Seeing Like a State, Seeing Like a City

by

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> *The state-centricity of modern political theory has long been noted, but efforts to think otherwise about politics have been frustrated by the allegation that social life is inherently chaotic. The standard claim is that there can be no law – and hence no politics – without sovereignty. Despite the mythological force of this claim, it is at odds with everyday experience, including our experience with politics and government. The argument in this paper is that a different ontology of the political is implicit in our understanding of the city, which focuses on the complex practices of government and self-government that enable strangers to live together. The practices that make cities possible are the ones now celebrated as "political". I argue that a fundamental ontological shift is involved in approaching the problems of political theory through the city rather than the state. One is obliged to deal with the fact that a multiplicity of political authorities in different registers is the rule rather than the exception and that the relations between these authorities are determined by many practices other than claims to sovereignty. The effort to label anarchist thought as idealist is a cover for the idealism of state-centric political theory. I want to suggest that an authentically realist political theory must be rooted in an understanding of urbanism as a way of life. I will be drawing on Louis Wirth, Friedrich von Hayek, Jane Jacobs, and Henri Lefebvre to develop my argument.*

A naïf might imagine that the object of political theory was to explain politics. Judging from what self-described "political theorists" do in this country, nothing could be further from the truth. Efforts to *explain* politics generally come from outside political theory: from politicians and bureaucrats, historians and journalists, sociologists and economists, psychologists and biologists, geographers and anthropologists, and even occasionally "political scientists". Unlike scientists in most disciplines, *political* scientists rely very little on the theories that theorists in their discipline develop. Political theorists generally operate in splendid isolation, at one remove from political scientists and at another remove from politicians and political activists. Many devote their efforts to the activity Hegel warned us against: giving instructions to the world. These instructions consist of constitutional principles, norms of conduct, ideological orientations, or laws and policies, for which some sort of philosophical rationalization is offered. In some cases, the mode of intervention is more of a lament: this world will never learn to be the way that political theorists think that it should be! In the circumstances, it is not hard to sympathize with the realists who turn away from this moralistic idealism in favour of an examination of what is actually done. In that context, Machiavelli appears to be the exception that proves the rule: a canonized political theorist who actually makes *politics* his main object of study and claims that a proper understanding of politics must precede any effort to lay down principles of conduct or issue prescriptions to participants.

My claim here is that much of the unrealism of contemporary political theory can be attributed to the way that political theory has become attached to the state. There are two aspects of this attachment. To a great extent, political theory is *about* the state, or, more particularly, about the way the state might be better organized, differently conceived, re-positioned in the world, and so on. The *rechtstaat* – the well-ordered state – is an ideal that intrigues many if not most political theorists. Much of their work is oriented toward that ideal and grounded upon it. Even theorists who are doubtful about the state often attend to it, because they think that the state is here to stay. Theorists, like others, think that they must assume the enduring presence of the

state in order to be realistic. So, there is a double attachment: a normative link, arising from the belief that a well-ordered state is the ideal, and an empirical link, arising from the belief that the state, like the weather, will always be with us. Hidden in these latter two beliefs is a third: that the state, where present, ultimately structures the political field so as to determine its possibilities. In other words, there is a belief that sovereignty actually is effective. Many political theorists are deeply suspicious of politics, because politics – as opposed to law, reason, or morality – is a source of disorder. Politics involves plays of power, clashes of of interests, difference of identity and value, moments of instantaneous decision, waves of emotion, sudden shifts of opinion, violent conflicts, efforts at domination and liberation, aspirations to justice or glory or redemption, and venal concerns about wealth and status. It is never what we would want it to be, and so it is tempting to look to the state (or another authority imagined to be sovereign) to fix it. Law is usually the means imagined. It is supposed that, if politics gives way to law, disorder will give way to order: an order that flows from the power of the state. The power of the state is doubly authorized: by its seemingly inevitable presence on the one hand and by the way it embodies sovereign authority on the other. In principle, sovereign authority can override bad politics and institute the right and the good.

