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Paths to Understanding the City
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'Let us Go and Make Our Visit'

John Macionis and Vincent Parrillo offer a delicious, evocative taste of urban studies by opening their book *Cities and Urban Life* with T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

> "Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherized upon a table;
> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

> And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
> Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
> Let us go and make our visit."[1]

Macionis and Parrillo suggest that the city "is a dynamic entity unto itself, the most powerful drawing card in human history. In 1900, cities were home to just 9 percent of the world's population. In 1950, cities were home to 30 percent and then to 47 percent in 2000. If present trends continue, by 2025 cities will be home to 58 percent of humanity."[2] These trends have dramatic implications for the very real material circumstances that people will face: some will find unprecedented opportunity for achievement and prosperity (since urbanization has traditionally been the leading edge of innovation and wealth creation); but perhaps most of the world's newest urbanites, in the large, growing cities of the Global South, will confront poverty, oppression, and ecological catastrophe.

And yet what about that evening spread out against that sky, and those streets that follow like tedious arguments? Macionis and Parillo suggest that

> "The city is a complex reality that yields few easy answers. Our approach here is to study the city much as we would a poem. In encountering a new poem, most people wonder, 'What does it mean?' We may ask, 'What is the poem's topic?' 'What meter does it use?' 'What is its place in the poet's works?' ... U.S. Poet John Ciardi ... believed that we also need to consider the mood the poem creates in us, its readers, as well as the deeper subtleties conveyed in how the poem's words play together. Our concern, wrote Ciardi, should not be 'to arrive at a definition and close the book, but to arrive at an experience.' In other words, Ciardi, maintains, only by asking how a poem transmits its meaning -- by experiencing how all its complex elements fit together -- will we fully comprehend the poem. The same is true of cities."[3]

Two Paths...

The contrast between approaching the city as a poem, and approaching the city as the home of more than 50 percent of the globe's population, is simply one illustration of an influential dichotomy in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. As Barbara Phillips notes in her important book *City Lights*,[4] it is quite common to draw a sharp division between two different kinds of knowledge -- one about personal, intimate experience, and the other involving abstract, disinterested reflection:

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[1] T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," cited in John J. Macionis and Vincent N. Parrillo (2007). *Cities and Urban Life*, Fourth Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice-Hall, pp. 1-2.
[2] Macionis and Parrillo, *Cities*, p. 2.
[3] Macionis and Parrillo, *Cities*, p. 3.
[4] E. Barbara Phillips (1996). *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society*. Second Edition. Oxford

1. "Acquaintance with" metropolitan life comes from direct, intuitive, and non-linear insights, from the in-your-face sensations of seeing, touching hearing, tasting, and smelling urban life. As Phillips puts it:

> "Firsthand experience gives **acquaintance with** the city. Direct and concrete, it depends on sense experience: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. This mode of understanding is intuitive, non-linear, and holistic. Psychologists associate it with right-brain thinking."[5]

2. "Knowledge about" the metropolis is much different. It is rational, analytical, linear, and emphasizes abstraction and objectivity. It offers a detached, dispassionate assessment based on observable 'facts' or rules of logic. As Phillips writes,

> "**knowledge about** the city comes from abstract, logical thought. This mode of understanding is analytical, linear, and rational. It may be mathematical and highly theoretical. The 'knowledge about' path to understanding is sequential, ordering information by breaking it down into component parts. Psychologists associate it with left-brain thinking."[6]

__Acquaintance with__ cities comes from firsthand experience and sensory perception -- sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. __Knowledge about__ cities comes from abstract, logical reasoning.

Most histories of science emphasize that the abstract, "knowledge about" path was privileged through most of the twentieth century, until it came in for serious criticism and challenge beginning in the 1960s. Even today, however, the "knowledge about" approach remains central in activities of government agencies, private corporations, and many influential scientists. Statistics often provide the telltale sign of claims to rational, analytical, and objective statements.

These two paths are often complicated by the fact that contemporary communication, when effective, leads us to think we have acquaintance with or knowledge about a particular facet of urban life, even if we've had no direct experience or conducted no scientific experiments ourselves. A good novel will give us a feeling of intimate acquaintance, while a carefully-crafted policy document may seem to give us quite extensive knowledge about the place. There is usually an appeal to one of these paths in any form of contemporary communication -- anything produced by scholars, journalists, political officials, cinema directors, poets, novelists, photographers, and anyone else interested in the city.

