



CIVILITY

Richard Sennett, Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics and Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All the cities selected for Urban Age are big. Some of these cities, like Shanghai and Mexico City, are experiencing rapid growth on a scale which has little precedent in history; others, like London and New York, are mature but still growing; yet again, cities like Berlin face the real prospect of decline. The question is what these very different places can learn from one another. I would like to explore one answer which may seem odd. It concerns civility. By ‘civility’ I do not mean good manners; the word implies more deeply the capacity of people who differ to live together. It further implies that people who are of different races, classes, or religions can live together without daily control by the state – that the complexity of social life does not require policemen. This should be the promise of urban life: the city’s diversity of urban life becoming a source of mutual strength rather than a source of mutual estrangement and civic bitterness. To make sense of this ideal in the cities of our time means a certain change in the way we think about “difference.” In Europe and North America, we have emphasised differences in identity – what makes Germans and Turks, or Americans and Mexicans culturally different. In the cities of China, India, or Mexico itself, cultural differences matter much less than differences in wealth and social class: the vast shantytowns of Latin America, South Asia and tropical Africa attest to this expanding gap between rich and poor. To understand the scale of this class difference, we might recall that of Mexico City’s current population of 18 million, the United Nations estimates that 42% of its citizens are at or just above the poverty line; in Shanghai, the East’s fabled tiger of growth, the estimates are that currently 35% of its population is in the same state. Can ‘civility’ have any practical significance under these conditions? I want to argue that it does – that indeed we can learn something from the experience of differences in cultural identity about how to civilise economic differences. In this regard, I want to consider the history of Jews in cities, a scorned and feared ‘Other’ in European civilisation. Their urban existence took three forms – forms which foreshadow the problems of living in difference today faced by quite different peoples in other cities on the globe. The first of the ways Jews, as outsiders, lived in cities is encapsulated in the Jewish Ghetto of Renaissance Venice. Jews were necessary to

the city not only as merchant traders but also as doctors and scribes; doctoring then was dangerous and low paid work which Christians avoided. Most merchant traders spoke languages the Venetians themselves did not know, but this skill was also low-paid. These necessary strangers lived in an enclosed place which consisted of three islands linked together by a set of draw-bridges. During the day Jews worked in the city, at dusk they returned to the Ghetto islands, the bridges were drawn up, the outsiders shut in for the night with police boats policing the outside. The reason for this arrangement is that the Venice lacked civility of the fundamental sort. During Lent Jews were attacked as the supposed killers of Christ; at times of plague they were attacked as the supposed poisoners of wells. Prejudices against them were so strong that they could survive only in isolation with protection from the state – the patrol boats were meant as much to keep others out as Jews penned up within. So here was a model of urban difference without civility, requiring the state to perform the office of peacekeeping which civil society could not. To understand the second model, skip to Berlin at the end of the 18th Century. Jews at that time and place were tolerated in civil society, so long as in public they effaced any expression of what made them different. Jews lived throughout Berlin; though barred from the army and the universities, they enjoyed a measure of other legal rights which a Venetian Jew could not have imagined. These rights attached to the city’s many poor as well as its relatively few rich Jews. But all paid a price. People turned on them whenever they asserted their own particularity in public; in practice this meant, for instance, that Jews were at liberty to worship within synagogues but attacked when they built booths or shrines outside during religious festivals. Berlin Judaism, in the words of Moses Mendelssohn, was the religion of closed doors and shuttered windows, not a religion of the streets. This model of civility exchanged inclusion for identity. The exchange, rather like current debates about the headscarf for Muslim young women in French schools, supposed that civil society and more largely citizenship required its own unitary identity; you could not be different and still be connected to others. On the streets of Enlightenment Berlin, as in French schools now, the dominant culture became a universal standard

