Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) is widely recognized as a major American intellectual, who, despite his self-definition as a “generalist,” is known primarily as an authority on technology, architecture, and urbanism and secondarily as a scholar of American culture. Yet, he remains a somewhat misunderstood figure in the twenty-first century, especially regarding cities. He was the most committed American disciple of both Patrick Geddes and Ebenezer Howard, advocating consistently for the creation of interconnected garden cities within a regional framework. Especially in later years, Mumford was labeled anti-urban, but more correctly, he was antimetropolitan in the manner of Howard. Cities must reach a critical mass before they could sustain a viable culture, he argued; however, if too large, they would choke on their own successes.

Early Years

Mumford was born in 1895 in Queens County, New York. His mother, a widow, had become pregnant unexpectedly, and she raised her young son on Manhattan's Upper West Side. What could have been a solitary childhood was happily relieved by the close bond Mumford forged with his stepgrandfather, who introduced him to the teeming metropolis. Mumford attended the prestigious Stuyvesant High School, but his academic record was mixed.

Lacking the credentials to gain admission to a traditional college or university, he enrolled at the City College of New York's evening program in fall of 1912. He toyed with the idea of pursuing an advanced degree in philosophy, but when he transferred to the more formally organized day program, he foundered academically once again. After being diagnosed with incipient tuberculosis, he withdrew from City College altogether; as a result, he would never earn his baccalaureate degree.

Although Mumford was already something of an autodidact, what truly saved him from spiraling into an unfocused adulthood was his reading of *Evolution*, a book cowritten by Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson and published in 1911. Mumford immediately grasped the implications of Geddes’s essential thesis: that humankind’s cultural evolution was akin to its biological evolution and that the former could be subjected to as careful a scientific scrutiny as the latter. The investigative tool that Geddes proffered was the regional survey, a sociocultural study of a region and its myriad inhabitants. Mesmerized, Mumford devoured other books by Geddes, and in the process, he determined to model his own career path after Geddes: not to become a specialist in one discipline, but rather, to embrace all disciplines. The city, as the summation of all of man’s intellectual and practical activities, would become for Mumford, as it had already for Geddes, the subject around which he organized his myriad interests.

Not long after encountering Geddes's writings, Mumford read Ebenezer Howard's seminal planning treatise, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. That Howard's Garden City neatly complemented Geddes's regionalism became almost immediately apparent to Mumford. With pen and notepad in hand, Mumford began to comb the city of his youth with his eyes freshly attuned to sights ranging from geological formations to real estate development patterns. The next several years proved to be a period of intensive urban study for Mumford, interrupted only briefly by a stateside tour of duty with the U.S. Navy near the end of World War I. Mumford recognized the need to earn a living, especially after his
1921 marriage to Sophia Wittenberg, and thus, he began expanding his notes into published essays, articles, book reviews, and, eventually, books. As a freelance writer and critic, he explored such topics as architecture, literature, sociology, and politics in such publications as the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, the *Dial*, and the *New Republic*. In the early 1930s, Mumford began his long tenure as the *New Yorker*’s art and architecture critic, a position that permitted him to continue his regional surveys while earning a substantial income. As an architecture critic, he disavowed romantic revivalism while embracing such progressive currents as the organicism of Frank Lloyd Wright and the functionalism of various European modernists.

**Writings and Advocacy**

Two interrelated themes predominated in Mumford's early writings: the role of utopian ideals in the reconstruction of post-World War I society and the rediscovery of America's pre-1900 cultural roots as a means of reinvigorating creativity in the present. The first theme found a receptive audience via the publication of Mumford's first book, *The Story of Utopias* (1922). The first part of the book surveyed utopian writings from antiquity to the present, while the second part examined what Mumford called "collective utopias," essentially the social, political, and economic constraints that reified class boundaries. One might have expected Mumford to conclude his book with a call to Marxist revolution, but he instead imparted gentler prescriptions derived from Geddes's regional survey and Howard's Garden City. Mumford defined this new world order by the ancient Greek term *Eutopia*, roughly translated as "the good place," and he urged his readers to strive toward this goal when converting ideas into practice.

