Philosophy of the City, City of Philosophy

(presentation, not the full paper)

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*Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts.*

----Italo Calvino

Italo Calvino’s novel *Invisible Cities*, or rather his prose-poetry as he would like to call it, contains chapters such as cities and memory, cities and desire, cities and signs, cities and eyes, cities and names, cities and the dead, cities and sky, and so on. It also contains chapters such as thin cities, trading cities, continuous cities, and hidden cities. But it does not have a chapter entitled ‘cities and philosophy’, or ‘philosophical cities’. However, like those invisible cities Marco Polo describes for Kublai Khan in this book, perhaps Calvino has also wanted to make the real title of his novel invisible, and which, if I venture a guess, may well be *Philosophy of Cities*. Perhaps through an imaginary dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan on cities, what Calvino has really wanted to write is a certain philosophy of cities, or rather, a city of philosophy, a poetically philosophical city, a city that may poetically and philosophically exist.

Indeed, for some of important philosophers, the city and philosophy are inseparable. For example, while talking about the birth of philosophy, Hobbes says *Leviathan*, “Where first were great and flourishing Cities, there was first the study of Philosophy.” And Plato’s the *Republic*, a work often considered the most important and greatest among all the philosophical dialogues of Plato, may perhaps also be read eventually as a book about the city, or the philosophy *of* the city. (Here I am using the word “of” as a double genitive: philosophy on the city and philosophy belonging to the city. City’s philosophy.) Why so? Because what Plato’s Socrates discusses in this great dialogue is how to form an ideal polis (*πόλις* ). In the Chinese translation of this Greek word, it is sometime rendered as 城邦, sometimes as 国家, which can be misleading. In Allan Bloom’s newer translation of the *Republic*, “city” is adopted consistently as the translation of “polis” throughout this work. Nowadays, some people would tend to use “city-state” (or 城市—国家) for “polis”, emphasizing something like a double identity in the Greek word “polis”.

The juxtaposition of “city” and “state” in the English or Chinese rendition of “polis” seems at lease to suggest, contrary to some seemingly common sense in our understanding of the relationship and difference between the state and the city, the line or the boundary between the state and the city is not always as clear-cut as one might believe. Thus, in order to develop suitable and adequate discourse for a thinking and discussion of the question of the city, we will inevitably be brought back to the classical question of philosophy “what is…?”, which should not be confused with the question “which is…?” The latter concerns only the subsumption of examples or concrete entities under a name. In this form of question, we can ask for instance, Is Shanghai a city? For most of us, the answer seems quite obvious. Of course, it is a city. However, if we further ask, what is Shanghai as a city? Then the nature of the question changes. This question asks if Shanghai is an example or even an exemplary example of the city, then what is such a city which can be exemplified by Shanghai, or by other entities equally called “city”? Is it its population? Is it its building? Is it its transport and communication? Is it its economy? Is it its business? Is it its culture and education? Or is it all of these listed above plus many other things that can be subsumed within the seemingly physicals boundaries defined by the name Shanghai as a concrete entity? If we ask questions such as these, then the question of the city becomes much more difficult and complex. In other words, when we attempt to imagine, think and discuss the question of the city, we are unable to really bypass the question which might look a little naïve in our so-called postmodern culture: what is a city? What is the essence of a city? We concern ourselves with the city’s what-ness, or its being.

Why do we need to know what a city is? Why do we want to trouble ourselves with such a question? Why bother. Do we not already have enough theoretical and technical discourses for us to talk about cities with which we all seem very familiar? At least for the following reason: we all hope to think about the future of our cities. But it would be impossible for us to hope what the future city should be if we do not know what a city is. Of course, when we start to apply to something the word 城市 in Chinese, or the word “city” in English, we must have already presupposed the what-ness or the being of a city, otherwise we might even take a beehive or ant nest as a city. Our task is to make explicit our implicit understanding of the being of the city.

