

## THE NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ITS CULTURE

*Richard Sennett*

DEMOCRACY TODAY TAKES FORM within a public culture that is profoundly influenced by the new political economy. In this economy, work and place are changing in ways that a mere twenty years ago seemed unimaginable. In the 1970s, the great corporate bureaucracies and government hierarchies of the developed world appeared to be securely entrenched, the products of centuries of economic development and nation-building. Commentators used to speak of “late capitalism” or “mature capitalism” as though earlier forces of growth had somehow entered an end-game phase. But today, a new chapter has opened. The economy is global and makes use of new technology; mammoth government and corporate bureaucracies are becoming both more flexible and less secure institutions. As a result, the ways we work have altered: short-term jobs replace stable careers, skills rapidly evolve, and the middle class experiences anxieties and uncertainties more confined in an earlier era to the working classes.

Place has a different meaning now as well, in large part thanks to these economic changes. An earlier generation believed that nations—and within nations, cities—could govern their own fortunes. Now, the emerging economic network is less susceptible to

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the controls of geography. A divide has thus opened between polity—in the sense of self-rule—and economy. This then raises the question, where can democracy really happen? What interests me in particular is the dramatic impact that underlying economic conditions have on the pursuit of democracy in the postmodern community and the postmodern workplace.

I look at the practice of democracy not so much as a fixed set of procedural requirements, but as a process that needs to have certain kinds of symbolic markers and consummations that define where people are in relation to each other. In other words, all democratic processes need to culminate in symbolic forms that are provisional but defined. And one of the ways that the postmodern economy is challenging democracy has to do with the destruction of those sign posts, especially those sign posts that mark how people are to make sense of their lives in terms of place and time. Postmodernity has managed to challenge the notion that time should have a coherent, narrative shape—it has had a disorienting effect. The flexible economy has not only fragmented workers' lives, but also made it very difficult for workers to understand how the project of survival itself has a history in time.

How do we experience institutional changes in work and place and, more generally, changes in our concept of time as a cultural shift? Old Marxist notions, which argued that the economy directly represents itself in consciousness, will not serve us. Allow me to put forward instead two simple propositions that seem to be emerging at the end of the twentieth century.

First, today's material conditions are impoverishing the value of work. Flexible, short-term work is ceasing to serve as a point of reference for defining durable personal purposes and a sense of self-worth. Sociologically, work serves ever less as a forum for stable, sociable relations. Second, the value of place has thereby increased. The sense of place is based on the need to belong not to "society" in the abstract, but to somewhere in particular. As the shifting institutions of the economy diminish the experience of belonging some-

where special at work, people's commitments increase to geographic places like nations, cities, and localities. The question is: commitments of what sort? Nationalism or ethnic localism can indeed serve as defensive refuges against a hostile economic order, but at a steep human price, fostering hatred of immigrants or outsiders.

These two propositions might suggest an unrelievedly bleak view of the culture of the emerging political economy. But this is not my view. Work is a problematic frame for the self, since it tends to equate worldly success and personal worth. Of more civic consequence is the fact that troubled fortunes might actually induce people to see themselves as other than economic animals. Rather than act defensively, they might instead put a certain distance between themselves and their material circumstances. They might recognize that their value as citizens is not dependent upon their riches. Such detachment could enrich the ways in which people use the places where they live. If work now restricts the self, place could expand it.

At least this was Hannah Arendt's hope a generation ago, when she articulated in *The Human Condition* her famous distinction between labor and politics.<sup>1</sup> She hoped in particular that in urban life, with its large scale and impersonality, people could conduct a civic existence that did not merely reflect or depend upon their personal fortunes. Today, the uncertainties of the new economy argue more than ever for a selfhood, as well as civic behavior, unchained from the conditions of labor. Yet, the places in which this might occur can neither be classical cities, like those Arendt admired, nor can they be defensive, inward-turning localities. We need a new kind of civic life to cope with the new economy.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