Of course, as we all know, sovereign authority has that capacity only in our imaginations. Political theorists are caught up in their own version of the myth of the "good tsar". Russian peasants are said to have believed that the tsar himself was a benevolent figure who would address their problems if he knew of them; unfortunately, landlords and local officials kept the truth from him. In the political theorists' version of this, actual states are akin to the local landlords and officials, locking up the truth of the state, and preventing others from bringing the *rechtstaat* into being. Political theorists, like charismatic peasant leaders, seek only to free the state and bring it back to its true purpose. Stated so, the project of political theory sounds ridiculous – and well it should. We know that actual politics conforms to no one's ideal, and that the crucial problems of politics cannot be resolved by the exercise of sovereign authority. And yet, we are tempted always to theorize in relation to the imagined community of the state – or, at least, in relation to an imagined sovereign authority – rather than in relation to politics proper. Politics proper has shifting and uncertain boundaries; it is invested with irresolvable conflicts; it is fraught with uncertainty; it brings us as low as it does high. To theorize in relation to politics is to deal with a chaotic field, in which order is always partial, relative, and temporary. The political is always in transformation. The effect of a political intervention is always uncertain.

So, what is there to say, theoretically? Must we retreat into silence? I think not. For political theory to be realistic, however, it must attune itself to the complexities and uncertainties of politics. One way of doing this is to learn to see like a city rather than a state. To envision the political *through* the state is to see it in terms of the practices of sovereignty and hence of law. To envision the political through *the city* is to see it in terms of complex practices of government and self-government, practices that always involve multiple authorities in different registers. In the city as city, sovereignty and hence the law is always in suspense, but order is nonetheless generated by the various practices of government and self-government. We know something of the latter, thanks to the work of sociologists and anthropologists. Nevertheless, the real world of politics – politics seen through the city – remains woefully undertheorized. In this short paper, I can do little more than to gesture at what is involved in re-imagining the political through the city. In the first section, I will say a bit more about the genesis of our current political imagination, and then, in the second section, I will begin to explain what would be involved in

seeing like a city. In the third and final section, I will suggest how such a vision can lead to greater realism.

Seeing Like a State

Political theory as we know it developed in the shadow of the state. When the discipline began to take its present shape, in the late nineteenth century United States, it was in the context of an effort to improve higher education by bringing American institutions up to the level of the most advanced ones in Europe: namely, those in Germany.[2] The newly familiar scholarly divisions that separated political science from economics on the one hand and sociology on the other were overlaid by the distinction between the social sciences generally (of which *political* science was one) and the humanities, including philosophy and history. The social sciences were supposed to bring a new rigour to the study of human social life. From the beginning, the assumption was that political science would be focused on government and more generally upon the state: hence, upon the comparative study of constitutions or more particular political institutions, public administration and public policy, and also the contest between parties and other groups for control of governmental institutions, the exercise of political leadership, the contest of political doctrines, and so on. One might study the sociology of politics, or indeed its psychology. One might also study political economy, as people had been doing since the time of the physiocrats. But, what made political science distinctive is that it took the state, rather than society or the economy, as its object of study. Within political science, all analytical roads led to the state, because the state is what political science had to explain. Sociologists or economists might try to explain it, but in the end they lacked appropriate tools. If they tried to explain the state away, as an effect of society or an effect of the economy, they ultimately failed, because the state was *sui generis*: something that emerged over time and would develop into the future as a result of distinctively *political* struggles that had to be understood on their own terms. The insistence on the need for a distinctively *political* science was bound up with the recognition that human affairs were not simply social or economic in character: they were also political, and had to be analyzed accordingly by a separate discipline. What came to be called "political theory" was related to that discipline of "political science".

If a political scientist was interested in explaining the way things were, a political theorist was interested in how they might be: or, so most political theorists thought. Political struggle was always about ideas, in the sense that political actors put forward different ideas about the way people should be governed and for what purposes, the bases of legitimacy, and the constitution of the political realm. These matters could be studied empirically, but it was also important to work out what made sense and how. Of necessity, that meant that current political ideas had to be put into a context that was both historical and philosophical: historical in the sense that ideas had to be traced to their origins and connected to other ideas; philosophical in the sense that those same ideas had to be subjected to rational assessment. Knowledge of consequences would never be enough, since political ideas were always bound up with notions of how people *ought* to live and hence with claims about the right and the good. To some analysts, this implied that political theory had to be part of moral and political philosophy, rather than political science. That move has been resisted, of course: on the grounds that the political is different from the moral or even from the ethical, and hence that the *political* ought is different from the *moral* ought. Machiavelli is not a moral philosopher of any consequence, but he is a major political theorist. His way of drawing the line between morality and politics may not be to everyone's taste, but it raises an issue of central concern to political theory. More generally, the findings of political science, which a moral philosopher may choose to ignore, are of central concern to

political theory in so far as it is a discipline concerned with the form and disposition of the state. If one accepts reason of state – broadly or narrowly conceived – one can fancy oneself a realist.

