

URBAN PROSPECTS

The End of the City?

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So many of the issues confronting the city have been rehearsed so often in the popular press that any reasonably alert citizen can recite them: disinvestment in older cities and the export of capital and jobs to the sunbelt and overseas; suburbanization and the consequent fragmentation of political and fiscal jurisdictions; rising welfare costs and declining tax bases; racial division and gentrification; the reduction of federal social programs at a time when cities have become increasingly dependent upon them; the decline of the manufacturing sector and the rise of the service sector that brings us fast food and fast knowledge. Yet much of the discussion of these issues lacks a full enough historical framework to explain the apparent futility of our efforts at urban improvement. It is the historical and political context of city problems, rather than attempts at technical innovation, that we must concern ourselves with and understand. One approach to such understanding, it seems to me, is to explore the origins of the modern city in America and the pattern of urban politics that grew up with it.

Between the American Revolution and the Civil War, New York City became a metropolis and took its place beside the great cities of Europe. During this brief period the social and physical patterns inherited from the eighteenth century gave way to new ones that established novel forms of social and physical differentiation, transforming the political context of urban life.

The logic of these transformations, though much obscured in the past century, threatens many ideals historically associated with the city. In recent public discussions, however, the dangers have become manifest. A rather grim logic is now displayed, one that denies political and moral meaning to the city. This culmination of American urban thought marks the end of an era of the city that began with the Greek polis and found its most important definition in Aristotle's *Politics*. In current political discourse the city has no legitimate existence prior to or superior to the claims of the market. There is no political justification of the city.

The current thinking is bipartisan. It is apparent in the urban report of the

Presidential Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties, a group appointed by Jimmy Carter. And it is even more sharply defined in the recent urban policy report released by the Department of Housing and Urban Development with Ronald Reagan's approval. Both reports are identified with New Yorkers. The former is known as the McGill Commission Report, after William McGill, former president of Columbia University and chairman of the commission, and the latter report was drafted by former Columbia University professor E.S. Savas. It is symbolic of a momentous loss of urban self-confidence that the strongest articulations of this new antiurbanism come from New York City itself. Witness the recent report by the commission of prominent New Yorkers funded and published by the Twentieth Century Fund, *The Future of New York City*, or read the commentary on New York and cities in general that Roger Starr regularly writes on the editorial page of the *New York Times*, or read the interviews of Felix Rohatyn or his regular articles published in the *New York Review of Books*.

Two themes with a long history seem to culminate in these recent urban prescriptions. The first is the recurring cluster of worry, revulsion, and occasional sympathetic concern for the condition of life among the poorest of the city's residents, for what were once called the "lower orders" and then the "dangerous classes." The phrase "urban crisis" is intended in our time to capture these concerns. But we are, in fact, talking about a *political* crisis. Ever since the American moral imagination first confronted the problem, even the prospective problem, of the urban masses, a politics of justice and participation has rarely been embraced, or even tolerated by Americans. Nearly two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, provided Americans with a language for denying the "mobs of great cities" political standing, reserving that for the independent yeoman. Jefferson sought to protect republicanism through the establishment, particularly with the purchase of Louisiana, of an extensive agrarian republic. He was, moreover, generally hostile to intensive, urban-oriented, hierarchical capitalist development, writing in one of his last letters against the advent of "moneyed incorporations . . . riding and ruling over the plundered ploughman."¹ Today, however, political commentators who have uncritically embraced corporate capitalism rejoice in Jefferson's contempt for the urban lower classes without respecting the context for that contempt. Surely it was this traditional urban worry, for example, that was at work when Irving Kristol, in his inaugural lecture as Luce Professor of Urban Values at New York University, referred to urban populations not as citizens but as mobs. And, as we shall see, this tradition of commentary profoundly shapes the political contours

¹ Jefferson to William Giles, December 26, 1825, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, F.L. Ford, ed. (New York: Putnam's, 1899), 10:356.

of much liberal—or perhaps I should say neoliberal—as well as neoconservative urban thought.

