



**What have you learnt from this course about the nature of modern urban experience?**

‘We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology’  
(Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geography*, London: Verso, 1989, p.6)

Modern urban experience exists in a spatial concept called ‘city’. This word is sometimes headed by an adjective like ‘urban’, ‘metropolitan’ or ‘capital’, when it stands alone, however, it also produces the same meaning as ‘urban areas’ distinguished from rural areas, in a modern sense.<sup>1</sup> In the Western civilisation, urban cities come into shapes through the Industrial Revolution during late 18th and early 19th century; industrialised factories in cities create numerous job opportunities which attract thousands and millions of labour and their families to migrate there, such phenomenon are known as urbanisation. At the initiate stage of urbanisation, the organisation of infrastructures and institutions in the city are not well-developed, and since most people are not mentally prepared for this revolutionary social transformation – the unprecedented expansion of cities with the emergence of masses of people and matters, problematic social strata and issues are hence created. Meanwhile, the transformation on the nature of society also brings forward new experiences and perceptions to its inhabitants. This period of adaptation gives birth to the study of urban sociology, its representational scholars and theorists include Ferdinand Tönnies, Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, Friedrich Engels and Max Weber.

City is a cultural text, I will read and analyse 'the nature of modern urban experience' in respect to its impact on individuals' personalities, behaviour and psychology, how these elements are influenced by the shifting of social and individual objectives and power in comparison to the traditional folk-society<sup>2</sup>. Is there freedom and respect for individuality when the individuals need to confront with masses, tackle with their personal goals and social responsibility in everyday life? I will raise some issues we did not come across in the module however are important in the core of every city.

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The change in social structure and practice gives rise to change in people's personality and perceptions. Industrial revolution leads to differentiation among people into two major classes: bourgeoisie and workers, or capitalists and proletariats in Marxist language, each leads an extreme living experiences. Workers are exploited by bourgeoisie who usually are the bosses or managers in factories: they work long hours, in tough conditions and receive low wages; their only affordable homes are in slums. Slums are nightmare for every human, overcrowded with ill-equipped houses, give bad smells, and are a source of poverty, disease, crimes, prostitutes, whatever filth and filthy associations. In such tough conditions and capitalistic climate, the working class strive for better living quality by working harder and even harder, looking for promotions and opportunities; on the one hand, the bourgeoisie do not cease for pleasure, they keep inventing new ideas to compete with other commercial rivals in order to make bigger money. Money and time become secular, to keep up the pace of the city's development, everyone is supposed to have a job. 'Survival of the Fittest'<sup>3</sup> eventually takes a prominent role in people's belief and brings forward fundamental change in human relationships.

Always having a goal and motivation for achievement, perseverance and creativity is in fact some of the best human attributes. In Social Statics (1850) and other works, Spencer

argues that through competition social evolution would automatically produce prosperity and personal liberty unparalleled in human history.<sup>4</sup> Under capitalism with the reinforcement in competition, particular personalities of the urban individual are shaped: capitalistic, blasé, indifferent, and sense of insecurity. In regard to human relationships, modern form of detachment replaces traditional form of attachment - isolation. Tönnie believes some of these particularities are caused by the emphasis on calculation and exchange (industry and commerce); Simmel says the cause is the intensification of stimuli in the rapid-changing society; I think the formation of these particular personalities, is in general related to a practical problem - the lack of space in urban city.

### Calculation and Exchange

The nature of money in modern urban experience can explain partly the capitalistic personality of its people as no one can deny his necessity of money. Money is a social power, when it takes control over people, it does not only make them capitalistic, it may go further and turn them into greedy, lusty men, nevertheless, it gives people power. At this point, Marx's parody is a good illustration: 'The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power...I am stupid, but money is the real mind of all things and how then should its processor be stupid?...Do not I, who thanks to money am capable of all that human heart longs for, possess all human capacities? Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary?'<sup>5</sup>

Money seizes a dominant position in urban experience. According to Tönnie, individuals' demand for commodities is conditioned by their dependence on the Gesellschaft (society), he writes: 'each individual manufacturer of commodities is entirely conditioned by and dependent upon all other manufacturers of commodities, since each individual's share of all other useful goods and also the replacement of his necessary means of production.'<sup>6</sup>

Paper money is a representation of commodity in a sense that these pieces of paper, marked with numbers and symbols, have their value assigned by the Gesellschaft, used for exchange in the Gesellschaft. Tönnie makes another remark: ‘...such money is desired by nobody for the sake of keeping it but by everybody with the view to getting rid of it.’<sup>7</sup> Money is not only essential but a pleasure to have. Furthermore, it brings freedom to its owners by giving them the means ‘to choose how, when, where, and with whom to use money to satisfy their needs, wants and fancies’<sup>8</sup>

The development of chain of production and mass production in industrial revolution also contributes to the consumption culture as well as responsible for the sense of uniformity and calculative minds of urban people. On a superficial level, since goods and commodities come in huge quantity and are put in the market in a systematic yet uniform way (think of the shopping culture in supermarkets), people buy the same goods, wear the same cloths, through the presentation of all kinds of identical artefacts, a sense of uniformity is produced. On a deeper level, the job of a worker in the chain of production is set and standard, in mass production there can be three hundred workers all trained in the same way, and do the same routine jobs, they wear the same uniform, go to the same pub after work., say the same nasty things about their boss – all this sameness naturally encourages uniformity in these individuals’ inner lives. Money economy has been internalised as what Simmel describes: ‘Only money economy has filled the days of so many people with weighing, calculating, with numerical determinations, with a reduction of qualitative values to quantitative ones’<sup>9</sup>, people become calculative and concern more on the quantity of things instead of quality. Look again at supermarkets, the big red signs with bold white font saying ‘buy two get one free’ or ‘3 for 1.99’ are precisely aimed at its shoppers’ psychology.

