

THE URBAN LANDSCAPE AS A THREAT TO TRADITIONAL POLITICAL THEORY

BY
BRADLEY W. BRYAN¹

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¹ Bradley Bryan holds degrees in political theory and law, is a Law Clerk at the British Columbia Court of Appeal, and has worked as a Senior Researcher at the Eco-Research Chair of Environmental Law and Policy in the Faculty of Law at the University of Victoria. The author would like to thank Warren Magnusson for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper. The author would also like to thank Michael M'Gonigle and Deborah Curran for helpful ideas and suggestions. Finally, as the Eco-Research Chairs are funded by the Tri-Council Secretariat, I would like to thank the Secretariat for its ongoing support.

sad is Eros, Builder of Cities
- W.H. Auden²

Introduction

We might imagine that Eros's sadness stems from the fact that the god builds cities and is responsible for his own undoing among humans. But Auden places Eros at the grave of Freud. Eros's grief in seeing Freud pass away from the flesh suggests insights into the layers of the unconscious behind the immediacy of the urban landscape: there is unwritten history to these libidinally charged spaces. But Eros, that harbinger of elements human, is the one who casts visions of the flesh into stone.³ Eros builds cities because *that is what eros is for*. The city contains the sharpened edges of our passions, of our depravity, of darkness, of violence, and of the immanent sensuality that can mark each of these. But do not be mistaken: the urban city changes us by pushing us to become who might not otherwise have been.

The city, as the urban centre, is no longer an expression of communal ties and bonds, but rather is characterized by rational transactions and efficient movement: it is an association for the purpose of production.⁴ The culture of urban cities reflects this shift from communal ties based on a deeper understanding of things like place, hierarchy and belonging to a cosmopolitan life constituted by transactions at all levels.⁵ The city becomes urban by dissolving these ties. And yet the urban ironically replaces these ties with the presentation of a unique array of political experiences, among which the idea of community, traditionally conceived, seems difficult to imagine.⁶ Our built environments, following Le Corbusier but on a grander scale, are machines for living in.⁷

² W.H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," *Collected Poems*. Edward Mendelson ed. (New York: Vintage Press, 1991) 273, at 276.

³ The title of Richard Sennett's book discusses the way in which bodies move through the built environment, not how the former express themselves through the latter. See *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994).

⁴ The transition of the public space from its communal beginnings to its rational basis in association involves the evolution of a complex array of social institutions. See Max Weber, "The City" in *Economy and Society*. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), at 1212; Gerald Frug, "The City as a Legal Concept" (1980) 93:6 *Harvard Law Review* 1057. Ferdinand Tönnies deals with this shift in a more theoretically explicit, though not historically detailed, account in *Community and Association (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. Charles P. Loomis trans. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955).

⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), at 90ff. In the same vein, Witold Rybczynski describes how the personal and the private, as exemplified in a concept of "Home" only develops out of a particular public sentiment towards dictates of rational production: see Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*. (New York: Penguin, 1986), at 51ff, and chapter two generally where the Dutch experience of "Domesticity" arises parallel to the origins of capitalist production structures. The rise of the "transaction" as the defining element of social relationships is certainly a Weberian notion: *General Economic History*, Frank H. Knight trans. (New York: Collier Books, 1961), at 235-57.

⁶ Part of the problem with the traditional terms of analysis is that they restrict our vision on the state, thus mischaracterizing the nature of political experience on the whole. See Warren Magnusson, *The Search for Political Space*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), at 29-48. The sociology of Weber and Tönnies uses the society as the unit of analysis. Thus, at the level of societies, it becomes easier to speak of an "urban" sociology than it does to speak of an urban political science, since the latter conceives of political



The term “community” is mobilized to represent a particular set of historical contingencies.⁸ At its most basic (almost crude) level, the word “community” refers to a particularly good “thing” existent at a given time, that is, of the golden age of homelands: of the *gemeinschaft* that existed prior to its transformation into (or rather, elimination and replacement by) a *gesellschaft*;⁹ in its more sophisticated versions, it represents the complicated metaphysical understanding of Selves at home in the world, referring to the way in which we actualize ourselves through participation in the good. If one heeds the tradition which informs our self-understandings, the ideal of *civitas* hovers at the edges. *Civitas* refers largely to the people living in an organized community, the citizens of a state, and “the rights of a citizen, citizenship, and the gift of citizenship conferring rights *sine suffragio*.”¹⁰ To be a citizen is to exercise the virtue of *civitas*, which involves one’s inherent identity as a being of the community. Civic republicanism is one strand of this tradition of political theory which contemplates a metaphysical understanding of the self as an inherently related being.

It is in this civic republican tradition of thought, and its concomitant pitfalls, that Hannah Arendt finds herself. An exponent of a retrieved public sphere, Arendt’s

science as a state-centric discipline. The urban is studied as a manifestation of the state, rather than a specific unit itself.

⁷See David Harvey’s description of the effects of Le Corbusier: *The Condition of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), ch 1; also Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), at 165-68.

⁸Rorty might remark that community is itself a particular set of contingent relationships manifest in a common understanding about what life is all about, but this seems to preclude the more insightful task of looking into the ways in which the term is used, and how it is mobilized. See “The Contingency of Community” *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). I use the word “mobilized” to suggest “war-like” imagery because it allows us to see that words like “community” are used with political purposes in mind, and further, are used as particular “trump” cards in discourse (much like the words “freedom” were used in American politics in the 1950’s). With respect to what community might signify, Baudrillard might remark that the word community is signified by *The Waltons*, or *Little House on the Prairie*, and that such signifiers become the reality, the touchstone, against which other actions occur. See *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Charles Levin trans. (St. Louis, MO: Telos, 1981). His analysis brings in a very articulate discussion of the process by which the commodification of images creates reality.

⁹Tönnies, *Community and Association (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*, *supra* note 3. Berman’s modernism contrasted with Harvey’s postmodernism gives a nice picture of the movement from the despairing and aestheticized pictures of the rationalized city, to an analysis of it which privileges factors which cause changes to cultural patterns. Weber describes some of the dynamics of this process in a particular way, as does Gerald Frug: *supra* note 1. The way in which the transformation affects the interaction of individuals in the public sphere is canvassed in an interesting way in Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Thomas Burger trans. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1989). Habermas’s analysis, though carried out with the Civil Code of Germany in mind, and the particular structure of the public sphere implied by it, his analysis is well suited to the Common-Law tradition, where the evolution of rules of conduct which transformed the structure of the public sphere occurred somewhat more obviously and obliquely. The evolution of the Chancery from a court of Conscience to a court of Equity demonstrates, among other things, the “structuring” effect of law on social relations. In this instance, the court of Conscience began to fall on hard times during Cardinal Wolsey’s time as Chancellor. Wolsey was known for his distaste for lawyers, and enjoyed showing them up in any manner possible. After Wolsey’s death, there was a strong reaction to the perceived “arbitrary” authority of the Chancery. It was argued that the *ad hoc* nature of the Chancellor’s decisions offended the rule of law. See J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*. 3rd ed. (London: Butterworths, 1990), at 122-3. In this way, the law comes to be seen as more “rational” because it is more predictable and has its basis in a set of rules rather than in the consciences of men (that is, men rather than humans).

¹⁰Thus, the basis of *civitas* is in the root *cive*, which denotes that which humans give rise to in themselves through their association with others. The expression of *civitas* becomes the actualization or manifestation of *cive*.

political theory emphasizes the fundamental importance of participatory political action for human realization. Thus, her philosophical project is to articulate the loss of that public space, to understand how a “place” in the world for humans has perished, and to pursue a more engaged conception. It is claimed that we are no longer at home in the world; our related nature, the unity of thought and being, is now a shattered myth that we recognize which burdens us with separateness and isolation.

By looking at the factors surrounding the disappearance of the civic republican “community” ideal in the urban centre, trace elements of the category we refer to as “humanity” emerge. That is, by going to the urban to find the demise of an idealized way of living we become aware of certain features of our thinking concerning what it means to be an actualized individual. If indeed the urban signifies the disappearance of a particular kind of living with a replacement by another, we must ask: what is it that disappears, what appears, and what do the humans existing “there” look like? Is there *civitas* in the urban?¹¹

Upon realizing the multiplicity of factors at work to produce that which we call urbanism, the urban becomes something other than an expression of the lifestyle of the city, but rather becomes the actual mode of existence which continually creates the conditions for the “downfall” and “resurrection” of the human through its continual creation of the illusion and the myth in a setting where bodies are in continual movement.¹² The urban becomes a non-entity because the urban is about the placelessness of the human, becoming an allocator of “space” through its “settling” of beings without places. Thus, as we noted at the beginning, the city becomes “urban,” at least in one respect, when it is no longer possible to see it as an expression of community, but rather when it exists as an association of rational transactions and efficient movement.