Secondly, the modern American city grew up and took form—physically and politically—during a century in which there was a momentous move to immunize economic decisions in the marketplace from the political realm. As William Pfaff recently observed, Americans in contrast to Europeans are inclined to submit themselves “to the proposition that the market must arbitrate, and that it is scientifically impartial, choosing necessity.”² The market in this remarkable example of reification becomes a public philosophy and a natural law of society all at once. Under such assumptions politics is rendered marginal if not precisely null.

In contemporary discussion of urban economies, of urban growth and decline, we are repeatedly counseled to accept passively the decision of the market, however tragic its local consequences. Choices concerning the use of property, no matter how broad their ramifications for our common life, are assumed to be properly removed from the arena of political discussion and conflict and from moral judgment.

Nowhere is this obfuscation of the notion of a public philosophy and urban political conflict more evident than in the Reagan administration’s National Urban Policy Report of 1982. The first chapter of this report begins with a brief paean to the benefits to be derived by cities from the economic growth to be stimulated by the administration’s “Economic Recovery” program. Then it moves to a section titled “The Evolution of Urban America.” Here the report instructs the reader on the way that cities grow independent of any politics in the public realm. The first sentence sets the philosophical tone for the report: “Urban growth in a free society,” we learn, “is the result of decisions by many individuals, households, and firms, acting independently, to cluster together in particular places.”³ This extraordinary sentence not only equates my individual power with that of General Motors, but it also stresses that in a *free* society, we must each act independently, without any perceived collective purpose or interest. While thus denying any political expression of a public interest (and the conflict implied by such expression), the report assumes that a consensual public exists, somehow beyond these self-interested actors who allegedly include us all, a public that will be satisfied with both its powerlessness and with the substantive policies of an autarchic private sector.

² William Pfaff, “Reflections: Elitists and Egalitarians,” *The New Yorker* (September 28, 1981), p. 123.

³ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The President’s National Urban Policy Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1982), pp. 1–2.

The modern city is distinguished in part by its spatial form. Social historians have for some time now insisted upon the significance of the separation of work and residence, while urban historians have recognized that the spatial separation of the two has given modern form to the city. It is only recently, however, with the publication of *City Trenches* by Ira Katznelson, that the importance of this social and physical transformation for the shaping of political discourse in American cities has been recognized.⁴

Katznelson interprets the separation of work and residence in antebellum American cities as the decisive event in the formation of urban political culture in the United States. He claims that this separation, in conjunction with the comparative acceptance of labor unions by the American state and its willingness to open participation through the vote, accounts for the absence of class language in American politics. While American workers had no difficulty grasping and using the language of class at work and in their unions, they did not carry this language into the life of their residential communities. The political participation of urban workers in the United States was defined in territorial rather than in class terms. The urban political machine rooted itself in the neighborhood, and the stuff of urban politics became ethnic competition over the territorial supply of municipal services. With the advent of the liberal state these services became more consequential, but they remained reactive to the market, and the boundaries of political discourse were reached before one entered the factory and before one discussed patterns of capital investment and income distribution. The legacy of this historical formation severely limits the democratic promise of local politics and community activism in our cities.

Just when these changes in the geography of urban life were emerging and bifurcating the political consciousness of the urban working classes, broader changes in the culture were working toward the limitation of municipal politics and authority. First let me discuss, however briefly, the way in which the urban economy escaped from the realm of politics, and then I will consider the legacy of worry about democracy and the moral order of cities.

Between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, the last vestiges of mercantilism, which had regulated the urban economy of the eighteenth century, were abandoned in favor of a Lockean understanding of the relation of politics to economics. In the eighteenth century, the connection between politics and economics was openly acknowledged in the city. Indeed, the greatest amount of government activity recorded in the minutes of eighteenth-century municipi-

4 New York: Pantheon, 1981.

palities concerned the regulation of the local economy. The general welfare or, more precisely, economic security was legally and morally favored over private market opportunities. Mid-eighteenth-century New Yorkers had little faith in the self-regulating market—or, I might add, in democracy. My point, therefore, is not that affairs were more democratic or communal; they were not. But economic activity was considered to be a legitimate object of political negotiation, whatever the relations of power. In such an essentially mercantilist environment, the right of the city's population to economic security was more important than the protection of the economic ventures of individuals.