Amongst political theorists, the common view is that the ancient Greeks first saw the problem with which we have to contend. For there to be a settled way of life in which humans achieve the most of which they are capable, there must be a political order that determines what is lawful and what is not, and protects lawful citizens and the lawful order itself against internal and external threats. The right to interpret and enforce laws, as well as to make new laws as needed is implicit in the concept of such an order. So too is the right to use violence when necessary to maintain the law and the order which gives rise to and flows from that law. The Greeks are interesting because they saw that reasons could be given for preferring one form of order to another and that most if not all of the reasons could be assessed without recourse to religious precepts. Modern political theorists are inspired by this humanism-*avant-la-lettre*, as well as by the ideal of the Greek *polis*: an order in which free and equal citizens govern themselves by deliberating and deciding together on the most important issues, delegating lesser matters to ordinary people chosen by lot, and filling the highest offices by electing the best to those positions and holding them to strict account. In the polis, we see the germ of the modern extensive republic: the liberal-democratic nation-state now regarded as the norm of political order.

It is well known that Enlightenment thinkers looked back to Greece and Rome for models. By the early twentieth century, many serious thinkers believed that the political achievements of the Greeks and the Romans actually could be surpassed: that an extensive republic based on the rule of law could be established and maintained indefinitely; that everyone – rich and poor, black and white, male and female – could be given the benefits of citizenship; that there could be open debate and democratic decision on public issues; that officials high and low could be elected and held to account; and, that a federation of republics could be established to maintain peace amongst the nations. In thinking then and now, the United States of America had pride of place, since it was arguably the first and obviously the most striking example of a modern republic: one that offered a model to emulate or a point of reference in articulating something better, something freer, more democratic and more egalitarian. Although in the first half of the twentieth century there were many intellectuals who reacted against the idea of liberal democracy, such voices have been muted in the past fifty or sixty years as political institutions in different parts of the world have been remodelled in light of the ideals of modern republicanism. Whether there has been real democratization or not is a matter for dispute. What is not in dispute is that a particular form of the republic – the liberal-democratic nation-state – is taken to be the norm. If political order in some part of the world departs from that norm, that is thought to be a problem. The presumption is that the liberal-democratic nation-state must be universalized if we are to move successfully toward the best political order.

The two junctures of modern republicanism – nation and state, liberty and democracy – are both distinctive, as is the third juncture, the one that fuses the nation-state with liberal-democracy. That there can be no democracy without liberty has long been accepted, although there is much dispute about the form of liberty that democracy requires. More interesting are the other two fusions, of nation with state and of nation-state with liberal-democracy. These fusions have received much less attention from political theorists, because they are not so easily analyzed within the Graeco-Roman-Enlightenment tradition. Whether a nation exists or not is largely a matter of how the people concerned feel about it. There is no obvious reason why people should identify as a nation if they do not; nor is there any reason why they should not, if

they do. But, the strength of nationalist sentiment seems to be such that it requires the division of the world into separate states, *and* helps to sustain those states as autonomous political entities once they are created. So-called "constitutional patriotism" is the Enlightened version of nationalism: it enables a double loyalty, to one's own state and to the system of states that maintains and qualifies state autonomy. What renders everything intelligible is the principle of state sovereignty, which suggests that there must be an ultimate authority in every part of the world in order to maintain a lawful order there, and that in the world as a whole the ultimate authorities must be related to one another as equals. Either might will make right through the balance of power, or the right will be empowered through mutual recognition.

For philosophers, the principle of sovereignty is attractive, because it suggests the possibility of enforcing an ideal: if not universally at least locally. In so far as the principle of sovereignty is accepted, the ordering impulse of moral and political philosophy – the one that leads to prescriptions for morality, ethics, law, government, and politics – comes to seem practical. In writing or speaking, one's implicit appeal is to the sovereign: the one who has the capacity to implement the principles being advanced. The effect is a sort of complicity with sovereign authority, a complicity that is often unacknowledged. Amongst political theorists, this complicity may take a slightly different form in that it is often tied to the claim (usually unarticulated, but often implicit) that *state* sovereignty is inevitable in the modern era and hence that state sovereignty must be taken as the ground on which theorists have to work. Behind that is the idea that, without sovereignty in some form, there can only be chaos, lawlessness, and violence: thus, the defeat of every plan for betterment and every scheme to vindicate the right.