Even though we can see that the urban centre is a rationalized structure of production which has evolved in a turbulent fashion, various experiences in urban life paint an illusory, mythical, and ominous portrait of the nature of human urban reality. Paired with this dynamic picture is, of course, the banal vision of the suburb as a “homeland,” or the “wasteland” of ghettos and slums.¹³ “Homelands” can also refer to our places of origin, or the way in which we identify with a larger community. But even then, the word “homelands” comes to signify all sorts of things, but things with which we cannot relate while engaged with the urban: our

¹¹Magnusson, *The Search for Political Space*, *supra* note 5. Magnusson's study demonstrates the particularly broad base of social movements which converge in the urban sphere as a sphere of political expression. The urban offers a place to bring one's politics because these “communities” find space to “self-actualize.” Alexis de Tocqueville's observations of democracy seem cogent when one looks at the phenomenon of citizenship in the urban centre, even if they point to a more engaged vision. See Chapter 17, “How the Aspect of Society in the United States is at Once Excited and Monotonous” *Democracy in America*, vol. II. Henry Reeve trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), at 239-42. We need to ask: if the more engaged vision still animates our popular discourses, are those elements we identify in the city as “alienating” merely an expression of the longing for such an engaged vision? Or, rather, are there contradictory visions at work when we approach the urban?

¹²See Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996), at ch. 1; for a creepier vision of where the urban machine takes us, see Lewis Mumford, “Technology and Culture” in *The Lewis Mumford Reader*. Donald Miller ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), at 299.

¹³For a more sobering vision, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. (New York: Verso, 1990). And for a particularly bleak portrait of the way in which the urban can only carry “residues” of tangible life-fulfilling experiences, see R.M. Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Stephen Mitchell trans. (New York: Random House, 1982).



tongues are tied by a convergence of different discourses, all convening toward an explanation of what the “urban” might signify in relation to “homeland.”

The tradition which conceives of our inherent humanity in terms of political community, to which I am loosely referring as the civic republican tradition and the virtue of *civitas*, encounters difficulties when coming to the new urban reality because the nature of human agency in this environment is radically different.¹⁴ For instance, my world may include a large number of individuals, but those individuals are identified by their roles in the urban rather than the identities they have of themselves in the community: the bus driver, the person at the post office, the police officer, the mayor.¹⁵ Meaning becomes limited to the rationalized structures of urban life. Crises in meaning therefore continually present themselves in new forms, and philosophers are continually pushed to re-articulate from first principles, or to philosophize in revolt against philosophy itself: we are continually driven back to contemplate the troublesome relationship between thought and action, between mind and being in reality.¹⁶ Thus at the level of theorizing we are thwarted when we come to articulate just what urbanism might be.¹⁷

In this paper, I will dig into the particular problem addressed by the philosophical adherents of what I am calling civic republicanism (people like Aristotle, de Tocqueville, Rousseau, and Herder) expressed in the thought of Arendt, and by association, in Heidegger. This metaphysical problem is simply described as the existential juncture between the human and the world in which it finds itself. Urbanism challenges this problem by expressing the problem of angst and the metaphysical discomfort associated with it as a fact of living; one endures the urban through the greatness and wonder it provides in its manifestly individualized pursuits.¹⁸ Though Arendt's analysis of the urban world as a place of lost homelands (where we are destined to inauthentic modes of being while frantically working to recreate a public sphere) is full of insights into the human condition, it misses an aspect of the urban lifestyle which informs who we are as human beings: the Dionysian elements of myth, of the momentary, of the self “lost” or “given over” to the logic of the erotic, the passionate, the political violence in which we partake upon moving and acting, and all of their intoxicating effects. The urban still retains all its inherent danger for the human spirit (boredom, banality, commodity fetishism, the unremarkable re-occurrence of the same day), but

¹⁴See the conception of human agency brought forth in Arendt's final chapter “The Revolutionary Tradition and its Lost Treasure” in *On Revolution*. (New York: Viking Press, 1963), at 217; and the discussion of the components of the *vita activa* in the first chapter of *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), at 7-21.

¹⁵ The process of “rationalization of social relations” captures the transformation of communal identities into productive roles. See Weber, *General Economic History*, *supra* note 4, at 170-91.

¹⁶This “revolt” and “rearticulation” is characterized in different ways by Arendt as a response to the difficult separation and disjunction created by Kantian Philosophy. She contends that with Kant, the destruction of the unity of thought and Being is complete: the individual is removed from the world. See Hannah Arendt, “What is Existenz Philosophy?” (1946) 13:1 *Partisan Review* 34, at 39.

¹⁷The speechlessness from which we suffer when confronted with the urban reflects a larger malaise with social theory itself, exemplified perhaps more starkly by the contradictions inherent in the Enlightenment tradition itself: Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), at 80-6. See Michael Peter Smith, *The City and Social Theory*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979); Louis Wirth “Urbanism as a Way of Life” in *Classic Essays in the Culture of Cities*. Richard Sennett ed. (New York: Meredith, 1969) 143.

¹⁸ In this way, the social movement becomes simply another way in which individuals reach out into the urban spectacle to find that sense of meaning which gives a sense of personal power.

manages to continually attract and present the human in its fuller elements. It will be seen that urbanism challenges this traditional understanding of the human by directing our attention to the relationship between remembering, forgetting, and the bases of action which provide us with a doorway to become who we really are.¹⁹

I will begin by looking at the way in which Arendt understands the problem of homelessness as a characteristic of modernity, which inevitably involves a consideration of Heidegger as well. After drawing out the intricacies in the way in which the *civitas* tradition casts the understanding of the individual in the world, I will turn to look at alternative ways of understanding the human as a political being in the world by looking at the writings of, among others, Walter Benjamin. By looking at these different strands, and through a reflection on the urban reality and its effect on our daily existence, we will be in a position to point out the hapless scramblings of civic republican political theory when faced with urban living. Urbanism's challenge to the *civitas* ideal reveals how awkward we feel when we turn to an antiquated discourse, with that markedly Western knee-jerk reflex to remember Athens, to rally explanations around the disturbing immanence of the itinerant at our elbow and in ourselves. And yet latent within our scrambling are the seeds of renewal since we necessarily approach living in the urban on the river of history: it produces our horrors, it feeds our joys, and it pulls the rug from under our feet just when we leap for greatness.

I. Philosophers of Lost Homelands

This question has today been forgotten - although our time considers itself progressive in again affirming "metaphysics."

*- Heidegger, the opening lines of **Being and Time**.²⁰*

The social scientific understanding of the urban environment follows in the stead of the civic republican ideal by taking on its categories of analysis. In Weber, as with the revolutionary ideal, there is an understanding of society as an artifact to be analyzed, diagnosed, and fixed.²¹ Weber's understanding of the origins of the city,

¹⁹ This is the ironic subtitle of Nietzsche's self-proclaimed autobiography, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*. R.J. Hollingdale trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979). In the context of Nietzsche's thought, humans are not self-actualized beings because they are not able to assert control over themselves in a way that their identity as individuals requires. Thus one "becomes" an individual (and an individual of a specific type according to Nietzsche) only by coming to terms with the temporality of existence and the impossibility of willing into the past (which is the Nietzschean indictment against morality).

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson trans. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962), at 21.

²¹ Roberto Unger notes that the Western mode of thinking, especially in the variant I am calling the civic republican tradition, exhibits an overweening tendency to see society as an "artifact," and in so doing ends up making universalizing statements it cannot justify. See R.M. Unger, *Social Theory*, *supra* note 16, at ch. 1. The problem of seeing society as a series of endogenous factors to be isolated and kept constant while introducing isolated exogenous ones, if not highly questionable to begin with, has been almost thoroughly refuted. See Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*. (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1958); and Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), at 123-4. It is interesting that Jon Elster was at one time head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago while doing much research on the problems with different aspects of rationality and rational choice models, and that his ideas have been well received there. The irony is that it has been at Chicago that the type of unsophisticated economic mode of analyzing different phenomena has developed in



through its birth in North America *via* Talcott Parsons, has come to express a certain way of looking at the urban as a social phenomenon.²² Thus we get the particular kinds of analysis done by Wirth, which become a strange mix of social analysis with an *underlying* motive to reclaim an authentic type of lifestyle.²³ The ideal of *civitas* structures the observations made by social scientists by setting the agenda for the types of observations to be made, that is, for identifying what is important to be recorded and what is essential to be seen. In other words, the particular values of “community,” with which the neutral researcher approaches the subject of the urban, dictate the content of those observations: if the ideal of community and a healthy *gemeinschaft* are the underlying understandings of what a healthy and proper political existence is all about, then the observations of urban life will demonstrate that the lack of these ties creates conditions of alienation in urban centres. Again, the mobilization of the “community” begets a perspective on the urban as a destroyer of homelands.

Whereas Weber's project articulates the loss of a particular type of social relation through rationalization, rather than the rationalized study of societies on the whole,²⁴ the claim of social science is still that social analysis will tell us how to fix our social relations in order to re-produce *gemeinschaft* ties.²⁵ Where this type of thinking leads is the questionable journey on which Adorno and Horkheimer lead us in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Enlightenment rationalism is shown to have its basis in an ethic of destruction: public reason overwhelms private faith.²⁶ However, where Adorno and Horkheimer resolve the project of the Enlightenment in a dark pessimism, Arendt and others²⁷ attempt to re-cast an understanding of the human in a more fundamental way.

the last fifty years (with, for example, the economic analysis of law by Richard Posner). A brief account of this is given in Neil Duxbury, "Liberalism, Self-Interest and Precommitment" (1996) 9 *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 383, at 383-4.