Though the ideological roots of change were present a century earlier in the political thought of John Locke and other even earlier English thinkers and its social basis was apparent in the latter half of the eighteenth century, it was not until the nineteenth century that Americans experienced what Karl Polanyi called the "great transformation" in a classic work of that title. There had long been trade and hard bargaining, but the innovation that characterizes modern capitalist economies is the transformation of the market into an autonomous and self-justifying force in society. In the eighteenth century social priorities, expressed through the political structure and moral suasion, shaped the character of economic activity in the city. But in the nineteenth century, economic activity became an autonomous system of market relationships freed of all constraint, practical and moral, beyond itself, save for obvious police powers residual in the state.⁵

The problem, of course, then as now, is that private decision makers in the market when freed of civic values might not act in the best interests of the collectivity. Today we react with great surprise at the casualness with which corporations move plants, depriving one city of many livelihoods, while extracting new and often expensive concessions from another city. But this is precisely what the great transformation was all about. Adam Smith early recognized that the new urban capitalist would be an untrustworthy sort, with little civic commitment. "A very trifling disgust," Smith observed in *The Wealth of Nations*, "will make him remove his capital."⁶

While Smith clearly recognized such actions as acts of volition, the current sense of the market as something above personal or political choice suggests that a law of nature akin to the law of gravity is at work. This mentality underlies the attitude of resignation that usually surrounds discussion of the flight of capital and jobs from older cities.

It supplies, for example, the motif of the urban report of the Presidential

⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar, Rinehart, 1944). On the eighteenth century, see J.E. Crowley, *This Sheba Shelf* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

⁶ *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), p. 359.

Commission for a National Agenda, the so-called McGill Commission.⁷ This report seeks to prepare us for the end of the city—two centuries is apparently the life span of the American city. The authors do not explain how Rome has managed to keep on for more than twenty centuries or Paris more than ten. Perhaps those critical eighteenth-century commentators on America, Robertson and Buffon, were correct after all about the enervating effects of the New World environment.

More directly to the point, the burden of the report is to counsel those of us in older cities that the end of the city is a necessary and just decision of the market. Again and again we are told to recognize forces that are “potent and enduring,” trends that are “persistent and immutable,” and the “long-term inevitability and desirability of this transformation.” Once one enters into the mentality of this report, one comes into contact with a world in which there are actions without responsible actors. Everything is reduced to the crudest form of economic determinism. Such language, of course, is intended to depoliticize fundamental social acts. It is a prescription for political passivity.

Decisions producing structural changes in American society, changes that the authors of the report portray as equal in consequence to the industrial revolution or even the invention of cities, are to be kept beyond the realm of political discussion and remedy. While government intervention in support of such trends is acceptable, a countervailing policy is not. We must not interfere with these decisions ascribed to the market, though we are urged as ethical beings to be prepared to deal humanely with the tragic *consequences* of these unavoidable decisions. Such thinking is usually called realistic. But it is in fact what C. Wright Mills once called “crackpot realism.” It obscures all the relevant questions. Who is making the choices? How and on what grounds can they be encouraged, even required, to choose differently? And, of course, we must ask whether the pattern of decisions produces systematic injustices. The failure to ask these questions is an indication of the degree to which the market is accepted as a science of society, and, indeed, as a legitimating public philosophy. The consequences may be discussed as moral and political problems, but not the acts themselves.