## Stimuli

'Flâneur' is a term originally coined by 19th century French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, in the Baudelaire's expression, flâneur goes 'botanising on the asphalt'. Flâneur is a common-people-character who can be found strolling on every city street; as well as an observer and a reader of urban life, he is an outsider.

Simmel has been regarded as the first sociologist of emotions and senses, he puts himself in the shoes of a flâneur, attempts to create an impressionistic record of urban people's mental life, and in the end concludes that urban people are blasé and indifferent. From his experience in modern city, he witnesses the bombardment of senses in an almost cinematic fashion: 'The rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. There are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates'<sup>10</sup> This mode of immoderate sensuous life is the cause of people's nonchalant attitude and behaviour, because it stimulates people's psyche to their utmost reactivity until it loses the ability to produce any reaction or is too weak and tired to react. Question: what is the source of this mode of life? To do a close reading on Simmel's impression of urban experience, we can look into 'changing images', 'discontinuity', 'unexpectedness'.

'Changing images' should refer to crowds, televisions, vehicles, machines, elevators and escalators, smoke from factories' chimney etc. 'Discontinuity' can be the fragments of people's conversation one overhears on the street, in café, restaurants or inside the elevator; it can also be the unfinished conversation among people or broken noises from factories and cars on the street. 'Unexpectedness' may mean the new constructions going on during urban revolution, with the advances in technology and invention of pre-fabricated

raw materials, construction is made easy and can be done fast, hence the inhabitants are often surprised at the appearance of new infrastructure or architecture, probably just in front of their doorstep out of the blue. The basic form of all the above-mentioned elements is *image*, organic and mechanical, often in motion. To protect themselves against the threatening inconsistency of their external environment, city men eventually develop an organ – the matter-of-factness. This insensitivity guards the distance between the men and the images and events that would displace them psychologically.

Simmel points out that blasé attitude promotes and enhances intellectual rationality, he says: ‘...stupid people who are not intellectually alive in the first place usually are not exactly blasé’, and regarding the intelligent people (intellectuals), he goes: ‘a life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all’<sup>11</sup>. ‘A life in endless pursuit of pleasure’ may be referring to the life-long pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, which is a natural aptitude of intellectuals. Intellectual distance is perceivable in modern urban space because of the lack of space and the bodily closeness; in this sense, city dwellers are free, independent and open-minded, contrasting with the trivialities and prejudices which often attach people from folk-society.

I do not totally agree with Simmel on the notion that blasé urban people are cleverer than the ‘less-blasé people’ or town folks; human is born with free-will, it is not the privilege of the urban people to have intellectual investigations, they may have an advantage of better technology, access to resources and opportunities to meet like-minded people because of the nature of heterogeneity in the big city population. Nevertheless, it does not mean those ‘less-blasé people’ and town folk are stupid; this representation is too subjective, it is not even a problem with majority and minority or ‘exceptional cases’ but a basic question on Simmel’s own definition of cleverness and intellectuality. Redfield reckons folk-society is

the ideal-type of community, one of its important values/ virtues is 'Kinship, its relations and institutions, is central to all experience, and the family is the unit of action. The value of traditional acts and objects is not to be questioned; hence they are sacred.'<sup>12</sup> Imagine an intellectual urban man who is good at everything but fails to maintain a happy relationship with his family, because he treats his family with the same blasé attitude that he uses to deal with all other things – is he really intelligent then? Imagine an illiterate farmer who loves his children and is loved in return, discovers by himself a new way to grow sweet corn and passionately promotes his ideas in his remote village – is he stupid? On the one hand, it is not fair to say urban people think with their heads not their hearts, I believe there are numerous people who are intellectual and non-blasé, the way Simmel elaborates is indeed stereotyping blasé and non-blasé people, urban and rural inhabitants.