for all. The third way Jews lived in cities is embodied by the experience of London's East-End Jews in the early years of the 20th century. These were almost entirely poor Jews. So accustomed are we to the stereotype of the upwardly-mobile Jew that we fail to appreciate how many urban Jews were rooted, long-term, in poverty – which was the case for these Jews, clustered around Brick Lane and its environs, the home now to many equally poor Bangladeshis. This was not a protected ghetto, as was Renaissance Venice, nor was it a space of secret identity, as was Jewish life in 18th century Berlin. Rather it was a space abandoned to its own devices by the dominant culture. Leslie Stephen, a reasonably humane late Victorian, said of this Jewish community, “they live as they like, without being any trouble to us.” The reason for this was that the dominant culture did not much trouble about them. Here lies the secret of the third model: civility based on indifference. The Jews of the East End were free as their forbearers were not; indifference had made that gift. But the result of such toleration was mutual ignorance; the denizens of this “unfathomable London,” as E.M. Foster called it, did not participate in a larger collective life. The Berlin model had repressed identity for sake of a common citizenship; the London model repressed urban citizenship for the sake of this peculiar form of civility. What do these three cultural models suggest about cities today in which economic inequalities matter most? Of the three, the model of the Venetian ghetto, by one of history's ironies, is the way the rich increasingly protect themselves against the poor. Every time a gated community is built, a new ghetto comes into existence; every time a prosperous community is ringed by parks, or separated by the impenetrable barriers of a highway, a soft ghetto is created to protect inside. We need to discuss how effective these modern ghettos are in coping with crime; what I wish to emphasise is that, old or new, this form of settlement has given up on civility as a project. It supposes that differences need to be policed. The Berlin model is in a way the most idealistic. It supposes that the traces of near-poverty, like Jewishness, can somehow be hidden or discounted. Lest you think that this is absurd, I would remind you that this was Hannah Arendt's image of a good city, one in which people spoke and dealt with others without reckoning how rich or poor were those they addressed. It is, more ambiguously, the ideal of Islam's power to unify which animates those in many Muslim cities today: a universal culture which discounts material differences. The experience of the Berlin Jews shows the problem here: universal cultures can be repressive. To put this in another context, I'd cite to you the remark of one of Ceausescu's city planners, leading a visiting delegation

from one standardised building complex to the next: “you see how relentlessly modern we are!” Universalism can become a smoke-screen for hiding inequalities, as though they do not matter, which in the case of the mass of poor and near-poor in developing cities they clearly do. Which leaves us with the third, London model, which is indeed, I am afraid to say, the future as matters now stand. Dissociation as a version of civility. Fragmentation as a form of freedom. A social compromise which works against shared citizenship. A helicopter flight over Cairo, Mexico City, or for that matter Los Angeles shows these proposition made into physical reality. Many planning strategies unwittingly lead to this dead-end, as when we try to decrease density by pushing new development outward, rather than gather it inward within the city. Or again, the London model springs to life whenever we locate public services in the geographic centre of a particular community rather than at the edge where that community touches on another of different character. It's a cliché to say that cities are complex social organisms, but complexity is inert if differences do not interact. How streets are laid out, public spaces organised, transportation designed, housing woven into the fabric of the city – all these concrete physical practices make a difference to the sociological experience of urban space. If I could translate the social problem of civility into visual terms, I would say it consists in finding ways to knit the city together without homogenising it. Many of the existing formulas planners use for knitting, such as mixed-use development, fail in actual practice to knit. This project is thus a foray into developing new practices, as much as it aims to share amongst urbanists what we already know. There is one way in which cultural difference cannot be compared to economic inequality. When civility in the city works well, people acquire multiple identities. This was the story of many of New York's Jews, and also more recently of many of the city's Afro-Caribbeans, Koreans and Indians, whose work identities outside the home community have been grafted onto race, religion or ethnicity. When civility fails in the city, identities remain singular rather than compound; someone who can be easily stereotyped is more vulnerable to discrimination than someone with a more complex social identity. Economic ‘civility’ is not a matter of such multiple identification, the bourgeois sentimentally identifying with the poor. Rather, a more worldly recognition that civic indifference – my third model – has up to this point marked giant cities like Sao Paulo or Bombay, and that indifference is an unsustainable condition; these cities will explode, as did European cities in the 19th century under similar economic conditions. What we learn from culture about

economics is perhaps ironic: toleration is not the goal,
rather, active inclusion.

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