The depoliticization of economic life leaves us with a rather remarkable image of history and society, one characterized by actions without actors. Of course, such a view is not an accurate reading of American economic history. As historians as different as David Noble and Alfred Chandler have shown, the economic structure of the United States is the product of conscious strategy and aggrandizing decisions. It is what Chandler calls the visible hand of corporate management, often assisted by the state, and not the mythical invisible hand of

⁷ President's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties, *Urban America in the Eighties* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980). For a fuller critique of this report, see Thomas Bender, “A Nation of Immigrants to the Sun Belt,” *The Nation*, March 28, 1981, pp. 359–61.

market theorists, that has shaped our economic history.⁸

By making the market the standard of value, without recognizing countervailing democratic political expression of social values, the McGill Commission report reduces and impoverishes urban culture. And it diminishes to the vanishing point the central fact of city life: place. While place does not in itself make social bonds, certainly it is a fundamental dimension of human experience. It often constitutes and prompts the collective memories that make cohesion and culture possible. Seeking to dissociate place and culture, the report urges that the power of government be used to loose the ties that hold individuals together in particular places. The commission responsible for the report clearly fails to grasp that association of place and culture is what cities are all about—symbolically, economically, politically.

The new thinking reflected in the report seeks to deny place as a category of experience or analysis. The social structures, symbolic meanings, and physical forms associated with place have no value. The report urges us to be tough, to throw away “outdated urban structures and functions.” While explaining that cities have been transformed from centers of production to centers of consumption, they turn the city itself into a consumable, something to be discarded casually when it gets old. There is nothing to value in the old. “Public policy,” according to the report, “should seek to loosen the tie between distressed people and distressed places just as a variety of technological developments have loosened the ties between industry and its traditional and urban location.”⁹ People, it seems, are being asked to be as mobile as capital. Marx’s description of the flow of commodities, one of his most passionate and chilling metaphors of capitalist society, is here casually prescribed as the good life. With such perfect mobility space ceases to be a factor in history, and places lose their significance in the organization of individual and group lives. All of this is encapsulated in a slogan about aiding people rather than places, by encouraging residents of old eastern cities to migrate to the new cities of the sunbelt. No doubt the rhetorical intention is to convey human concern, to respect the individual. In fact, of course, the slogan masks the intention to reduce people to the role of movable commodities in a national capital and labor market. And, as in the case of any consumer product, older models of urban life are to be simply thrown away. All must respond to the discipline of the market.

Now I wish to turn to my second theme, the uncomfortable relation between democracy and the city in America. And our discussion returns, as any discussion of cities and democracy in America must, to Thomas Jefferson.

⁸ David Noble, *America by Design* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

⁹ *Urban America in the Eighties*, pp. 36, 62.

If Jefferson was, as Alexis de Tocqueville put it, "the most powerful advocate democracy has ever had,"¹⁰ he was also the American city's most hostile critic. It is common to remark upon the agrarian bias of the founding fathers and of Jefferson in particular. But this does not get us as close to the issue of democracy and the city as we need to be. What we call a bias of Jefferson's generation is in fact a political philosophy and a social ideal. At the core of Jeffersonian political thought was the notion that good citizens live and work in the country rather than in the city. For Jefferson this belief was based upon a political sociology that recognized a fundamental difference between urban and rural economies.

Recall the famous passage in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "Those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine value."¹¹ This passage is environmentalist and for precisely that reason it places moral virtue at the center of American discourse about economic and political life in a form threatening to cities. Jefferson makes his political point clear at the end of the passage: "The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body." Several things here deserve comment. Jefferson's concern is with the nourishment of free and virtuous citizens. He finds them in the countryside, largely because for Jefferson the yeoman farmer symbolized both a general equality of material condition and independence from superior authority. Cities were characterized in Jefferson's mind with gross inequalities of wealth and hierarchies of power. Workers dependent on others for employment could not, Jefferson worried, be free and virtuous citizens. It is important to understand, then, the precise foundation of Jefferson's antiurbanism. It was not the hostility of a provincial. Jefferson, who was an enormously cultivated man and who thrived in Paris, fully appreciated the economic and cultural possibilities of city life, but, to be baldly anachronistic, Lincoln and Citicorp Centers were simply insufficient to redeem a pattern of social organization founded upon hierarchical power and gross inequality in the social condition of citizens.

