
The Uprooting of American Order

Jeff Polet

In story, man goes into the wilderness, where his savage nature is given free rein. He eats his meat uncooked, drinks directly from streams, is by turns rapacious and murderous. He is isolated, removed from the civilizing influences of communal life. For the Puritans, the wilderness marked God’s absence; it was the place of punishment, but also the place of purification. If it wasn’t exactly an earthly hell, it was at least an earthly purgatory.

In his classic essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner compares the map of America to a “series of glaciations,” each age leaving behind its sedimentary traces—in this instance, one of regressive civilization. The frontier, he says, is “the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” which marked a “return to primitive conditions.” Shifting our eyes from west to east over the American continent, we saw the trace of civilization itself: from lawlessness, to the hunter, to the disintegration of savagery by the trader, to the untutored pastoral of the rancher, to the raising of unrotated crops, to the “denser

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culture of the farm settlement,” to the processors and the manufacturers of the Ohio valley, and finally into the cities of the east. The American frontier, he argued, traces in reverse the movement of humans into cities.

Our language reflects this movement. Civilization is derived from civitas, the city. The wilderness is the realm of the barbarian, red in tooth and claw, marked by savage cruelty. The city is the place where we become cultured, refined, and educated. The wilderness is the place of disorder and reinforces the sense of danger and terror that emanates from disordered souls. But the city is the realm of order. It is where human beings fashion, with intelligence and wit and mutual support, a public life that tames our animal natures. It transforms us from little more than beasts to creatures little lower than angels.

In the first chapter of The Roots of American Order, Russell Kirk asserts the preeminence of the human need for order. On the edge of human affairs, on the margins of human striving, lies the “gaping void”—chaos—“that always threatens to swallow us whole.” Keeping ourselves away from it is life. Getting nearer to it is death. These forces of order and chaos are at war within and without ourselves, for “the want of order is the mother of confusion.” We can’t avoid the pull of chaos alone. We need the strength of others to resist with us. The city encircles and protects us. Through mutual striving to stem off chaos, human beings create the conditions and the elements of good order.

It is upon the forces of chaos that the spirit of God moves in Genesis 1. The primeval emptiness, the tohu wabohu, is transformed by divine speech, and order emerges. The narrative arc of sacred writ connects human creativity to God’s own. Placed in a garden, we end in a city. The wilderness is barren of life. The city is the place of order because it is the place where human beings become most godlike in their creative ventures, procreation foremost among them.

When Kirk discusses the nature of American order, he identifies cities as the proper sources. The American civic project was just that: an attempt to form order as a continuation of the cities of the past. Roots focuses on five cities: Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, and—as their American successor—Philadelphia. Part of America’s genius has been its selective appropriation of the best of what came before it. That itself is a source of stability. This is why, as Kirk claims, it was the English Parliament, and particularly the king, who were the true revolutionaries, while the American action was “a revolution not made, but prevented.”

In the wilderness there is no order, but neither is there, properly speaking, liberty. The wild man may seem free in that he does what he lists, but that is not liberty directed at anything other than a satisfaction of immediate desires. The world within mirrors the world without: it is desolate, untamed, arid. Without an ordering principle to our liberties, they soon become bestial. We may be born free and equal, but that moment must be part of the larger narrative of growth, differentiation, and development that concludes in our death. Whatever else our freedom is, it involves purposeful human action as it traverses the passage from birth to death with a goal of dying well.

The Philadelphians recognized that this meant liberty properly belonged to the civilized person, the dweller in the cities both eternal and temporal, who recognized the particularity of this life within a larger story and a larger moral order. But the city itself is no guarantee of order. Milton names the city of Pandemonium as the capital of hell, noting its immense size and identifying it as a “meeting center.” Its architect, Mulciber, was famous for building things on a grand scale. It is where, according to Milton, the forces of Chaos gather to plot their overthrow of heaven. No celestial city, it is the grand city of the dark underworld that stands as the
antipode to good order. As a city, it is the dwelling place of tyrants.

So a city can be a place of both order and disorder. Where barbarism makes itself present in the city, it does so with the cunning of the demons in Milton’s lost paradise. A city may look grand and attractive on the outside but can be inwardly rotten and corrupt. Tocqueville took the absence of such cities to be a blessing to American democracy. But what if, he asked, there should ever develop within America “subterrrestrial” (or “unheavenly”) cities. Could American democracy survive this?

He seriously doubted it. And in the 170 years separating us from Tocqueville, we’ve seen the emergence of such hellish cities, where the agents of chaos plot to destroy human liberty and the formation of healthy communities. If we were going to contrast Kirk’s five cities with five anti-cities, five agents of tyranny and chaos, which would these be?

Let me suggest five cities analogous to the five Kirk proffers.