²²The richness of the Weberian analysis of culture and value, however, was lost through the process of its introduction to North America: Talcott Parsons' understanding of Weber's importance for sociology highlighted the idea of ideal types as a method of analysis, ignoring much of the rest. The result is a social science that is highly positivistic in approach, and self-proclaimed as neutral. See Peter Lassman and Irving Velody, "Max Weber on Science, Disenchantment and the Search for Meaning" in *Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation'*. Peter Lassman & Irving Velody eds. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 159, at 161.

²³Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as Way of Life," *supra* note 16. In Wirth's account, it is easy to identify that there is a particular set of values at work, since the tone of the article makes urban living out to be something quite uninteresting and even terribly alienating. The strength of the article is that the observations he makes resonate well with us; the weakness is, however, that these observations are made under an ethic of social science which claims to be simply making observations about the status of life *as it objectively exists* in the urban centre.

²⁴Weber, *Economy and Society*, *supra* note 3, at 983ff; see also, "Science as a Vocation" in *Sociological Writings*. Wolf Heydebrand trans. (New York: Continuum Books, 1994), at 280-1.

²⁵Though Weber himself had a bleak understanding of what could be done to improve the lot of humanity (feeling that the rationalizing tendency in modern life was too strong), he did place a certain faith in the power of charisma to "lift" humanity out of its iron cage. See "Politics as a Vocation" in *From Max Weber*. H.H. Gerth & C.W. Mills eds. (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1948) 77.

²⁶The tone of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is both harsh and urgent. Its charm is its unabashed indictment against "reason" by showing its barbaric product in a new mythologizing. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. John Cumming trans. (New York: Continuum Books, 1982).

²⁷Habermas is one of these people who does not see the Enlightenment project as one doomed to failure. On the contrary, he feels that only one particular strand of reason has been exhausted, and that the communicative aspect of reason has yet to be fully explored. See Thomas McCarthy, "Introduction," in Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), at p. xxi-xxii.

Hannah Arendt is a political philosopher of the lost homeland.²⁸ Growing up in Europe in the 20's and 30's and being Jewish, she has experienced the loss of homelands personally and philosophically.²⁹ Her days at the University in Marburg were marked by her notable acquaintance and affair with Heidegger, and later at Heidelberg, by the origins of her lifelong friendship with Karl Jaspers.³⁰ While living in Paris some years later, she also became acquainted with Walter Benjamin, a *littéraire* whose cosmopolitanism may have abetted a political naiveté that ultimately cost him is life.³¹ Arendt's outlook on the lack of permanence of human institutions (institutions required for human greatness) was certainly affected by witnessing her former mentor's Nazi leanings, by her friend Benjamin's suicide while fleeing to and from homelands, by her own chance escape from the Nazis, not to mention the perilous movements of her childhood years.³² The loss of homelands was, therefore, a philosophical experience with personal resonance. Its philosophical manifestation does not come until after the war when everything settles. Arendt began her quest to articulate how human understanding and life in the public sphere were linked.³³

The experience of "lost homelands" became a project of "becoming human" through political expression in the public sphere. "For political freedom, generally speaking, means the right 'to be participator in government,' or it means nothing."³⁴ "Freedom" is not a condition of "lack of restraint," but of emerging from a darkness into light; thus for Arendt, freedom involves the "move" into the public realm, a move which signifies an act of courage for the individual.³⁵ Only then has the individual "arrived in a realm where the concern for life has lost validity."³⁶ To be free is to begin, and to begin rests on the *ab urbe condita*: "the

²⁸See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1951), which does not deal so much with authoritarian regimes as it does with the effects that they have on communities and their public spaces. Much of Arendt's writings deal with the sense of being "out of place" in the world due to a *loss* of place, and what it takes to *retrieve* this: see *On Revolution*, *supra* note 13, where she gives us clues as to what it might mean to "become human" in a political sense. In *The Human Condition*, *supra* note 13, Arendt explains her vision of the human, and what it means to be *whole*, when she describes the *vita activa*. And in *Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*. (New York: Grove Press, 1978) she gives an account of the placelessness of the Jews, and the expression of this in Zionism.

²⁹ For a brief portrait into the vicissitudes of young Hannah Arendt's life, see Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, "From the Pariah's Point of View: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Life and Work" in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*. Melynn A. Hill ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979) 3, at 4-11.

³⁰See Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. (London: Sage, 1996), 119-20n. Her correspondence with Jaspers continued for quite some time after the war: Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt / Karl Jaspers Briefwechsel 1926-1969*. herausgegeben von Lotte Kohler und Hans Saner. (Munchen: Piper, 1985).

³¹It has been noted that Benjamin did not take a particular "interest" in Zionism or in his Jewish Identity, but nevertheless felt particular pangs of guilt about it. His literary life preoccupied him more than political life did. Thus, he waited in Paris until it became quite apparent that he should have already left. Perhaps his naiveté of the seriousness of the political reality for the Jewish Identity prevented him from leaving sooner, but only "perhaps." Bertolt Brecht described Benjamin's demise as the first offense against German literature by the Hitler. See Hannah Arendt, "Introduction" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Harry Zohn trans. Hannah Arendt ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), at 2.

³²Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, *supra* note 29, at p. xxv; Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, "From the Pariah's Point of View," *supra* note 28.

³³This resulted in the piece entitled "What is Existenz Philosophy?" *supra* note 15, where Arendt gives an appreciation of where philosophy stands in its relation to the problems of the Kantian inheritance, and of how Heidegger's contribution had *proven* to be dangerous, or overly fantastic.

³⁴Arendt, *On Revolution*, *supra* note 13, at 221.

³⁵Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. (New York: Viking Press, 1954), at 147-9, 156.

³⁶*Ibid*, at 156.



foundation of the city, the guaranty of Roman freedom.”³⁷ Since becoming human is a practical activity based in a set of social relations, a new understanding of public life emerges when we look at, among other things, revolution and political action.³⁸

The underlying purpose of Arendt's writing remains quite transparent to the reader: her own struggle to understand how the rootedness of identity is destroyed by modern existence, and the questions this creates for what it means to be human. The questions it raises concerns the relationship, and the implicit difference between the human and the citizen, between *humanitas* and *civitas*. What, then, is there about *civitas* that renders humans *more* human, or more preferable to its lack? From this difficult question emerges the equally difficult questions concerning the way in which the urban somehow impedes or prevents the realization of our full humanity by continually thwarting the cultivation of *civitas*.

Civitas thus involves retrieving those aspects of our metaphysical tradition which breathe meaning into the interstices of our public life, but which have become shrouded, confused, and even discarded amid the wreckage of Enlightenment rationalism. The problem of the public sphere, then, is one based in a metaphysical “homelessness” of beings. Looking to the deep roots in the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato, as well as in the thought of de Tocqueville, Rousseau, and Herder provides a starting point for the task of retrieval.³⁹

Contextualizing her political theory in this tradition helps us identify how she became concerned with the problem of the place of the human being in the world at large through her reading of Kant. As she notes, with Kant there is no longer an identity between thought and being, existence and essence: “while Kant made Man the master and measure of Man, at the same time he lowered him to a slave of Being.”⁴⁰ However, the link between the metaphysical displacement of the unity of being and the problematic of the public sphere is a manifestation of a deeper philosophical quandary concerning the disjuncture between thought and being, which points to a “questioning” she certainly inherited from her mentor.⁴¹

³⁷ *Ibid*, at 166.

³⁸ Arendt's famous last chapter “The Revolutionary Tradition and its Lost Treasure” draws out this theme in its fullest: *supra* note 13. See also Hamilton, Jay, Madison, *The Federalist Papers*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), at 44-6; and Hanna Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Private and Public” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*. Lewis P. Hinchman & Sandra K. Hinchman eds. (Albany, New York: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1994) 261, at 282-4.

³⁹ See Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, *supra* note 34, at 26, and ch. 1 generally; de Tocqueville, *supra* note 10. In *What is Called Thinking*, Heidegger writes that the student of philosophy should not even begin to study Nietzsche until Aristotle has been contemplated for approximately 10 years. Through the understanding of Dasein that emerges in Heidegger's later writings, Being is approached only through an engagement with those things which inform how we understand who we are, which means an engagement with language, which means a radical historicism of looking into the roots of where our linguistic conceptions come from. Only in this way can we begin to understand how we have been formed, and thus only through the magic of language can we come into a more primal relationship with Being: Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* J. Glenn Gray trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), at 128ff.

⁴⁰ Arendt, “What is Existenz Philosophy?” *supra* note 15, at 41.

⁴¹ *Ibid*. Heidegger's articulation of the end of metaphysics (of nihilism) not as the consequences of values, but the institution of them was taken seriously by Arendt, and thus she too sees a turning point with Kant.