The well known controversy between Hamilton and Jefferson hinged on such issues, phrased at the time in terms of intensive and extensive development. Hamilton sought to solidify a financial elite in the cities that would be the bulwark of the new government, and his program implied a concentration of wealth and power. Such a policy seemed to Jefferson a prescription for corruption. He praised western expansion precisely because it tended to prevent the concentration of wealth and capital in the eastern cities and served to distribute political power into the hands of the independent yeomanry. In purchasing Louisiana,

¹⁰ *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), 1:280.

¹¹ T.P. Abernathy, ed. (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1964), p. 157.

Thomas Jefferson was convinced that he had preserved essential equality in America—and thus political virtue—to the thousandth generation.

Jefferson was not responding directly to American cities. Remember, more than 90 percent of the population were farmers when Jefferson became president in 1800. He had in mind European cities, and he wanted to avoid their experience. After Jefferson's death, American cities burgeoned, New York City most of all. Cities not only became a central fact of American life, but the simultaneous and integral development of industrial capitalism created an extensive and new pattern of dependent social relations within them. Jefferson's prospective worry seemed to have become a frightening reality.

By 1831, when New York City received a young French aristocrat named Alexis de Tocqueville, the first indications of a modern urban social order were becoming apparent. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville directly discussed the relation of cities to democratic prospects in the United States. Cities clearly frightened him. His generally optimistic interpretation of specifically American democracy faltered when he reflected on the problem of large cities in America. In a chapter titled "Principal Causes Which Tend to Maintain the Democratic Republic in the United States," he added a long footnote:

The United States has no metropolis, but it already contains several very large cities. Philadelphia reckoned 161,000 inhabitants and New York 202,000 in the year 1830. The lower ranks which inhabit these cities constitute a rabble even more formidable than the populace of European towns. They consist of freed blacks, in the first place, who are condemned by the laws and public opinion to a hereditary state of misery and degradation. They also contain a multitude of Europeans who have been driven to the shores of the New World by their misfortunes or their misconduct. . . . As inhabitants of a country where they have no civil rights, they are ready to turn all the passions which agitate the community to their own advantage; thus, within the last few months, serious riots have broken out in Philadelphia and New York. . . . I look upon the size of certain American cities, especially on the nature of their population, as a real danger which threatens the future security of the democratic republics of the New World; and I venture to predict that they will perish from this circumstance, unless the government succeeds in creating an armed force which, while it remains under the control of the majority of the nation, will be independent of the town population and able to repress its excesses.¹²

Surely, here is an expression of the politics of control. The quotation is important in another way as well. It is an index of the fear that the city engendered in

¹² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:299-300.

Tocqueville (and the Whig elite with whom he associated during his visit to America) that in this passage he abandoned one of the central tenets of his explanation of the sustaining virtues of the American democracy. Again and again he remarks that the surest value of democratic institutions, governmental and voluntary, is their role in educating the population in the responsibilities of civic life. Men, he writes, cannot belong to political associations for any length of time

without finding out how order is maintained among a large number of men and by what contrivance they are made to advance, harmoniously and methodically, to the same object. Thus they learn to surrender their own will to that of all the rest and to make their own exertions subordinate to the common impulse, things which it is not less necessary to know in civil than in political associations. Political associations may therefore be considered as large free schools, where all the members of the community go to learn the general theory of associations.¹³

Like Jefferson, he did not trust the city as a political environment. The social and political atmosphere of urban life formed mobs, not citizens. Confronted by the city Jefferson feared, a city in which the conditions of rough equality necessary for democratic government were absent, Tocqueville easily abandoned democratic visions and resorted to ones of force, no doubt out of an awareness that violence was increasingly the only resort of the underclass being formed in the city.

