



## City in Modern Cultural Criticism: Lewis Mumford and István Hajnal

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**Abstract.** The critique of the city is an almost obligatory cliché of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural criticism. This paper offers a parallel critical analysis of the conceptions of American ecologist Lewis Mumford and Hungarian historian István Hajnal. They were contemporaries, and their approaches had been inspired by interwar cultural criticism. Mumford did not hate the city: it was, for him, the engine of history, a reservoir of cultural creativeness. The theory of Hajnal, from many aspects, runs parallel with Mumford's – moreover, the Hungarian historian gives a detailed theory on the types of European city. What connects them is an ecological approach.

**Keywords:** Spengler, cultural criticism, parasite, engine, Mumford, Hajnal

### Introduction: Oswald Spengler and His City Philosophy

The history of modernity has been intertwined from the beginning with the motif of anti-urbanism. There is, of course, a long tradition of this aversion; anti-urban sentiments were part and parcel of a cultural package containing different elements from bucolic Roman poetry to antique republicanism. Countryside rustic simplicity and ancient patriotic virtue were opposed to the urban viciousness and corruption; the story of Cincinnatus, the emblematic figure of the ancient martial Roman virtues who had been invited by the Roman Senate from his plough-stock to save the patria was a central image of this pre-modern anti-urbanism. The modern version of this idea had been nourished by the tensions of the modern urbanization process having culminated in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Anti-urban theories were particularly popular in the Central and Eastern European region where the urban centres–provinces opposition was burdened by ethnic tensions and social conflicts.

Oswald Spengler, the prophet of doom, is undoubtedly the best known anti-urban thinker of modern cultural criticism. (On the Spenglerian theory, see:

Farrenkopf 2001, Felken 1988, Hughes 1952, Koktanek 1968). He canalized the aversion to the city in his cultural morphology. His anti-urbanism, at the same time, is coloured by a deep ambivalence: city, on the one hand, is a vampire, a parasite sucking the blood of the countryside and, on the other hand, the city, in Spengler's theory, is depicted by a lively and impressive metaphor: it is the scene where the history of mankind has begun (Kovács 2011a). Spengler uses an antithetical notion pair: *eternal village* – *historically changing city*. While the modern metropolis is one of the main targets of Spengler's criticism, his aversion does not extend to the country town, the medieval and early modern baroque city of culture; the latter, in fact, is the scene where the flowers of Western or Faustian culture yield their autumnal heavy and beautiful crops from Michelangelo's sculpture to the music of Mozart and Beethoven. This ambiguity turns into the opposition of *soul* (*Seele*) and *spirit* (*Geist*) and that of culture and civilization embodied in the contrast between Paris and Berlin. Spengler scourges the soulless metropolis; it is the terrain of cold inanimate rationalism and intellectualism and that of plutocracy concealed by the fig-leaf of parliamentary democracy. The pictures of Fritz Lang's classical film *Metropolis* suggestively visualize Spengler's conception on the stone-Colossus of megapolis. Berlin, on the other hand, represents the utmost achievements of European culture.

## Mumford and Spengler in the Context of the Interwar Cultural Criticism

The interwar decades meant a stressed period in the history of modern anti-urbanism; the cultural criticism of the age was a theoretical response to the challenge of modernity crisis, whose first signs had already been reflected in the *fin de siècle* pessimistic public mood suggested by both the works and the self-reflections of contemporary intellectuals. Pessimism and resignation got a new impetus after the WWI crisis not only in Europe but on a global scale, including the USA. This paper offers a sketch of a comparative analysis of two thinkers who were the contemporaries of each other but were living in geographically and culturally distant locations: the American Lewis Mumford and the Hungarian István Hajnal. What connects them is their conception of city development flavoured by an ecologically sensitive pessimistic cultural critique. Lewis Mumford was one of the most prominent forefathers of ecological thought (Blake 1990, Kovács 2009, Kovács 2011b, Miller 1989); he labelled himself a *generalist* dealing with a wide spectrum of disciplines from the history of technics and civilizations to that of the city and city planning. He dedicated two lengthy books to this subject: *The Culture of Cities* (1938) and *The City in History* (1961).

However, when compared to Central European, first of all German, *Kulturpessimismus*, American cultural criticism appears largely different. Lewis Mumford belonged to the first generation of American modernity criticism. Albeit the American version had been inspired by European traditions, first of all by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, it grew out from a different cultural background. Randolph Bourne, Van Wycks Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford, the group of *young Americans*, (Blake 1990) who had been socialized in the atmosphere of post-civil war America, refused the world of big business and large-scale industrialization, but their idea of grass-roots democracy stemmed from the traditions of American democratic populism. Their world view was coloured by the ideas of the intellectual movement of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American transcendentalism, including such influential authors like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. They also shared the attitude of the turn-of-the-century American pragmatism, and a critical assimilation of the philosophy of John Dewey enriched their thought.