For Arendt, the leading a fully human life is a process involving a link between understanding and action.⁴² The realization of humanity cannot be a passive process, and more importantly, is not necessarily linked to the *vita contemplativa*, but to the *vita activa*. “Realization” or “fulfillment” only comes through a disclosure of the unchangeable identity of the person, a disclosure which “becomes tangible only in the story of the actor’s and speaker’s life.”⁴³ The public sphere urges such self-disclosure because it is where we understand our own ‘earthly transcendence’.⁴⁴

Understanding the importance of the public sphere to the realization of one’s humanity, and further, seeing that revolution (the American Revolution in particular) as a situation where humans did actualize themselves, Arendt identifies the lost opportunity of the American revolution in the inability to once and for all institutionalize the revolution in the public life of the new republic. The particular uneasiness of modernity, in the realization that reason destroys the unity of thought and being, which, is one which cannot be remedied without a return to a previous way of questioning. It is precisely here that Heidegger’s relevance is greatest, for he is the one who presses us to actively remember our Greek origins.⁴⁵

Heidegger’s project of recovering homelands is animated by an entirely new discourse, one which “is the first absolutely and uncompromisingly this-worldly philosophy.”⁴⁶ The project of retrieving Being for beings involves refocusing on the problem of the unity of thought and action in a way that brings to light the fundamental existence of humans *qua* beings-in-the-world: that their existence is their essence.⁴⁷ Rather than seeing “dwelling” as the physical act of creating a home, Heidegger is concerned with the pressing question of Being, and of how beings can become “at home.”

However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the *real plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in a lack of houses.... The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*. What if man’s homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *real thought* of homelessness? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer.⁴⁸

⁴²Arendt’s last project was to culminate in a three volume work (the last of which would have concerned “Judgement”). The work was posthumously organized by her friend Mary McCarthy. For the way in which willing is central to thinking, see Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. 2 vols. Mary McCarthy ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), especially vol 1, at 55-62.

⁴³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *supra* note 13, at 193.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, at 55.

⁴⁵In his later work, Heidegger has absorbed Nietzsche and furthered his delving into the Greeks: *What is Called Thinking*, *supra* note 38, pt. 2.

⁴⁶Arendt, “What is Existenz Philosophy?” *supra* note 15, at 49.

⁴⁷Heidegger, *Being and Time*, *supra* note 19, at 79.

⁴⁸ Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Albert Hofstadter trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), at 161, emphasis in the original.



In this way, thinking provides a path toward resolving the metaphysical separation between essence and existence by pointing us toward the bases of such unity in our tradition; through language we come again to “dwell.”⁴⁹

For our purposes, the important aspect of Heidegger's thought is not so much its detail as to what it might imply politically. Arendt remarks that Heidegger's philosophy leaves us with the conundrum of a Self contrary to “Man.” She argues that the Self becomes an empty concept in opposition to Man because each individual can exist independently of humanity and represent nobody but oneself: the experience of “guilty nothingness” eliminates the presence of humanity in each individual. “The Self as conscience has put itself in place of humanity, and the Being of the Self in place of the Being of Man.”⁵⁰ This profoundly individualizing move leaves individuals isolated, and up to their own devices. Although the question concerning the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and his political engagement with National Socialism continually besets the study of his thought, Arendt, in 1946, seemed quite cognizant of the relationship, and took some care in spelling it out:

Heidegger has therefore attempted in later lectures to bring in, by way of afterthought, such mythologizing confusions as Folk and Earth as a social foundation for his isolated Selves. It is evident that such conceptions can lead one only out of philosophy into some naturalistic superstition. If it is not part of the concept of Man that he inhabits the world with his fellows, then there remains only a mechanical reconciliation by which the atomised Self is given a substratum essentially discordant with its own concept. This can only serve to organize the Selves engaged in willing themselves into an Over-self, in order to make a transition from the fundamental guilt, grasped through resoluteness, to action.⁵¹

Now it is not clear that the mechanical reconciliation is itself the natural outcome of the isolation of individual selves, or if, rather, the individual is left indefensible against such “organizing of selves.”⁵² Specifically, we are left with the dilemma concerning a radically isolated selfhood which is easily manipulated by the false promises of solidarity put forward by authoritarian movements.⁵³ In this way, Heidegger's identification of the placelessness of beings gives a particularly insightful account of how and why people throw themselves into such movements

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Arendt, “What is Existenz Philosophy?” *supra* note 15, at 51.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* Villa and Benhabib disagree with regard to Arendt's own position on Heidegger's political engagement and its relation to his philosophy. See Benhabib, *supra* note 29; and Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁵² In retrospect, this “mechanical organizing of selves” may be something of which we have seen too much, and one is tempted to probe further into Heidegger's writings to see if he was describing a the unfortunate state of affairs of beings, or if he was in fact pointing towards a political solution. Benhabib writes, “certainly, the absence of a philosophical theorem of intersubjectivity, or of the co-constitution of subjects, is not enough to lead a thinker to espouse National Socialism.” Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, *supra* note 29, at 104. One is tempted to mark Arendt's comments and ask if his later writings shed any more light on the answers to the question of being (cryptically encoded as “temporality”) or about a strange almost mysticism which is unavoidable in order to reconcile the Self to Being.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, at 105.

with such passion, and perhaps lends some significance to Heidegger's own claim that his thinking exhibits a fundamental critique of National Socialism.⁵⁴

In his later writings, Heidegger focuses on the danger inherent in not retrieving an understanding of Being by passing over thinking about it. He urges that there are important dangers which lurk within the process of forgetting.⁵⁵ In "The Question Concerning Technology" a continual danger in the routinization of production structures (because of the totalizing effect this has on the *weltanschauung* of the participants) is described as leading to a type of "gadgetry" of the human.⁵⁶ As existence exhibits a continual "Falling away" from Being,⁵⁷ there is added urgency to reflect on being, how it exists in language, and to retrieve its meaning and significance. The danger is that the opportunity to reclaim an authentic relation to Being is continually lost, yet continually offers the renewed and doubly charged opportunity to rekindle it. The real danger of living in the urban setting is that the urban itself is completely engaged in the process of enframing, that is, in technology. It signifies the possibility that humans will fail to recognize that human living in the urban is about enframing the world in a particular way, a way which holds itself out as being the only way. The real danger is in our continual falling away without the means of recognizing it: we need to develop the virtue of thinking to recover an awareness of this falling away. Only through such a remembering can we create the opportunity to come into a more original relation with / experience of Being, and only such a reckoning allows us to recognize the loss of place for the human in the urban.

Thus the urban presents a challenge to our essential humanity because it presents an ordering of our affairs according to processes invisible to the eye and vacant to the mind: the process that technology renders on the human, through its expression in the urban, is one we cannot fight because we have forgotten from where it comes, and how to look for it. It is as though urbanism always existed. In his first book *The Uses of Disorder*, Richard Sennett celebrates the chaos of the urban as a way in which we can approach a more "humane" existence.⁵⁸ Having studied under Arendt, Sennett was aware that our understanding of humanity was best cultivated through participation in the public sphere.⁵⁹ Sennett argues that the diversity of the city presents an opportunity for beings to experience that which is different from them. He remarks that we need to understand the urban reality as something other than a "purified whole" which contains and creates "purified identities."⁶⁰ In this way, the urban is itself a creator of myths which presents a

⁵⁴Heidegger's own involvement with such a movement, however, stands ominously in the background, and his later writings only shed a little light on it. For a great account, see Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*. Allan Blunden trans. (London: Harper Collins, 1993). See Heidegger's own statements regarding his thought as critique of National Socialism "for anyone who has ears...": "Only a God can Save Us" the *Speigel* interview" in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*. Thomas Sheehan ed. (Chicago: Precedent Publishin, 1981) 45.

⁵⁵Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Basic Writings*. David Farrell Krell ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977) 283.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷Heidegger, *Being and Time*, *supra* note 19, at 219-24.

⁵⁸Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970). A similar more benign version of this is alive in the pages of Iris Marion Young, "City Life and Difference" *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), ch. 8

⁵⁹ However, Sennett was also well acquainted with the work of Lewis Mumford, and this influenced his understanding of the city as a place where communities are based in the modern world.

⁶⁰ Sennett, *Uses of Disorder*, *supra* note 57, at 96-103, 129-36.



diversity and possibility for complex experience.⁶¹ However, Sennett argues that in order to achieve an urban reality which presents itself in a manner consistent with his idea of “disorder,” urban planning requires that those living in the area are “actively involved in the shaping of their social lives.”⁶²

However, the later Sennett seems to have meditated on the philosophical tradition informing theorists like Arendt and Heidegger, and to have assimilated this into his understanding of the human: the tone is darker, more despairing, and more inline with what we might imagine Arendt to be saying about the urban.⁶³ He comes to identify aspects of the loss of a public sphere which makes humans whole through their interaction with others. This “fall of public man” is much more significant than he had previously thought.⁶⁴ It is no longer contended that the urban necessarily offers the wonder of youthful abandon in otherness, but in fact aids and abets the dissolution of those positive forces which hold the potential for creating the foundations of a new freedom. His later works bring forth a clearer vision of the engaged self which has become lost in the scaffolds of the fast and neurotic city. Urban planning remain central to his vision of the new urban reality - provided that it engenders a more participatory attitude toward the human.⁶⁵

It is important to reflect on the links between the kinds of exuberant ideas of Sennett’s early works and the ideas of thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Baudelaire because there is a celebration of the diversity the city presents: the urban is a place where people are individual-ized⁶⁶ by coming into contact with diversity as they emerge from the particularized identities which co-exist in multitudes in the urban environment.⁶⁷ Difference and disorder provide opportunities for humans to reach into aspects of themselves through the encounter, which hints at the link between forgetting and remembering when one is faced with the new and required to act. “Action without the need of contemplation,

⁶¹ *Ibid*, at 82-84.

