Lewis Mumford and the Organicist Concept in Social Thought

Robert Casillo

One of the best-known twentieth-century exponents of social organicism, Lewis Mumford has woven many of the sturdiest strands of organicist thought—classical, medieval, and modern—into a complex whole. Throughout his career he has emphasized the importance of the family and neighborhood as indispensable components of a genuinely organic social life. At the same time his vision of the ideal society embraces a balanced or "organic" relationship not only with its natural environment but also with its material and technological apparatus. To speak in broader terms, Mumford has sought to define a version of social organicism which—by allowing for individual, local, and regional autonomy, a diversity of competing interests, and the possibility of historical development—escapes the charge often levelled by both leftists and liberals against social organicist thinking: that is, that it assumes the priority of the collective over the individual and thus leads inevitably to a falsely normative totality characterized by a centralized authoritarian government and a static, hierarchical organization—in short, conservative or fascist reaction. Generally, Mumford has avoided the familiar pitfalls of social organicist thought, in large part by subjecting his own theories to criticism and revision. If anything, the greatest challenge to his social theory came in the 1950s and 1960s, with the unparalleled explosion of the chaotic megalopolis and above all with the emergence of what Jacques Ellul has termed the dominance of technique or the "technological society." Technique threatens at once to replace the organic environment and to sacrifice the last vestiges of individual and local autonomy to the imperatives of technological adaptation. Under such conditions the very terms

1 For the Marxist rejection of organicism as implying the priority of the social whole to the part, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Berkeley, 1984), 27; Karl Popper's liberal critique of organicism is discussed later in this paper.

Copyright 1992 by JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS, INC.
by which Mumford defines the organic society would seem to have lost their basis in social reality.

Some of the main theoretical sources of Mumford’s organismic are in such Romantic writers as Coleridge, Ruskin, Morris, and, not least, Hegel. For Hegel, as for Mumford, Nature and reality form an integrated whole within which man and society are essential parts. Yet this whole, far from being seamless or static, permits tension and conflict and pulses with inner development. Not only does Mumford approve of the “original Hegelian conception of the organic unity of natural and social processes, in their continuous development and transformation,” he accepts Hegel’s idealistic emphasis on the role of consciousness and ideology in historical process. Although he acknowledges the importance of material conditions in society and culture, Mumford asserts the relative autonomy of man’s “idolum” or Weltanschauung and so rejects as inorganic (hence mechanistic) the vulgar Marxist view that ideas, values, and aesthetic symbols merely reflect or conceal material factors.

The nineteenth-century revolution in the natural sciences furnishes the most immediate source of Mumford’s organismic. Writing in the wake of Darwin and greatly influenced by Patrick Geddes, the Scottish biologist, sociologist, and urban planner, Mumford denies that Nature is a static Newtonian mechanism, a mathematically predictable aggregate of isolated entities. Rather, macrocosmic and microcosmic Nature embody what Geddes defines as synergy, the rule that an organic whole is more than the sum of its parts. One must therefore think of Nature, natural entities, and indeed all of reality in terms of interacting minor wholes within the whole. But while Mumford embraces Darwin’s view of Nature as an “ecology” or “web of life,” he cannot completely accept Darwin’s interpretation of evolution as competitive, deterministic, and random. Nature reveals complicated interdependences, manifold cooperations, and immanent purpose. Natural forms generally evolve to ever higher levels of differentiation and integration, hence greater cooperation. Pervaded by a “superfluity” of formative energies, the cosmos testifies to an emerging order and design whereby freedom complements necessity, and purpose supervenes upon chance.

This design is neither closed nor static, for nature constitutes an open system whose elements tend inherently (or at least periodically) to achieve “dynamic equilibrium.” Originating in late nineteenth-century science, the concept of dynamic equilibrium is founded on a radical dissociation

---


between the growth of living organisms and the mere "stational equilibrium" of non-living matter. In the 1920s and 1930s the concept was developed by a number of thinkers whom Mumford admires, among them the biologist Walter Cannon, who described the body as ever seeking homeostasis, an internal dynamic equilibrium. Cannon's colleague at Harvard, Lawrence J. Henderson, distinguished between physical systems, which are static and closed, and organic, open ones, which achieve a "dynamic equilibrium" in interacting with their environments. Henderson did not confine this concept to biology but used it as Mumford does to describe the "normative" state of any social system.5

Born in 1895, Mumford benefitted from the rebellion against positivism in every major discipline. In The Golden Day (1926) he celebrates the organicist concepts that had challenged the "naive externalities of the older physics." Whitehead's holistic description of reality in terms of ever-altering "organic" interrelations alerted Mumford to the limitations of mechanism with its static, quantifying, isolating abstraction. Summarizing the British biologist C. Lloyd Morgan's concept of "emergent evolution," Mumford notes that the "introduction of a new factor does not just add to the existing mass, but produces an over-all change, a new configuration, which alters its properties. Properties that could not be recognized in the pre-emergent stage . . . then for the first time become visible."6 Mumford is indebted as well to the American "revolt against formalism," led by John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, Charles Beard, James Harvey Robinson, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Anti-positivists all, these writers rejected simplistically empirical, causal, and factual methods in favor of historical method, cultural organicism, and an anti-formalistic quest for interdisciplinary information.7

Mumford's social organicism in some ways resembles Hegel's concept of totality. For Hegel, totality implied neither the suppression of differentiation for the sake of identity, as in Schelling, nor a homogenous aggregate, as in a mass society, but rather what Martin Jay terms "hierarchically linked" and "horizontally juxtaposed" totalities. The movement of the social whole, according to Jay, is generated through the contradictory interaction of various "subtotalities," whose relation becomes ever more complex as the process advances to ever higher syntheses. Like Mumford, Hegel despised abstract holism and insisted on the need for "intermediate [social] articulation" and for constant interaction on all levels as opposed to the suppression of some parts in favor of others. Although Hegel is

7 Morton White, Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism (New York, 1949), 12, 20, 23, 25, 27.
rightly deemed a statist, he conceived of the state as expressing the parts of society, not cancelling them. Nonetheless Hegel's system raised political problems which Mumford like other American social theorists had to surmount. Insofar as, for Hegel, the state embodies the totality at its present stage of development, the individual not only comes after institutions but also requires the intervention of the state in order to act; he is subordinated to if not submerged within the totality. Moreover, since Hegel's idealistic monism is deterministic and thus valorizes the status quo as normative, real freedom consists in conformity to present conditions, which result from an irresistible progress beyond the individual's control. Hence Hegel invites charges often made by critics of organicism, namely, that it leads inevitably to a static authoritarianism and fatalism, the sacrifice of the parts to the whole. Like the American communitarians Daniel Mark Baldwin and Charles Horton Cooley, Mumford seeks to avoid this impasse by challenging the exclusive right of the state to express and dominate the social order and also by insisting on the capacity of the creative individual to criticize and transcend existing conditions.