## *Growth*

To make sense of the culture of the emerging political economy, we might begin by defining its key word, “growth.” Growth occurs, most simply, in four ways. The simplest is a sheer increase in number, an increase in supply (such as more ants in a colony or more television sets on the market). Growth of this sort appears in economic thinking among writers like Jean Baptiste Say, whose *loi des débouchés* postulated that “increased supply creates its own demand.” This increase in number can lead to an alteration of structure. This is how Adam Smith conceived of growth in *The Wealth of Nations*.<sup>2</sup> Larger markets, he said, trigger the division of labor in work. Growth in which size begets complexity of structure is familiar to us in government bureaucracies, as well as in industry. A third and quite different kind of growth occurs through metamorphosis. A body changes its shape or structure without necessarily increasing in number. A moth turning into a butterfly grows in this way, so do characters in a novel. Finally a system can grow by becoming more democratic. This kind of growth is anti-foundational. As John Dewey argued, the elements in a system are free to interact and influence one another so that boundaries become febrile, forms become mixed. The system contracts or expands in parts without overall coordination. Communications networks, such as the early Internet, are obvious examples of how growth can occur democratically. Such a growth process differs from a market mechanism, in which an exchange ideally clears all transactions and so regulates all actors in the system. Resistances, irregularities, and cognitive dissonances take on a positive value in democratic forms of growth. This is why subjective life develops through something like the practice of inner democracy—interpretive and emotional complexity emerges without a master plan, a hegemonic rule, and an undisputed explanation.

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<sup>2</sup> See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: Strahun and Cadell, 1776).

My own view is that the freedom and flexibility of democratic growth is not a matter of pure process, but gives rise to the need for signposts, defined forms, tentative rituals, and provisional decisions that help people to orient themselves and evaluate future conduct. Yet, the flexible economy is destroying exactly these formal elements, which orient people in the process of democratic growth. Put another way, what we need to cope with the emerging political economy is more democratic forms of flexible growth. The question is: where should such growth be promoted? At the workplace? In the community? Are they equally possible, or equally desirable, sites for democracy?

### *Smith's Paradox*

Let me begin to look at these questions by examining the cultural deficits to the new capitalism. For example, one paradox of growth has dogged the development of modern capitalism throughout its long history. With material growth comes the impoverishment of qualitative experience.

The age of High Capitalism—which for convenience's sake can be said to span the two centuries following the publication of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776—was an era that lusted for sheer quantitative growth, of the first sort I've described, but had trouble dealing with the human consequences of the second sort, in which the increase in wealth occurred through more complex economic structures. Adam Smith argued that the division of labor, which was a structural complexity, was promoted by the expansion of free markets with ever greater numbers of goods, services, and laborers in circulation. To Smith, a growing society seemed like a honeycomb; each new cell was a place for ever more specialized tasks. A nail-maker doing everything himself could make a few hundred nails a day. Smith calculated that if nail-making were broken down into all its component parts, and each worker did only one task, a nail-maker could process more than 48,000 nails a day. Work experience, however, would become more routine in the process.

Breaking the task of making nails into its component parts would condemn individual nail-makers to a numbingly boring day; hour after hour nail-makers would be doing the same small job.

I call this coupling of material growth with qualitative impoverishment “Smith’s Paradox,” after Adam Smith. Though Smith did not coin this term, he did recognize the existence of this paradox, which came down to us in what we call “Fordist Production,” monotonous assembly-line work, the kind of assembly-line work prevalent in Ford’s Highland Park plant in Michigan during the First World War. Today, proponents of the new capitalism claim that Smith’s Paradox is now coming to an end. Modern technology promises to banish routine work to the innards of machines, leaving ever more workers free to do flexible, non-routine tasks. In fact, however, the qualitative impoverishment recognized by Smith has simply taken new forms. New technology frequently “de-skills” workers, who now tend to machines as electronic janitors. Meanwhile, the conditions of job tenure also compound de-skilling. Workers learn how to do one particular job well, only to find that work-task at an end. The reality now facing young workers with at least two years of college is that they will change jobs, on average, at least eleven times in the course of their working lives.

More brutally, the division of labor now separates those who get to work and those who don’t. Large numbers of people are set free of routine tasks only to find themselves useless or under-used economically, especially in the context of the global labor supply. Geography no longer separates the skilled First World from the unskilled Third World. Computer code is written efficiently, for instance, in Bombay for a third to a seventh its cost in IBM home offices.

Statistics on job creation do not quite get at people’s fear of uselessness. The number of jobs, even good skilled jobs, does not dictate who will have access to them, how long the jobs can be held, or, indeed, how long the jobs will exist. Ten years ago, for instance, the U.S. economy had a deficit of computer systems analysts. Today, it has a surplus. And many of these highly skilled workers, contrary to

ideology, do not retrain well. Their skills are too specific. In sum, the specter of uselessness now shadows the lives of educated middle-class people, and this specter now compounds the older experiential problem of routine among less-favored workers. The young suffer the pangs of uselessness in a particularly cruel way, since an ever-expanding educational system trains them ever more elaborately for jobs that do not exist.