⁶² *Ibid*, at 102.

⁶³ The first step on that road comes with *The Fall of Public Man*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976), where Sennett begins to look at the disappearance of the Public Sphere and the consequences this has for self-actualization. Not as bright and cheery as the *The Uses of Disorder*, but not dark. In *Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) and *Flesh and Stone*, *supra* note 2, the tone has become considerably somber: now the urban is a relationship between the moving and the unmoved, the flesh and the stone, in the urban reality.

⁶⁴ *The Fall of Public Man*, *ibid*.

⁶⁵ *Conscience of the Eye*, *supra* note 62, at p. xiv; and *Flesh and Stone*, *supra* note 2, at 16. Sennett argues, in a way that evidences the influence of Foucault, that the history of the city demonstrates the way in which images of wholeness have guided structures of power through a by mobilizing a discourse of “civilization.” He writes,

In the end this historic tension between domination and civilization asks us a question about ourselves. How will we exit from our own bodily passivity - where is the chink in our own system, where is our liberation to come from?

Flesh and Stone, *supra* note 2, at 374.

⁶⁶ That is, the urban takes individuals *qua* social beings, and individualizes them by creating conditions for their separate existence. In this way, alienation is an outcome of individualization rather than an outcome of the urban *per se*.

⁶⁷ Benjamin does not focus on the foundations of communities in the urban environment, but rather the particular dynamics among individuals. He analyzes the way in which different literary figures bring these to life. See especially the essays entitled “Some Reflections on Kafka,” and “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*. Harry Zohn trans., Hannah Arendt ed., (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), at 141 and 155 respectively.

action without domination and mastery: those are the ideals of a humane culture.”⁶⁸

But such forgetting is marked by a transitoriness: Arendt's modernity shines through in her despair at the ephemeral nature of daily life that only serves to expire into the next without the glory associated with the action of the public sphere. “Although she praises Benjamin for being a poet, there is ultimately no kinship between the poet who sings to eternalize the city and to save from oblivion those deeds of human greatness, and the modern storyteller who has no identifiable human city.”⁶⁹ The urban is not the polis, and the characteristics the urban brings to political life are cause for despair since authentic existence is precluded by the rationality of the urban and by the problem of finding rational grounds for action in isolation.⁷⁰

With the strange dynamic of urban living continually brought to our mind by figures like K. in Kafka's *The Castle*, or by surreal urban scenarios like David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, the question we are being forced to ask is: why do we choose or allow ourselves to structure our living environments in such a way that perpetuates such a disconnected and unglorified existence? The question which arises, and which we need to keep in mind, is: what does it mean to be a citizen in an urban landscape? If these metaphysical understandings shed light on unconnectedness, why is there no way to understand the richness of urban living, or the complexity of its economic stratification, or the centrality of violence to the political life on the streets?

Arendt's analysis, therefore, identifies the reasons why we feel locked in an iron cage. And yet her ontological understanding leaves her without a convincing way out of the malaise since thinking about the glory of the *polis* and thinking about action do not create the grounds for it, even by her own criteria.⁷¹ The paradoxical heritage of Enlightenment rationalism, identified by Weber's famous (or infamous) adage, leaves us with the profound difficulty of attempting to re-create the conditions of life we have taken apart with reason. We are left looking with longing to ages of a glory unrealizable in the urban. The vision of what is great in life becomes severely limited to being informed solely by a tradition which has, with tireless perspicuity, unadumbrated the wondrous ravel of greatness. Out of all this, Arendt is only able to conclude that the modern urban life is one which does not offer freedom for its citizens, thus denies them their humanity, and *thus passes a sentence on urban living as destructive*.⁷² Indeed, the death of subject, an announcement made famous by Foucault,⁷³ is described with precision by Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,⁷⁴ such that we find the seeds of homelessness and of oppression in the lack of identity everywhere. Thus, our theoretical musings

⁶⁸ Sennett, *Conscience of the Eye*, *supra* note 62, at 248.

⁶⁹ See Seyla Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, *supra* note 29, at 94. This character of “everydayness” is present in Heidegger's understanding of the “facticity” of being-in-the-world.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* See also Ronald Beiner, “Interpretive Essay” in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Ronald Beiner ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 89-90.

⁷¹ See Beiner, *ibid.*, at 152-5.

⁷² The divergence between Arendt and Benjamin implies this troubling and reluctant stance on behalf of Arendt: Benhabib, *supra* note 29, at 92-5.

⁷³ Michel Foucault, “The Birth of a World” in *Foucault Live: Select Interviews, 1962-1984*. John Johnston trans. (New York: Semiotexte(e), 1989) 57, at 60-1.

⁷⁴ “Imperialism,” *Origins of Totalitarianism*, *supra* note 27, at 290-7.



on lost homelands continually bring us to the question of why we find the urban compelling, and why we do nothing to change it. The exigency of our theoretical status remains as we traipse around in the urban, our eyes on the horizon for answers as to how we will fit into the world, a world which has created a way of life to accommodate and perpetuate placelessness. And yet we continue to be bewitched by the urban: false consciousness arguments are so unappealing. It is as though the metaphysical underpinnings of our world-views demand that we find a very particular kind of meaning in the world, and it is becoming quite apparent that such a meaning is not to be found.

II. At Home in the Urban

Woe betide the man who goes to antiquity for the study of anything other than ideal art, logic and general method! By immersing himself too deeply in it, he will no longer have the present in his mind's eye; he throws away the value and the privileges afforded by circumstance; for nearly all our originality comes from the stamp that time impresses upon our sensibility.

- Charles Baudelaire⁷⁵

But what if our field of vision has become skewed, such that we have been approaching the problems of political identity and freedom by focusing on aspects of our heritage that may no longer be possible nor relevant? In this way, we can see the metaphysical tradition as a set of shackles with which we analyze the world - we cannot help but find it a miserable place given the longing for a resolution the separation of the human from the world at large. As is becoming completely obvious, we simply lack the terms to describe what it might mean to be "at home" in the urban: categories like the "*flâneur*" are appealing because they give a stability to an analysis where no analysis can stay stable for long. In this section, I will begin by looking at the way Benjamin and others find ways to articulate a sense of "being at home" in the urban centre. From there, I will demonstrate that the philosophy of Heidegger and Arendt may indeed provide a framework for understanding our experiences in the urban, experiences which augment our sense of homelessness, but provide the grounds for new ways of thinking. However, as will be patently obvious, we lack a vocabulary for such an analysis. Thus much of my analysis will inevitably take the form of gesturing toward the universals that reside in experiences particular to the urban.⁷⁶ Such an exercise demonstrates, rather crudely, the limits of the metaphysical enterprise upon which we rely, but also the extent to which we depend on it for our understanding of what is great in the urban. At once, we are tossed between the certainty of the homeland and the emancipation of the unstructured urban. In contrast to the leap to the ancients made by Arendt and Heidegger, Walter Benjamin looks elsewhere for "humanity." As evidenced by Benjamin's particular understanding of Zionism and of modern politics, his concerns were first and foremost literary ones. He and Gershom Scholem were on opposite sides of the Zionist coin: whereas Scholem's Zionism

⁷⁵ Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*. P.E. Charvet trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972) 390, at 405.

⁷⁶ Is this a monological understanding of urban reality? And if it is, is there not an argument to be made that such an understanding contains the seeds of resistance? See Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*. (London: Virago Press, 1991) for a work which argues otherwise.

encouraged an early departure from Germany to Palestine, Benjamin's political senses were overburdened by an unwillingness to leave Paris, captivated by its mystery.⁷⁷ The urban reality was, for Benjamin, a place where the horror of the mundane and the political-economic reality of capitalism was matched by wondrous instances of "profane illumination."⁷⁸

Benjamin was one to eschew the metaphysical in favour of the aesthetic.⁷⁹ He was a literary type, and as a consequence his existence was dominated by cosmopolitan concerns of heart and eye among the Parisian crowds rather than political ones of the public sphere or metaphysical questions of mind and reality.⁸⁰ This is not to suggest that Benjamin had no knowledge of philosophy, but to note that his interests lay primarily in art.⁸¹ Benjamin was an urban dweller: his experiences and understanding of what is great and reprehensible in the human was informed continually by the urban reality which decorates the edges of all his thought.⁸² It is only through this type of understanding that one can approach Benjamin, for "[w]ithout considering this background of the city, which became a decisive experience for the young Benjamin one can hardly understand why the *flâneur* became the key figure in his writings."⁸³

Benjamin saw in urban existence something not apparent in the work of Arendt and the "tradition" in which she finds herself, which is the strange and poetic solace of the crowd, of having an existence of the outsider, of being the *flâneur*.⁸⁴ The *flâneur* exists in a particular kind of urban environment: one who strolls through the crowd, living a leisurely life that allows for strolling through crowds. The urban life of Europe, specifically Paris, encourages *flânerie* more readily than does

⁷⁷ Hans Sahl, "Walter Benjamin in the Internment Camp" in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*. Gary Smith ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1988) 346, at 346. Benjamin was not politically naïve in his understanding of the particular way capitalism manifested itself in the daily life of the city and through history in general. Indeed, it has been remarked that Benjamin's *Das Passagen-Werk* is a work which describes Marx's base-superstructure analogy with the language of psychoanalysis: Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), at 20-1. See also, Hannah Arendt, "Introduction" *Illuminations*, *supra* note 30, at 29-38.