Yet even more than Hegel, Mumford's social organicism reflects the attempt of his American and European contemporaries to overthrow, revise, and yet in some ways preserve Herbert Spencer's legacy. A monistic materialist, Spencer holds that all laws are derivable from the laws of physics, and that reality is a seamless web of interrelated parts. It follows that society observes the same laws of organization as Nature, which provides analogies of man's social life. Evolution rises from the homogeneous to the heterogenous, the less integrated to the more integrated, the less equilibrated to the more equilibrated, so that at each step there is a better fit between organism and environment. As "a system of mutually-dependent parts severally performing actions subserving maintenance of the combination," Spencer says, the social organism achieves a new and higher equilibrium at every stage of its evolution. But unlike Comte, who viewed social equilibrium as always provisional, Spencer believed (with Hegel) that social evolution must culminate in a static equilibrium, the "perfect" maximum of differentiation and integration. Spencer's conclusion reflects his reliance on a physical rather than biological model.

Social organicism cuts across political divisions. Assuming that social organicism implies control in a center analogous to the brain, Lester Ward argued for state intervention. Spencer, in contrast, thought of the controlling members as dispersed among the social organism. Thus, notwithstanding D. G. Ritchie's pro-statist argument that Spencer's organic

8 Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality, 53 and n., 58, 59.
10 For Spencer, see Russett, The Concept, 24, 25, 37, 38, 42-43; Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought (Boston, 1955), 42.
society resembled an “extremely low type of being,” Spencer conjoined social organicism with anti-collectivism and laissez faire: state interference with any part of the social organism might result in damage to another part. Moreover, competition is essential to progress, weeding out the unfit. Social altruism, Spencer somehow felt, would make up for lack of state intervention.11

Mumford’s debt to Spencer and Social Darwinism comes to him partly through his self-confessed master Patrick Geddes, whom Mumford praises for his “ecological approach,” his recognition that the “world of biology included all human phenomena,” and that cities are “as much a natural structure as anthills or beaver colonies.”12 More specifically, Geddes exemplified “Reform Darwinism,” a movement toward social solidarity begun in the 1890s. Unlike Darwin, Geddes regarded life and evolutionary process as purposive rather than as the result of accidental variation. Since Geddes claimed that love and cooperation are as important as egoistic competition in natural and social processes, he appealed to Spencer’s idea of altruism against the Darwin-Huxley view of natural selection as the consequence of competition.13 Mumford similarly identifies a good and bad Darwin, the first sympathetic toward natural life, the second concocting a demonic Malthusian vision of the survival of the fittest. Mumford wrongly dismisses natural selection as a “myth,” since nature also reveals “mutual aid, reciprocal interplay . . ., symbiosis” among all beings.14 This argument owes much to Peter Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid, which contends that an instinct of social solidarity and cooperation typifies both natural species and human societies. Relying on Darwin’s evidence of human altruism and sociality in The Descent of Man, Kropotkin aimed his attacks primarily at Huxley.15

Although Mumford and Geddes agree with Spencer that natural and social evolution achieve increasing differentiation and integration, they disagree with him on other key issues. Obviously, World War I had exploded Spencer’s argument for the pacificist character of industrial society. Like Lester Ward and many American social thinkers after 1900, Mumford rejects Spencer’s (and Hegel’s) theory that society must inevitably reach static equilibrium or “closure” in favor of a dynamic equilibrium model deriving from biology. Nor can Mumford, Geddes, or their Ameri-

11 Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, 40, 41; Russett, The Concept, 41; Greta Jones, Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction between Biological and Sociological Theory (Brighton, 1980), 56, 61.
15 Peter Kropotkin, Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution (New York, 1907), 1-75.
can contemporaries accept Spencer's materialistic monism, an inherently deterministic philosophy which insisted on both the necessity of the individual's adaptation to external conditions and the futility of all attempts to remake society and man. Mumford's and Geddes's pro-planning approach somewhat resembles Lester Ward's justification of state intervention on the grounds that Nature's instinctive or "genic" activity had issued in the "telic" or consciously purposive character of social life, and that where the state has no function there is no integration.  

Avoiding the contradiction in Spencer between laissez faire and social organicism, Mumford holds that whereas laissez faire is inorganic, reducing society to warring atoms, the organic society is necessarily cooperative and integrated.

Mumford's and Geddes's attack on laissez faire and social competition testifies to their indebtedness to John Ruskin's organicism. Although Ruskin rejected the "biological revolution," he had a keen eye for natural forms and processes. Not only does he describe all organic beings as ruled by the "Law of Help," he thinks of nature as an ecological, synergetic system of self-limiting interdependences. As nature is composed of helpful, functioning parts, so Ruskin's ideal society is an organic hierarchy whose members function for the good of the whole; and just as God rules nature, so society requires a directive authority. Ruskin's extraction of hierarchical values from a divinely ordered nature raises a question to be considered later, that is, whether organicism necessarily leads to a static and repressive social vision.

For Ruskin as for Mumford the ideal person is interdisciplinary and multioccupational—capable of harmonizing mental and manual labor, theory and practice. As the teacher's aim is the "wholeness" and "balance" of the individual, he necessarily pursues an "organic approach to knowledge." Hence the centrality of craft for both writers, as this unsystematic activity integrates and expresses man's total being. Every human action is to be judged ethically, within a normative "hierarchy" of needs and purposes. Both writers lament that technology (not to be confused with techne or craft) and the division of labor have separated intellectual and practical life, sacrificed values to technique, and given rise to deadening professionalism. Mumford's and Ruskin's call for a return to craft signifies not reactionary aestheticism but the awareness that art—with its sensuous, synthetic, hence "organic" forms, and capacity to

17 Mumford, Sketches, 43, 330; Patrick Geddes, John Ruskin, Economist (Edinburgh, 1888), passim.
express the inner world—had been devalued under quantifying technology. Just as their interdisciplinary pedagogy counteracts specialization, so their interdisciplinary methods point towards an organic synthesis of knowledge.\(^\text{20}\)

Ruskin was indebted to classical Greek economics and held that economics is organically subordinated to social, political, and moral issues. Rejecting the abstract jargon of nineteenth-century economic orthodoxy, he denounced laissez faire as anti-social and purposeless while calling for an end to the competitive and exploitative wage-system. For him *homo economicus* was a capitalist myth. Although somewhat unfair to the orthodox economists, Ruskin realized that their emphasis on production, exchange, and private acquisition had fostered the popular confusion of money with real values, social “illth” with genuine wealth.\(^\text{21}\) Society had forgotten that wealth is “intrinsic,” valuable not by market estimations but only in satisfying human needs. Thus Ruskin gives a literally organicist interpretation to economic value. As “the true veins of wealth” are “in Flesh” so there is, as he writes in *Unto this Last*, “no wealth but life.”\(^\text{22}\) Whereas orthodox or “scarcity” economists thought that Nature’s “parsimony” could be temporarily overcome only by saving, labor, and production, Ruskin foresaw industrial abundance and argued that production achieves its “perfection” in consumption of high quality, which includes cultural and social satisfactions. Ruskin’s vision of abundance accords with his belief in nature’s creative bounty, while his integrated view of the economy, expressed through organic analogies, evokes his ecology.\(^\text{23}\)