As we described above, Spengler outlined a characteristically German-type city philosophy imbued with metaphysics. In political terms, he massively attacked modern democracy, labelling it as a fig-leaf of plutocracy. City, for Spengler, was a fortress of the uprooted forces of modernity, a vampire sucking the blood of the countryside. This kind of metaphysical anti-urbanism was alien to the American thought. Mumford, the most renowned figure of his generation, was a missing link between the German and American versions of cultural criticism. His mother was of German origin, and Mumford himself did not only have a good command of German language but knew exceptionally well German culture and had first-hand information of contemporary German cultural criticism. At the same time, he definitely refused the Spenglerian kind of it. During the years of WWII, he wrote a critical essay on Spengler, in which he labelled the Spenglerian oeuvre 'a morbid saga of barbarism' and massively criticized his one-sidedness and fatalism:

All intercourse with outside cultures is impossible: all carryovers from the past are for Spengler an illusion. The processes of self-repair, self-renewal, self-transcendence, which are as observable in cultures as in persons, were completely overlooked by Spengler. His many vital perceptions of the historic process served only one purpose which he kept steadfastly in view: as apology for barbarism. (Mumford 1973: 220)

## **A Closer Look at Mumford**

The conception of Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) of city development has been embedded in the framework of his historical philosophy and philosophical anthropology. A human being possesses two basic abilities: he is able to construct

a new physical environment, a second nature, and to create cultural symbols, moral, and esthetical ideas. These abilities are based upon two prime instincts: will to power and a sense of order. The history of settlement forms begins in Neolithic times with the village. The city is an outcome of the urban revolution taking place in the valleys' hydraulic civilizations and the region of the so-called Fertile Crescent, in the Near East. City, in the theory of Mumford, collects and synthesizes the cultural heritage of the past. It is both a *magnet and a container* (Mumford 1961: 9, 82–83). It attracts different customs, institutions, the segments of material and intellectual cultures remote in space and time, gathering them within its walls; its cultural creativeness is feeding on this many-coloured variety. City is also a meeting place of foreigners. At the same time, there is an inherent ambivalence encoded in the structure of the city; it is a terrain of the simultaneous coexistence of openness and exclusiveness, cooperation and domination, the two basic social organizing methods of human society. Domination begets power, whose habitat is the citadel in the centre of the city, mostly built on a hilltop. In ensuing historical periods, different city types emerge; they differ from each other from the aspect of social organizational method preferred by them. In an antique Greek polis and, first of all, in a medieval town, cooperation and social interdependence are able to check domination and power – *communitas* takes command over *dominium*.

This social and political arrangement is reflected in the physical infrastructure of the city: there is a striking contrast between the winding narrow streets of a medieval town and the straight boulevards of a Baroque city running into a central square; it is the contrast of organic development and mechanic construction devised by a sole planner-despot. The vista of the city is a faithful image of contemporary power relations. The Baroque city planner is in the same position in the field of planning as the Baroque ruler in the field of politics. But this spirit pervades the whole age: one of Mumford's favourite quotations comes from Descartes who in his classical philosophical text, *Discourse de la method*, draws a parallel between the medieval, organically developed town and the new, rationally planned city, emphasizing the superiority of the latter over the randomly grown-up former. This conception, according to Mumford, is a typical expression of the intellectual hubris of modernity.

City, in the theory of Mumford, lives in a mutually beneficial relationship with its countryside: they together make a region. This relationship cannot be based on one-sided advantages enjoyed solely by the city to the detriment of its countryside. As a consequence of an emphatically ecological approach, he sees the city and its environment as an ecological habitat; this starting-point explains his sharp critique exercised over the modern Megapolis; albeit it is a possessor of the best elements of the cultural heritage of human history, its exaggerated dimensions, its power concentration and the dominant mechanized way of life of mass existence

prevent the complete utilization of this heritage. Modern Megapolis in its present form is an image and embodiment of the modern *megamachine*; this famous metaphor of Mumford refers to a civilization based upon a social organizing method using individuals as cogs in a gigantic machine: domination overwrites community, top-down built structures outpace small democratic bottom-up structures. What is needed, Mumford critically concludes, is the dismantling of power concentration and formless gigantism resulting only in a dysfunctional city life; the renewal of modern city needs radical decentralization:

(...) when a city has reached the megapolitan stage, it is plainly on the downward path (...) Most of the existing world cities have become over-congested because they did have real advantages in international communication: they were the meeting points of transcontinental and trans-oceanic highways: often they possessed a superior inheritance of culture institutes, reaching back into a unique historic past. These advantages would remain even if the present mass-agglomerations of people were reduced to a cluster of inter-related cities, no one of which would have over fifty thousand people, nor the cluster have more than a million: what was once present only in an urban point is now available throughout a whole region. (Mumford 1938: 295–296)

