

Cities' Collective Mentalities

A Walking Discovery

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In the context of the developing regionalist current warning against the destructive effects of mindless globalization ‘flattening’ the world, Bell and de-Shalit adopt a non-positivist method. Their stories tackling the complexity and holistic “spirit” of cities like Montreal, Paris, Jerusalem, Beijing or Singapore are reminiscent of earlier “strolling” literature.

Reviewed: Daniel A. Bell and Avner de-Shalit, *The Spirit of Cities, Why Identity Matters in a Global Age*, Princeton: New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 352 p., \$35.00.

The Spirit of Cities, Why Identity Matters in a Global Age by Daniel A. Bell and Avner de-Shalit addresses important political philosophy issues and it does this in a very accessible way. Educated at McGill and Oxford, Bell, taught in Singapore and Hong Kong, and is currently a professor at Shanghai Jiaotong University in Shanghai and at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He is a prolific author of books on political theory, dealing with *communitarianism*, human rights, East Asian Politics including China, and Confucianism¹. In his books, Bell has argued that there is a distinct East Asian communitarian way of political and social thinking that goes back to Confucius and his followers, not to Marx and Lenin. Bell maintains that communitarian new Confucianism is neither inferior nor superior to Western liberal democracy, but is simply different. He further asserts that Western liberals have to understand and respect this different view rather than criticize it and in principle oppose it. Bell’s co-author, Anver de-Shalit, studied

¹ Daniel Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (2006), and *China’s New Confucianism* (2008).

at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at Oxford. He is now dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences in the Hebrew University. As a political philosopher de-Shalit focused on the problem of environmental ethics and in 2003 published *Moral and Political Reasoning in Environmental Practice*, co-edited with A. Light.

Studying a City's Distinct Political Values

The idea to write a book together on political values and dominant beliefs as they relate to contemporary cities, what they called 'ethos' or 'spirit' of cities, came to Bell and de-Shalit during a Political Science meeting in 2001, when they were "walking the streets of San Francisco." The ten chapters of the book that is the product of that walk ten years ago are dedicated to one city, each distilled down to a dominant "spirit," something, perhaps, political scientists would have called in the past "habits of the mind" or "collective mentality."

The book does not follow the style of mainstream political science academic publications. Vehemently rejecting the "positivist" academic ways of political and social science papers, the authors chose a hybrid literary genre, a collage of autobiographical recollections in the first person, history snippets, bits and pieces of architectural criticism, improvised interviews with city inhabitants, anecdotes of all kinds, together with straightforward dry political statements and analysis.

The chapters of the book are short and follow one another each focusing on a city. The initial chapter is devoted to Jerusalem the place of birth of de-Shalit the next to Montreal, the place Bell was born and brought up. Predictably, de-Shalit, clearly the author of this chapter, pictures Jerusalem dominated primarily by religion, politics, the conflicts between Christian sects and certainly between Jews and Arabs. There are some fragmented short, post-zionist references to history and Zionism, but the narrative, is driven mainly by personal experiences of the author talking to Holocaust survivors, Orthodox, and ultra-Orthodox Jews as well to Arabs and Christians that highlight the sense of tension between the inhabitants of the 'City of Religion' as de-Shalit calls Jerusalem. Bell writes about Montreal with much more frequent references to history to explain the linguistic conflict between Francophones and Anglophones of

the city which he believes created its characteristic ethos. Similarly Bell identifies the City-State of Singapore with a single dominant theme, 'Nation Building'. However, the content of the chapter is more about the paternalistic politics of the state and its one party system about which the authors do not seem to be as enthusiastic as they are with vibrant Hong Kong which they call 'The City of Materialism'. However, as the chapter ends the main issue relates to the June 4th Tiananmen Square killings and the June 5th vigils, trying to analyze the political attitudes of the city, hardly materialistic in this case. The contents of the chapter on Beijing that follows, 'The City of Political Power' is dedicated even more to politics, contemporary but also to the political ideas of Confucianism, old and new – Bell's specialty. But there are also interesting comments about the National Center of the Performing Arts by the French architect Paul Andreu, a misfit building in the Chinese capital according to a Beijing taxi driver. Like Beijing the chapter of Berlin, mixes autobiographical comments next to vignettes of buildings of the city and memory and political history behind them. The book ends with a grand finale dedicated to New York. As the content of the chapters seems to be variant and freewheeling similarly the connection between chapters appears purposely loose and in the Introduction the authors advised their readers to go through the text without necessarily following the book's sequence.