“There is no wealth but life”: for Mumford and Geddes this is Ruskin’s central statement.\(^\text{24}\) Mumford claims that the abstractions of Victorian economists had little connection with the real needs, interests, and habits of human society. They had substituted monetary for vital use values, the cost of labor theory for the more accurate theory of intrinsic value. Mocking “Economic Man” as a mere abstraction, Mumford notes that in the nineteenth century the supposed “iron law” of wages had reduced labor to the subsistence level and that adequate housing remains almost impossible under unregulated capitalism. Not only does Mumford use Ruskin’s term “illth” to characterize products in which pecuniary considerations banish organic ones (as in the adulteration of food), but he argues as Ruskin does that the worth of any product must be weighed against the human cost—in life and limb—of producing it. Whereas Ricardo and Marx identified value with productive labor, Mumford traces it to abundant nature and


defines it as the “life function[s]” of certain things, their power to foster vitality. According to Mumford, Ruskin anticipated Geddes’s “biotechnic” order, and Geddes rightly interprets Ruskin’s idea of intrinsic value in caloric terms. The new economy should aim at a living wage, good and plentiful food, a sound environment, and cultural advantages.25

Although Ruskin is sometimes seen as an unwitting father of the welfare state, his advocacy of planning was equivocal, for he feared monistic collectivized engineering over a variety of corporate institutions.26 Mumford and Geddes similarly prefer to invest their reformist hopes not in bureaucracy but in individuals, voluntary associations, and existing urban structures. Their fear of the state is grounded in Geddes’s distinction between closed or mechanical and open or organic plans. Typifying what Mumford terms the “fallacy of systems,” the closed plan is imposed upon reality ab extra and thus “neglect[s] the varied factors that belong to life by reason of its complex needs and organic purposes.” In contrast, the open plan accepts that life “cannot be reduced” to a system, for its essence is process not static perfection.27 The distinction between closed and open plans calls to mind Coleridge’s (and Ruskin’s) antithesis (deriving from German Naturphilosophie) between the mechanical form imposed upon a material ab extra, without regard for its properties, and the organic form which shapes itself from within, and which is more than a collection of individual parts.28 No merely ideal construct, the open plan works patiently and “cooperatively” with pre-existent materials, with local individuals and associations, “perhaps guiding them, but first . . . understanding their purposes.” As open plans accommodate slow growth and new responses, they permit life to achieve dynamic balance and more subtle and complex richness of form.29 Nonetheless, one sees a tension in Mumford’s thought between the attractions of planning and the values of growth, change, and spontaneity.

By 1900 Spencer’s organicism was under attack. Not only had Spencer presented a multitude of arbitrary analogies between Nature and society, but he and his followers had neglected the differences between biological and social systems. Mumford “rule[s] out false biological analogies between societies and organisms,” adding that Spencer and others had “pushed these to the point of absurdity.” Rejecting “organismic” theories,
which, to quote Russett, “express a literal analogy between society and physical organisms and [are] couched in biological terminology,” Mumford favors an “organic” theory of society, focusing largely on social psychology.30

Nonetheless, Mumford’s organicism depends on at least one analogy between natural and social life. He and Geddes extend the Aristotelian assumption that organisms instinctively (hence purposively) control their growth and thus find their ecological niche. Any society or city must likewise achieve an internal “dynamic equilibrium” lest it grow too large and disintegrate from within. This requires self-limitation and interdependence among its parts, which, as in the case of neighborhoods, resemble cells or organs. To define the city one looks for its “organizing nucleus,” geographical and man-made “boundaries,” “subsidiary centers for association and communication,” “groups and institutions.” But man must also realize the ecological truth that city and countryside are properly a single unit existing in a good “symbiosis,” neither dominating the other.31 Mumford accordingly condemns what Geddes terms “conurbation,” the uncontrolled metropolitan expansion into the countryside. For Geddes, London is a “vast irregular growth”; for Mumford, it is an ameboid aggregation of “urban granules.”32

Another astonishing flaw became apparent in Spencerian organicism by the turn of the century: the failure to show how the individual and society are organically connected. Especially dissatisfying was Spencer’s identification of solidarity with functional or economic interdependence, mere mechanical connections rather than shared values.33 Challenging Spencer, the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley argued that self and social process are psychological, and that the self is a product of society. The “social self” originates in the communal context of the “primary group,” namely family, neighborhood, playground, and school, which are the basis for socialization and all other cooperative interactions. Society’s “organic” bonds are not analyzable in terms of organic analogies or mechanical structures but in observable psychic and symbolic interactions and the shared values arising from them. Cooley emphasized, though, that the individual is properly in dialectical balance with society rather than submerged in it.34 Contributing to a major shift from the biological view of society to social psychology, Cooley belonged to an

30 Mumford, The Culture, 303; Russett, The Concept, 67n.
31 Mumford, The City, 52, 53, 93, 184.
33 Jean Quandt, From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Intellectuals (New Brunswick, 1970), 17, 24, 28, 57-58, 87, 171n.
American "communitarian" movement which included John Dewey, Josiah Royce, James Mark Baldwin, George Herbert Mead, and Jane Addams, all of whom emphasized the social self and the importance of the social in understanding human nature. 35 In part the importance of the theory of the primary group is that, contrary to Spencer, it emphasized cooperation rather than competition as the basis for society. But even more important—insofar as this concept enabled Cooley, Baldwin, and subsequently Mumford to define a supposedly normal and universal humanity in its fundamental and timeless situation—it provided a fixed social and even political standard for evaluating institutions and hence a means of escaping the relativism typical of the evolutionary point of view. 36

Cooley, Dewey, Robert Park, and other communitarians knew that their social categories resembled those of European thinkers: Henry Sumner Maine, who distinguished between societies of status and modern ones of contract; Georg Simmel, who examined the effect of the metropolis on mental life; and especially Ferdinand Tönnies, who distinguished Gemeinschaft from Gesellschaft. The first is the organic, familial, cooperative, and culturally integrated society of the agrarian village; the second, the atomized and artificial society of the modern city, with its division of labor, markets, state bureaucracy, and class conflict. 37 But whereas in Tönnies the medieval community is a "given" unity of wills into which one is born, the American communitarians were democratic and, like Mumford, stressed voluntary associations. They identified the organic community with the small town or city constituted by such primary groups as family, neighborhood, and school. They admired its face-to-face relations, participatory politics, and local autonomy. Notwithstanding social differences, the free mingling of classes in social and political life permitted the development of common values. As these communities were comparatively undifferentiated socially and economically, craft prevailed over industrial specialization and a common culture existed. 38