So, in these ways and others, we political theorists are trained to "see like a state" (to borrow a term from James C. Scott[3]). We think from the vantage point of the state about the realm we are to govern in our minds. We attempt to reduce it to a uniform field, imagine the political subjectivities that might be brought into being and put in order, and orchestrate things (in our minds, at least) so that everything will fit together as we think it should. We are the philosopher kings or enlightened monarchs or great redeemers or popular liberators of our own imaginations. Sovereignty in general and the state in particular is the condition that we assume to assure ourselves of our own sanity: we are not megalomaniacs, but only advisors to those who could implement our dreams.

Is there a different way of thinking available to us? I want to suggest that we can learn to "see like a city" rather than "see like a state". It requires some effort of imagination, but there are important precursors on whom we can draw.

Seeing Like a City

We can start to sense the possibilities for a different way of seeing if we return once again to the ancient *polis*. It is typical now to think of the polis as a miniature state : hence, the increasingly common tendency to translate the term, polis, as "state". We know that the polis was not a state, and indeed that the idea of the state did not really take shape before the sixteenth century of the common era, about two thousand years after the heyday of classical Greek philosophy. But, we tend to set that knowledge aside, because we scarcely know how to think of political order, except in terms of the state. For us, the state is normative in the sense that all other forms of political order are simply defective versions of it. What makes the polis recognizable for us, as a state, is that is that it is not simply the effect of religious or tribal traditions. It is a kind of rational order, intelligible in terms of human needs and possibilities conceived in the most general terms, without reference to the particularities of religious belief or cultural tradition. In principle, it is an order appropriate for all humans, especially in so far as it

meets needs and realizes possibilities that are suppressed by particular religions or cultures. Thus, the polis is the embodiment of a universal truth, a truth realized in a different, perhaps higher form within the modern state.

To see the polis in this way is to obscure its character as a city, however. Plato and Aristotle, the most influential of the Greek thinkers, were not comfortable with the *cityness* of the polis. They feared its disorder, its openness, its variety, and its multiplicity of contending authorities. I use the term, "authorities," in the broadest sense here to refer to the presence of many different forms of authority and claims to authority: a condition in which the question of authority is never really settled. The condition that Plato and Aristotle particularly feared is one in which efforts to impose an over-arching authority tended to generate a reaction that produced yet more authorities to contest the authority of the existing ones. One might argue that what typifies the city is not the imposition of an over-arching authority, but the multiplication of challenges to existing authorities of all sorts. Hence, the medieval maxim that "city air makes free". To embrace the city is actually to embrace a condition that problematizes claims to over-arching authority by generating rival claims. The rival claims are, in modern parlance, "attractors" that generate forms of order that may be sustained for some time, but that are liable to be displaced by other attractors that produce new forms of order.[4] So, the city is not a stable order, so much as a field of possibilities generated by diverse human efforts. One sign of this is that the modern city transcends its own bounds, so that it no longer makes sense to think of a city as a self-contained entity. The Aristotelian ideal of self-sufficiency is unsustainable.

Weber realized that the medieval European city was even more interesting than the *polis* in some ways, because it developed at one remove from sovereign authority. In one formulation, he described it in terms of "non-legitimate domination" – or, as I would put it, a domain in which authorities emerged that were either unauthorized by the sovereign, recognized by the sovereign only after the fact, or constituted in direct defiance of the sovereign.[5] What enabled a distinctively civic order to exist was not the grant of the sovereign, but the production of effective authorities from within the civic order itself. Authorities emerged, not in accordance with an overarching plan or established rules of recognition, but rather in accordance with the opportunities and necessities of the time. People claimed and exerted authority in various forms and for various purposes, under various circumstances. Authorities thus proliferated, with various political rationalities in play at the same time. Some of these rationalities were religious, dynastic, or tribal/national. Others were partisan/ideological. Still others were attuned to a logic of class domination. And some were tied to projects of civic improvement or moral reform. Cities were generators of possibility that attracted the ambitious, but they tended, thanks to their ideational and organizational fertility, to resist or subvert efforts to reduce them to any uniform order. Not that the reduction to a uniform order was impossible: that was what Weber thought had happened in Oriental cities. But, in principle, the city was a form of order resistant to and/or subversive of sovereignty.

