

Fear and uncertainty: life in modern cities

Carlo Colloca

National Secretary of the Scientific Council of the Section of Sociology of the Territory of the Italian Association of Sociology (AIS).

- Responsible for the University of Catania in the ERASMUS Programme 2014-2021 with the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) of Madrid.

- Member of the PhD in Political Science Board in University of Catania.

Prof. of Urban and Rural Sociology Dept. of Political and Social Sciences University of Catania

The article discusses the phenomenon of industrialization, which led to profound changes in the structure of the material modern city

Key words: urban development, industrial revolution, «urban fear», urban conflict, social divisions.

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1. *The long march towards modern urban migration*

The Greek *pólis* and the urban development related to Roman imperialism marked an indissoluble bond between social community and urban shape. The Greek city-state was an independent political entity, which had its own laws and institutions, as well as a defined and stable geographic area comprising the urban area along with the rural territory, the outskirts, and the suburban sanctuaries. The *agorá*/sanctuary binomy in the *pólis* reflected the bond between political and cultural relations, and defined the territory through a sacred element (Bearzot 2009). The city of Rome also identified itself with the State, and the Forum represented the materialisation of a communal place where the people made laws, chose leaders, finalised peace treaties and formed alliances; they also gathered in temples to venerate common divinities, as a symbol of spiritual unity and social cohesion. In *I doveri* (*De officiis*), Cicerone broke society down into concentric rings and placed the city as an intermediate ring between family and the State, as if it were a social structure of integration¹. The cities of the Roman Empire were the *civitates* gravitating around the *Urbs*; they were the cells of an immense territorial fabric, the capillary network of the administrative and military organisation of the Roman State (Cracco Ruggini 1987, 128). In wider terms, the antique city revolved around three elements that defined its activities and role. First of all, there was a sacred element, a symbol of the protection of the

¹ Translated by Anna Resta Barrile, Rizzoli, Milano, 1987.

gods, who then demanded that the community pay its dues. The second one was a military element, which was representative of the sovereignty exercised over the city, but also over distant territories, such as colonies or provinces of the Empire. Lastly, the market, where urban economy developed, and which became the symbol of democracy. Between 1857 and 1858, in *Grundrisse (Outline of the Critique of Political Economy)*, Karl Marx stated that “the history of classical antiquity is the history of cities, but on cities based on land ownership and agriculture; Asian history is a kind of undifferentiated unity of town and countryside [...]; the Middle Ages (Germanic period) starts with the countryside as the locus of history, whose further development then proceeds through the opposition of town and country” (Marx 1968-1970 [1953], 105). Marx believed that the purpose of the antique city was, in any case, that of forging a better citizen who devoted himself to collective goals, functional to the maintenance of the community. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, many urban centres in Western Europe experienced critical conditions due to the decline of social, economical and political institutions, whereas other cities in the North of Africa and Middle East were flourishing, i.e. the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, which had 450,000 inhabitants.

The restoration of European urban fabric can be traced to the Middle Ages (XI century), with the rise of city-states which assumed various shapes and modalities. City-states spread mainly throughout Italy, but also in the Iberian peninsula, in central-southern Germany and in the Flanders (table 1).

Tab. 1- *The biggest European cities between the year 1000 and 1900 per number of inhabitants (in thousands).*

1000		1200		1400		1600		1700		1800		1900	
City	Pop.	City	Pop.	City	Pop.	City	Pop.	City	Pop.	City	Pop.	City	Pop.
Cordov	150	Palermo	150	Parigi	275	Parigi	225	Londra	550	Londra	948	Londra	6.480
Palermo	120	Parigi	110	Bruges	125	Napoli	125	Parigi	530	Parigi	550	Parigi	3.330
Siviglia	90	Siviglia	80	Milan	125	Milan	100	Napoli	207	Napoli	430	Berlino	2.424
Salerno	50	Venezia	70	Venezia	110	Venezia	100	Lisbona	188	Vienna	247	Vienna	1.662
Venezia	45	Cordoba	60	Genova	100	Granada	70	Amsterdam	172	Amsterdam	217	Pietroburgo	1.439
Ratisbona	40	Firenze	60	Granada	100	Praga	70	Roma	149	Dublinko	200	Manchester	1.255
Toledo	37	Granada	60	Firenze	95	Lisbona	65	Venezia	144	Lisbona	195	Birmingham	1.248
Barbasco	35	Colonia	50	Praga	95	Tours	60	Mosca	130	Berlino	172	Mosca	1.120
Cartage	35	León	40	Gand	70	Ghent	55	Milano	124	Madrid	168	Glasgow	1.072

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Roma	35	Ypres	40	Sivigli	70	Genov	50	Palerm	100	Roma	153	Liverpod	940

Source: adaptation of data produced by Hohenberg and Less (1987 [1985]), Gottdiener and Hutchison (2005).