Not only does Mumford accept Cooley's view of the self as a product of social interaction but he believes that self and society are fundamentally psychic constructs. Hence his (and Geddes's) insistence on participatory social drama and symbolism. According to Mumford, Romanticism erred in emphasizing antisocial subjectivity, as did Burckhardt in praising Renaissance individualism over medieval corporatism. Citing Cooley, Mumford observes that "Gemeinschaft" originates in the "primary group, with

37 Morton White and Lucia White, The Intellectual versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 146, 156, 158, 164; Quandt, From the Small Town, 17; Ferdinand Tönnies, Fundamental Concepts of Sociology, tr. Charles F. Loomis (New York, 1940), passim.
38 Quandt, From the Small Town, 5, 7, 8, and passim.
its spontaneous, instinctual, largely ‘given’ relationships.” Here is another reason that societies must avoid becoming too large spatially or too populous, for though great numbers might seem to promote social intercourse, there is a “greater field for collective action in a village.” Seedbeds of local and thence wider community, neighborhoods deserve protection as fundamental social “cell[s]” and as a restraint on uncontrolled urban growth.39 Appreciating the political value of small associations, Mumford laments that the Founding Fathers failed to make the “democratic local unit the basic cell” of our whole system of government.40 So, too, he prefers comparatively undifferentiated societies in which, labor being only moderately divided, no major divisions exist between culture and society.

Mumford’s organicism is fed by several other American sources. In 1941 F. O. Matthiessen noted that Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman all identified the organic society with shared values and the “union” of labor and culture.41 But while Morton and Lucia White correctly link Mumford with Emerson’s organicism, which they trace to Coleridge, they mistakenly contend that Mumford shares Emerson’s anti-social love of Nature and solitude as well as his anti-urbanism.42 Actually, Mumford is not anti-urban but anti-megalopolitan; and whereas the radically individualistic Emerson (like his American Romantic colleagues) has no theory of society, Mumford does. At the same time, Mumford’s social organicism has affinities with Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne, and Waldo Frank, who were associated with the short-lived magazine The Seven Arts. As Casey Blake observes, these writers dreamed of creating a new “post-industrial” community and a democratic culture grounded on an “organic ethos of mutuality.”43 Believing that the organic society requires cultural unity, they sought to close the division in America between high and low culture, between high-toned moral theory and daily practice. Yet Bourne died young, Brooks labored on what sometimes amounted to an historical fantasy of a harmonious early New England, and Frank ventured into mysticism. Mumford by contrast deepened his critical understanding of organicism through historical, scientific, sociological, and anthropological research.

Thorstein Veblen, with whom Mumford studied, was of major importance to the development of his social organicism. Mumford accepts Veblen’s description of neolithic “savagery” as idyllic if not utopian. In both writers the neolithic village signifies communal values, a human scale,

40 Mumford, The Urban, 224.
42 White and White, The Intellectual, 24-35, 204-8, 228, 235-36.
collective or "democratic" participation, equality between men and women, agrarianism, and an "instinct of workmanship" whereby each person produces his share for the general welfare. Without private property—and hence free from parasitism, emulative competition, and predation—the peaceful neolithic village esteems women for the gentle arts of nurture and cultivation. Just as the functional participation of individuals prevents class conflict, so productivity dispels scarcity. Veblen thus deplored the defeat of neolithic culture by "barbarism" as represented by competitive warrior aristocracies avid of private property and contemptuous of productive work. Gradually the neolithic village gives way to the city, with its class divisions, priestly secrecy, and alienating scale. Similarly, for the later Mumford the morbid form of post-neolithic civilization is the urban "megamachine," with its regimented urban masses dominated by an exploitative aristocracy and a priesthood bent on imperial expansion. To be sure, Veblen does not envision a return to the neolithic village, and Mumford criticizes it as being too static, tribal, closed; yet they hope to revive its long perverted or suffocated "instincts" in an industrial setting, while Mumford insists that all healthy neighborhoods continue the neolithic pattern. Indeed, what David Noble says of Veblen applies to Mumford: the neolithic village corresponds to the primary group and stands as the basic and "unconquerable" social unit, the measure of the universally human. So long as this pattern exists, whether in a primitive or urban setting, there remains the possibility of returning to "normative" humanity.

For both Veblen and Mumford, "barbarism" prefigures inorganic social relations under capitalism. The dominance of a parasitic upper class, descendant of the exploitative warrior aristocracies and comparable to what Veblen describes as a "tumor" on the body of society, has resulted in the general devaluation of productive work in favor of conspicuous waste and leisure. Confusing money values with real wealth, capitalism sacrifices production and the instinct of workmanship to the pecuniary interests of businessmen and financiers. Yet Veblen believed that neolithic values might be recovered if the economy were taken over by an elite of engineers who, somewhat like Frederick Taylor's efficiency experts, would direct the industrial plant not for private profit but efficiently and productively. Veblen realized, though, that this possibility was highly unlikely.


Much of Veblen’s critique reappears in Mumford: the dissociation of pecuniary values from productivity; the ideal of a functional and hence non-class producer’s society, for which American history affords many analogues (the Populists, the Knights of Labor, Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*); and the concept of technocracy, to which Mumford was drawn in the 1930s. But there is no perfect congruity between these writers, for Veblen’s social organicism is impoverished, cramped, and imbalanced by comparison with Mumford’s richly varied orchestrations of human need. Although Veblen sometimes identifies the instinct of workmanship with a gratuitous “play” instinct, his Malthusian fear of scarcity leads him more generally to define it in terms of a parsimonious and impersonal productive efficiency. The same value underlies Veblen’s puritanical disparagement of ritual, ceremony, drama, indeed of all cultural symbolism as wasteful ornament, invidious self-advertisement. As David Riesman notes, Veblen’s obsession with productivity issues in a conception of social organization similar to that of Edward Bellamy: centralized administration, elimination of competition as wasteful, the adaptation of society to industrial organization. For all his praise of the instinct of workmanship, Veblen expected humanity to submit to the machine and was so impressed by its modern ascendency that he tended to identify it with the social process itself. Given this onesided emphasis on technocracy and the machine, Veblen cannot really be considered a social organicist. By contrast, Mumford’s social thought reflects his assumption of natural abundance and superfluity. Despite his overestimation of aesthetic functionalism in the 1930s, the later Mumford recognizes the claims not only of play but of self-expression and symbolic ornament in art and architecture, just as he emphasizes the social efficacy of drama and ritual. Again, reacting to the Depression, Mumford is overly preoccupied with industrial productivity in the 1930s, yet on the whole he is highly critical of those who, like Edward Bellamy and most modern utopians, believe a one-sided concern with industrial efficiency or machinery holds the solution to all social problems.