Doubts about urban democracy abounded among New York's elite in the nineteenth century. Former Mayor Philip Hone, for example, recorded in his diary in 1840 his conclusion that "scenes of violence, disorder, and riot have taught us in this city that universal suffrage will not do for large communities." Though it "works better" in the country, he thought democracy hopeless with the city's "heterogeneous mass of vile humanity."¹⁴ Recall, also, that control of the metropolitan police force created in the middle of the century was taken from municipal authorities and placed in state hands precisely to make it less responsive to the democratic ward politics of the largely immigrant city. And throughout its history, New York's municipal charter has required state approval of a variety of municipal actions. At the base of these policies is the assumption by those in power and seeking to retain power that urban democracy is inherently irresponsible and cannot be trusted.

Of course, our urban history has had as well proponents of hope. The answer to Jefferson is intellectually simple, if politically difficult. The inequality that makes urban democracy problematic can be attacked as preparation for economic and political democracy. One of the earliest and most important statements of this hope came from Frederick Law Olmsted, appreciated by New York-

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2:124-125.

¹⁴ *The Diary of Philip Hone*, Allan Nevins, ed. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1927), p. 508.

ers as the designer of Central Park, and nineteenth-century America's most impressive urban theorist. "Our country," he wrote in 1877, "has entered upon a stage of progress in which its welfare is to depend on the convenience, safety, order and economy of life in its great cities. It cannot prosper independently of them; cannot gain in virtue, wisdom, comfort, except as they also advance." Some years earlier, in a private letter encouraging a friend to undertake a career of urban reform in New York City, he had observed: "Government should have in view the encouragement of a democratic condition of society as well as of government."¹⁵

A generation later, Frederick C. Howe, one of the most important of the Progressive urban advocates stated his revision of Jefferson in the title of a book: *The City: The Hope of Democracy*. "To the City," he wrote, "we are to look for a rebirth of democracy." He brought Tocqueville's faith in political experience into the city. He was convinced that expanded political activity in cities would produce an "enlarged public spirit." "The humanizing forces of today," he insisted, "are almost all proceeding from the city. They are creating a new moral sense, a new conception of the obligations of political life."¹⁶

Such advocates of the city were not without effect. They helped lay the foundations of the welfare state. Yet it is fair, I think, to describe the resulting welfare state as the mildest of all forms of the politics of control rather than an example of the politics of justice. The welfare state is compensatory: rather than seriously challenging the sources of inequality, it seeks to ameliorate its worst consequences. It is clear that reservations about urban democracy have never been fully overcome.

The era of big cities coincides with and is, I believe, implicated in a fundamental revision of democratic theory. Modern democratic theory began, as far back as Hobbes in Europe and Jefferson and Adams in the United States, as an attack on certain types of elite power and privilege, seeing elites as the main danger to the well-governed polity. But the age of urban, industrial, and organizational society—and what we must fearfully confess looks like the acceptance of a permanent underclass—there has been a contrary tendency. Democratic theorists, liberals not excepted, have come to believe, in the words of Sheldon Wolin, "that the perpetuation of democracy depends on the ability of the elite to protect the system against the masses."¹⁷ The culmination of this tendency, so far as cit-

15 *Landscape into Cityscape*, Albert Fein, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 52; Charles McLaughlin et al., eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Volume 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 235.

16 Frederick C. Howe, *The City: The Hope of Democracy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), pp. 7, 27-28.

17 Sheldon S. Wolin, foreword to Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. ix.

ies are concerned, is not in the future. It arrived in 1975, with the creation of the Big MAC (the Municipal Acceptance Corporation) and the Emergency Financial Control Board, which have as their missions the discipline of the citizenry of New York.

Whether interest-group pluralism qualifies as genuinely democratic practice is debatable. But even this notion of organized elites competing for influence has been transformed by the developments represented by the Financial Control Board. The task of political or interest-group leadership since its advent has become the imposition of the demands of nonelected public authority on its constituency rather than bringing that constituency's desires into the political process. While pluralism has been viewed as a way of distributing the goodies bestowed by public authority, it today threatens to become an instrument of paternalistic denial for most of us, with the goodies reserved to the narrow elite represented on the boards, as the plans for Westway and the building boom below 96th Street so eloquently testify.