Stories, Impressions and Vignettes

Bell and de-Shalit are aware that their method could be considered too "impressionistic." But since the book was "not meant (to aim at a) final answer" but give only "plausible results," they dispensed with such criticism. Their ambition, as they state in the introduction of the book, was to tell "a story," a "fiction (almost dreamlike)," made out of many stories, each dedicated to one of the cities they knew, in the hope that their work would "open dialogues about the cities," inviting "other writers" to tell "different... stories." Such a declaration of openness, of course, places great constraints upon the reader's response, allowing only for the acceptance or the rejection of the authors' invitation to tell their own story "mixing the personal and the political about the ethoses of ... cities." Having lectured or taught in almost the same places de-Shalit and Bell have, I caught myself doing just that in my mind as I read *The Spirit of Cities*. And I came up with experiences that consistently differed from theirs.

In the chapter on Singapore, Bell talks about the Singaporean ambassador in Washington interviewing him about his political beliefs before his official appointment at the National University of Singapore. Since I never had such an experience during the many times I have been visiting professor and once Distinguished Professor at the same institution I could not write about it but I could include an account of my two-hour interrogation in Montreal, by a high level security official about my political views when I applied for a teaching position there—my wife being a Montrealer—despite the fact that at that time I was a US permanent resident and a Harvard professor, with no plans to resign. In the Paris chapter, I couldn't write about pocking non-pasteurized cheese, as de Shalit and Bell did, since in my forty years of teaching and researching there, only once, in 1972, did a sympathetic young woman tried to teach me how to identify a mature piece of cheese. By contrast, the fascination with non-pasteurized cheese would certainly have made an appearance in my chapter on New York, since, during the 1970s, my publisher at that time, together with other eminent publishers and entrepreneurs, obsessed with the prohibition of non-pasteurized cheese in the U.S., patronized a clandestine small private airplane that commuted between Paris and New York importing every morning, together with fresh bread, a new shipment of it.

I wonder, however, if the book's real only *raison d'être* was to invite other authors to counter its stories and “tell (other) stories” about the different kind of ‘ethos’ of cities, a process that could continue ad infinitum. The methodological approach that Bell and de Shalit adopt derives from what the post-modernists of the 1970s and 80s saw as the future of political discourse carried out through dialogues instead of positivist authoritarian publications and lectures. Despite the numerous critiques that have pointed out the logical futility and moral weakness of such extreme “everything goes,” relativistic approaches, very few would dispute the important “critical” role “stories” did and do play in history in awakening awareness of oppressive conditions that habits of mind, weakness of character, or conformism are suppressing. “Stories,” while notoriously weak in accuracy and objectivity, can also be powerful in representing the complexity and holistic nature of phenomena such as the “spirit of cities,” something that analytical methods would have a great difficulty of doing.

Bell has experimented in the past with such narrative methods inserting vignettes of autobiographical accounts and imaginary dialogues between quasi-real personae, both non-academic devices for political science, in his traditional academic writings a practice that made his political philosophy texts much more palpable. In this book, the idea of using narrative devices was more ambitious, to produce a story. Their subtitles, however, linking a city to a single notion (Jerusalem is the City of Religion, Singapore of Nation Building, Hong Kong of Materialism, etc.), make the reading a very predictable experience rather than “dreamlike fiction,” and produce a framework that reads like a tourist brochure or Sunday-newspaper travel reports branding cities to appeal to the consumer.

***Flânerie* as a Writing Method**

Equally reductive is the presentation of what they have called the “spirit” of the city introducing explicit, abstract, rational political arguments detached from what Paul Vidal de la Blache called *milieu*, the “geographical personality,” natural or human made, of the city, that contains specific “ways of life” (*genres de vie*). The problem of representing the physical, social, psychological, and political complexity and dynamism of the emerging *genres de vie* of the developing modern city was recognized almost a century ago by a number of authors who found that scientific, “positivist” approaches, already in development at that time, were inadequate. Like Bell and de-Shalit today, they began experimenting with other methods of representation, new narrative devices to study and write about the modern city.