Mumford’s appeal to neotechnic precedents reflects his assumption that man’s historical evolution holds the secret of bedrock human nature. Yet even more than the neolithic, Mumford’s preferred societies are the Greek *polis* and the medieval town or city. He praises these communities for their small scale, social intimacy, economic interdependence with the countryside, and slow, purposive, adaptive growth within “organic limits” and the open plan. Comparatively casteless and unspecialized, Greek


and medieval society enjoyed flourishing craft traditions whereby the individual acquired the broad outlook necessary for social and—especially in the case of the *polis*—political participation. Inseparable from political and religious life, Greek and medieval art formed part of the everyday social environment, so that culture and society were intertwined. At the same time, the economy in both instances was “organically” embedded in society. Like Ruskin, Mumford unfavorably contrasts the modern emphasis on exchange value, laissez faire, accumulation, and competition to the Greek and medieval concern for use value, distribution, social function, and economic cooperation.\(^{49}\)

But rather than defining the *polis* as his social ideal, Mumford criticizes it for accepting slavery and the subjection of women as well as for clinging to autarchic, tribal values. Plato and Aristotle should have “moralized,” not condemned, commerce. Nor is it true, as Peter Firchow claims, that Mumford’s utopia is the Middle Ages; for Mumford contends that Renaissance capitalism and individualism at first provided a necessary corrective to medieval otherworldliness and traditionalism.\(^{50}\) No less dubious is Meyer Schapiro’s assertion that medieval authoritarianism constitutes Mumford’s social ideal.\(^{51}\) This is not to deny that Mumford’s view of the Middle Ages owes something not just to Geddes, Kropotkin, and Morris but to a conservative Romantic tradition which included Coleridge, Cobbett, Southey, Pugin, Carlyle, and Ruskin. Idealizing the Middle Ages as an authoritarian, hierarchical society united by traditional bonds of loyalty and obedience as opposed to cash or contract, these writers thought of it as a true community because it seemed to consist not of hostile classes but of functional ranks, each within an organic, corporate whole.\(^{52}\) But while Mumford offers a version of social functionalism, he interprets the Middle Ages in democratic rather than in authoritarian or hierarchical terms. He happily notes that the medieval state was weak, that the polyn- technic tradition of the Middle Ages was “democratic” in its avoidance of monopolizable fuels and tools, and that medieval guilds achieved—besides social participation—a measure of self-government and self-protection. Although Mumford admits that feudal oppressions existed, he finds them mitigated by reciprocities among the classes.\(^{53}\)

\(^{49}\) For Mumford on the Greeks, see *The Story*, 40-41; *The City*, 124-33, 165, 168, 183-86. For Mumford on the Middle Ages, see *The City*, 248-328; *The Condition*, 108, 161, 163.


Yet the *polis* and the medieval city might seem almost ideal by comparison with modern urban America. Imbued with the ideal of life as a unified whole, Jane Addams and other communitarians saw that the division of labor had eclipsed craftsmanship, sundered theoretical and practical education, intellectual and manual labor, and spatially segregated social classes. Here are grounds for Dewey's repudiation of exclusively literary culture and Addams's and Geddes's conviction of the inadequacy of the three R's and purely vocational training. The communitarians also saw that older neighborhoods and institutions had deteriorated amid the growth of urban mass society. Formerly the basis of community, the primary groups had yielded to more impersonal "secondary groups": the factory, the office, the courts, the police, and the press. Increasingly in the modern metropolis one's sense of community depended on remote mechanical devices, while democracy was reduced to strained identification with representative bodies and a bureaucratic state. Even small towns and regions—Josiah Royce's building blocks of national community—were becoming appendages of metropolises.54

Reiterating this communitarian critique, Mumford observes that the American colonial village broke up when trade led to physical expansion, wider contacts, and the dwindling of "common concerns." He traces this fragmentation to the extreme division of labor under capitalism, allied with technology and the militaristic state. The balanced personality of the craftsman could not survive the separation of mental from manual skills and the overliterary emphasis of upper class education, which intensified social segregation. Meanwhile the city grew so large that face-to-face relations declined along with the family, neighborhood, and region. As the unity of mass society was at best the mechanical product of mediating devices such as the press and radio, the citizen became a vicarious spectator and consumer of mere information. Political bureaucracies proliferated, since the big city could no longer function on the older, more intimate communal basis.55

The best-known of the communitarian reforms is the settlement house and in particular Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago, whose purpose was to provide a social, cultural, and educational center in slum areas. Addams, Cooley, and John Dewey also saw the school as a means of combating industrial specialization while fostering democratic values and primary group relations. Although the communitarians partly blamed modern communications and technology for the loss of community,


Dewey, Veblen, Cooley, and Park also welcomed them as a means of
restoring it. Like Cooley, Dewey claimed that the proper use of modern
communications should extend the primary group to the larger society
and thus enhance democracy. According to Park, the press cannot substi-
tute for the older community but can connect groups.56
As late as 1962 Mumford observes that “We shall never . . . [deal]
effectively with . . . large units and differentiated groups, unless . . . we
rebuild and revitalize the small unit.” An enthusiast (like Geddes) of
the settlement house and its founders Canon Barnett and Jane Addams,
Mumford also celebrates Clarence Perry, who conceived of the commu-
nity center.57 Lest the sprawling modern city become “Parasitopolis,” a
bloated, dysfunctional, and inorganic entity, Mumford and Geddes pro-
pose to implement Ebenezer Howard's small-scale, low-density garden
cities. Conceived on an open plan, these would transplant excessive urban
populations within a natural environment while contributing to regional
decentralization.58 Mumford agrees with Dewey and Geddes that work
should balance intellectual and manual labor, literacy and practical
knowledge; yet a “common curriculum” is also needed in order to promote
communal values. Ideally such reforms will result in informed political
participation, so that politics will be a “constant . . . process in daily
living.”59 Mumford also frequently contends in the 1930s that modern
communications has the potential to restore immediacy, intimacy, and
face-to-face encounters, while in 1951 he anticipates McLuhan's dubious
claim that electronic media are creating a global village.60
Mumford and the communitarians were excessively optimistic, as most
of their proposed reforms had at best partial success. After World War
II sociologists accepted that “society is a spatial but not a spiritual commu-
nity,” and that “interdependence exists without individual identification
with the whole.”61 Just as Addams was merely dreaming to think that
arts and crafts could counteract the division of labor, so Cooley and
Dewey failed to reconcile creativity with the reality of industrial machin-
ery.62 Having placed too much faith in the new media, which were neither
art nor dialogue, the communitarians saw their hopes for democracy

56 Quandt, From the Small Town, 29, 33, 51, 58, 59, 62, 66, 67, 71, 75, 101-16, 137,
140; White and White, The Intellectual, 152-53, 159-61, 170-72; Cohen, Charles Horton
Cooley, 69, 183-84, 200, 224, 226.
57 Mumford, The Urban Prospect, 18, 36, 62, 64, 66-67; Mumford, The City, 500.
58 Patrick Geddes, Patrick Geddes: Spokesman for Man and the Environment, ed. M.
59 Mumford, Values, 163, 165, 178, 213; Mumford, The Culture, 382.
60 Mumford, Technics, 239-41; Mumford, The Conduct, 238.
(New York, 1927), 98; Cohen, Charles Horton Cooley, 229; White and White, The Intellec-
tual, 234-35.
62 Quandt, From the Small Town, 92, 95, 96, 97, 202n.
likewise derailed by bureaucratic resistance in parties and states and also by the citizens’ neglect of their responsibilities. In appealing to education for citizenship as a main source of social reform they miscalculated the irresistible rise of specialization while succumbing to circular logic: to bring about the new educational system, institutions already had to possess the values the system was intended to produce.63