To think the essence or the being of the city is the task that various theoretical discourse all have to face eventually, even reluctantly. When a theoretical discourse tries to address this question, it becomes a philosophical discourse, it becomes philosophy. In a certain sense, in a daring sense, perhaps all philosophy is eventually the philosophy of city. How so? We could perhaps draw such a brief outline as follows: in Europe and/or in the West, Plato’s the *Republic* starts with the question of justice, but becomes mainly a discussion of the ideal polis, which as I have mentioned before is city, or city-state. The two things are inseparable in Plato. Aristotle’s Politics regards the question of the state as a question about the highest good.[[1]](#footnote-1) But this state is still the Greek polis. Thus again the concept of state and the concept of city intertwine and are inseparable. When Augustine talks about the ideal rule, he uses the title *The City of God*. In Leviathan, we see the same interchangeable use of the word state (common-wealth) and city (civitas). For example, Hobbes says in the introduction to this work that “For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man”. Until Levinas. If we accept his view that the first philosophy is not ontology but ethics, and that in reality it is the law and other social superstructure based on my infinite responsibility for the other that can protect relative justice, then the state would still be the last question if not the first question. Thus, in our contemporary global economic, political and cultural contexts, is the discussion of the question of city in the last analysis a discussion of the question of the state? State of limited sovereignty, more autonomous city, open city (are contemporary Chinese cities truly open cities? Do they still have cite walls to prevent many from truly entering and living in the city?), city of hospitability, city of refugees, city which would tolerate political, economic and cultural heresies and dissidents—these are all important questions when we start to think the question of the city.

Here let me add a point or a line of a possible argument which is important not only for our understanding of the essence of man, but also for our thinking of the essence of the city. We all know Aristotle’s famous saying that “man is by nature a political animal.”[[2]](#footnote-2) I don’t know how my colleagues here who are native speakers of an Indo-European language would take this assertion of Aristotle’s. In a Chinese context, this proposition is often either misleading or becomes rather incomprehensible, given that the Chinese translation of the word “politics” and “political”, 政治, 政治的, are highly ideologically charged words. However, if we could be brave enough but also take necessary precaution at the same time in our translation of this Aristotelian proposition, we may as well say that “man is by nature a city animal”. For as I have mentioned earlier, the word “political” comes from “polis”, that is, city, city-state, or 城市国家 in Chinese. Thus to say that man is by nature a “political” animal is to say that man is by nature a city animal, an animal who lives in the “city”, who lives on and from the city, and who would cease to be what it is without a city. Man is by nature a city animal: this proposition would concern both the essence of man and the essence of the city. Both would cease to be what they are without each other. Would we dare to accept such bold propositions? Have there always been people present and past who are recluses in the desert or on high mountains, far from the city? If we accept the above hypotheses, let’s say my own working hypotheses based on a certain translation of the Aristotelian proposition, then we must say man always carries a certain city—the city—with him even when he or she chooses to become a recluse or is banished from the city. Then the question of what a city is becomes even more urgent if we want to revisit the question of what man is, or what is the being of the human being. Thus, if on the one hand, there has been the Baudelairian type of solitude and melancholy undergone by people in European cities, in the modern European metropolitan cities, or the great pressure and despair undergone by the Chinese 蚁族 or the ant clan in large contemporary Chinese cities, and, on the other hand, there is the Aristotelian type of assertion that man is what he or she is, together with contemporary Chinese government’s ambition for great urbanization and many common Chinese peoples’ aspiration for city lite, then the task of thinking of the future of city becomes more urgent for us to take. Such a thinking may well have to be based on the above mentioned double bind: on the one hand, city is necessary for man to be what he is, (and this of course requires rigorous analysis and exposition), but on the other hand, typical modern cities seem to have become (in a certain sense or in some aspects) something that prevents man from what he or she is or should be.

1. Aristotle, *Politics*: “Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the "Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one," whom Homer denounces—the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, translated by Benjamin Jowett. Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999, p. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)