The biggest European city in the year 1000 was Cordova, seat of the caliphate, followed by Palermo which, during the Arab and Norman domination, was one of the most densely populated European centres. In 1400, Paris, which had begun its expansion two centuries earlier, became the capital of a rising state; its history is inextricably interwoven with the history of France. Free city-states also expanded, developing the mercantile capitalism of which Max Weber spoke: Bruges, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Venice and, further East, an urban development of Prague was also registered.

In the 1600s, Paris and London were the biggest European cities, whilst Naples, which in the 1500s had almost 125,000 inhabitants, more than doubled its population, thus becoming the Italian city with the highest density. This phenomena continued in the three above-mentioned cities in the 1700s, and exploded in the 1800s due to the industrial revolution. An increase in urbanisation also affected North-Eastern Europe, including Amsterdam and Moscow. In the 1900s, London had almost reached six and a half million inhabitants, thus becoming the symbol of accomplishment of a modern urban-industrial society. It was soon followed by Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and St Petersburg, big capital cities that concentrated the political power of national states. Urban centres such as Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, and Liverpool were turned into industrial cities by big industry and new technologies. These cities had economic power, services and an increasing and increasingly heterogeneous population, as a result of migrating fluxes from the countryside and small towns. However, the cities were not ready to host so many labourers, who lived in inhuman conditions in the outskirts of the old part of the city. This is what happened in Manchester, where the whole process sprung from a small built-up area, which at the beginning of the XVIII century had eight thousand inhabitants, 75,000 one hundred years later, and almost 400,000 half way through the XVIII century. The development of Manchester was similar to the majority of European cities undergoing analogous industrialisation processes. It took place in concentric bands with a progressive expansion of the suburbs, where the workers' housing and the factories were located.

2. Social foundations of uncertainty

We cannot separate the industrial revolution from the new "urban revolution" that had already begun by the middle of XVIII century. Wool businessman Samuel Hill from Yorkshire, for example, hired 1,500 workers between 1740 and 1750. They were mainly domestic workers who moved to centralised structures, thus revolutionising the production system, which then became based on manufacturing which corresponded to a salary. Numerous capitalist enterprises developed in the same way. The location of the workplaces was quite some distance from the waged workers' homes, and this eventually led to an

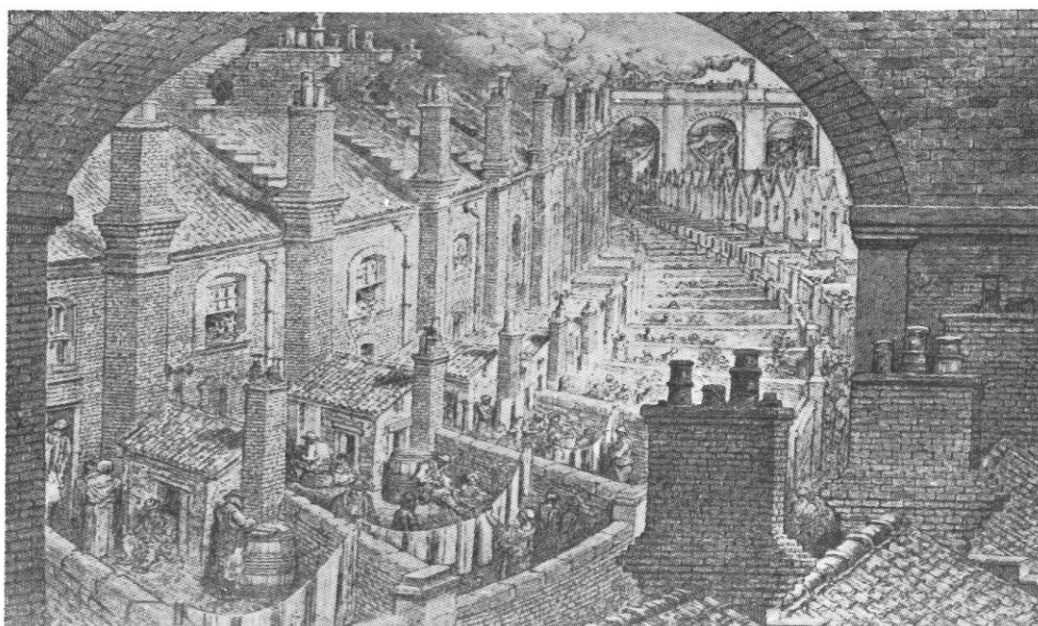
unprecedented concentration of individuals in the cities, with implications on the composition and functioning of families. The latter gradually became a specialised unit whose purpose was consumption (Mokyr 2002 [1993], 169). According to Werner Sombart, the rapid demographic growth, which took place in a number of cities between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, gave life to a new type of city with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants. Between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, cities exceeded a million people, leading to a rise of metropolises (Cacciari 1973). Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, some capital cities carried out important urban innovations: Baron Haussmann's renovation of Paris to widen Louis XIV's *grands boulevards*; the development of Vienna's Ring, which is one of the most successful examples of "recycling" spaces which are no longer used due to modified urban functions (in particular military defence no longer being a priority); the rise of the first *garden-city* in Letchworth, fifty kilometres from London. The great adventure brought about by the use of coal, steam machines and steel revolutionises cities. Cumbersome and noisy factories soon multiplied; railways shortened distances, favouring commerce and leading to a massive influx of an anonymous, rootless population to the cities. In his historical reconstruction of the origins of the bourgeois age, Eric J. Hobsbawm reminds us that talking about cities in the middle of the XIX century means talking about "overcrowded" environments and "slums", and "the more rapidly the city grew [...], the more crammed it became" (Hobsbawm 2010 [1975], 259). The poorest – which were also the majority – had to spend the night in a place close to the factory in order to commute at an affordable cost (Toynbee 1972 [1970], 216). In the middle of the nineteenth century, every big city, mainly in England, built what Friedrich Engels called "ugly quarters"² where the industrial working class was crammed, concealed by "hypocritical city planning"³ in an attempt to hide reality, so as to not *offend* the bourgeois morality⁴. The working class lived in the "worst houses and the worst area in town". Crammed along unpaved roads, these houses, which had no more than four rooms including a kitchen, were surrounded by rubbish and sewage pipes - there was no sewage system. The houses were cramped and the courtyards and streets surrounding them were very narrow. The structure of the neighbourhood even affected air circulation. When the weather was good, the streets functioned as a clothes horses with ropes connecting the houses, and laundry hanging out to dry. St. Giles in London well exemplified the conditions workers lived in at the time. "Here live the poorest of the poor, the worst paid workers with thieves and the victims of prostitution indiscriminately huddled together, the majority Irish, or of Irish