The result of uselessness, de-skilling, and task-labor for the American worker is the *dispensable self*. Instead of the institutionally induced boredom of the assembly line, this experiential deficit appears more to lie within the worker—a worker who hasn't made him- or herself of lasting value to others and so can simply disappear from view. The economic language in use today—"skills-based economy," "informational competence," "task-flexible labor," and the like—shifts the focus from impersonal conditions like the possession of capital to more personal matters of competence. As this economic rhetoric becomes more personal, it gradually de-symbolizes the public realm of labor: economic inequality, power, and powerlessness are facts that are difficult to translate into self-knowledge. Similarly, the process of flexibilization in the workplace destroys permanent categories of occupation. Ironically, while work inequality has grown, the map for evaluating this inequality has been lost. While this shift in language seems personally empowering, it, in fact, can serve to increase the burdens on the working self.

This sense of "dispensability"—a sense of failing to be of much value in this economy—has great sociological implications. What Michael Young feared in his prophetic book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, has come to pass: As the economy needs ever fewer, highly-educated people to run it, the "moral distance" between the masses and the elite widens.<sup>3</sup> The masses, now comprising people in suits and ties,

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Dunlop Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033: The New Elite of Our Social Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1959).

as well as those in overalls, appear peripheral to the elite, productive core. The economy profits by shrinking its labor base. Its emphasis on personal agency helps explain why welfare dependency and parasitism are such sensitive issues for people whose fortunes are now in doubt. Labor is disposable.

Some tough-minded economists argue that current forms of unemployment, under-employment, de-skilling, and parasitism are incurable in the emerging economic order, since the economy profits from doing “more with less.” But this qualitative impoverishment, this re-organization that makes increasing numbers of people feel that they personally have no footing in the process of economic growth, poses a profound political challenge. There is no easy solution to Smith’s Paradox, the problem of impoverished work experience. The postmodern vision of a project-less life is only for the elite. In the lives of most people, it is a form of oppression—a cultural ethos that is inhumane. There is a loss of the notion that you can guarantee something for your children, a profound loss of social honor. It is possible to live with a flexible self only if you are so empowered economically, culturally, and politically that “possibility” requires choices of the sort made by consumers in a mall.

### *Durable Time*

Because sheer quantitative growth and the division of labor offer no remedy to the subjective, experiential problems of work, some policy makers have turned to the third model of growth, metamorphosis. In the political arena, such a form of development is called variously “auto-gestion,” “self-management,” or simply “change from within.” The practical and worthy aim is to make work more humane by having workers themselves control their work. The goal is to have workers reform their institutions of work through a decisive act of collective will. In the political arena, metamorphosis occurs through rupturing established institutions. While management gurus practice rupture from the top down, socialists have aimed to remake work institutions from the bottom up. The practi-

cal record of such efforts at work re-organization is mixed. Some forms of change from within and workers' auto-gestion succeed, mostly in small, niche enterprises; others fail, overwhelmed by the larger currents of the global economy.

Change from within supposes order can be made out of chaos by an act of will; in political terms, the polity is self-creating. The social difficulty with the model arises, though, from the very act of will it supposes. Basic social bonds like trust, loyalty, and obligation require a long time to develop and have diminished as people do shifting, task-centered jobs. Loyalty requires that personal experience accumulate at an institution over time, but the emerging political economy will not let it accumulate. Personal time, like civic time, must possess duration and coherence. Workers form a sense of subjective strength and positive agency through making things last. But will alone is insufficient to accomplish that task.

Max Weber's famous image of modern life confined in an "iron cage" slights stability as a positive even in the lives of ordinary people. Weber feared the rise at the beginning of the twentieth century of large national bureaucracies and corporations that made use of the service ethic, earning the loyalty of those whom they made secure. Weber doubted that loyal servants make objectively-minded citizens. Yet petty bureaucrats, time servers, and the like derived a sense of status and public honor from their stations in bureaucracies. T. H. Marshall, the intellectual father of the modern British welfare state, understood this well: however static big institutions may be, however resistant to change from within, they provide their members a scaffolding of mutual loyalty and of trust that events can be controlled, which are prerequisites of citizenship. The bureaucrat as good citizen is not a pretty picture, but then, Jay Gould had no interest in the subject at all.