To see the city so is to recognize that it is not a miniature state, but rather an order of an entirely different type.[6] It is not organized on the sovereignty principle, but instead on the principle of self-organization, which in turn implies a multiplicity of authorities operating under conditions of rivalry and interdependence. The most influential account of the city on these terms is the one that projects the market (a civic institution) onto a global scale and theorizes it as a self-organizing "economy". We know this account in its various iterations from Smith to Hayek. We also know the analyses that show that mutual adjustment is possible even when the entities in competition with one another are rivalrous governments and not just competing businesses. One

need to not go into these accounts in detail or accept the ideological cant associated with them to see that there is a larger point at stake. A kind of order can emerge even when there are rivalrous authorities.[7] Moreover, a secondary politics attuned to the form of that order is likely to be generated when the form appears disorderly or disruptive to people's desires and expectations. The point is not (whatever Hayek might have thought) that the order of the city projected globally conforms to an ideal, but rather that it *is* an order of sorts that can be analyzed on its own terms.

Another insight comes from the work of urbanists like Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett.[8] I call this principle of "proximate diversity". The idea is that the city can generate *civilized* order by bringing diverse activities together: by making them proximate to one another. Jacobs noticed how this worked more than a half century ago in her native Greenwich Village. Out of that has come an idea of urban order that challenges many of the presumptions of statist urban planning – as James C. Scott has noticed. One need not idealize the processes that Jacobs noticed to see that there are street-level practices of government and self-government that enable markets to function, traffic to flow, people to move about, goods to be produced, services to be provided, gods to be worshipped, books to be written, ideas to be circulated, and so on. These are the primary processes of government and self-government: the ones make "civilization" in any form possible. The familial, tribal, cultural, and religious loyalties that bind people together in other ways are not necessarily helpful to urban order. In fact, they often lead to conflict that brings the city as a city to a standstill. Often this is the pretext for the assertion of sovereignty. In so far as sovereign authority suppresses conflict and facilitates "civilized" activities it can be regarded as the *sine qua non* of urban life. But, this view of it – the Hobbesian view – is misleading in so far as it conceals the origins of civilized life. Sovereignty may secure civilized life, but it does not create it. To the extent that people learn to live with people who are not of their own family, clan, tribe, village, religion, culture, or nation, it is through the everyday negotiations of life: the ones that enable people who are otherwise strangers to live beside one another as neighbours, to pass each other peacefully on the street, work together, do business with one another, or even come together in joint projects for mutual benefit. It would be wrong to suppose that the ordering practices of urban life are generated from the bottom up. It is not that simple. People live on many scales simultaneously, and there are always ideas about the wider order or orders of life that inform what happens on a smaller scale – and *vice versa*. There is no simple way of describing how it is that masses of people who are otherwise strangers can come together and produce a relatively civilized urban order. What is clear, however, is that the imposition of sovereignty is at best one element in the generation of such an order.

Is sovereignty *necessary* to urban order, however? ... Who knows? Certainly, people like to be secure in their own homes, and to be able to go about their business without threat of violence. Theft, robbery, extortion, and intimidation are not welcome: to say nothing of rape, assault, and murder. Cities can scarcely exist without policing in some form or another, formal or informal, and this means mobilizing force to protect the existing order. How this is done has varied a great deal: only in the last couple of centuries has the modern system of policing become the norm. It is interesting, though, that effective policing usually depends on keeping the state at a distance: that is, ensuring that there is an organic relation between the police and the population, a relation of trust that emerges when the police are under the control of local authorities rather than the state. So, the policing function is as much an effect of self-organization as is everything else in the city. Sovereign authority might collapse, but this doesn't mean that the police would also collapse. ... Or, does it? ... The collapse of the police would

presumably be triggered by the collapse or fragmentation of the army. This is a different matter. The premise of most political theory has been that an army is necessary to secure the ground on which civilized life – included civilized policing – develops. How can we be secure without an army? How can there be an army without a commander-in-chief: a sovereign?