One of the very first experiments was *Le Paysan de Paris* by Louis Aragon in 1926, to be followed, in 1929, by Franz Hessel’s *Ein Flâneur in Berlin*. Both texts used a stroller (*flâneur*), as a device to explore the modern *genres de vie* of the city as a *milieu*. De Shalit and Bell are aware of the idea of strolling but they do not commit themselves to it as a method of inquiry. As Daniel Halévy stated in his 1932 brief autobiographical text, *Pays Parisien*, “*c’est en marchant dans Paris que je fis mes rencontres*” (My walks through Paris are responsible for the encounters I made) and through that obtained political knowledge of the creative and destructive dynamics of modern Paris. In his book Halevy as a young *flâneur*, narrates how he began to grasp Paris as a *pays*, as homeland shared by the inhabitants of Paris as a community. He called Paris a *pays*,

instead of a city in analogy to how peasants that form a particular community refer to a specific geographical parcel they share as “*mon pays*.” However, the reality of the cities around the world is different. In fact, in the same book, an older Halevy still strolling through Paris realized that Paris was not any more a *pays* but many, disconnected ones. His story was written not at the moment modern Paris emerged as a *pays* corresponding to a community, but at the juncture when Paris under the creative-destructive forces of modernization begun to decompose into many, if any, communities which not only did not share a common identity but had no more knowledge of each other. This process of the destruction of the world of *pays*, called *dépaysement* by Bailly, in his recent masterful account of voyages², continues to proliferate with dismal results.

A Regionalist Approach with Limits

Although de-Shalit’s and Bell’s declared intention, in the introduction, was simply to write a “story” without any political agenda, they take a clear political stance in other parts of the book. In the same introduction, the authors declare that their “agenda” is to counter the worry that, “in the age of globalization ... (when) states are becoming more uniform,” cities might “nourish and support particular forms of life that are threatened.” Indeed, the stories assembled in their book demonstrate—albeit idiosyncratically—the particularity of the ethos of each city surviving in a world of states that are dominated by forces of homogenization. The idea that there are two levels, state and city, the one supporting globalization while the other enabling diversity, is certainly very interesting especially in the context of a significant movement today, regionalism, not to be confused with nationalist regionalism and the search for national styles of the past.³ Current regionalism, ecological, cultural, economic, and architectural promotes the awareness of the destructive effects of mindless globalization ‘flattening’ the world, stressing the creative potential of natural and cultural diversity, uniqueness, and particularity.

² Jean-Christophe Bailly *Le Dépaysement, Voyages en France*, Paris, Seuil, 2011. Voir le compte-rendu de l’ouvrage publié dans *La Vie des idées* : Pascal Sévérac, « Mélancolie joyeuse du paysage », 15 février 2012. <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Melancolie-joyeuse-du-paysage.html>

³ Alexander Tzonis, *Architecture of Regionalism in the Age of Globalization, Peaks and Valleys in the Flat World*, Routledge, London, 2011.

However, the authors themselves turn against their own agenda of diversity by passing judgment on the ethos of the cities. Bell, for example, approves of many aspects of Singapore but not its dominant ethos—the one that “sends police to monitor the potted plants of Singaporean residents to ensure that they do not serve as breeding grounds for dengue fever-spreading mosquitoes.” He even states that under certain circumstances he would be very happy to “struggle to improve it.” On the other hand, the authors enthuse about New York and its ethos of “ambition” (in reality they are taken by its pluralism, vitality, and its “civicism,” a term coined by the authors to stand for “the sentiment of urban pride”). This implies that New York is a prototype which can be used to improve Singapore, which means that Singapore will eventually become like New York, in contradiction to the authors’ stated “agenda” of diversity. Unsurprisingly, the book ends with the phrase “God bless New York” and not with “*Vive la différence*.” These fuzzy inconsistencies might be easy to overlook within a mere “story” but a mainstream essay in the much maligned “positivist” tradition may have served the authors better in their pursuit of a real political agenda of “diversity.”

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