² Friedrich Engels was 22 years old when he stayed in Manchester hosted by a cotton firm where his father was a business associate. Between winter 1842 and summer 1844, he came into contact with the workers' world and Irish immigrants. He was also in contact with socialist leaders and fascinated by the proletariat's cause. When he returned to his hometown, Barmen, he wrote *The condition of the working class in England* between 1844 and 1845, making use of documentation and participant observation.

³ Engels was referring to Manchester – but this description could have referred to all big industrialised cities – where the commercial quarter, mainly made up of offices and storehouses, is full of shops that hide the misery of the nearby labourers' quarter. The shops, Engels writes "suffice to conceal from the eyes of the wealthy men and women of strong stomach and weak nerves the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth" (Engels 2011 [1845], 111).

extraction, and those who have not yet sunk in the whirlpool of moral ruin which surrounds them, sinking daily deeper, losing daily more and more of their power to resist the demoralising influence of want, filth, and evil surroundings” (Engels 2011 [1845], 88-90). In *The German ideology* (1846) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx also discussed the dehumanising conditions that the proletariat of industrial cities was forced to live in, but, at the same time, Marx focused on the building of awareness of their degrading living and working conditions. This consciousness raising was favoured by the social and morphological features of the city. The proletarianization process developed in the places where the bourgeoisie believed they had subdued labouring masses, that is in factories and slums. In fact, as Marx pointed out, in these places there was a physical proximity which allowed workers to share their *status*; the proletariat’s political action sprung from this process of socialisation. It was the city that allowed the proletariat to develop from “class in itself” to “class for itself”, from a static aggregate to the protagonist of a revolution (Cavalli 1970, 29-33). Marx and Engels’ city is the one we see in Gustave Doré’s drawings (figure 1).

Fig. 1 – *Gustave Doré. View of the London slums* (1872).



More in general, the industrial city is vividly described in Charles Dickens’ social novels, with a plot which is constructed around everyday life in industrial cities, where living means fighting for survival. Coketown in *Hard Times* (1854) was an example of Dickens’ city, with “malodorous dies” and “winding fumes” uninterruptedly coming from its chimneys; a city where the population was forced into monotonous and physically demanding jobs. A city producing misery, loneliness and crime outlined the background to Edgar Allan Poe’s gloomy and

anguished stories; but we also find it in Robert Louis Stevenson's work, as a background to Mr Hyde's despicable and furtive actions, taking place in *sin city*, which Doctor Jekyll apparently did not know about. And we must also mention the works of Victor Hugo, Fëdor Dostoevskij, Émile Zola, and George Robert Gissing, who used literature to reveal unknown aspects of life in the second half of the nineteenth century, and to explore the obscure side of big industrialised cities. Robert Park – a central figure in the development of studies on American metropolises – claims that at the end of the 1930s, social sciences “owe a great debt to novelists for their insight into contemporary life” (Park, Burgess, McKenzie 1999 [1938], 7).