There is, however, less justification for other criticisms which—having been levelled against Mumford’s predecessors and colleagues among the American communitarians (whether progressive or social democratic)—also extend to Mumford himself. Although the communitarians thought of themselves as liberal reformists, some critics have sought reasons to charge them with being essentially conservative. An exemplar of “sociological functionalism,” which emphasizes interdependence between society and the individual, Cooley insisted that even if one fails to grasp society as an orderly, equilibrated whole, it always remains one.64 The other communitarians’ social organicism similarly cut across political divisions thanks to their bias towards harmony and unity, interaction and adjustment. Tending, as Cooley did, to assume that each individual is a social microcosm, they espoused not a class but a functional theory of society in which groups and individuals work adaptively with the rest and in which reconciliation and slow development are preferred to group conflict and revolutionary change. The communitarians’ idealist bias encouraged them to dismiss materialist arguments for social change as one-sided. All this supposedly explains their conservative fear of social struggle, which violated their ideal of association, and their timidity in political reform, as they feared the state as inorganic. Instead, they sought to reduce social impersonality through such methods of social control as “psychic improvements” in the workplace and the transformation of values in education.65

On different lines James B. Gilbert has launched an indiscriminate attack against early twentieth-century and especially post-World War II social reformers, many of whom were progressive, social democratic, and Reform Darwinist communitarians who influenced Mumford. Like Jean Quandt, Gilbert holds that their excessive love of harmony and equilibrium issued in an ideology intolerant of class division and social conflict and thus in favor of psychic improvements and other middle-class palliatives. He has only contempt for the settlement house and the emphasis

65 For this critique, see Quandt, From the Small Town, 28, 129, 131-39, 186n, 214-15n; Cohen, Charles Horton Cooley, 179.
on education as a means of reform. But unlike Quandt, Gilbert holds that this ideology was anti-democratic and anti-regionalist, since it aimed at the subordination of the individual to the social whole.

Casting a wide net, Gilbert portrays these reforming intellectuals as the architects of a centralizing state collectivism with a paternalistic, welfare emphasis, in which an elite of technocratic experts and bureaucrats—the reformers themselves—were to play an indispensable role as large-scale planners. Veblen is one of many examples. Greatly influenced by Edward Bellamy, these collectivists believed that, just as modern society should imitate industrial organization, so the state should pattern itself on the new model of the modern commercial corporation. The goal was to integrate individuals within the industrial and economic system and to direct them in the sole interest of production and efficiency. To this end they sought to manipulate the worker and the work situation by means of industrial psychology through the new techniques of scientific management and industrial psychology devised by Frederick Taylor and Elton Mayo. Not only did Mayo believe with Taylor that the "science of human relations" could harmonize the interests of labor and management, he believed that it could achieve the recovery of the primary group in the workplace. Under the collectivists' scheme the state was falsely conceived as the objective embodiment of the community, hence dedicated to administrative or civic "service" rather than to the support of privileged class interests or the extension of its own power. As for society, they understood it in terms not of competing classes but of functional groups of producers defined entirely by their work. Finally, Gilbert holds that this kind of collectivism—functional, managerial, non-participatory, and state socialist—is the logical result of the application of the impossibly vague organic or "biological" metaphor of society, which conceals class conflicts while promoting collectivist results advertised as true communalism.66

Although Gilbert has documented well the movement toward collectivism in the 1920s, his criticisms are largely unfair to Mumford's colleagues. Again like Quandt, Gilbert seems to think that if a writer is not revolutionary, materialist, skeptical of all class cooperation, and radically anti-capitalist, he is necessarily a conservative or proto-fascist. Admittedly, the reconciliation of the individual and the social was a lasting problem for the progressives and social democrats (as for many others). Yet however much they emphasized social harmony, they never did so to the point of absorbing the individual within the group or state.

Baldwin, Cooley, and Herbert Croly are paradigmatic examples, insisting that the individual ideally remains at once social and morally autonomous. This viewpoint is inseparable from the communitarians' democratic concept of participatory, pragmatic experiment toward open-ended social change—not a static but a dynamic equilibrium allowing for differences between individuals and groups and thus a degree of conflict. Hence the communitarians' emphasis, however misguided, on communications to enlarge awareness. Far from being authoritarian, paternalistic collectivists, these reformers felt the irreconcilable modern tension between bureaucratic centralization and democratic, localistic freedom. Rejecting Hegel's conservative emphasis on the superiority of the state to the individual, they insisted upon both the educative, disciplinary role of groups and the creative, critical role of the responsible individual. Their "sociology of freedom," as David Noble puts it, in no sense accepts the status quo as the best possible social arrangement but rather evaluates the present in the light of an ideal harmony of wills. Accordingly they rejected laissez faire and conceived of the state as the embodiment of communal ethics. Although they recognized the necessity for experts, they thought of them not as usurping democracy or creating values but as advising and providing information. Instead of extolling social control, they viewed efficiency experts as instrumentalists without values. Although they believed that welfare reform pointed in the direction of a more socialized "service" state, they also saw paternalism as a threat to freedom. Fearful of subsuming functional groups under state socialism, they refused to stress functions or duties at the expense of rights and indeed envisioned (as did the Guild Socialists) self-government in industry. They differed in their attitudes toward private property, yet they generally distinguished between property for use and property for power. If they sought to regulate rather than to command capitalism, they did so in order to avoid the potentially greater evil of state dominance through ownership of industry and property. And finally, these reformers rejected onesided materialist ideologies because they understood that cultural values and education are essential to voluntary and lasting social change, that neither revolution nor machinery is sufficient to foster public virtue: an idealist position which, like most of their ideas, resembles Mumford's.67

What then of Mumford's alleged conservatism, reaction, and even

67 This paragraph is indebted to Noble, The Paradox, 72-73, 92-95, 106-7; Jandy, Charles Horton Cooley, 182-87; and especially Kloppenberg, Uncertain Victory, 148, 254-56, 267-68, 271-72, 349-61, 373, 381-84, 391, 396-97, 400, 401, 402, 411, 502n. Suggesting that the progressivists and communitarians avoided collectivism partly because they rejected social organicism, Kloppenberg seems to accept the common assumption, which Mumford aims to disprove, that organicist theories are inherently collectivist and authoritarian. Actually, some of the writers Kloppenberg admires were social organicists; but like Mumford they sought an organicism that avoided a repressive collectivism.
crypto-fascism? Mumford prefers to think of society not as divided into antagonistic groups but as a comparatively integrated and cooperative whole. “Unity,” he writes, “underlies even conflicts between the dominant forces of society, since each resolution of thesis and antithesis in turn produces a synthesis which reconciles their claims in a new emergent pattern.” Marx’s belief that class conflict determines historical change is thus for Mumford a betrayal of Hegel’s emphasis on reconciliation, reciprocity, mutuality, and the “organic unity of natural and social processes.” Dismissing the “utopia of the partisan” as a “fetish,” Mumford denies that the only fundamental modern problem is the “labor problem” and that its cure lies in the ownership of production by a group or class. In no sense an “organic entity” or “true social group,” the proletariat amounts to “arbitrary collections of individuals” unified not by “common functions”—as in craftsmen of the same guild—but by a “common collective symbol of loyalty and hate.” Mumford’s alternative is a functional society in which all “non-parasitic” economic groups are harmonized within what some might view as the inherently repressive and dishonest category of “producer.” Despite some revolutionary-sounding pronouncements in the 1930s, Mumford is no revolutionary. Reminiscent of Geddes’s hero Carlyle, Mumford’s principle of “organic filiation” enables him to view social history as a continuous development similar to organic life.