Although *The Story of Utopias* garnered positive notices, Mumford felt compelled to break free of Geddes’s ideological hold in his next several books by exploring a new theme: America's cultural heritage. *Sticks and Stones* (1924) examined America's past from an architectural perspective and *The Golden Day* (1926) from a literary angle. *Herman Melville* (1929), a biography of the well-known author, and the *Brown Decades* (1931) amplified and corrected many of the observations contained in the earlier works. In all four books, Mumford presented evidence of a significant cultural efflorescence led by a distinguished group of writers, architects, artists, and other creative types in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Moreover, in Mumford's view, some key figures—notably Alfred Stieglitz and Frank Lloyd Wright—had effectively bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These were the exemplars that Mumford challenged his contemporaries to emulate.

Even as Mumford's profile as a writer and critic rose significantly during the 1920s, so did his profile as a housing and community advocate. In 1923, he became a founding member of the Regional Planning Association of America. The association's membership was small and based largely in the New York metropolitan area but included some of the most progressive minds of the era: architects Clarence Stein, Frederick Ackerman, and Henry Wright; editor Charles Harris Whitaker; and conservationist Benton MacKaye. Mumford served as the association's secretary and general spokesman. Due in part to his influence, the association broadly embraced both Geddes's regional survey and Howard's Garden City. Geddes's imprint may be seen on the association's most famous project, the Appalachian Trail, a public-private wilderness easement along the mountainous areas of the eastern United States, which was conceived by MacKaye.

Howard's imprint may be seen in the association's focus on solving the nation's affordable housing shortage in the years following World War I. Toward this end, the association formed a subsidiary, the
City Housing Corporation, to undertake the development of two planned communities: Sunnyside Gardens (1924-1928) in the New York City borough of Queens and Radburn (1928-1932) in northern New Jersey. Mumford and his wife moved to Sunnyside Gardens following the birth of their son, Geddes, in 1925; 11 years later, they made the rural village of Amenia in upstate New York their permanent home.

As the association's spokesman, Mumford wrote numerous articles and essays extolling its regional-ist ideals. In May 1925, Mumford edited a special graphic issue of The Survey that featured essays on regional planning by many of the association's members; notably, it was Mumford's introductory essay, titled "Planning the Fourth Migration," that set the issue's ideological tenor. What he deemed the first migration was the pioneers' westward journey across North America. The second migration saw the clustering of settlers from farms into industrial towns, while the third migration saw an even greater movement of people from smaller towns into major cities. In Mumford's view, the fourth migration would reverse this flow. Improvements in transportation, communication, and the electrical power grid would negate the magnetic pull of the metropolis, making it possible for Americans to enjoy the benefits of big city life in smaller towns and even in the primeval wilderness. Mumford was essentially updating Howard's rationale for the Garden City, but advancing it to its logical conclusion: Evolving technology might make the Garden City itself obsolete. Six years later, he coauthored an influential article with Benton MacKaye on the “townless highway,” in which Radburn's separation of traffic would be extended into the countryside via limited access highways to link similarly planned towns.

Master Works

By the early 1930s, Mumford was ready for new intellectual challenges. Eutopia, the overarching theme of his first book, returned to the forefront of his writings, and it would ultimately define the rest of his career. His next major project was a four-volume study of Western civilization known as The Renewal of Life. The series's expansive scope owed a great intellectual debt to Geddes, with the first volume, Technics and Civilization (1934), corresponding to Geddes's sociocultural category of work; the second, The Culture of Cities (1938), to his category of place; and the third and fourth, The Condition of Man (1944) and The Conduct of Life (1951), to his category of folk. On a more profound level, the project's core thesis was predicated on what Geddes's termed insurgency, a word that has, of course, unpleasant associations with war, but which Geddes used to describe a life force in the throes of renewing itself.