3. *Urban inequalities*

Urban inequalities do not only fascinate scholars and artists, but they were also taken into consideration by the first social researchers who collected and classified “social facts”, i.e. Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882) and Charles Booth (1840-1916). Frédéric Le Play had a key role in the development of sociological research, as he started the tradition of social surveys (Orsini 1984). He wrote a collection of monographs on working class families throughout Europe in the nineteenth century – *Les Ouvriers européens* (1878-1879) – where he combined deep descriptive insight into their lives with a comparative approach (Bagnasco 2007, 25). Le Play's attention to detail is noticeable in his scrupulous reconstruction of life conditions, as in his description of *Bernard D.* – “a temporary worker paid on a daily basis” (Le Play in Martinelli 2004, 115) – and his numerous family's house in the Parisian suburb of Saint-Martin. Between July and August 1860, Le Play gathered information on the job, piecing together the householder's biography, civil state, occupation, means of support, sanitary conditions, features of the house where *Bernard D.* lived with his family, diet, moral customs and free time. The conclusion of Le Play's survey – which could also be applied to other working class families crammed in European cities at the time – was that, at the end of the eighteenth century, France had already become the “reign of the unstable family” (*ivi*, 132). This was due to profound social disorganisation; families in urban industrialising areas “lived in misery and isolation among huge crowds” (*ibidem*), because of the dissolution of the social relations which were typical of the preindustrial society. This social unease was enhanced by a lack of moral rules causing a state of “anomy”, which also led some people to extreme actions such as suicide. As Émile Durkheim (1992 [1897]) pointed out, after having carried out an accurate analysis of statistical data, the modern city hosted progress and industrial development, but an intense “suicidal current” also flowed about cities. The latter was due to a disproportion between the individual's ambitions and the concrete possibility of achieving them. Charles Booth also carried out extensive research on the matter, publishing - between 1892 and 1903 - seventeen volumes titled *Life and Labour of the People in London*. His study is divided into three series, the first one on “Poverty”, the second on “Industry” and the third on “Religious influences” (O'Day e Englander 1993). He focused on how poverty and misery, but also wealth and regular earnings, influenced social behaviour. He also studied the effects that specific places could have on various generations, and how they could induce certain social pathologies. Booth collected quantitative data regarding the composition of families, housing, profession, income, the use of sanitary structures, and – through a series of interviews – he also found out about alcohol consumption, prostitution, criminality, married life, household consumption, local government and police. Booth's survey reconstructed the socio-economical structure of the city of London in the last years of the Victorian age through an articulate statistical exposition and a series of maps – which were the first example of social cartography – where each road was coloured according to its inhabitants' income and social class. The maps were also colour-coded, with black referring to the poorer quarters, inhabited by the “*lowest class*”, where deviant behaviour occurred more frequently; whereas yellow referred to the areas where wealthier families, the “*upper-middle and upper classes*”

lived⁵. This “ecological” approach would eventually be adopted by the Chicago School. Dickens’ works and Booth’s descriptions made an impact on the public debate, leading to important social reforms in England between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, which anticipated the birth of the *Welfare State*. Industrialisation led to deep changes in the material structure of the city, also because of the new social organisation it brought about. These changes may be summarised into four main points: a) the land once used for fields and crops was now used for factories which needed wide portions of territory; b) the increasing demand for accommodation, energy sources and public infrastructures could not be met in a short time; a balance between quality and costs was also hard to reach. These factors led to the living conditions of labourers which Engels spoke about; c) the cities’ need to invest in systems of communication that connected them to other cities and small towns, was related to the workers’ need to commute, but it was also an effect of market economy; d) the diffusion of «urban fear» as a social phenomena which has marked the development of the metropolis and its daily life (Amendola 2011); therefore –as Michel Foucault pointed out (2005 [2004], 56) – the issue of exercising control over the city arose, also through a hierarchical distribution of spaces. City planners started to believe that a number of architectural measures were to be carried out – i.e. the *boulevards* wanted by Napoleon III in Paris – to make cities more functional, but also to reduce the risk of urban conflict caused by deep social divisions.

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⁵ The London School of Economics and Political Science library took care of the computerisation of Charles Booth’s archive, which can now be consulted on the website <<http://booth.lse.ac.uk/>>.

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