It is a mistake, though, to suppose that Mumford shares the desire of many conservatives for a static, authoritarian, or self-identical social harmony. His ideal, like Cooley’s, is always a “dynamic equilibrium” of diverse elements. Never does he stress mutualities or the functional integration of groups to the point of conceiving any society as perfectly harmonious or immune to conflict or change: the “various elements in a civilization are never in complete equilibrium,” for there is always a “tug and pull of . . . life-destroying functions and the life-conserving ones.” Mumford often questions not simply whether a society can achieve the perfection of a normative totality—in short, a utopia—but whether it ought to want to do so. As for the idea of the individual as a social microcosm, which implies the perfect harmony between inner and outer, and which some communitarians assumed, Mumford espouses it in his Emersonian moments yet realizes that even in handicraft periods the division of labor prevented its fulfilment. Mumford’s distance from bureaucratic collectivism can be inferred from his critique of Spencer’s defi-

---

69 Mumford, The Conduct, 224-25.
70 Mumford, The Story, 240, 245; Mumford, Technics, 191.
72 Mumford, Technics, 64.
nition of life as the "continuous adjustment" of inner to external relations. Mumford adds the potentially democratic principle that the organism must also shape its environment according to its inner needs. Although attracted to social functionalism and the concept of positive liberty, Mumford’s refusal to stress social obligations over the rights of individuals and groups is sufficient to dissociate him from fascist corporatism. Likewise his organicist insistence on the relative autonomy of regions and social institutions is an attempt to mediate democratically between state power and the individual.

Yet it is not altogether incomprehensible that Mumford has been accused of authoritarianism and bureaucratic conservatism, since he was, for at least a decade, tempted by something resembling managerial collectivism. During the 1930s, the decade of Technics and Civilization and The Culture of Cities, Mumford advocated a planned economy, regulation, and even nationalization of land use, and the creation of a "service" or welfare state as an alternative to the power state of preceding periods. Profoundly impressed by the Soviet Union, Mumford asserts the "collective" interest and the "collective" will. Despite his insistence on democratic participation, regional autonomy, and regional federalism, Mumford’s massive enterprise requires a high degree of centralized, bureaucratic control—not open but closed planning. Just as a "bolder social economy will touch every aspect of the industrial complex," so it is necessary to "rationalize industry organically, ... with reference to the entire social situation." Notwithstanding the organicist rhetoric, this is a formula for bureaucracy. Like Veblen and Gilbert’s collectivists, Mumford is drawn to technocracy, envisioning a "well-managed society" under the supervision of experts in "human engineering." When he refers to "intelligent social control," it is unclear whether society is the controlling agent or the controlled subject. For all his disdain of Bellamyite utopias militaristically organized and onesidedly focused on industrial production, during this period Mumford fetishizes productivity and efficiency and admires Frederick Taylor and Elton Mayo. As Casey Blake says, Mumford confused organicism with organization.

There is a further irony. Although Mumford’s major works of the 1930s disprove the theory of technological determinism and although he insists that technology is properly subordinate to social values, uses, and ends, the machine stands at the center of his vision of social reconciliation. Mumford argues that the environmentally destructive industry of the

73 Mumford, The Culture, 322; Mumford, The Conduct, 36.
74 Mumford, Technics, 380, 383, 403, 417; Mumford, The Culture, 348.
75 Mumford, The Culture, 375, 377, 380; Mumford, Technics, 390, 413.
76 Mumford, Technics, 404, 411.
nineteenth century is being replaced by more efficient and flexible “neo-technic” inventions such as steel, aluminum, electricity, the dynamo, the airplane, and the automobile. Tending inherently toward social interconnections, regionalism, and “basic communism,” these machines, once placed in the hands of engineers and freed from wasteful capitalist canons (as Veblen too had hoped) must virtually achieve what amounts to a biotechnic utopia.

Mumford’s utopia of the 1930s suggests some of the dangers Karl Popper claims to find in all organicist and utopian thinking. Identifying organicism with the utopian impulse totally to recast society in contrast with patient, liberal, piecemeal improvement, Popper argues that the wholesale application of the organic metaphor leads to regimentation, hierarchy, authoritarian elitism, and the sacrifice of the individual to the collective. The first architect of the closed society was Plato, who feared change and loved permanence. Admiring the organic body as a fixed hierarchy (reason, emotion, vegetable nature), he sought to model society upon the body but so rigidly as to arrest the organic tendency to growth and decay. As there is nothing comparable to class conflict in an organism, so there is no class conflict in an organic society. Each group has its place and function, being governed by a technocratic elite of guardians trained in wisdom. Ironically, the organic society or at least Popper’s version of it leads to mechanical rigidity and control—a pattern fulfilled, incidentally, in Carlyle and Ruskin.

Even into the 1950s Mumford sometimes envisions cultural regeneration as resulting from messianic inspiration or a humanistic priesthood. Since it claims cultural expertise for itself, this body seems inorganic, and its members might become Stalinesque “engineers of souls.” During this decade Mumford is still fascinated by industrial management and by social projects that must involve large scale, centralized planning. However, by the 1960s he rejects technocracy and sees utopias as inherently totalitarian, static, and mechanical—an argument Popper may have influenced. But unlike Popper, Mumford does not reject organicism as inherently utopian and totalitarian. He holds that when Plato attempted to create his organic society, his inadequate concept of the organic led him to mechanism. Unlike Aristotle, whose method resembled that of a gardener or experimental biologist, the mathematizing Plato never asked himself whether “perfection . . . was in fact an attribute of organic life.” Instead of cooperating with Nature, this “button-molder” simplified life after a “geometric absolute.” Sacrificing the individual to the group, he falsely deduced

79 Karl Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies (Princeton, 1963), 1: 12, 18, 20, 21, 36, 40, 50-51, 56, 70, 77, 80, 100, 103, 141, 166, 173, 262n.
class inequality and vocational specialization from individuals' unequal talents. Mumford now decisively identifies it with qualities amenable to open plans: spontaneity, patience, immanent development, voluntary participation, and cooperation.

