

To cite this article:

Carlos Fortuna (2020), "Overcoming the Unsouled City", *The European Sociologist*, 1(45). Online since 2 June 2020. URL: <https://www.europeansociologist.org/issue-45-pandemic-impossibilities-vol-1/living-overcoming-unsouled-city>.

Overcoming the Unsouled City

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I have just finished writing a book that will shortly be published in Brazil and in Portugal. It is a book about cities and the various expressions of *urbanness* that take place there. One of the chapters of *Cidades e Urbanidades* [Cities and Urbanities] is dedicated to an eulogy of walking, showing how it is only the human rhythm of the urban walk that enables us to decipher the city and its material, sociohistorical and symbolic expressions. Like us, the book was blindsided by the pandemic turbulence caused by Covid-19, and it was engulfed in the ensuing widespread darkness of nightmare and fear.

It is no longer possible to walk in the city. For the time being, we believe. This effect is quite dramatic as it suspends everything we know about the origins of culture. Civilization arose from our feet. It was by walking that our pre-historic ancestors met and began to interact with one another. It was in this way that the economy was created, that politics was invented, and that people learned how to make war and build peace. After all, it was by walking that the city was created and our *common* life took shape.

With people confined to their homes, the city is put on hold. And the city on hold is an oxymoron. Its *raison d'être* and its soul derive from constant flux, transformation and change. A city at a standstill is something without a soul. Streets without people and without the sprightly bustle of everyday life are a strange sight. Empty schools and universities are anachronistic landscapes. Disconcerting also is the landscape of urban silence that has settled where sounds and noise once prevailed. Sad are the cafés, shops, museums, cinemas and gardens with 'closed to the public' notices. With no 'public' and no street, the soulless city is repulsive.

It drives you back to the private space of home – for those who have it. The possibility of accomplishing this retreat is, however, profoundly asymmetric. I am not just thinking about the thousands of homeless people who live in the city streets. I am mainly thinking about the millions that live in unspeakable precariousness in poor, derelict neighborhoods, in slums, townships and *favelas*, with neither the possibility of physical isolation, nor the political and social protection that could preserve them from the malignant exposure to the new Coronavirus. In contrast, urbanites worldwide, accustomed to more solid living conditions and shut up at home, now experience a continuing interaction with the 'small numbers' of their households.

Isolation at home is not an alternative to the absence of *urbanness*. Rather, it represents its negation. For this reason, everyday isolation seeks distraction and amusement.

Maybe the redeeming computer, used for teleworking, can also be used for distraction. Emailing, social networks, online games and TV series can surely work as a refuge. Anything goes. All this leads the individuals inside the home to seek to change it and let the outside world in, making the home a place where a new, possibly more progressive and cosmopolitan, ethos is tested, involving dialogue and learning with others and with the 'big numbers' of social movements and crowds.

Seclusion itself also has to be creative. It needs to rein in the crisis and depression. If it is no longer possible to walk in the city, and thus to make culture, politics and history, might not individuals try out a domestic neo-nomadism? Way back in 1794, Xavier de Maistre, a French military officer detached in Italy, was imprisoned at home for 42 days. It was during this period that he wrote his celebrated *Voyage autour de ma chambre* [A Journey Around My Room], a parody in the style of the travel narratives of his time. 'When I travel through my room', he writes, 'I rarely follow a straight line: I go from the table towards a picture hanging in a corner; from there, I set out obliquely towards the door; but even though, when I begin, it really is my intention to go there, if I happen to meet my armchair en route, I don't think twice about it, and settle down in it without further ado'.

It is not de Maistre's polychronic aptitude that I am recommending here to secluded moderns. Nonetheless, I believe – inspired by the anthropology of Arjun Appadurai [1] and Daniel Miller [2, 3], as well as by Bill Bryson's essayistic writing [4] – that something similar to his domestic nomadism can be attempted in today's unexpected stays at home. Everything happens as if the walk took place in the now interdicted city streets, revealing the history and the memory of places and the longed-for affections and social intercourse under an open sky. Please accept the suggestion, dear reader, and get ready to wander about *à la* de Maistre. With your family, and provided with pen and paper, start by making the trajectory between the dining-room table and the group picture hanging on the wall. Write down its date (or festive occasion) and place, do not forget to identify its author, and finally make a note of all the members of the photographed group. Set out then towards the cupboard to recall how the knick-knack on top preserves the memory of the holidays you spent in exotic landscapes. In the meantime, correct the children's spelling of place names. And carry on to the kitchen, recreating the stories of utensils and memories of distant smells and tastes. Do not stop until, exhausted like de Maistre, you can no longer refuse to let yourself drop down on the couch. Repeat the journey the next day between different 'stations' and make other records of your walk. Retrieve old pictures, caress old watches saved from oblivion, and go as far as to write down the history of the handed-down dressing table.

More than merely creative, this ramble is autobiographical. Let the objects at home speak. They tell you and others your history and that of your bonds, and at the same time each one of them acquires a renewed social meaning. They also re-connect you with the world outside, make you remember your trips to faraway places, now impossible to repeat. They validate the collective identity of the group that cannot be photographed again. These objects and their circumstances are part and parcel of your identity capital, they have become a part of you. Personal and collective memories are

not dead, and they are reactivated by walking through the four corners of the home. Use creatively, dear reader, this epidemiological seclusion, and let memories take you by surprise, now that the street no longer waits for you and the city became unsouled. Do as Marcel Proust did with his tea and madeleine at Combray, and let these involuntary memories of your condition spread over your body and take hold of you.

Surprise the pandemic that took everybody by surprise and kept you at home. See how the city outside is shattered. Imagine that it is more beautiful and democratic, more just and sustainable. Do not give in to thoughts of how it will be after the crisis. We know it will be stunned and convalescing. This was how it was left by nature and Covid-19, which swept through the ravaged territories of economic, urbanistic and social neoliberalism. It needs strength to recover and gain new meanings. One thing is certain: the rebirth of the city cannot be predicated on the same principles that led to its devastation. As philosopher Alphonso Lingis [5] argues, in his disquieting *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, solidarity emerges when one exposes oneself to the naked, the destitute and the dying.

Give, then, to the convalescing and naked city the cosmopolitan and critical ethos reconquered at home, surrounded by your objects and memories. Join those others that also wish for an *other* city. Give a new becoming to this post-city, to its still depleted streets and its weary cafés, theatres and shops, its hospitals and schools still trying to pull through. This crisis has given civilization a chance to gain political awareness (and, by extension, a renewed urban life) about the fact that the city before us will not be the result of the empirical experience of social justice as we know it, but of the perception of the serious expressions of injustice that have shut it off. Neither will it result from the practice of equal distribution of resources, but from the known and grievous social inequalities in the access to those resources. Finally, it will not result from widespread happiness and well-being, but from the elimination of suffering and humiliation.

The post-city city and its *urbanness* will experience a slow recovery. But its time will arrive. It is like this that crises manifest themselves, this much they have taught us. All the past crises have created, against the current, the bases that have enabled us to overcome them. Let us join this effort of creating totally new *commonalities* in the city.

References

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