## A Closer Look at Hajnal

In his sociology of history, Hungarian historian István Hajnal (1892–1956), a three years older contemporary of Mumford, was inspired by the wave of ecologically sensitive German cultural criticism, the relational sociology of Hans Freyer and contemporary French sociology, particularly of Emile Durkheim (Kovács 2016, Szirák 2008). Hajnal, similarly to Mumford, opposes vertical social relations based upon domination to horizontal ones based upon mutuality; these latter constitute the *small circles of liberty* superseded by impersonal-bureaucratic rational social organizing methods of modernity. The conception of Hajnal of city is embedded in a peculiar history of philosophy and a conservative philosophical anthropology. According to him, there are two social organizing methods in human societies: one of them is based upon *customary social practices* – in this case, human actions are determined by customs inherited from the previous generations. Another social organizing method is based upon *individual rationality* – in this case, human actions are regulated by the human mind not restricted by anything except for itself. These methods have been originated in two basic human abilities: the ability of objectification of the physical environment and that of thinking. The latter, Hajnal surprisingly argues,

is not a special difference, the Aristotelian *differentia specifica* elevating human being above the animal kingdom; in his interpretation, this is a peculiar kind of animal instinct of subsistence. This ability serves the survival of the biological organism named human being; all other things are subordinated to this purpose; so, this generates an egoistic behaviour when a human being is driven by it and it does not respect anything else except for the organism itself. Nature and his/her human fellows are seen only as means to the end of self-subsistence.

The warranty of mutuality in human society is the complex of customary social organizing practices; they enforce the naked rationality striving to exploit nature and other human beings at any rate to conform to its human and physical environment. Customary social practices are embodied in customs and social institutions made by the human mind and physical objects made by the human hand. The European Middle Ages is in a unique position in the theory of Hajnal; it was not by chance, Hajnal points out, that the historical breakthrough to modernity took place in Europe. The customary social practices here have successfully moderated rational social practices without petrifying the social structure.

The European city was a product of this historical development; the argumentation of Hajnal runs parallel with that of Mumford. It is not the number of its inhabitants that is the real criterion of a city. Not every large agglomeration of people is a real city (Hajnal 1993). What makes a city is not the crowd swarming in the streets or its privileged position as a bureaucratic or power centre. It is the array of inner social, political constellations and the relation to its countryside which constitute the city. Medieval towns were small concerning the number of their inhabitants; they only had a few thousand dwellers: medieval Paris with its 100,000-strong population was an exception to the rule. Hajnal, again very similarly to Mumford, strongly emphasizes that the medieval town was a terrain of liberty embodied in group privileges ensured by customs and later sanctified in the written form of charters. The town as a whole, as a sociological reality, was a community in which social relations were based on mutuality; this did not mean, of course, social or political equality in the modern sense. On the contrary, it was a set of uneven social positions, but there was some kind of *mutuality* with the attitudes of give and take; modern liberty would not have emerged without these medieval antecedents – Hajnal emphasizes in his anti-Weberian historical philosophy. One-sided, exploitative conditions, including the human–human and the human–nature relationships, were not able to acquire a dominant position because of the customary social organizing methods assuring and maintaining mutuality in the inner life of the city and its cooperative relation to the countryside and natural environment. The outstanding cultural creativity of the medieval city were rooted in the constellations of the above-mentioned factors.

Hajnal, following the logic of contemporary cultural criticism, feels aversion to the overcrowded modern metropolis – from this respect, his standpoint is essentially the same as Mumford's approach. Both thinkers were inspired by the patterns of the city critique of contemporary cultural criticism: the modern Megapolis, from this perspective, is a terrain of an alienated mechanic existence dissolving the bonds of community and degrading its inhabitants to lonely and faceless atoms in a gigantic beehive which enforces its environment to accept the megapolitan way of life as a sole option in modern times. Behind their ideas, of course, there are partly similar, partly different contexts. What is common to them both is the tradition of ecologically inspired modernity critique of the interwar German thought emphasizing the dichotomy of *organic–mechanic*.

## Conclusions

The commitment to the ecological standpoint is a common motif for both of them: in the case of Mumford, it is evidently at the centre of his thoughts. The city is not able to withdraw itself from the force of the ecological law which sanctions a living organism because that does not take into account the interests of other neighbouring organisms in their common habitat and overturns, by depletion of natural resources and pollution, the sensitive equilibrium of the ecosystem. In the case of Hajnal, the ecological approach is not an explicit theory, but it is a basic background supposition behind his thoughts.

However, the inner contexts are different: Mumford draws on the heterogeneous and many-coloured heritage of American anti-urbanism including democratic populism, the idea of farmer democracy coined by Jefferson, and the American transcendentalism of Walt Whitman and Emerson (White 1962). He refuses the city metaphysics of Oswald Spengler based on a fatalistic philosophy of history; Mumford is committed to the idea of the renewal of Megapolis on the basis of a regionally oriented city planning focusing on decentralization. Hungarian historian István Hajnal, whose ideas of the social role of peasantry stand close to the conception of the Hungarian Populist Movement of the interwar period, living in the interwar Central European reality, has been inspired by the contemporary Hungarian debates on the role of the newly emerging metropolis, Budapest. However, Mumford and Hajnal do not suggest a return to the past – they know bucolic utopias are beyond the horizons of reality.

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