⁷⁸ Benjamin's use of narcotics, specifically hashish, was occasional at best, but was carried out with a view to understanding the experience of intoxication as a mode of experience produced by an industrial production complex which drives individuals back into themselves. See Hermann Schweppenhauser, "Propaedeutics of Profane Illumination" in *On Walter Benjamin*, *ibid*, 33, at 34-5ff; and Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, *ibid*, at 249-59; and Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, *supra* note 11, at 7-20.

⁷⁹ It is not to say that Benjamin did not philosophize, nor to say he was unfamiliar with philosophy. See Hannah Arendt's insightful discussion of Benjamin's grounding in the poetic rather than the philosophical: Hannah Arendt, "Introduction," *supra* note 30, at 14.

⁸⁰ Benjamin went on a long trip to Moscow in pursuit of the Latvian actress Asja Lacis, which resulted not in a successful love affair but in a major literary essay on the city, and an unpublished work on Goethe. Benjamin returned to Paris feeling defeated. See Harold Chorney, *City of Dreams: Social Theory and the Urban Experience*. (Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Canada, 1990), at 121; and Peter Demetz, "Introduction" in *Walter Benjamin, Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Peter Demetz ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), at p. xiii.

⁸¹ On the contrary, Benjamin was also quite at home among philosophy and philosophers, as is evidenced by what his young protégé had to say about him: see Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*" in *On Walter Benjamin*, *supra* note 76, 2, at 5ff.

⁸² For a really great study that accounts for the centrality of the city to Benjamin's project, see Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, *supra* note 11.

⁸³ Arendt, "Introduction," *supra* note 30, at 21.

⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" *Illuminations*, *supra* note 30.



its American counterpart.⁸⁵ In Paris, one can readily access much of what is desirable to access by foot: the urban core is an area for the pedestrian with vehicle traffic being more inefficient and frustrating as a means for getting around.⁸⁶ The North American phenomenon of suburban sprawl, on the other hand, demands the primacy of the automobile, thereby completely precluding chance encounters among members of the community as they carry on their affairs of the day. “What all other cities seem to permit only reluctantly to the dregs of society - strolling, idling, *flânerie* - Paris streets actually invite everyone to do.”⁸⁷

However, the life of the *flâneur* is one separated from the life of the community. This separated nature allows the individual to observe the crowd in a different way than if one were a member of it. The idea of the “public sphere” becomes transmuted into an empty vessel filled with beings which can be observed by the *flâneur* (not unlike Weber’s legacy of seeing the society at large as an artifact). The separation between the passive observer and the crowd ensures that the passive observer will never partake in the particular experiences which only members of the crowd can experience, and this takes us back to those links Arendt makes between public action and freedom. For on Benjamin’s account, there is a mindlessness to the crowd which exhibits certain herd tendencies,⁸⁸ and yet the jostling and bustle allows for the unpredictable. It is in the fleeting experiences that the urban presents as a whole that one reaches into the depths of one’s humanity. And the fundamental experience that the *flâneur*, the passer-by, has is the shock which comes from being dislocated, from being made aware of the distance between him or herself and those in the crowd. Shock is the experience of the jostling of the city and of the experience of being separated from that which is effecting the passive *flâneur*. And yet there is delight in it *because of* the freedom from the surroundings such a shock implies.

The understanding of placelessness is not simply a result of the individualized pursuit of the aesthetic, but rather an outcome of a complex historical process. In this way, Benjamin’s lack of identification with the Jewish community was less motivated by any particular disdain for “Jewishness” as it was by the strange sense that such traditions were merely comfort zones of the spirit rather than places for the authentic cultivation of anything. Arendt remarks,

these men did not wish to “return” either to the ranks of the Jewish people or to Judaism, and could not desire to do so - not because they believed in “progress” and an automatic disappearance of anti-Semitism or because they were too “assimilated” and too alienated from their Jewish heritage, but because all traditions and cultures as

⁸⁵ Reinhard H. Thum, *The City: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verhaeren*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), at 22-53; Marc Eli Blanchard, *In Search of the City: Engels, Baudelaire, Rimbaud*. (Saratoga, California: Anma Libri, 1985), at 71-114.

⁸⁶ William Chapman Sharpe, *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Williams*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), at 40-50; Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 73-6.

⁸⁷ Arendt, “Introduction,” *supra* note 30, at 21.

⁸⁸ Benjamin is influenced by Nietzsche in this regard. See “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *supra* note 30, at 174-6. As with Nietzsche, Benjamin was also concerned with pointing out reason’s basis in unreason: Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” *supra* note 80, at 5.

well as all “belonging” had become equally questionable to them.⁸⁹

For Benjamin, then, the urban life is one which makes the whole idea of belonging and rootedness seem questionable. The urban is not necessarily the place where structures of the public sphere no longer exist, but a place where our humanity, in its darkness and its light, comes shining through. One can be at home as a *flâneur* only if one wanders and observes the mass of people in their daily frolic. The urban presents historical materialism in its various guises of domination,⁹⁰ but it also presents an aesthetic solace which allows one to become lost in one’s forays into the nebulosity of the lives of strangers.⁹¹

For Benjamin, as well as Baudelaire, one’s humanity is not so simply about the tie that binds, but those hidden things which make those ties, *and the lack thereof*, rich for consumption. The urban experience is rich because of the illusion, the myth, and the opportunities to become lost within them. Freedom from the burdens of “time” means a freedom from the burden of ordering one’s life (by ordering the actions of a day on a time-line) according to society’s prescription. In order to experience this, the individual must be able to remain free from the effects of roots, of traditions, and of belonging. Thus, in this odd way, Benjamin provides the clues for an overcoming of the tradition which finds its solace, its sense, by appealing to tradition. I say that he only provides “clues” because Benjamin was himself quite wedded to the same tradition of thinking we find expressed in Heidegger and Arendt, which Benjamin encountered in Marx. However it is the sense of abandon he felt while living in Paris, an abandon reflected in his writings, as an *esprit inconnu* floating at the edges of the crowd, which points us to experiences of urban reality which are not only fulfilling but also present aspects of humanity, of *becoming human*, previously obscured.⁹²

In such a perspective there are remnants of the Nietzschean appreciation for the “darkness” of the “shadow” (that characteristic about humans which grows larger as the light of day wanes) as a productive and creative force.⁹³ The urban, in its beauty, provides temptation and mystery and opportunity and political violence. And yet side by side the opportunities for fullness, there is the eternal hell of the continual production of the same in the sphere of everyday living.⁹⁴ Fullness comes from the illusion and myth brought by intoxicating experience.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Arendt, “Introduction,” *supra* note 30, at 36.

⁹⁰ It is completely admitted that I am emphasizing the single side of Benjamin’s thought, the one of which expresses his fascination with the urban. His thinking regarding the way capitalism expresses itself in the context of the metropolis is much more nuanced and involved than I am presenting here.

⁹¹ Benjamin writes, “[t]he spectator’s process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind.” “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*, *supra* note 30, at 238.

⁹² See Benjamin, “Moscow Diary” in *Reflections*, *supra* note 79, at 97; and Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Harry Zohn trans. (London: NLB, 1973), at 35-66.

⁹³ Nietzsche celebrated this ‘darkness’ as a creative force in *The Birth of Tragedy & The Case of Wagner*. W. Kaufmann trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). Benjamin appreciated Nietzsche’s understanding of this darkness and the way in which it came to express itself. See Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, *supra* note 11, at 103-108. He was, as were a few others, skeptical of the type of popularity Nietzsche was receiving.

⁹⁴ Benjamin’s understanding of Marx is complemented by an understanding of city as text, as Gilloch notes. Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, *supra* note 11, at 181-84.

⁹⁵ Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, *supra* note 76, at 86-9.



Reflecting on all of this, in many ways the urban centre becomes the place where humanity is produced. *Civitas* gives rise to *humanitas* by creating the grounds of culture, that is, by *civ-ilizing*. The root *cive* denotes that which concerns humans which humans themselves give rise to, whereas the *humanus* in *humanitas* denotes those aspects which separate humans from other animals, among which is *cive* or civilizing virtues or “culture” in the sense of “cultured sensibilities.” The urban takes us and creates us by creating the world in which we live, and through our partaking of it we continually create it as well. From the surreal alienation of K.’s endless search for the Castle, to the beauty of the *Rêve Parisien*, the urban is more than the sum of the individual experiences, but rather stands as an entity outside the individual which offers different experiences of humanity to him or her.⁹⁶ Benjamin’s Parisian arcades project becomes an extended discussion of the medium through which the myths of humanity can operate to fulfill its mandate of providing grounds for humanity: that is, the urban centre. There is sensuality, eros, and mysticism under the ramparts of the arcades.⁹⁷

Such a consideration must not be blind to the reality of violence which governs the streets of many urban centres. Consider: the political reality of gang violence in the urban centre. It is a reality which has produced an entire culture: artistic expression, public action and public requirements, rules of violence, rules of possession and territory, and intoxication. The urban, in this view, an historical expression of the attempts to physically subdue the “other.” This darker side, too, has its liberations, as Elizabeth Wilson has noted in *The Sphinx in the City*.⁹⁸

Achieving humanity, and living a full free life accordingly, is not sufficiently accounted for as the political action of reaching out through the particularized webs of community; rather, becoming human, as the urban sphere suggests, involves experiences which, by their nature, are not political but aesthetic.⁹⁹ The experience of the urban, while always demonstrating alienation and domination, still brings this aesthetic reality into the foreground. Indeed, the communal ideal strikes the individualized aesthete like Benjamin as difficult to conceive while living with the reality of crowds, and being a stranger among them.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*. Edwin and Willa Muir trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Charles Baudelaire, “Rêve Parisien,” *Selected Verse*. F. Scarfe trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964) 212.