A Vancouver Illustration

Consider two contrasting views of portions of urban life in the city of Vancouver. The City's Office of Cultural Affairs produces an annual report on a wide variety of cultural and arts

[5] Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 7.
[6] Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 7.

activities in this fine city. Included is a "statistical overview of Vancouver's non-for-profit cultural sector," from which we learn that during a full season a few years ago, 108 major organizations presented more than 1,700 festivals, 3,200 live performances, and more than 500 visual arts and museum exhibitions. More than 14,100 volunteers contributed 435,000 hours of service to non-for-profit cultural organizations. More than 297,000 students attended performances given by Vancouver arts organizations in their schools. Total revenues by these organizations topped $93 million, allowing the City to speak of more than a twelve-to-one "leverage" for the total of $7.03 million in grants it made that year.[7] Curiously enough, the "Grant Summary" page highlights the City's book awards, one of which went to a book that has much more "acquaintance with" insight than the abstract "knowledge about" conveyed by the statistics in the annual report. One of the chapters in the book, *Every Block on 100 West Hastings*, begins with a witches' brew of provocative quotes by local journalists, television critics, and police constables speaking of the Downtown Eastside: "Vancouver's worst neighbourhood...probably Canada's worst neighbourhood," the "worst block in Vancouver," a place "not simply outside of 'civilization,' but beyond 'the boundary into hell' itself," "a disease-ridden enclave of filth and desolation" because of "an influx of new denizens -- career criminals whose only solace is prolific intravenous drug use where the price is humanity and their dignity," a place where the single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels shock the observer: "The garbage. The smell. The rats. The cockroaches. The filthy toilets."[8]

Nicholas Blomley, who has spent many years gaining both acquaintance with and knowledge about the neighborhood, criticizes much of the press coverage of the place, especially for the lazy adoption of politically charged terms from the U.S. (such as the description of an "isolated ghetto").

> "...claims of isolation jar against the experience of a place where expensive condos stand just around the corner from a drug market where cocaine and heroin are openly offered and exchanged. Tourist shops operate just down the street from (and tourists wander through) drug users smoking rock or 'fixing' or occasionally 'tweaking.' Increasingly high-priced, renovated heritage houses are located in the same neighbourhood as cheap rooms, welfare offices, and food lines. Meanwhile, the local and international media -- including television and film -- never tire of Downtown Eastside scenes. So familiar -- and notorious -- has the neighbourhood become that Hollywood production crews are an almost constant presence in the area's back alleys. Many, if not the majority, of local residents may be economically and politically marginal. But if this place is an isolated ghetto, it must be the most accessible and well-known one in history."[9]

[7] City of Vancouver, Office of Cultural Affairs (2004).
[8] Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley (2003). "The Worst Block in Vancouver." *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, photographed by Stan Douglas, edited by Reid Shier. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery / Arsenal Pulp Press, pp. 18-58, quotes from various sources and pages.
[9] Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley, "The Worst Block," 26, 29.

Reconsidering the Two Paths

The dichotomy between intimate experience and rational abstraction is widespread and seemingly obvious. But it is also quite limiting, and it has its risks. Most scholars are now suspicious of the sharp distinction between these two paths and different ways of thinking: "...the distinction between acquaintance with (subjective understanding) and knowledge about (so-called objective understanding) is phony." [10]
Several trends are important here.

Most urban scholars are now suspicious of the clear distinction between "knowledge about" and "acquaintance with" cities.

First, developments in art have celebrated multiple points of view, undermining the certainty of singular visions.

Second, feminist scholars and other philosophers of science have shown that "subjective" and "objective" kinds of knowledge coexist, and cannot always be clearly separated.

Third, linguists and deconstructionists have questioned the existence of an external world independent of the interpretations and meanings that people assign to that world.