Now one might draw some rather appalling lessons from this development, but Felix Rohatyn, a central figure and the most articulate of the new "reformers" of the city, in fact drew a quite different lesson from the experience. He elevated this disciplining function to a fundamental principle of government. His much discussed plan for a new Reconstruction Finance Corporation to revitalize northeastern cities depends upon the creation of an agency of great power and resources that is, in words Rohatyn published in the presumably liberal *New York Review of Books*, "publicly accountable but is run outside of politics." This board of philosopher-kings, representing banking, business, and labor, would "negotiate . . . stringent concessions" as conditions for providing funds, as MAC did in New York City.¹⁸ The most important result of the fiscal crisis, if the widespread and favorable commentary on Rohatyn's ideas mean anything, is apparently the depoliticization, at least in any recognizably democratic sense, of our city life.

My reading of these two historical legacies suggests that antecedent to and the essential context for the fiscal crisis is a political crisis. This political crisis, which has been endemic and enduring, today takes the form of a fiscal crisis because of a new and undeniable perception of scarcity. Our fundamental civic task under such circumstances is to deal equitably with a situation in which expressed wants exceed available resources. Politics, economics, and moral imperatives are inextricably linked. If the resulting distribution of resources is to have legitimacy, those links must successfully bear public scrutiny. The economist Lester Thurow recently made this point while discussing the national econ-

¹⁸ Felix Rohatyn, "Reconstructing America," *New York Review of Books*, March 5, 1981, pp. 16-20.

omy: "Our society," he writes, "has reached a point where it must start to make explicit equity decisions if it is to advance. . . . If we cannot learn to make, impose, and defend equity decisions, we are not going to solve any of our economic problems."¹⁹ The same is true of our urban problems.

How—in the late twentieth century—can such decisions be morally justified or legitimated but through democracy? Open and responsible democratic politics cannot produce more, but it can, especially in a heterogeneous society, come closest to a sense of the public interest. Although it will not lead to universal satisfaction, it will result in a more equitable, representative, and legitimate public policy.

From the very era of our national embrace of democratic ideology 150 years ago, our democratic practice has fallen short in fundamental, not trivial ways. The physical form of the modern American city has sustained a limitation of the bounds of political discourse that has been motivated by our fear of the masses and by our public denial of classes. We have excluded the means of life from the realm of political discourse. As a result, the political activism we see in our cities is too often merely defensive and negative, obstructing the antisocial acts of the government or business, but not significantly shaping the pattern of capital investment in our cities. Local activism too often produces instead divisive conflict over municipal services rather than larger movements to recapture political control of the urban economy under conditions of democratic participation. My point, then, has been that contemporary activism confronts a historically embedded structure of urban politics that is not easily transcended.

Lest my intentions be misunderstood, I emphasize in conclusion that I have not tried to portray in a nostalgic way a fall from democracy. The eighteenth-century city was not democratic; it was hierarchical and elite dominated. The relevant contrast between it and our own city concerns the comprehensiveness of its nondemocratic politics. Its moral, political, and economic universes of discourse were continuous. This unified discourse, called by historians the "moral economy," was dissolved with the rise of democratic ideologies and procedures in America. As a result, justice, which Aristotle called the "bond of men" in political society, was left as an abstraction, as an independent discourse.

Making justice part of urban political discourse returns us to Jefferson's challenge to the city and its citizen-making capacity. Unless we can sustain a vision and a movement in cities that is sufficiently egalitarian to make democracy possible, we cannot answer Jefferson. And until we do that, we cannot defend the city on democratic grounds. If, as Jefferson, Tocqueville, Olmsted, and others have insisted, urban inequality threatens democracy, we must make that central fact of city life itself a part of our political discourse.

19 Lester Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Society* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 194.