontological recognition of relationships and interdependency. This ontological recognition is what allows ethical recognition to take hold. All individuals living in a particular place at a particular time—a here and now—have a relationship of interdependency with the natural

world both locally and globally currently and in the future—in other words, both here and now and there and then. The same is true for the solidarity of each individual and all other human beings—both others here and now and others there and then.

I believe that if these questions can be answered in cities, indeed if they can be answered anyplace, they will require the imagination of the *civitas* not the imagination of the *urbs*. In saying that I realize that I may be pressing this distinction too hard and too far. I have done so in order to push back against the dominant, ubiquitous discourse of our time in which voices trumpeting the urban market mentality shout while civic democratic voices whisper. Of course, actual cities are both civic and urban; *civitas* and *urbs* coexist and intertwine as they always have.

We must beware of having a market without a polis, but we don't need to go to the other extreme of having a polis without a market at all. Integration and synthesis, proper proportion and balance between the aspirations of competitive self-interest and communal solidarity—entrepreneurialism and citizenship—are what is needed. In a variety of ways and in interestingly different registers, the essays in this issue of *Minding Nature* each explore such a synthetic vision.

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 What can save us? Just cities.

In his essay Benjamin Barber considers the potential for timely and effective ecological governance that is arising out of global networks of major cities today. Recognizing that their geography and ecological circumstances make them particularly vulnerable to the disruptions of climate change and sea-level rise, the leaders of many cities began to interact several years ago in the face of the inability of the international climate governance process to make headway and the failure of major nation-states to curb their carbon emissions. Detailing many intercity organizations and city-based initiatives around the world, Barber sees in them not only a new tool for taking effective climate action but also a revitalization of democratic governance within sovereign states and across state boundaries. He closes with suggestions about how to develop this innovative kind of global governance so as to break out of the impasse of international politics into a pragmatic and problem solving-kind of politics for which the city is a well-suited form.

Julian Agyeman's essay turns to questions of design and planning and the lived experience of the global city. While Barber stresses democratic participation, Agyeman focuses on the condition that he calls "difference," a term that he prefers to "diversity." The city is an open environment for difference and otherness, offering "a complex, dynamic, and embodied set of realities in which people re/create identities, meanings, and values." He sees a connection between this intercultural social reality of the city and conservation and ecological management practices. Traditional practices in conservation and environment restoration have been trying to reduce ecological differences in favor of a more static normative notion of a healthy ecosystem—for example, by removing non-native species. Ecological thinking today is questioning many of these past assumptions and Agyeman looks forward to a time of exploration and discovery not only in the social/cultural experience of

the city environment and also in our understanding of nature within it.

Julianne Lutz Warren's evocative essay focuses on the ontological, indeed cosmological, fallacy of a human-centered understanding of our own conditions of existence and the dis-valuation of other forms of life. In that context, she appraises the phenomenon of urban ecology and cities as human habitations. She sees like Barber many problems but also promise, and like Agyeman a richness and dynamism of texture and experience. A promise of cities is that they may reflect the choice of life over money; efficiently metabolize energy, and choose mutual health over unequal wealth.

Two reflections in this issue by Patricia Tull and Gavin Van Horn cover different points on the broad spectrum of cultural and natural meaning.

An underlying theme of all our work is changing human behavior toward the natural world to make it more sustainable and responsible, more appreciative and joyful. Changing behavior requires changing motivation, and changing motivation requires new forms of sensibility and imagination—as well as new reasons and arguments—that individuals derive from their sources of cultural meaning and value. The reflection by Patricia Tull follows that lead in recognizing

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the Bible as a significant source of meaning and inspiration for large numbers of people in the world today, including those devout Christians who take the teachings of scripture very seriously. Accordingly, it is important to comprehend the richness of the understanding of nature that is contained in the Bible. Tull shows that humankind's place in the creation has been misunderstood as, for example, in passages that refer to man's dominion or rule over nature. Tull argues that the proper interpretation here is that mankind has an obligation that is generative, not exploitative or human-centered.

Adding to the brief discussion of restoration ecology in Agyeman's essay, Gavin Van Horn writes about the various dimensions of what William Jordan and George Lubick in their book *The Restoration of Nature*, call "ecocentric restoration." The perspective here is that restoration work—and it is hard work resulting in aching muscles and an expanded imagination at the end of the day—has several dimensions. It is a form of play or performance that brings the human into special contact with the natural, reminding us of the otherness of nature and of our own profound effects on it. It is also a kind of tribute that reminds us to have respect and to be humble. It is a controlling activity that leads us to see beyond purpose of control to a broader, deeper sense of purpose. Van Horn asks why it is worthwhile to restore an ecosystem. His eloquent answer is: "because it implicates us as participants, partners, and co-creators in the well-being of living systems, prompting questions about our role in the destruction or alteration of parts or all of a landscape and directly engaging us in more-than-human worlds."

The Last Word comes from Kate Cummings. She engages us with a meditation on love and death, words and unmediated experience. It should be read, not summarized.

NOTES

1 Thanks to unprecedented climate forcing largely due to human activity, the Earth is in a state of serious energy imbalance, and this has many severe consequences, including the triggering of slow, but irreversible climate change due to the phenomenon of thermal inertia in the oceans. Permitting global temperature to rise by 2° C by the end of the century, once considered a reasonable goal, is not an acceptable option. It appears to be still technically possible to avoid that or higher levels, but not for much longer. See J. Hansen, P. Kharecha, M. Sato, V. Masson-Delmotte, F. Ackerman, et al., "Assessing 'Dangerous Climate Change': Required Reduction of Carbon Emissions to Protect Young People, Future Generations and Nature," *PLoS ONE* 8,no.12 (2013): e81648, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0081648J.