### Space

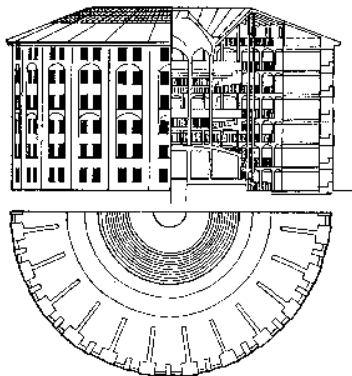
'...this feature was first noticed in the 1840s, the reaction was fear, revulsion and horror...one realises for the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature...the brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space.'<sup>13</sup>

Space is important in a city, and private space is sacred, this fact is the basic reason for people's sense of insecurity and isolation. People have to defend their private space, it does not only mean one's properties like home, it also means *time* which individual can spend alone; time and space are twins, they are different yet inseparable. Isolation, it may be as simple as merely the 120 minutes one has when seeing a film alone or the taxi journey he has from cinema back home alone (provided that the taxi driver is not a

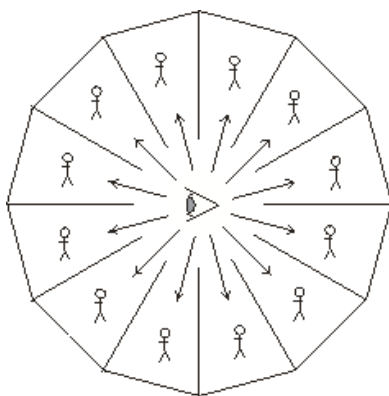
chatterbox); isolation is indispensable to maintain a healthy balance in one's psyche, to neutralise one's life full of the stimuli.

Moving further, people's sense of insecurity and isolation is determined by social power.

Human, architecture and vehicles are all confined to the same area; everything is so intimately connected that the city cannot afford any chaos, neither social-wise or structure-wise. To uphold social order, law is laid down in urban space. Police force is formed in order to impose the law, although the police fundamentally means protection of the inhabitants' lives and properties, it is a form of social power and in some ways, increases the inhabitants' sense of insecurity. Foucault's idea of shifting of social power and self-surveillance can be applied on this paradox.



Foucault's Panopticism is based on 19th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham's architectural model which aims at maximising the visibility of prisoners to their jailers. The 'pan-opticon' means 'all-seeing device'. The jailer at the centre can see all the inmates, but they cannot see each other, or the jailer. Because the prisoners cannot tell at any moment whether they are being observed, they will behave at all times as if they were.



In modern society, the Panopticon serves as a hierarchical observation facilitated by institutions, for example prisons, police, laws, schools, hospitals, sometimes they appear in physical forms like CCTV or photography. Foucault's metaphor for Panopticon is 'the gaze', the basis of self-surveillance in which the individuals observe their own behaviour, a cost-effective method that permits power to be exercised *naturally*. '...you have the system of surveillance, which on the contrary involves very little expense. There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze

which each individual under its weight will end by interiorisation to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be minimal cost.<sup>14</sup> Under such conception, people see each other or see themselves being observed 24 hours a day, as potential destructive students at school, as thieves or rapists on the narrow dark street where CCTVs are installed etc., both in a physical and abstract sense. How then can they be relaxed if the city is full of potential dangers and criminals? When they may not trust themselves? 'The gaze' is indeed an applied imaginary tool that gathers all possibility and potential of anti-social behaviour; it is an ideology of self-surveillance.

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Experience in a modern urban city has various representations, through the analysis I have carried out on the psychological aspect of the urban people, I realised many of the representations and misrepresentations are negative and sometimes stereotyped. To conclude my essay, I will bring out certain points on the positive side of the city's nature.

In city, personal development is possible as one is not bond to his family like what people are in small folk-society, in addition, the technological convenience allows mobility that assists one's ambition by making time more efficiently-used. Possibility in the pursuit of freedom is evident, and freedom can be 'stretched' far, only it may be associated with capitalistic matters. Diversity of people and happenings in cities are not all passive, disintegration of social structures and forces during the industrial revolution indeed generates new forms of integration and affirmation. Conditions in the cities allow ever increasing opportunities for contact with wider groups of people, and for the spread of ideas. Together these circumstances are favourable to the development of a rich and varied urban culture, even if the living experience in a city is unpleasant, modern culture depends upon it, and is inconceivable without it.

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- <sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1976), p.55
- <sup>2</sup> Folk-urban typology is a well-known study of sociologist Robert Redfield, he describes folk-society as the ideal-type version of community, it is 'a small collectivity containing no more people within it than can know each other well' and is polar opposite of urban society in every way.  
Ferdinand Tönnie, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Charles. P. Looms. (trans. and ed.) (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p.15-16
- <sup>3</sup> A phrase coined by sociologist Herbert Spencer partly to support naturalist and geologist Charles Darwin's claim in *The Descent of Man* (1871) that both human beings and animals go through a process of 'natural selection' in order to survive.
- <sup>4</sup> Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia Deluxe. (2004), *Article on Herbert Spencer* [CD-ROM]. Microsoft Corporation.
- <sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), p.167.
- <sup>6</sup> Tönnie, *op.cit.*, p.69-70
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.70
- <sup>8</sup> David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.168
- <sup>9</sup> Georg Simmel(1905), *The Metropolis and Mental Life* in Richard Sennett (ed.), *Class Essays on the Culture of Cities* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p.50
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid* p.48
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.51
- <sup>12</sup> Tönnie, *op.cit.*, p15-16
- <sup>13</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (London: Allen and Unwin,1845), p.306-307
- <sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault (1975), *The Eye of Power* C. Gordon (ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), p.147

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