Corporate Action in a City: A Media Archeology with Respect to Institutionalized Forms to Frame the Unexpected
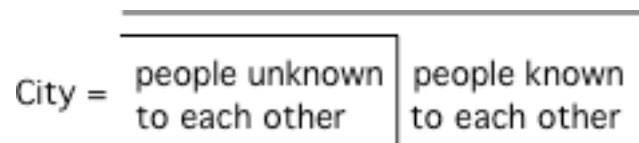
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I.

A city is an ecological unity combining people known to each other and people unknown to each other. The city may be defined as the social institution enabling people unknown to each other to nevertheless live together (Weber 1958; Baecker 2004, 2008).

This is non-trivial if you compare an urban society to tribal societies. To this day to accept people unknown to you to tax you and to tell you how to behave in accordance with the law, to teach your children, to sell to you and buy from you, to present works of art to you, and to sit next to you in busses and trams is a socially and psychologically demanding treat. Max Weber claims that living together with unknown people became only possible by overcoming the many gods of the tribes and instead meeting to worship only one of them (Weber 1958).

By using a Spencer-Brown expression (Spencer Brown 1972) we may be able to code the social institution of the city as follows:

$$\text{City} = \overline{\left.\begin{array}{l}\text{people unknown} \\ \text{to each other}\end{array}\right|}\begin{array}{l}\text{people known} \\ \text{to each other}\end{array}$$

A first mark of distinction severes a space which is called into being by indicating people unknown to each other who nevertheless are able to meet, and to separate again, within the context of people known to each other who may then learn to do, that is to act and to communicate likewise, thereby distinguishing people known to each other as well.

The city comes up with a kind of corporate action (Park 1967), which makes sure that people can meet, find out what to do to, and with, each other, and to separate again. There are

further forms of coporate action which seem to depend on the city. Organizations bind people unkown to each other into a network of contracts. Crowds, most notably panics, coordinate the behavior of people unknown to each other by more or less forceful stigmergy (Canetti 1962, Grassé 1959).

The evolution of the social institution of the city produces a human intellect of its own. To live in a city means to learn to be able to stay cool, that is able to select autonomously with respect to encounters and commodities being offered (Simmel 1997). Any city comes with its own dandies who make a show of their autonomy and thereby re-enter the very idea and social principle of the city into the city (Baudelaire 1963; Benjamin 1968).
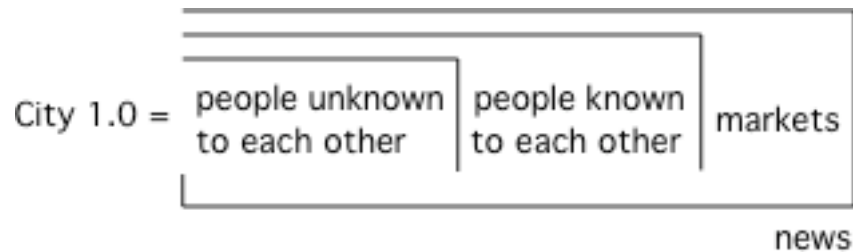
II.

The Chicago school of sociology names three mechanisms of corporate action constituting the city, markets and news, neighborhoods, and professions (Park 1967). All three of them constitute the city in an ecological way in that they do not rely on some super-system defining an overall order of the city. Instead, they rely on heterarchy and give rise to local hierarchies emerging and unraveling again. I propose to attribute these three mechanisms to the first three media epochs of the historical evolution of the city, and to add a fourth one, creative economies, to account for a fourth, the present media epoch.

III.

The social institution of the city exists already in tribal society. The place where people unknown to each other may meet nevertheless is here called by the name of the silent trade (Grierson 1980). People of one tribe approach this place, put down some things they would like to offer in exchange for some others, and withdraw. People of some other tribe approach as well, check on the things being offered and either take them while leaving their own, or refuse them an withdraw without leaving their own. It takes years and centuries for some patterns of exchange, and for the according terms of trade, to emerge, stabilize, and evolve. Jean-Christophe Agnew rightly speaks of those places as "worlds apart" and compares them to theaters where action taking account of onlookers and presenting itself is equally, but in a different mode, being tried out (Agnew 1986; see for silent trades, that is for early markets ibid., pp. 17 ff.).