First, Paris, in keeping with Kirk’s contrasting of the French and American revolutions. Kirk takes his cue from Edmund Burke’s observation that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was a revolution not made but prevented. The Paris revolutionaries, in contrast to the Americans, saw the act of revolution as destructive: you had to burn down the city first before you could build on the ruins. The American revolutionaries were trying to preserve English constitutionalism and the common law from the usurpations of the king. The French thought throne and altar were illegitimate in themselves and had to be toppled.

The Americans operated within the context of a civilization that had been built over time, respectful of the efforts of their forebears. They saw how civilization had been carved out of the wilderness and how tenuous it was. They recognized what they were doing as the best possible thing for them to do at that time in that place—not a universal template. The French operated under the illusion of abstract principles. They would remake the world according to the images
provided by their imaginations, which alone, they thought, had the weight of reality. They had no appreciation for historical continuity and contingency, for the achievements of the past or obligations to the future. The terror they unleashed resulted from their unwillingness to learn the hard lessons about human desire and from their unyielding belief that all who preceded them were imprisoned by their own prejudices, while the revolutionaries alone were enlightened.

City number two is Brussels, the contemporary representation of cosmopolitan longings. This dream is predicated on the conviction that particularity and historical contingency can never aspire to universality, nor can they be anything other than a source of conflict and strife. One of the first cities we read about in the Hebrew scriptures, Babel, came from the same impulse. Humans have it within their power to build an edifice of such magnitude that they can attain heaven. The outcome then, as now, led to fracturing when such expectations were dashed. We are scattered, and because we have been taught to despise our places and particularities, we find ourselves even more lost than before.

Spengler, in his *Decline of the West*, argued that the decline phase of civilization reaches its nadir with the emergence of political Caesarism, the cash nexus in economics, and the appearance of large and powerful cities. Prior to and into the constitutional era, Americans took up the standing English conflict between the “court” and the “country” parties: this conflict emerged when power began to crystallize around the king, drawing rent seekers and would-be power brokers. The growth in royal offices required ever more siphoning of resources from the country, whose denizens rebelled against the appropriation of their wealth. The productive wealth they created that added to the public weal was extracted by officers who produced nothing. The shift to monetary transactions was the key to the process.

Thus it should not surprise us that the cosmopolitan dreamers of Brussels believed that currency was the key to establishing an order that would keep war from ever disturbing Europe again. The historical experience of Europe was sufficiently distressing to stimulate such hopes. After all, the whole modern history of Europe is largely a history of wars, each worse than the one before. But the European Union operates on the assumption that political problems are at bottom economic problems and that culture doesn’t really matter. Indeed, the beauty of money is precisely its abstract, ahistorical character—it can transcend cultural issues.

Speaking of money, the third anti-city I want to mention is New York, specifically Wall Street. Aristotle opens his *Politics* by arguing that the household is the birthplace of political life and the nursery of citizens. There he distinguishes between economics proper, *oikonomia*—household management and the generation of productive wealth—and *chrematistics*, the science of wealth that is skimmed off the activities of others, often through speculation or usury. Throughout medieval Christendom, *chrematistics* was considered a violation of natural and divine law. Restrictions derived from that belief necessarily limited trade, and thus growth, but what growth that occurred was healthy and natural.

In the past forty years, America has transformed itself from a productive economy into a financial one. The financial sector has become an ever increasing share of our total economic activity, and manufacturing less so. Aristotle’s distinction between *oikonomia* and *chrematistics* was largely based on the goodness of labor, which Kirk identifies as a bedrock principle of the American experiment, along with ideas of piety and fate, that we inherited from Rome. But we have devalued labor. Our educational systems are largely designed to ensure we will no longer
have people who can make things, fix things, do things, or grow things. Productive labor is good, Aristotle argued, because of the intimate relation between the actions performed and the goods produced. It maintains the bond between nature and human nature. Chrematistics disrupts the inherent connectedness of means and ends within human practice.

The economic collapse of ten years ago was fundamentally a financial collapse, as the shuffling of credit default swaps, hedging, insurance against hedging, disastrous asset-to-debt ratios, ratings agencies with an inherent conflict of interest, and the moral hazard created by government underwriting produced a bubble so large its deflation was felt across the world. In the wake of the 2008 crisis, Wall Street has responded by reinflating the bubble to even larger proportions. Wall Street, which suffered no criminal prosecutions for its conduct, is more powerful than ever. Prior to 2008 the six largest banks controlled 53 percent of capital investment assets. That number is now nearly 65 percent.

Of course, the banks could not have accomplished this without the accommodations provided by our fourth anti-city, Washington, D.C. Not only did the federal government not prosecute anyone involved in the financial collapse, it doubled down on the policies that led to the collapse in the first place. The Dodd-Frank reforms did nothing to simplify the system or to establish a balance that would benefit smaller banks and asset holders. The reform legislation's complicated system of regulation and reporting virtually ensured that Wall Street would be more powerful in its wake.