Mumford's attack on utopianism parallels his decisive devaluation of the role of machinery in shaping the organic community. Although he does not deny the usefulness of neotechnic inventions, he refuses to emphasize them onesidedly, and indeed he acknowledges their role in increasing conurbation and social disorder. There is, says Mumford, no mechanical device capable of effecting a moral "transformation" among individuals, and mere mechanical progress will not automatically improve man's estate. Whereas in the 1930s Mumford had greeted neotechnic communications with excessive enthusiasm, in 1945 he deplores reliance on communications technology as a substitute for morality and higher goals. Notwithstanding his admission in 1967 of the unlikely possibility that modern technology may help to restore the organic city, in 1970 he excoriates McLuhan's idea of the global village. Yet if renewal depends on neither the state nor technocracy nor machinery, on what does it depend? Mumford appeals in great part to the inward realm of ethics, morality, religion, poetry, and craft, to those few individuals who, having resisted the industrial, bureaucratized, and specialized world, are capable of rejecting its conformist mechanisms and automatisms. The first step toward renewal is the recovery of "inner autonomy"—the autonomy, however, not of the nineteenth-century liberal theorist's atomized individual but of a responsible and socialized moral agent. In accordance with Mumford's assumption of the social self, the next step is the "return to the group," the gathering of like-minded individuals in small associated nuclei. Here one sees the importance of William Morris to the later Mumford, for Morris espoused neither reaction ary medievalism nor collectivism but a guild-type socialism based on voluntary associations and local needs. Like Mumford, Morris places his hopes on human traits that are "still active," in families, communities, institutions, and individuals. As for the machine, Morris inspires Mumford's argument that it should be used chiefly to eliminate drudgery and to make room for those handicraft arts which, for Mumford, are the guarantee of autonomy.

Yet these projects were complicated by the realities of post-war society

81 Mumford, The City, 174, 177, 183, 184.
82 Mumford, The Conduct, 4-5.
84 Mumford, The Conduct, 255, 274.
85 Mumford, The Pentagon, 155, 156, 355-56.
and by Mumford's mounting pessimism toward technology in the 1950s and 1960s. In his earlier works Mumford had identified modern technology primarily with the machine. Now, like his great rival Jacques Ellul, Mumford sees it as an interlocking system of machines, techniques, bureaucrats, armies, scientific and administrative elites—a "megamachine" made up of inorganic and human components. Moreover, although Mumford had earlier rejected the theory of autonomous technology as an explanation of Western development, his later writings come close to Ellul's thesis that everything in modern mass society has necessarily become situated in relation to technology and its impersonal values of efficiency and organized intelligence. At once purposeless, unpredictable, self-augmenting, morally indifferent, anti- or non-ideological, and ever encroaching, technology has in Ellul's view become autonomous.\(^{86}\) To be sure, Mumford had approached this position as early as 1934, in *Technics and Civilization*, referring to the social collectivism "imposed" by modern technics, and observing that machines tend to be used regardless of whether the situation demands it.\(^{87}\) But generally Mumford tended to think less in terms of a technological system than of individual machines whose value depends on their use—the banal defense of technology—and more particularly upon their liberation from capitalist canons. However, in the 1960s Mumford's outlook changes. Noting the increasing "narrowing" of choices to the technological, he fearfully suggests that man is integrated within a technological system which destroys all other alternatives. Just as the megamachine reduces democracy (and socialism) to an ideological masquerade, so the techniques of modern communication forestall dialogue. Indeed, how could the messiah now express his message except through technology? Like Ellul, Mumford fears that any attempt to resolve the social impasse must rely on technological solutions and must therefore reentrench the technology. To quote *The City in History*: "The very effort to escape from Megalopolis blocks all its roads. Nothing can happen in the new type of infra-urban society unless it can be done by mass organization," which inevitably implicates the machine.\(^{88}\)

The technological system confronts Mumford with other, no less severe difficulties. His hopes for the restoration of the organic community depend on the restoration of the human essence, which he defines in terms of the responses and above all the intelligent purposes humanity has developed through the evolutionary process and in its symbiotic transactions with the natural environment. It follows that to restore human nature the environment must also be restored. But as Ellul points out, technology no longer mediates Nature to man: it has replaced the natural

---


\(^{87}\) Mumford, *Technics*, 281, 240.

and thus imposed upon humanity unprecedented adaptations. Even worse, it allows neither the natural world to restore itself nor man to reestablish a symbiotic relation with it. 89 Although in *The Culture of Cities* Mumford had said that the "notion that modern technology has lessened the importance of the natural habitat is precisely the opposite of the truth," by the 1960s he acknowledges that organic forms are constantly being replaced by "ingenious mechanical . . . substitutes." 90 The gravest consequence of these developments is that, in fixing man within a foreign environment incommensurable with Nature, they render his evolutionary traits irrelevant to the urgent necessity either of adapting to or, what is less likely, of revolting against the technological system. It should be added that Mumford's appeal to humanity's evolutionarily acquired purposiveness as a final defense against technological deformations is based on a neo-Lamarckian teleology few scientists can now accept.

Nor are these Mumford's only difficulties. His faith in the recovery of the organic community stems from his profound belief in the continuity of human social history and in the capacity of history to yield insight into humanity's authentic social nature. The past teaches the lesson that the primary group is the vital nucleus and building block of an organic society saved from onesided mechanism. Ideally this group is made up of autonomous individuals—free moral agents capable of withdrawing from the group voluntarily (like good Emersonians) and of critically judging and even rebelling against the surrounding society. Appealing to the presumed transhistorical or at least post-neolithic reality of the primary group and the autonomous individual, Mumford likes to compare the present situation to ancient Rome, when scattered yet indestructible communities of disaffected individuals provided new sources of spiritual growth amid the death throes of the Roman bureaucracy. 91 According to Ellul, however, it is useless to look to the past for solutions to the technological society, which is incomparable to any past form of social organization, not even to Mumford's far more cumbersome Egyptian "megachine." Ellul further points out that in the past it was possible for the individual to withdraw to a place where technique did not intrude, whereas now he cannot escape. 92 One of the later Mumford's major contradictions lies in placing historical faith in the morally autonomous or spontaneous individual when (as Mumford often admits) technology has developed incomparably sophisticated methods for the shaping of the personality through propaganda (or advertising) and administrative routine, thus robbing most of humanity of genuine inwardness and subjectivity. So too, despite Mumford's appeal to the primary group, he admits that the neotechnic village

89 Ellul, *The Technological*, 63, 79.
92 Ellul, *The Technological*, 78.
Robert Casillo

is disappearing under the technological onslaught, and that everywhere the "safeguards" of the "rural and communal underlayer" have vanished.93 As these are not likely to be reconstructed, save by technology (perhaps as a sort of theme park), Mumford's last works, for all their intermittent optimism, leave one with a vision of the disappearance of man, of normative humanity—in short, of our postmodern, posthistoric condition.

University of Miami.

93 Mumford, The Pentagon, 346, 351.