The current rush to take apart this institutional architecture is undoing the social, civic dimensions of durable time. Take loyalty, for example. When career paths are replaced by intermittent jobs, loyalties to institutions diminish. This generalization, of course, needs all

sorts of qualification. For instance, one study of dismissed IBM programmers found that the people with more than twenty years of service remain enthusiastic about the company, while accepting their firing as a matter of fate. A more diminished sense of loyalty appears among younger workers, who have had more brutal dealings with the new economic order; many of these younger workers view the places where they work mostly as sites to make contacts with people who can get them better, or simply other, jobs.

In this, the young have not failed to do their duty, since new economic institutions make no guarantees in return. They routinely replace permanent workers with temporary workers, or “off-shore” work. Loyalty requires that personal experience accumulate in an institution, and the emerging political economy will not let it accumulate. Indeed, the profitable ease with which international capital today assembles, sells, and re-assembles corporations erases the durability of institutions to which one could develop loyalty or obligation.

Time, then, is everything in reckoning the social consequences of the new political economy. And as a cultural value, rupture—that favored child of postmodernism—is less politically challenging than the assertion that people ought to have the right to develop loyalty and commitment within institutions. If the dominant powers of the political economy violate durable time, can individuals provide for themselves—formally or informally—amongst one another the sign posts that institutions deny them?

This question is less abstract than it might seem at first. The modern economy did not simply wipe out the social struggles and personal values formed in an earlier phase of capitalism. What has been carried into the present from the past is a set of subjective values—values for making time coherent and durable, but in entirely personal terms. This personal, durable time intersects with the new economy of work in particularly disturbing ways.

### *The Coherent Self*

The Victorians founded their sense of self-worth on life organized as one long project: the German values of *formation*, the English virtues of purpose, were for keeps. Careers in business, military, or imperial bureaucracies made the life-long project possible; these careers graded work into a clear sequence of steps. Such expectations devalue the present for the sake of the future—the present that is in constant upheaval and that may tempt the individual into byways or evanescent pleasures. Weber described future-orientation as a mentality of delayed gratification. Yet, this Victorian experience of cohering time has another side, which was subsumed under the ethical category of taking responsibility for one's life, though in a way quite opposite from the innovatory character of the will to change from within.

Today, late Victorian values of personal responsibility are as strong as a century ago, but their institutional context has changed. The iron cage has been dismantled, so that individuals struggle for security and coherence in a seemingly empty arena. The destruction of institutional supports at work, as in the welfare state, leaves individuals only their sense of responsibility; the Victorian ethos now often charts a negative trajectory of defeated will, of having failed to make one's life cohere through one's work. Take what happens when career paths are replaced by intermittent jobs. Many temporary workers are put in the unenviable position of knowing that their job insecurity suits obligation-resistant companies, yet these temporary workers none-the-less believe that they are themselves responsible for the mess made of their careers. This sense of personal responsibility deflects workers' anger away from economic institutions to themselves.

Meanwhile, the new economic map, which devalues the life-long career project, has shifted the optimal age curves of work to younger, raw employees (employees who range in age from the early twenties to early forties, instead of employees who range in age from the late twenties to middle fifties) even though adults are living longer and

more vigorously. Studies of dismissed middle-aged workers find these workers both obsessed and puzzled by the liabilities of age. Rather than believing themselves to be faded and “over the hill,” these older workers feel that they are more organized and purposeful than younger workers are. Even so, they blame themselves when they are perceived by management to be obsolete. Likewise, they blame themselves for not having prepared better for this contingency.

Workers’ sense of personal responsibility and personal guilt is compounded by the rhetoric of modern management, which attempts to disguise power in the new economy by making the worker believe he or she is a self-directing agent—managers are now called “coaches,” “facilitators,” and the like. It is not the workers’ “false consciousness” that makes these titles credible, but rather a twisted sense of moral agency.

In modernity, people take responsibility for their lives because the whole of their lives feels their making. But when the ethical culture of modernity—with its codes of personal responsibility and life purpose—is carried into a society without institutional shelters, there appears not pride of self, but a dialectic of failure in the midst of growth. Growth in the new economy depends on gutting corporate size, ending bureaucratic guarantees, and profiting from the flux and extension of economic networks. People come to know the resulting dislocations as their own lack of direction. The ethic of responsibility becomes, ironically and terribly, a subjective yardstick to measure one’s failure to cohere.