⁹⁷ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, *supra* note 91, at pt. 1.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, *Sphinx in the City*, *supra* note 75. See also Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, *supra* note 12. Paul Virilio’s work presents a powerful framework for understanding the ways in which the use of urban space defines the nature of the political, and that the violence that fills those spaces is political violence: *Speed and Politics*. Mark Polizzotti trans. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986).

⁹⁹ A statement such as this will inevitably involve me in a chicken-and-egg argument with many theorists who argue that aesthetics are politically based, or that politics is aesthetically based. Such links are interesting when one considers, for example, the particular relationship between the aesthetic and the political of National Socialism. However, in the interests of space, and of not getting sidetracked into issues which are not completely germane to what I am doing here, in this discrete instance I must abandon all attempts at meeting such a charge by simply acknowledging that it is one.

¹⁰⁰ Though Benjamin considered himself an anarchist of sorts, his political views, and his political sense, were never as fully developed as were his sensibilities of criticism and art. He was known to have referred to himself as an anarchist, to have subscribed to one of the most conservative journals in France, to have paid on-going lip service to Zionists in order to secure a small stipend, to have traveled only in Europe, and to have been a lover of cities. His politics was a disinterested one. See Arendt, “Introduction,” *supra* note 30, at 278; David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*. (Oxford: Polity Press, 1985), at 187-90.

However, we must not forget that the despair of Benjamin and the cautiousness of Sennett on approaching the urban centre occur against the backdrop of a language steeped in a metaphysical legacy which informs who we are, and of how we are to belong in the world. Neither Benjamin nor Sennett could possibly break free from the particular vision offered by theorists like Arendt and Heidegger since those visions are constitutive of aspects of the modern self. Thus it is not just understandable but necessary that Sennett moves from a position of celebrating the disorder of the city as the panacea for reaching into our more human selves to one which is more cautious of solutions and more critical of the structures with which we approach such designs.¹⁰¹

We only identify certain phenomena against the horizon of values we bring. Arendt points us toward the reasons why we find aspects of modern living so disappointing, so alienating, so banal, and so unrewarding. Simply put, Arendt explains our lack of freedom and our consequent lack of humanity. This experience of disappointment in the potentialities of the human is apparent in Baudelaire as well. This is the other edge: the revolting and nauseating banality with which we become enmeshed in the city. The rise of the suburb, and the rise of the lifestyle that supports the suburb, makes this a reality. Here the urban brings us face to face with the decrepitude of our neighbours in their truly non-citizen capacity.

Banalities find their way into all aspects of the public space: the nauseating happiness and self-contentedness of protesting for zoning laws which, for example, require people to cut their lawns bring forth, in a brutally bare way, that which is appealing about Arendt's political philosophy: for we see this reality of the city and we want to say, 'oh humans, there is so much more in you.'¹⁰² Describing Paris, Rilke writes,

So this is where people come to live; I would have thought it is a city to die in. I have been out. I say: hospitals. I saw a man who staggered and fell. A crowd formed around him and I was spared the rest. I say a pregnant woman. She was dragging herself heavily along a high, warm wall, and now and then reached out to touch it as if to convince herself that it was still there. Yes, it was still there.¹⁰³

Bearing witness to elements of the banal and of the not-so-great, we further lament the time when we were pushed to greatness and splendor by things like, among others, revolution.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ The City holds the potential for a radical liberation by providing the chances for disorder: see Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, *supra* note 75.

¹⁰² This same phenomenon is apparent in the "moral authority" with which people offer themselves for arrest in protest of anti-smoking bylaws for restaurants. Rae Correlli, "The New Outlaws," *Maclean's*, April 14, 1997, p. 44.

¹⁰³ Rilke, *Malte Laurids Brigge*, *supra* note 12, at 3.

¹⁰⁴ Such realities of urban political struggles, such as lawn mowing by-laws, present a sad truth about Foucault's idea of resistance: there will be resistance to the exercise of power at all levels. Thus, we witness individuals who are outraged, to the point of declaring a hunger strike, over Sunday closing bylaws, or their lack thereof: see the facts leading up to the case of *R. v. Big M Drug Mart Ltd.*, [1985] 1 S.C.R. 295. The will to a more original resistance still seems exist in more fundamental social movements: see Magnusson, *Search for Political Space*, *supra* note 5.



Thus in Kafka we are continually struck by the way in which the nightmare of daily living sits at our fingertips; in Lynch's *Eraserhead* we are nauseated by magnified nuances of individual behaviour as it is produced by the horrific situations of urban life; and in Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* we are riveted to the gritty politics of the everyday in Los Angeles. In each of these we again find "shock," but with Kafka and Lynch it is a shock which is extended beyond livable proportions, and one which infects our vision of our modern, urban lives. The degree of unconnectedness of actions to any consequences, of identities to any substantive vision of the good, and of judgment to any set of shared meanings is plainly apparent; the meaninglessness of urban reality is continually laid bare before our eyes, such that we can do nothing but sit and stare.

But there is something here that is more dreadful: the silence. I imagine that during great fires such a moment of extreme tension must sometimes occur: the jets of water fall back, the firemen stop climbing the ladders, no one moves. Soundlessly a black cornice pushes forward overhead, and a high wall, with flames shooting up behind it, leans forward, soundlessly. Everyone stands and waits, with raised shoulders and faces contracted above their eyes, for the terrifying crash. The silence here is like that.¹⁰⁵

But in all of these, there is something with which we approach the horror in the urban, and that is the feeling that humanity, that is, what it means to be human, should be *so much more*.¹⁰⁶

And this, then, might provide a key to getting inside the frameworks we use in approaching the urban, and of where we need to look: the greatness of authenticity in action. The splendor of the city allows for greatness when it brings us closer to our "selves," that is, when it allows action unencumbered by critical reflection, and yet only at those moments do we find ourselves also with the chance of falling into disarray. At those moments when we are our most free in approaching the city, that is, our most forgetful, we are doubly jeopardized by the problem of the recurrence of memory, of that terrible fate where the frames of analysis of the past bring us to a particular stance vis-à-vis metropolis, and of that terrible eye which won't allow us to define what is human through action. It is as if all of our longing gestures are met with a critical pose, such that the free-flowing leap from the passive into the active is always inconveniently reproached by the reactive eye.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Rilke, *Malte Laurids Brigge*, *supra* note 12, at 5.

¹⁰⁶ The theme of greatness is one which continually arises, and which continually causes liberal theorists to cringe at the thought of the authoritarian cult of personality it may imply. Consider Weber's belief that only a charismatic leader could break the modernist chain of rationalization in "Politics as a Vocation" *supra* note 24, at 109-10. Consider also Nietzsche's particular formulation of greatness and of the project of the deification of man as an outgrowth of German Idealism, a project Nietzsche demonstrates is doomed to failure in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (which has been admirably interpreted by Peter Berkowitz in his award-winning *Nietzsche: the Ethics of an Immoralist*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995)). See the contemporary liberal discomfort with this idea in Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, "Active and Reactive" in *The New Nietzsche*. David Allison ed. (New York: Delta Books, 1977) 80, where he gives an interpretive spin to the Nietzschean account of values and morality, of

Thus we only feel at home in the city when we are least cognizant of the difficulties of harmonious action; and yet this lack of awareness itself can translate into the oppressiveness and danger of enframing, or it can present an opportunity to turn towards that which is so very human.

“Achieving” greatness through authentic human experience: what could this mean? For something becomes banal only if it is recognized as such, and to recognize a given aspect of urban reality *qua* banality is to come to that reality with the pretense that there is something more to hope for, something greater. Holden Caulfield’s distaste for the “phony” becomes a banner for the shock we feel when faced with the hypocrisy of the cliché in Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, but strikingly more profound, the pages of horror in Baudelaire’s “Gout de Néant” and Rilke’s “Ernste Stunde” only produce horror because we can contemplate the frailty our humanity through the experience of death and of nothingness these poets’ words bring into being.¹⁰⁹ Echoing Heidegger’s idea of being-towards-death (*sein-zur-tode*) as the fundamental individualizing experience of beings, the experience of the poetic, of the banal, of the boring, may also present our fundamental nature to ourselves. The experience of boredom, as Heidegger describes it, is much like the experiences of banality, of the depressing existence in urban centres, and of witnessing clichéd actions.¹¹⁰ To go one step further, the fact that the urban itself brings us to a diversity of such experiences invites encounters whose offspring are the chance engagements with our deeper selves. The urban is thus the way in which we can rid ourselves of that *shackling* otherness, so often manifest in the parochial views of the suburbanite, and leap toward that *liberating* otherness: the urban becomes the place of opportunity, of hidden fortune, of the appalling, of depths, and of the image.