Of the books in the series, The Culture of Cities earned Mumford particular acclaim. Time magazine placed Mumford on its cover, and Life magazine ran a multipage photographic spread on the book. Invitations to consult on city and regional plans soon followed: Honolulu and Portland and the Pacific Northwest region in 1938, and London in 1943 and 1945, all resulting in significant essays. Mumford was not content to rest on his laurels, however. He became more politically active, writing two books that urged American involvement in World War II: Men Must Act (1939) and Faith for Living (1940). Outraged by the Allied bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Mumford penned an article in March 1946 for the Saturday Review of Literature titled “Gentlemen, You are Mad!” becoming one of the first American intellectuals to warn of the perils of the nuclear age.

In 1945, he collected the Honolulu and London essays, along with several others, in an anthology titled City Development. The following year, he wrote a new introduction to Garden Cities of Tomorrow, representing Howard's vision just as the British parliament passed enabling legislation for the construction

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of garden-city-style satellites known as the “new towns.” Yet, when Mumford visited several of the
new towns in person in 1953, he was disappointed by their general sprawl. Lansbury, a redeveloped,
more compact neighborhood in East London, proved more to his liking. Other major cities, including
Rotterdam, Marseilles, Rome, Athens, Philadelphia, and New York, endured his critical scrutiny during the
1950s.

Still, as Mumford aged, his relationship with cities in general changed. Although he would live
intermittently in New York and other major cities, he became more an urban visitor than an urban
resident. He was also slow to recognize how rapidly cities were being transformed, directly on the
ground by the automobile and indirectly from the sky by the airplane, but once he did so, he sounded
the alarm repeatedly. Subsequently, he would also rue the dismantling of the nation's passenger railroad
system. Ironically, the man who had embraced and had urged the mastery of technology in the 1920s
and 1930s became in later years rather confounded by it. The regional surveyor slowly evolved into the
regional oracle, quick to make solemn pronouncements on planning mishaps, but reluctant to give
practical planning advice based on firsthand experience.

Mumford's disconnection with the modern city became glaringly apparent when, in 1962, he wrote a
scathing review of Jane Jacobs's *Death and Life of Great America Cities* (1961). To Jacobs, the ideal
neighborhood evolved over time, with a variety of functions, buildings, and residents, as represented by
her own city block. Her essential thesis was, in fact, rather similar to Geddes's line of thinking a half
century earlier, but Mumford failed to see this connection. Jacobs's book turned the planning
profession upside down, paving the way to a more pluralistic—even postmodern—approach to
revitalizing America's cities in the decades to come.

Nevertheless, the 1950s and 1960s proved to be extraordinarily productive for Mumford as a writer.
He updated and revised several of his earlier books on American culture, and he collected many of his
previously published articles and essays on architecture, planning, and other subjects into convenient
anthologies. His most pressing concern, however, was the pall cast over modern civilization by the
nuclear arms race and the cold war. *The Transformations of Man* (1956) was his attempt to condense
the message of *The Renewal of Life* into a single, more accessible volume, but he recognized quickly
that the original message would need to be expanded and bolstered for a new generation of readers.

*The City in History* (1961), arguably Mumford's most famous book, began as a revision of *The Culture of
Cities*. Although the core chapters of the book remained essentially intact, Mumford bracketed them
with wholly new sections on prehistoric and ancient cities and a new, rather pessimistic conclusion
colored by the impending prospect of nuclear annihilation. Dire as its pronouncements were, *The City in
History* was a critical and popular success, garnering Mumford the coveted National Book Award for
revisited the thesis of *Technics and Civilization* but posited an even bleaker world outlook in which
scientific and military leaders were conspiring to bring civilization to its untimely end. In his view,
Eutopia, the good place, would inevitably be bested by Utopia, the perfect place. Still, Mumford did not
relinquish his faith in the ability of humankind to renew itself.

Were Mumford alive today, he would undoubtedly be in the forefront of the sustainability and green
movements, advocating cleaner power, organic farming, and wilderness protection. To his small,
somewhat isolated farmhouse, he would likely have welcomed the Internet and the television satellite,
even as he would likely have cursed the superabundance of misinformation they sometimes deliver.
Last, he would almost certainly be urging his readers to learn from their collective past while taking control of their present and future: to let shared human values guide their hopes and dreams rather than the machine and its empty materialistic promises.

See also
Geddes, Patrick, Intellectuals, Utopia

Further Readings


Wojtowicz, Robert

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