In contrast, I would like to see discussions about democracy in the workplace enlarged beyond references to worker self-management. When we talk about democracy in the workplace, we must address the cultural dimensions of work, a different and literal kind of self-management in which coherence rather than rupture is a primary value. We must think through worker democracy in terms of this legacy of subjectivity. Is there some way to lighten workers’ burden of self-responsibility, while acknowledging workers’ desire for coherence and durability?

## *Place*

The city is democracy's home, declared Hannah Arendt, a place for forming loyalties and practicing responsibilities. It also is a social setting in which personal attributes fade somewhat in a milieu of impersonality. Thus, Arendt imagined that the city—or more properly, “urbanity”—could relieve burdens of material circumstances in the social relations between people. Could Arendt's vision somehow be combined with the ideal of democratic growth invoked by John Dewey—that of the city as a place of ever increasing complexity of values, beliefs, and cultural forms?

The cities, as well as the smaller communities, we know in America bear little relation to this ideal place. In communities, people do indeed try to compensate for their dislocations and impoverished experience in the economy, but often in destructive ways—through communal coercion and shared illusion. Many current building projects are exercises in withdrawal from a complex world, deploying self-consciously “traditional” architecture that bespeaks a mythic communal coherence and shared identity in the past. These comforts of a supposedly simpler age appear in the New Englishish housing developments designed by the American planners Elizabeth Platter-Zyberg and Andreas Duwany, among the architects in Britain working for the Prince of Wales to reproduce “native” English architecture, and in the neighborhood renovation work on the Continent undertaken by Leon Krier. All these place-makers are artists of claustrophobia, whose icons, however, do indeed promise stability, longevity, and safety.

In order to avoid place-making on these conservative terms, we need to clarify what signposts and markers of form might successfully orient an alternative, open, and democratic community life. Let me cite three.

First, communities must not shy away from confronting hostile forces. Communities can indeed challenge the new economy rather than react defensively to it. Modern corporations like to present

themselves as having cut free from local powers—they may have a factory in Mexico, an office in Bombay, and a media center in lower Manhattan; these all appear as nodes in a global network. Today, localities fear that if they exercise sovereignty, as when they tax or regulate a business locally, the corporation could just as easily find another node. I believe, however, that we are already seeing signs that the economy is not as locationally indifferent as has been assumed. You can buy any stock you like in Dubuque, Iowa, but not make a market of stocks in the cornfields. The ivy cloisters of Harvard may furnish plenty of raw intellectual talent, yet lack the craziness, messiness, and surprise that makes Manhattan a stimulating if unpleasant place to work. Similarly, in South-East Asia, it is becoming increasingly clear that local social and cultural geographies indeed count for a great deal in investment decisions. And because the new political economy is not, in fact, indifferent to location, there exists the possibility for making communal demands—contracting with corporations to assure jobs for a certain number of years in exchange for tax relief, or enforcing strict work-place rules on age discrimination. What matters is the will to confront. Up until now, politics have tended to behave like weak supplicants rather than necessary partners. Put simply, place has power.

Second, strong communities need not turn inward in a repressive fashion. Planning, especially in large-scale environments, can avert this and open groups up to one another by focusing on the borders of local sub-communities as active zones. For instance, “active edge” planners today seek to direct new building away from local centers and toward the boundaries separating communities. In East London, for example, some planners are working to make the edge of distinct communities into a febrile zone of interaction and exchange between different groups. Yet another strategy is to diversify central spaces, so that different functions overlap and interact in geographic centers. Planners in Los Angeles are seeking ways to put clinics, government offices, and old-age centers into shopping malls, which formerly were devoted solely to consumption activities. Planners in Germany are similarly exploring how to get light manufacturing back into the pedestrian zones in city centers.

In honor of Arendt, many of these planners call themselves members of the “New Agora” movement. They don’t see planning as the attempt to determine a specific outcome, but they do make assumptions about the form in which interaction and process should occur. In the case of active-edge planners, the animating belief is that the more people interact, the more they will become involved with those unlike themselves. In the case of the central zone planners, the animating belief is that the value of a place will increase when it is not simply commercial. Such planning is “democratic” in my own use of the word. The agora has a defined shape that can open up the possibility of complexity rather than hegemony. Again, part and parcel of this complexity of place is the diversification of a place’s purpose. For instance, you can make shopping malls into places where people actually hang out, not just places for consumption. If you make malls more like town centers, you can draw people out of the network of their intimate neighborhood.