There is no easy answer to such questions, except to say that in the city as city the problem of sovereignty is infinitely deferred. To use Schmittian language, sovereignty is the exception that is postponed, evaded, deflected, subverted, and ultimately transfigured. What threatens the city is the invading army or the gang of lawless rioters. The sovereign promises to repel the invading army and/or to suppress the riots; the sovereign expects obedience in return. But, this bargain – which is not really a bargain, since people have no choice but to accept it – is just a moment in the re-organization of the city. Ultimately, the sovereign and the sovereign's pretensions are incorporated as another element in the life of the city. The sovereign is not the rock on which the city is built, but part of the rubble that the city transforms into reinforced concrete. The processes that renew civic order in the wake of war are the ones that made civic order possible before the war. Once the vibrancy of urban life is restored, the sovereign's authority is increasingly tamed, contained, and incorporated into the ordinary ways of the city. For the city to flourish, sovereign authority must be transformed into the exception that proves the rule.

To see like a state is to suppose that the most important political problems are resolved once sovereignty is established. This supposition is very much at odds with experience. Often as not, the effort to establish a stable state generates violent conflict or exacerbates existing conflicts, because one claim to sovereign authority is being advanced at the expense of others. If things go well, a particular sovereignty-claim may be accepted and then made increasingly irrelevant politically as the various actors adjust to a situation in which they must offer nominal allegiance to certain principles. Things do not always go well, however. Another way of achieving a kind of civil peace is when rival sovereignty-claims are moderated or held in suspense as people with radically different views work out ways of living side by side. This latter way is more akin to the other practices of urban life. When we see like a state, we assume that the state is the necessary solution to the problem of sovereignty, and miss the fact that this purported solution may be part of the problem. Even to suppose that *some* form of sovereignty – not necessarily state sovereignty – is necessary to political order is to beg the question. It is not clear that the problem of sovereignty has to be resolved. What Weber noticed about medieval cities is of more general interest, for these were places where sovereignty claims were displaced, evaded, held in abeyance, or otherwise rendered ineffective as urbanites got on with what they wanted to do. Such suspense is not necessarily ideal, but neither is a forced resolution of the suspense. In any case, a resolution is liable to be temporary.

To see like a city is to recognize that political order is not something that can be fixed in any simple way. It is always in the process of being overcome by something else, and the latter may emerge from almost any quarter. The threat of such overcoming provides the excuse for sovereignty, the desire for which always exceeds any need that it may serve. So, it is well to be suspicious of any claim to sovereignty, on the grounds that it is likely to be both excessive and ineffective. To see like a city is to accept a certain disorderliness, unpredictability, and multiplicity as inevitable, and to pose the problem of politics in relation to that complexity, rather than in relation to the simplicity that sovereignty seeks.

Seeing Like a Theorist

The simplicity that sovereignty seeks is related to the simplicity that philosophy has often sought: as Plato recognized, philosophy and kingship must coincide if a certain form of order is to be implemented. The simplicity of such an order is implicit in its form of determinacy: governed by linear equations, the unfolding of such an order can be predicted in advance. The city, on the other hand, is a complex order, whose unfolding is non-linear. Outcomes cannot be predicted with any certainty. A type of authority that had been considered irrelevant – such as religious authority – may suddenly re-appear in a new form, with new force. A form of economic enterprise that no one had imagined – Google or Facebook – may transform scientific inquiry or social relations, as well as undercut established businesses and open up new opportunities for the accumulation of wealth. Armies or police forces can be destabilized by insurgents using new forms of deployment and unconventional weaponry. And, political alliances can be formed between groups and for purposes that were never contemplated a few years before. There is a homology between the city and politics that contrasts with the homology between the state and sovereignty. In binding itself to the state, political theory connects itself to the latter pair, and abandons the former. This is a mistake. It would be better to abandon the state to the philosophers and claim politics – and hence the city – for our theoretical field.

What are the implications of this? The first is that the form of politics can never be anticipated in advance of its emergence. We cannot say in advance what the main problems of the immediate future will be. We can extrapolate trends, of course, and by doing so predict that certain familiar problems will continue and others emerge and become salient. But, there will be surprises, and some of those surprises will be such that they throw most of our calculations off kilter. So, we can never be very confident about our ability to anticipate the field of political activity to which our theories must relate. We may accept parameters that have no force, and theorize about problems and patterns of politics that fade into insignificance. As Hegel recognized, we can scarcely comprehend our own time in thought, let alone project ourselves into the future. The second implication follows from the first. We cannot say in advance that the key theoretical issues are axiological, epistemological, or ontological. The persistent axiological emphasis of Anglo-American political theory – the demand to be normative – arises from the belief that there is a known field of the political to which our prescriptions might relate. But, in fact, the field is *not* known, and we are faced, as theorists, with the persistent challenge of comprehending something that is shifting and changing before our eyes. To suppose that our main problem is to work out appropriate moral axioms is actually to avoid the task at hand, which is to make politics intelligible. The third implication also follows from the first. We must be modest in our claims and expectations. The God's-eye view is not available to us: we can offer only partial understandings that may be helpful in limited ways.

