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SOME REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE CITY

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1. The bipolarity of the *polis* is indicated in Aristotle's defining statement about it.

“When several villages are united to form an association that is almost or completely self-sufficing, the *polis* comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life and continuing in existence for the sake of the good life.”

- a. On the one hand, the *polis* must be of a size, involving enough land and resources, enough people for an adequate division of labor and for security and defense, so that it can be almost or completely self-sufficing.
 - (1) Under certain conditions, the *polis* can be as small as a city (in the sense of a Greek city-state, such as Athens or Sparta).
 - (2) Under other economic and military conditions, it may have to be as large as a great imperial city, such as Rome.
 - (3) Under still other conditions, it may have to enlarge even further and become a national state, and even a national empire.
 - (4) And the future may hold in store for us what lies inevitably at the end of this line of development—the world state.
 - (5) The word “*polis*” should be neutrally translated by the English phrase “political community” rather than by the word “state” (the usual translation) because the political community may be a city (city-state) or an empire (imperial state) or a nation (nation-state and national empire) or, as eventually it will be, it may be a world state.
- b. On the other hand, the *polis* must be so constituted as to serve the end for which it continues in existence—the good human life.
 - (1) At this pole, the size of the political community must be determined quite differently—not by economic and military conditions approximating self-sufficiency and security, but by the conditions needed for its citizens to lead good human lives.
 - (2) The ancient cities (or city-states) were of a size (usually with a population of not more than 30,000 citizens) that enabled all the citizens to be neighbors with one another.
 - (3) They should be neighbors in the sense of being able to have direct acquaintance with one another. To require them all to be friends in the full sense of that term is to ask too much. But it is not too much to require that they be associated in a common life and for a common purpose: to cooperate with one another in the achievement of a good human life—the life of man both as a rational and as a social animal.
 - (4) What are the indispensable minimal conditions of the good life that the polis must provide?

- (a) Enough division of labor so that some of its citizens engage in the production of economic goods (the goods of subsistence), while others engage in the production of spiritual goods (the goods of civilization).
 - (b) But all, no matter what their special work is, must be in a position or be helped to enjoy the goods of civilization—the products of the arts and sciences, of philosophy and religion. And this enjoyment must be communal or social, not solitary and private.
- (5) This requires them to be engaged in conversation with one another—in the *agora* or other public meeting places—not only about political matters, but also about ideas and values, about things to be known and understood by all, and about values to be experienced and appreciated by all.
- (6) Hence the size of the *polis* must be small enough to be organic—all its components functioning in relation to one another.
- (7) The heart or center of this organism must be one or more public places frequented by the citizens who live as neighbors and know one another. There they should meet and interact with one another—politically and culturally.
2. The modern industrial city—the *metro-polis*—is much too large for the second purpose that the *polis* should serve—namely, the good life for all, cooperatively pursued and communally enjoyed.
- a. Its ever enlarging size responds to the driving force of the other pole in the definition of the *polis*—the economic conditions that must be satisfied.
 - b. It is nothing but a unit in still larger political communities (counties, states, nations, etc.) upon which it depends, for no matter how large it grows, it can no longer ever again be almost or completely self-sufficing.
 - c. It is perfectly clear that these larger political communities are even less able than the modern industrial city to serve the other pole in the definition of the *polis*—the good life for all its people.
3. How, then, can we find under modern conditions the *polis* that, while failing to serve the purposes for which the *polis* came into existence (self-sufficiency and security) may be able to serve the purpose for which it continues in existence (the good life)?
- a. My answer to the question is: *the neighborhood*.
 - b. Most modern cities are composed of local neighborhoods in which something like a communal life can be lived.
 - c. London and Paris, in my judgment, illustrate this point well. They are composed of many almost autonomous neighborhoods in which the residents participate in a common life, while at the same time being able

to go beyond their local neighborhoods to take advantage of the public centers and the cultural institutions that the encompassing city affords, unattainable within their local neighborhoods.

- d. These two considerations put before us the model of a city built to human scale.
 - e. What the encompassing city can provide for the good life, the local neighborhoods cannot provide; and, conversely, what the local neighborhoods can provide for the good life, the encompassing city is too large to provide.
 - f. Both must work together to fulfill the ethical purpose of the *polis*. The encompassing city must provide the cultural nourishment for the neighborhoods. The neighborhoods must provide communal consumption of the cultural nourishment.
4. The bi-polarity of the *polis* calls for an ever-increasing centralization of political and economic activity, on the one hand, together with an ever-increasing decentralization of human and cultural activities, on the other hand. Even when the world state comes into existence as maximal centralization, it will be necessary to strive more strongly for the decentralization of human activity that must have its locale in the local neighborhoods of the large, industrial encompassing city.
 5. World peace and prosperity will come into existence only with the formation of a world political community, with cultural pluralism preserved in world civilization. Peace and prosperity are the values to be achieved at one of the two poles that brought the *polis* into existence.
 6. The other pole—the good life, cooperatively pursued and communally enjoyed—calls for the opposite tendency toward decentralization, which must go as far as local neighborhoods that are culturally nourished by the public institutions of the encompassing industrial city, which in turn draw on the cultural riches of wider and more encompassing political units up to the limit which is a world community, both political and cultural, under world federal government.



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