When I say “intimate,” I am not speaking of a psychological intimacy, but of exposure to your neighbors—such as knowing whether and how they are employed. Did they use credit to buy that Ford Windstar? America exposes people economically to each other in ways that enter *social* discourse as measures of relative personal merit. The reason I have focused my work on impersonality as a political project is that I believe that if we can provide more places in which that exposure is obscured, we can create the preconditions for a more just political discourse and interaction. Granted, you cannot force people to treat each other just as plain citizens, but at least you can provide the sites in which that kind of interaction might occur. And that is why cosmopolitanism (in a non-Kantian sense) can be a political project. My emphasis on the shaping of community is not, as it were, that such veiled communal relations would triumph over capitalism. That would give to place an absurd power. But *where* democracy occurs does matter in *how* democracy occurs.

Places, especially urban places, have the capacity to help people to grow out of themselves into a more impersonal citizenship, and so

to relieve themselves of their own subjective burdens. This may seem abstract, but we experience one of its elements whenever we plunge into a crowded street. A hoary cliché views impersonal crowds as an evil. Throughout the history of the city, people have voted otherwise with their feet. And one great theme in the literature of modern urban culture—from Baudelaire to Aragon to Benjamin to Jane Jacobs—finds in crowds a peculiar antidote to selfhood with all its burdens, a release into a less personalized existence. When she moved to Washington Square in 1906, beginning an affair with another woman, Willa Cather declared, “At last I can breathe,” by which she meant that her erotic life no longer defined the terms of her social existence—at least in the dense, impersonal place to which she had moved.

Impersonality does more than shelter outsiders or members of subcultures; it offers the possibility for what Stuart Hall calls “hybridity,” a mixture of social elements beyond any single definition of self. Impersonal release has a particular value in terms of social class and material fortune. Various studies of existing mixed-class areas of big cities like New York and London yield an interesting portrait; intimate “neighborliness” is weak, but identification with the neighborhood is strong. The poor are relieved of social stigma; those who are rich in comparison—contrary to common sense, that most fallible of all guides—find daily life in a diverse neighborhood more stimulating than in places that serve only as private mirrors. These studies exemplify the sociological proposition advanced by Durkheim that impersonality and equality have a strong affinity.

The relief of self found in dense streets, mixed pubs, playgrounds, and markets thus is not inconsequential. Such dense forms of civil society affect how people think of themselves as citizens. As the late Henri Lefebvre put it, sensing one’s “right to the city” helps people feel entitled to other rights, rights not based on personal injuries or on victimhood. As I say, no one could argue that an impersonal city life will extinguish either the reality or the sentiments aroused by economic failure. But “extinguish,” like “rupture,” belongs to the sphere of growth envisioned through metamorphosis. I imagine

instead a more realistic democratic project, one which develops a kind of concurrent consciousness, in which a middle-aged, supposedly “over the hill” worker can also think of him- or herself in an entirely different way, by virtue of where he or she lives. This doubleness of self seems to be more practicable than the striving for rebirth, as in a metamorphosis.

To conclude, whether we seek for democracy in workplaces or in cities, we need to address the culture of the new capitalism. The economy does not “grow” personal skills and durable purposes, nor social trust, loyalty, or commitment. Economic practice has combined, however, with a durable cultural ethic, so that institutional nakedness co-exists with the will to take responsibility for one’s life. The forms of polity we need to invent must help people transcend both elements of that combination: we need a model of growth that helps people transcend the self as a burdensome possession. Place-making based on exclusion, sameness, or nostalgia is poisonous medicine socially, and psychologically useless. A self weighted with its insufficiencies cannot lift that burden by retreat into fantasy. Place-making based on diverse, dense, impersonal human contacts must find a way for these contacts to endure. The agora has to prove a durable institution. This is the challenge that urbanists like myself now confront.

Baudelaire famously defined modernity as experience of the fleeting and the fragmented. To accept life in its disjointed pieces is an adult experience of freedom, but still these pieces must lodge and embed themselves somewhere, hopefully in a place that allows them to grow and endure.