To shift from the state to the city has other implications for our thinking as well. Any concept of the state involves related concepts that denote the domains to which the state relates. The state governs society. It has a relation to the economy, culture, religion, and nationality. It has a relation to other states. Relations amongst states and between state and society are governed by the principle of sovereignty. Thanks to that principle, which appears to be operative in the world, we have an analytical starting point that enables us to effect a division of labour amongst social scientists and that specifies the boundary issues with which we have to contend as analysts. Is the disposition of the state determined by the economy, or *vice versa*? Does a disjuncture of nation and state foredoom the latter? Can a system of secularized states contain religious wars? Such questions seem good until we realize that they pre-suppose the political order that renders them intelligible. It is not clear that *that* is the political order with which we

have to contend. To envision the world *through* the city and *as* a city is to see its constitutive relations and boundaries differently.

One immediately thinks of the city in relation to the countryside, or of the urban in relation to the rural. Thus, a certain geography is invoked, but it is not the geography of the state system. As Wirth argued many years ago, a different *way of life* is implicit in urbanism, a way of life that can be distinguished from agrarianism or hunting and gathering.[9] As Lefebvre argued more recently, urbanism as such is different from industrialism and is implicitly global.[10] The frontier of the urban is not at the boundary between one state and the next; nor is at the boundary between state and society. Instead, it is at the boundary of the rural, the natural, or the un-urbanized: a boundary that can be understood both historically and geographically. At that boundary, questions of nature and culture are acutely contested. From one point of view, the city is understood as what civilizes us – transforms us from tribesmen or villagers into citizens – and what civilizes our environment – changes it into a safe, comfortable, but stimulating and interesting home for humans. From another point of view, the city alienates us from both nature and culture: despoils the environment even as it degrades the rich variety of cultures that give meaning to human life. We need not accept either of these polar visions to see that citification or urbanization or civilization – whatever you want to call it – involves transformations of the greatest political significance. How we are to understand ourselves in relation to our own natures or own cultures or in relation to what is not of human making is clearly of central concern. The issues at stake are more sharply posed when we see like a city rather than a state.

When we see like a city we quickly recognize that our trajectory is not something that can be controlled in any simple way. And yet the city is not ungoverned. This is as true of the global city as it is of the local city: that is, it is as true of the urban world as a whole as it is of particular cities, like Vancouver or Los Angeles. To see the world as a global city is to recognize immediately that it is characterized by a multiplicity of authorities in different registers (states, municipalities, religious bodies, for-profit corporations, NGOs, charismatic figures, and so on), each of which governs within its own domain, but each of whose efforts at government are checked, regulated, or challenged by others. The principle of state sovereignty is everywhere contested, not least by sovereign states. Locally, we can see a similar pattern: as one gets closer to the ground, as it were, the more apparent it becomes that the actual configuration of political authority is extremely complex and that it is poorly represented in models that assume the centricity of the state. One must explore the ground without too many preconceptions if one is to see what is actually there. About all we can say in advance is that the pattern of government and self-government is both complex and variable, over time and space. Nevertheless, it is clear that government and self-government – and, one must note (with the Foucauldians) that the one always involves the other – enable the city to exist locally and globally. We really cannot understand this in terms of the relation between state and society or state and economy, for those categories do not capture the complexities of authority production and inter-authority relations. So, if we think of the key political questions as being about the kind of authorities that we do or should have and how those authorities do or should relate to one another, then it becomes clear that we need to investigate the city, locally and globally, with great care if we are to understand what the most relevant questions are.