All of these developments in the humanities -- art, philosophy, social theory -- have driven a backlash against rational abstraction. In some fields, this backlash has gone quite a long way. This is especially pronounced for the case of quantification. Marcus Doel, a scholar at the University of Wales Swansea, documents the trouble in philosophy "concerning the ontological and ethical status of numbers, and their relationship to concepts, events, and sensations."[11] Doel makes his point forcefully by opening a philosophical article like this:

> "Let me put my cards on the table so that you know where I am coming from: I detest every one. No one in particular: just one in general. I prefer not to count on one. For me, number is a horror story. It is the most brutal of leveling devices. I look up from the screen and force myself to count: one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and there's another one and one and one and one and one and one and another one and on and on and on and on and on and on to another one and one and one and on and on to a different one and one and one. It is an onerous task. I find it truly nauseating. Counting on one necessarily renders everything as one and one, on and one. Such is the semblance of pure positivity, as if everything were affirmed by being counted upon. Life, the universe, and everything may be digitized. On and on, one and one. But make no mistake, by way of this operation that goes on and on interminably, the heterogeneous texture of the world is being liquidated: ambivalence reduced to equivalence. In a very little while the portion over here

[10] Phillips, *City Lights*, 11-12.
[11] Marcus A. Doel (2001). "Qualified Quantitative Geography." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19, 555-572, quote from p. 555.

> and the portion over there will be rendered equivalent, substitutable, and exchangeable. Each will lose its specificity, cease to exist in and of itself, and enter into general circulation. One and one, on and on. Is there anything that cannot be counted on? One world. One word. One life. One hand. One year. One tear ..."[12]

In the middle years of the twentieth century, the social sciences became quite obsessed with rational quantification and systematic theories.

How did we get from a simple division of two paths to an entire paragraph attacking one? The short answer is this: every revolution lays the seeds of its own destruction. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, the social sciences became quite obsessed with rational quantification and an ambitious attempt to create an integrated theory of certain knowledge about ... well, almost everything. Urban studies was part of this movement, and for a time many of those who studied cities were predicting the time when "urban systems" would be understood within the broader framework of "general systems theory." We would have laws about cities and urban life pretty much like physics and astronomy had their own laws.

But there's the irony. Just as the social sciences were becoming enamored with rational abstraction, many physical scientists began to emphasize ideas of unpredictability, uncertain measurement, and path-dependency. In fact, some of the most profound humanistic implications come from the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. In work that subsequently won the 1932 Nobel Prize, German physicist Werner Karl Heisenberg (1901-1976) theorized that it is impossible simultaneously to determine both the location and velocity of an electron, or for that matter, any other subatomic particle. Precise determination of one quality comes at the expense of the other, in part because the act of observing (think of shining a light on an atom so you can see it) heats up the atom and changes the speed of the particles. Moreover, the indeterminacy is greater for smaller particles.

Theorists in the humanities and social sciences have drawn a wide range of implications from the uncertainty principle and other scientific research on indeterminacy and unpredictability. Observers can never remove themselves (and their biases and preconceptions) from the act of observation. It is impossible to observe something without changing it in some way, and this change is often difficult or impossible to predict. It is impossible to study something without a point of view, and thus all history is revisionist history, reflective as much of present concerns, interests, and priorities as any

The Heisenberg uncertainty principle: It is not possible to observe something without changing it in some way.

[12] Doel, "Qualified," 555-556.

supposedly real or objective past.[13] Science is not value-neutral, and facts cannot be separated from values. Indeed, "there are no facts as such. We must always begin by introducing a meaning in order for there to be a fact."[14]

These are not just obscure academic points. The relations between subject and object, observer and observed, also matter when it comes to public debate and public policy. Several years after the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, for instance, large banks in the United States were still sorting through the wreckage. Millions of homeowners owe more on their mortgage loans than their house is worth, and many have faced foreclosure and eviction. In early 2011, Joe Nocera, a reporter with the *New York Times*, introduced a story about one borrower's struggle with the largest financial institution in the U.S., this way:

> "In physics, the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle states that the process of observing subatomic particles affects their behavior. We have a similar principle in journalism: the process of reporting a story can sometimes affect the behavior of those being reported on. Last Wednesday, the Heisenberg Journalism Principle was on full display in a courtroom at the Queens County Courthouse, in New York."[15]

Nocera's story documented the years-long struggle of a woman named Lilla Roberts, a 73-year old retired physical therapist, to get a fair and reasonable loan modification from Bank of America. Bank of America kept promising a modification, but then foreclosed without her knowledge, and transferred the loan to Fannie Mae, a once-private company that had been bailed out and nationalized in late 2008; Fannie Mae had begun eviction proceedings when Nocera first wrote about Roberts. But then the Heisenberg Journalism Principle kicked in.