And yet recalling the criticisms waged against Arendt’s discussion of the revolutionary ideal, the idea of action which is pure and of itself in the urban makes us ask: is this not what the revolutionary ideal is all about? Perhaps the failure of the revolution is not simply in its failure to institutionalize the positive force of the revolutionary ideal into an active public sphere, but rather the fact that life after the revolution will inevitably lack the grandeur of those moments of triumph. Thus, we burden ourselves with memories of greatness when we move to act, rather than move with the purity and self-assuredness that comes with focusing on the future.¹¹¹ For in this sense, the urban *is* the future: action through the urban today creates the urban of tomorrow.¹¹² Thus, Sennett admonishes that the revolutionary ideal burdens us with the threat of backwardness and parochialism. “Avoiding city life may preserve the ardor of solidarity, but at the cost of enforcing a terrible simplicity, that of the tribe or small village, on the revolutionaries.”¹¹³

the noble and the base. The reactive eye is one which depends, for its interpretive strength, upon the virtues of the active, since the reactive can only be defined in terms *set by* the active.

¹⁰⁸ J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1964).

¹⁰⁹ Baudelaire, “Le Gout de Néant” in *Selected Verse*, *supra* note 95, at 181. R.M. Rilke, “Ernste Stunde” in *The Book of Images*. Edward Snow trans. (New York: Farrar Strauss, & Giroux, 1991) 100.

¹¹⁰ Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” *Basic Writings*, *supra* note 55, at 100-1

¹¹¹ Nietzsche, “The meaning of our cheerfulness,” *The Gay Science*. W. Kaufmann trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), s. 343, p. 279.

¹¹² Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, *supra* note 12, at 3-4.

¹¹³ Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder*, *supra* note 57, at p. xv-xvi.



In this interesting way, Heidegger's later philosophy all points towards poeticized experience as a potential "saving power." There is the idea that Being reveals itself most fully when we are bored by revealing the totality of beings "as a whole." That we exist amidst the whole of beings is impossible to conceive, but occasionally this totality overwhelms us in the experience of profound boredom.¹¹⁴

Even and precisely then when we are not actually busy with things or ourselves this 'as a whole' overcomes us - for example in genuine boredom... Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole.¹¹⁵

In this exact way, the urban presents the possibility of presenting experiences akin to boredom. While waiting for the subway in the crowded Peel station in Montreal, the flux of bodies in motion reveals the shapelessness of identity and the ineffable sense of emptiness as each train passes. Lives of struggle among beings who remain unfamiliar produce new experiences in living. But to theorize these experiences ... we are lost for words

However, we cannot lose sight of what the discourse of the philosophical heritage revealed in Arendt leaves us. The discourse of *civitas* is one which is insightful of particular realities of urban life because it unearths those fundamental ways in which we understand ourselves. By virtue of doing so, it makes explicable the particular disappointment we feel when we approach public life, when we approach the politics of the state, and when we approach the public space and encounter fellow citizens in the un-glamorous pursuit of power. The idea of the citizen, of the *cive* as social constituent and benefactor, informs our relations in the public sphere by informing the sensations and opportunities we find there. Thus, this legacy of homelessness, with which we have certainly become disenchanted, itself provides the fulcrum for profound experiences which extricate us from the platitudinous existence of the quotidian.

The ideal of *civitas*, then, at once so empty and unreal in the urban, defines the types of "becoming human" realities associated with the public life of civic republicanism. It also comes to signify that which is lost through the urban and its tendency to commodify, to rationalize, and to alienate by stripping of meaning. But only by virtue of it can we understand that the urban itself presents opportunities to tap into the wellsprings of our own humanity by allowing us to revel in the creation of shocks.

Conclusion: Remembering and Forgetting

*Now it is time that gods emerge
from things by which we dwell...*

¹¹⁴Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings*, *supra* note 55, at 101.

¹¹⁵*Ibid*, at 101.

- R.M. Rilke¹¹⁶

As the above discussion demonstrates, our metaphysical heritage brings us to observe the urban, but leaves us there speechless. All of our attempts to grip it, as above, fall short of capturing our sense of being both at home and yet separate, homeless and isolated in the urban landscape. And none of this has touched on the specific realities of urban living for women, for minority groups, for the poor, for the single or the married with dependents, for the subject of violence or the one brandishing it, which further demonstrates the complexity and multiplicity of ways in which the urban *needs* to be approached. It is not enough to comment on its difference as a potentially positive thing, and I cannot claim to having even begun charting a course along them. I have merely endeavored to show the way in which one particular aspect of urbanism problematizes the civic republican ideal of political being. The ways in which one can approach the gigantic conglomerations of moving bodies seem endless, and yet our philosophical heritage blinds us to many an occasion for clearing new ground in urban humanism.

But the aestheticized experiences of people like Benjamin, Baudelaire, Kafka and Rilke, among, others provide opportunities to "get closer" to what the urban centre offers humans. For there can be no doubt, we are attracted to cities. The depths to which they plunge provides clues into what *urban* living is all about, and consequently into what the human is all about, and consequently, about what a political existence is *not sufficiently* about. We ask: are there necessary but not sufficient conditions to the "becoming of" political beings - do we need *conditions* in order to realize our humanity? According to the discussion above, are we not also capable of *becoming* at home in the urban thanks to our metaphysical heritage? Our humanity is continually realized in a gesture, a moment, an action, an awareness, and yes, a cliché. Thus, in this one small way, we have seen how, at one and the same time, one particular tradition both informs and complements our understanding of urban reality as it also serves to limit and obscure it. Thus, every opportunity for authentic political being in the urban is plagued by the encumbrance of memory and tradition, and yet is delivered into an unhesitating purity of emotion by the framework it provides. And here, finally, we are presented the uncanny hints of just how urbanism works to create our *civitas* out of the individualizing experiences of living "after Kant": in the particular relationship between memory and forgetting in the sphere of judging.

Nietzsche remarked that forgetting was the *active* faculty whereas memory was a passive one.¹¹⁷ To forget is to actively, but unconsciously, rid oneself of knowledge, whereas to remember is to simply accept that knowledge and to call it forth. In order to act, and thus to live, Nietzsche believed that forgetting was the more important activity than remembering, for remembering serves to complicate action by cluttering the mind whereas forgetting allows the mind and the body to unite in action.

Arendt's conception of the *vita activa*, which corresponds to action in the public sphere, also necessarily entails a healthy mean between remembering and

¹¹⁶ Rilke, cited in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, *supra* note 55, at 320.

¹¹⁷ See "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" *Untimely Meditations*. R.J. Hollingdale trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 57, at 75-7.



forgetting.¹¹⁸ However, in Arendt's case, the remembering we are being called upon to do is an act of retrieving a way of living and of judging, and hence, as Arendt argues, for acting. The relatedness of action to judgment, to willing, and to understanding ensures that the *act* of remembering serves to affect all other action. So just as surely as the metaphysical heritage of the Greeks lies nascent within my actions, so too do I proceed somewhat paralyzed by the continual critical eye that watches for the authentic action. While modernity is tormented with this ironic posture of proceeding analytically toward essential activity, the urban gives fertile ground for our uncomfortable ironism. We approach everything with the gaze of the *flâneur*, we experience depths and meanings, and we are beset by horrors, but all the while disquietingly strung between the dictates of remembering and judging, and of forgetting and acting. Arendt helps us see why our mental states and our bodily states are not so easily separable, a distinction which has caused much trouble. But she can take us no further in our experience of the urban than we already take ourselves, for the dialogue of the Greeks is where, as Nietzsche argues, the whole metaphysical quandary with seeing "being behind becoming" originates.¹¹⁹ And so our political identity is plagued by the hampers of inauthentic public spaces, of a critical judging which allows for observation but rarely participation, and a desire to leap into the beyond. In these ways, encounters with life in the urban serve to exacerbate that already clear sense of tragedy which looms over all of our attempts at authentic public action: we observe ourselves laughing; we gnash our teeth; we blink.

The limits of our understanding are obvious in so many ways, and yet try as we may, we repeatedly come up short: the categories of our thinking over-determined, the limits of our vocabulary continually apparent. The urban, as a technology of living, then, systematically presents the greatest danger to humanity, since we cannot conceive of it in any other terms than the ones we have (and when we do, we are quickly ushered back to where we began); and yet it surprisingly offers our newest, if not our sweetest, chances for a beyond by continually fabricating dreams and nightmares through which we glimpse ourselves *as* our Selves.

Eros wakes and pours his being into the interstices of spaces surrounding us so that we might see the eternity lying hidden in all things. But alas, the mortal eye is not trained for eternity, and hence is stuck on the rowboat of time continually tossed between remembrance of its transient life yet blessed with forgetting. And all this without a whisper about the reality of violence....¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ True to the Greeks, Arendt's Aristotelian roots here are clear: see Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹¹⁹ Nietzsche, "How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth: History of an Error" *Twilight of the Idols*. R.J. Hollingdale trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), at 50.

¹²⁰ See Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, *supra* note 97; Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, *supra* note 12; and Elizabeth Wilson, *Sphinx in the City*, *supra* note 75.