Tocqueville noted that a saving grace that helped maintain American democracy was the absence of a strong capital city (D.C. being a backwater at the time). The emergence of Washington as a major city has brought with it the predictable results. In Coming Apart, Charles Murray argued that America was facing a chronic problem of geographical separation that was both creating and exacerbating political divisions. He identified D.C. as an especially cocooned location, for seven of the twelve richest zip codes—“super zips”—were located in its metropolitan area. Power attracts money, and the combination attracts a particular type of person.

A powerful capital city contributes to inequality by drawing to itself those jostling for advantage and intensifies our tendency toward self-interest. This can be especially pernicious if individuals deny the natural mendacity of human beings, dressing up their own interests in the language of benevolence. Any political theory worth its salt has to account for the tendency of human beings not only to deceive others but most especially to deceive themselves. Torn away from local relationships of duty and accountability, draping themselves in the language of rights and “doing good,” the denizens of the capital soon begin to assume they have not only the right but the obligation to dictate to those in the countryside how they ought to live. They become insulated in power, convinced of their right to rule and to create grand schemes—all for the betterment of mankind, even if real, particular human beings are not asked if that is what they want.

Government becomes less representative and more managerial. “People who try to run a mass industrial society with a mixed and fluid population find it easiest to understand their task in accordance with a general scheme that emphasizes equality, technological rationality, and maximum preference satisfaction,” James Kalb wrote in a 2013 essay for Modern Age. Public life, Kalb argues, is not only freed from religion but also from nature and history. “Liberal modernity tries to turn the world into a machine for manufacturing satisfactions, but people are not satisfied. Most of us would be happier in the world of nature and tradition than in
the antiworld our betters have constructed, just as most of us would be happier in a traditional house than a dwelling unit designed by a cutting-edge architect.”

Which brings us to our fifth anti-city, and the most inhuman and anti-human of them all, the one that possesses all the vices of the others with none of their virtues: Silicon Valley.

Silicon Valley has dedicated itself to the quick buck, to novelty, to constant stimulation and growth, and to the destruction of the relationship between past and future. Its fundamental modes of operation—innovation and piracy—have no aim other than a constant burrowing deeper into people’s lives and minds. Its aim, if it has one, is to turn us into cyborgs, appendages to the gadgets it creates.

Could anyone in Silicon Valley write sensibly about love, about death, about the need for face-to-face communication, or about the rhythms of nature? The answer is decidedly no, and the evidence is in part displayed in an utter hostility to the parameters of existence. In their quest to bypass death, the Siliconians have denied all limits to human being and knowing. All wisdom begins in knowing the limits of our human-ness. But the Siliconian revolt is a pressing beyond all limits, and thus a pressing beyond wisdom and beyond that which makes us most human. The transhumanist movement, which believes that consciousness is but a series of algorithms that can be downloaded, is an anti-humanist movement precisely because it seeks to negate the fact that we are embodied creatures, part of the physical world, to which we have obligations and from which we draw our sustenance.

Silicon Valley spreads its poison by convincing us we need to inhale it. We come to believe we can’t exist without the toxins it produces. We wouldn’t know how to navigate our world, both literally and figuratively, without its intoxicating gadgets. We become helplessly and hopelessly dependent creatures, beneath our natural dignity. This dependency does not become the basis for the formation of healthy communities; instead it isolates and alienates us. The more isolated and alienated, the less human. The perniciousness of the vision can be found in its organizing principle of unlimited growth. It is hard to think of a city that uncivilizes human beings more than does Silicon Valley.

Those who would hew too close to the roots, Kirk argues, do not know the damage they are doing. The leaves begin to wither and die, the branches become brittle, we are provided no canopy for our lives, and the tree yields to the wilderness. A tree that looks outwardly healthy but is inwardly rotten will cause great damage when it comes down, as it must, usually on households that least suspect it. We need to attend to the roots, and that means in part protecting them from those who hack at them. But that requires a kind of study and prudential action that the Siliconians make less likely. What makes Silicon Valley so dangerous is that it not only distracts us from the task but also attenuates our capacity to recognize the need for such tending. After all, roots are unseen and ancient. “Here, behold that which is new and visible and think of naught else.”

Kirk constantly reminded us that “culture” and “horticulture” and “agriculture” all share in one another’s meanings. When the city separates us from the land, it divides us from ourselves. The importance of The Roots of American Order lies in the claim that there are such things as roots, and they need tending. We may be members of a city, but we are gardeners first. It was in a garden, after all, that we were initially placed. While the biblical narrative ends in a heavenly city, in the interim the earthly city is often a place of captivity, and thus the enemy of freedom.