> "Things quickly changed after my column was published. Within days, Fannie Mae handed the house back to Bank of America and washed its hands of the deal. Bank of America then did what it should have done in the first place: investigate whether Ms. Roberts was a good candidate for a loan modification. And whaddya know? She was!"[16]

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[13] In the early 1990s, conservative scholars and political officials repeatedly used the phrase "revisionist history" to attack historical scholarship that began to challenge mainstream interpretations by analyzing history from the perspective of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized people. Ironically, Newt Gingrich has recently written a series of "alternative histories" reimagining key battles in which the American Civil War is won by Robert E. Lee and the Confederacy. Newt Gingrich and William Forstchen (2004). *Grant Comes East.* New York: Thomas Dunne Books.

[14] Friedrich Nietzsche, cited in Watts, Michael. 1988. "Struggles over Land, Struggles Over Meaning: Some Thoughts on Naming, Peasant Resistance and the Politics of Place." In Reginald G. Golledge, Helen Couclelis, and Peter Gould, editors, *A Ground for Common Search,* pp. 31-50. Goleta, CA: The Santa Barbara Geographical Press.

[15] Joe Nocera (2011). "Shamed into Altering a Mortgage." *New York Times*, January 21.

[16] Nocera, "Shamed."

The Heisenberg Journalism Principle, Personified. This is part of the housing stock of Queens, New York. Not far from here, an African American woman, Lilla Roberts, 73, faced a tough battle over the terms of her mortgage with Bank of America, the largest financial institution in the United States. The bank only stopped ignoring her phone calls when her case got high-profile coverage in the *New York Times*. Her experience is a reminder that the act of observing something often changes it. See Joe Nocera (2011). "Shamed into Altering a Mortgage." *New York Times*, January 21. Photograph: Queens, NY, January 2011 (Elvin Wyly).

The recognition of the interdependency of subject and object, the inescapable relations between observer and observed, sent shock waves through many fields of inquiry. The old ways of doing things were suddenly put into question. All of the criticisms added up to a major challenge to the various forms of *positivism*, a philosophy of science emphasizing the search for universal scientific truths through the application of a consistent, shared, objective scientific method and empirical observation.

Pluralist Urban Studies

So we are left with a pluralist, and yet sometimes confusing state of affairs, in which we approach cities with a variety of methods in search of different kinds of knowledge. "Raw numbers don't tug at our heartstrings"[17] like good poetry, fiction, or cinema can, and as David Livingston puts it, "Statistics don't bleed."[18] And yet rational abstraction -- through quantification and similar approaches -- remains an essential item in the urbanist's toolbox,

[17] Phillips, "City Lights," 7.
[18] David Livingston (1992). *The Geographical Tradition.* Oxford: Blackwell.

despite the excesses and dangers of rational abstraction. Why? Four considerations are most important.

1. **First**, rational abstraction, positivism, and quantification retain enormous political legitimacy, and thus urban scholars can only be part of certain kinds of discussions if they are willing to use some of the language of abstraction and measurement.

Despite its limitations, rational abstraction remains important, because:

1. It has political legitimacy.
2. It helps build common ground through shared languages and methods.
3. It guards against relativism.
4. It can be balanced and integrated with subjective knowledge and "acquaintance with" urban life.