The most powerful argument for seeing like a state is that the most important political identities in the modern world are the ones produced at the intersection of nationalism with the state system. The doctrine of sovereignty seems to imply that any self-respecting nation should seek its own state, in order to enjoy equality with other nations. Clearly, the nexus of nation and

state is important, as is the doctrine of sovereignty, but when one examines matters *through* the city it becomes clear that identities, like values and interests, are protean. They tend to proliferate. Particular identities that have little to do with nation and state can come to the foreground and generate pressing political problems. We all know this: it is part of the stuff of everyday politics. If we see like a state, we can lose sight of the fact that the politically important identities (and politically important interests and values) are not necessarily the ones bound up with the nation-state; nor are they necessarily the ones that can be vindicated by an act of state sovereignty. We are always already engaged in a more complex politics, in which questions of nation and state certainly appear (and sometimes demand resolution), but in which other questions often overshadow them. The latter questions often cannot be resolved by the exercise of state sovereignty, because they relate to forms of authority that are resistant to state control. Ironically, one of the major impediments to state control is that states are generally too small to encompass the activities they are supposed to regulate. This reflects the fact that people are connected to one another through globalized urban networks. Urban life – and the identities it preserves, generates, or revives – actually transcends individual states and in fact the entire state system. So, it is hard to put nation and state in context if one fails to see like a city.

What holds many of us back from re-envisioning our field of study is the sense that what cannot be brought under the sign of the state is at best chaotic and at worst dangerous, violent, and disorderly. This reflects the antique view that the absence of the state entails "anarchy". What we learn from studying cities is almost the opposite. In the absence of the state, forms of political authority – and hence forms of government and self-government – tend to proliferate. The consequence may not be "good government," but it is certainly not anarchy. Self-described anarchists are actually interested in understanding the practices of government and self-government that emerge when the shadow of the state retreats. To my mind, that means explaining how cities are actually governed: the latter is not a topic in which state-centric theorists are much interested. So, ironically, anarchists are the realists in so far as they attempt to identify practices of government that emerge from the self-organization of people in and through cities. State-centric theory tends to be hopelessly idealist, in that it wishes the world to conform to a certain pattern to make things easy for the analyst. To see like a city is to recognize that order is relative, temporary, and localized, but no less real or meaningful for that. Law in various forms emerges, but it is not necessarily coordinated into a coherent whole. The resultant complexity may not be susceptible to full understanding, but that does not mean that we can have nothing of value to say about it.

In short, the city beckons us to see like political theorists who are in the midst of a world that exceeds our understanding, rather than like political philosophers who stand outside the world and judge it. The judgements of the philosophers are like regulations of the state, which many people will choose to ignore, often for good reasons. If we invest ourselves in the city, we can allow ourselves to think politically, and hence to illuminate the practices that we are attempting to theorize.

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[1] This paper is part of a larger project in which I am attempting to work out the broader implications of a shift from the state to the city as the assumed ground for political analysis. My title is a play on James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1998). I have made related presentations on "seeing like a city" at the University of Winnipeg (21 October 2007), National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan (12 December 2007), and the Urban Affairs Association (Baltimore MD, 24 April 2008). My thanks to those present at those sessions for their stimulating questions and comments.

[2] For much more thorough and nuanced analyses of the development of the American discipline, see John G. Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), and *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 2004)

[3] Scott's concerns are different from mine, but the contrast he makes between "state simplifications" and "mētis" or "knowledge embedded in local experience" (p. 311) is pertinent to my analysis. He notes that "processes as disparate as the creation of permanent last names, the standardization of weights and measures, the establishment of cadastral surveys and population registers, the invention of freehold tenure, the standardization of language and legal discourse, the design of cities, and the organization of transportation" can be understood in terms of the state's efforts to "get a handle on its subjects and their environment" (p.2). As Scott argues, this is not just a matter of enhancing the state's understanding to enable more effective rule. Its subjects and the land they inhabit have to be re-shaped to fit the state's purposes. The results are often disastrous. My point is that political theory too has been shaped to fit the project of the state.

[4] Compare Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Swerve Editions, 2000).

[5] See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978), vol. 2, ch. 16.

[6] This is a point I have made before in different ways: see, for example, "Urbanism, cites and local self-government," *Canadian Public Administration*, 48:1 (Spring 2005), 96-123, "Protecting the Right of Local Self-Government," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 38:4 (December 2005), 897-922, and "The City of God and the Global City," *CTheory.net* tdo43-10/5/2006.

[7] This is one way of interpreting international relations theory, in its various guises.

[8] See especially their early work: Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961) and Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

[9] Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a way of life," *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (July 1938), pp. 1—24, reprinted in Wirth, *On Cities and Social Life*, Albert J. Reiss Jr., ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

[10] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003 [1970]).