2. **Second**, abstraction and quantification are indispensable tools in attempts to achieve intersubjectivity (to forge some kind of common ground) and to keep people and institutions honest: although we may not be able to identify one single, universal truth, that doesn't eliminate the need to challenge indisputably false and misleading statements, no matter who is making them.[19]

3. **Third**, attempts to perform rational abstraction seem to provide one of the only reliable responses to the dangers of relativism brought by deconstruction and other streams of poststructuralism. Relativism is the idea that there are no absolute criteria for judging claims about truth or reality: there are only criteria defined *relative to particular cultures, times, and places.*

4. **Fourth**, the two paths are often complementary and compatible if the researcher draws on mixed methods. The work of many of the most

[19] For more than half a century, a significant element of the Holocaust-denial extremist movement was to cast doubt on the veracity of the six-million statistic that *does* bleed: the millions of Jewish people killed by the Nazis in the Second World War. Genocide and war statistics have always been a battleground, and recent conflicts are no exception. On the one side, U.S. military deaths in Iraq (including private contractors) exceeded 1,000 in September 2004, a symbolic threshold that led the *New York Times* to publish a two-page spread with photographs of all service members who gave their lives. *The New York Times* (2004), "The Roster of the Dead," September 8, A22-A23. But "The Dead" also includes Iraqi casualties. But on the other side the U.S. Defense Department repeatedly refused to estimate the statistics that bleed in Iraq's devastated cities. War casualty statistics have become their own autonomous battleground. Derek Gregory quotes a chief spokesman for the U.S. Central Command responding to reporters' questions: "We do not look at combat as a scorecard" and "We are not going to ask battlefield commanders to make specific reports on enemy casualties," which independent estimates have placed at up to 10,000 military and more than 6,000 civilian deaths in the first seven months of 2003. Colin Powell seemed not to care: "We really don't know how many civilian deaths there have been, and we don't know how many of them can be attributed to coalition action, as opposed to action on the part of Iraqi armed forces as they defended themselves." Derek Gregory (2004). The *Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq.* Oxford: Blackwell, quotes on pp. 207, 208. Gregory also quotes Derrick Jackson's remark that "the very people that the US claimed to be liberating were not worth counting." Derrick Jackson (2003), "U.S. Stays Blind to Iraq Casualties," *The Boston Globe*, November 14, quoted in Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 330. See notes 80, 82, and 83 in Gregory, *Colonial Present* (pp. 330, 331) for detailed estimates on Iraqi civilian casualties, which may also be found at http://www.iraqbodycount.net, which as of September 4, 2008 places the minimum civilian deaths at 86,863.

prominent urbanists is exceedingly difficult to classify, by virtue of their willingness to consider rational, abstract, objective principles as well as qualitative, subjective historical-cultural influences. One of the most influential public intellectuals, Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), wrote more than two dozen volumes on the history of cities, urban planning, and urban culture -- and his work repeatedly sought to integrate a) the search for the fundamental properties of cities and urbanization, with b) a sensitivity to meaning, symbolism, culture, and contingency. Thus his insightful essay, "What is a City?" lays the foundation with a simple rational definition of the city: "a related collection of primary groups and purposive associations: the first, like family and neighborhood, are common to all communities, while the second are especially characteristic of city life." But then Mumford quickly dives into the intricacies of social meanings in the metropolis:

It is possible to integrate the two paths, by using mixed methods to highlight different aspects of the urban experience.

> "The city in its complete sense .. is a geographical plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity. The city fosters art and is art; the city creates the theater and is the theater. It is in the city, the city as theater, that man's more purposive activities are focused, and work out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations."[20]

The Objective Importance of Subjectivity

What Mumford is gettting at here is that ***part of the objective reality of a city is defined by the subjective experiences and meanings of the city's people.*** This means that the two paths -- subjective acquaintance with, objective knowledge about -- are always complementary, and always coexisting. This is why many researchers use mixed methods, in an attempt to combine different kinds of methods and knowledge. Some experts advise blending "extensive" and "intensive" research methods. Extensive techniques -- for example, using statistical techniques applied to large datasets -- are best suited to reveal the extent, scope, or prevalence of a particular phenomenon. Intensive techniques -- for example, talking with people in long, open-ended interviews -- are better suited for in-depth analysis of the meanings and interpretations of a small number of places, institutions, or events.[21]

[20] Lewis Mumford (1937). "What is a City?" *Architectural Record 32*, November.
[21] Doreen Massey and Richard Meegan (1986). *Politics and Method: Contrasting Studies in Industrial Geography*. London: Routledge.