The Spencer-Brown expression of the city 1.0 puts the general social institution of the city into the context of its historical appearance in tribal society:

$$\text{City 1.0} = \overline{\overline{\overline{\underset{\text{to each other}}{\text{people unknown}}}\Big|\;\underset{\text{to each other}}{\text{people known}}\;\Big|\;\text{markets}}}\quad\text{news}$$

Markets mark the distinction of people unknown to each other from people known to each other as a space where meetings, and separations, are possible. News re-enter that distinction into the space brought forward by it, such that with respect to news (on expected and non-expected behavior, on cheating and trustfulness, on qualities and prices) the meetings, and separations, of people unknown to each other become moderated.

Markets in the form of silent trades seem to be an invention of tribal society. They take into account the appearance of language, which makes it possible to lie and to cheat, yet control that possibility by relegating the behavior of the people meeting to silent watching while using language to exchange news. Corporate action comprehends silent meetings between people of different tribes and talkative exchange of news between people of the same tribe. Soon, that is after some further centuries, that distinction devolves and people of different tribes do also talk to each other and learn how to cheat on their own people by colluding with people unknown to them. People crossing the lines are called strangers and live dangerously.

IV.

Ancient society adds writing to language, and houses and their neighborhood to news and markets. A house (*oikos*) is a place where people known to each other can retreat to and prepare for new action thus becoming opaque, private, and thus in some way again unknown to each other. To manage a household with respect to a city (*polis*) means to treat your own people as if it could turn strange to you in any moment. Socrates invents the art of *sophrosyne*, the art of containing and moderating yourself in order to be able to contain and moderate your wife, your children, your slaves, and your domestic animals. *Sophrosyne* lies

at the heart of an art called economics to skillfully manage a household by demanding sacrifice now and promising reward tomorrow (Xenophon 1970).

The Spencer-Brown expression of the city 2.0 of ancient society adds houses (which later become differentiated into homes and businesses) and neighborhoods to the city of tribal society:

City 2.0 = [[[people unknown to each other | people known to each other] markets] houses] news] neighborhoods
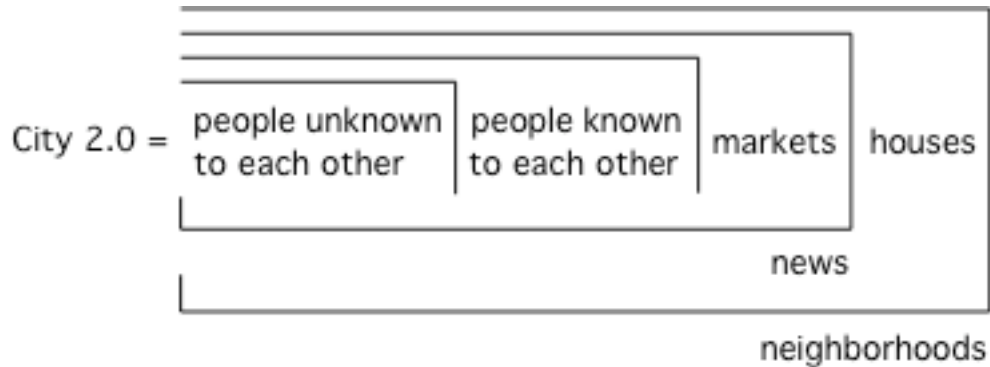
Houses indicate news as triggers of different action. Neighborhoods, or, as they somehow enthusiastically are called by social philosophers, "communities", are the tame version of the older distinction between your tribe and other tribes. In Neighborhoods different tribes may live together giving rise to a knowledge of whom, if at all, to trust when. Confidence may be called a behavior, which refrains from testing its own precondition, whereas trust depends on being studied (Sabel 1993). Neighborhoods are necessary to have two versions of people you are acquainted with, your relatives whom you treat as intimates without being completely known to you, and your neighbors whom you treat as people who are not completely unknown to you. Friends are called the people who cross the line.

Note that city 2.0, while relying on writing to begin to imagine longer and more uncertain time horizons for both sacrifice and reward, relies on a representation of language as the mode which is used to build and study trust. It is the word of politicians, of business men, and of academicians which literally speaks to people unknown to each other, giving rise to rhetoric and its despise.

V.

Modern society adds printing to writing and language. Plans become possible which are notable for both their success and their failure. Modern society develops a sense of complexity while looking at the expected and non-expected conditions that turn plans into

successes or failures. Professions emerge which claim a knowledge, and a knowledge how to execute it, of how to distinguish successful from failing behavior. The modern city 3.0 organizes itself according to groups, called corporations, which are able to strategize on plans and to legitimate by claims to professional behavior (Lefèbvre 2003).

Plans recode the unknowns of the city by either failing to account for them within the plans or by providing for them by providing for contingency. Again, professions are meant to be able to deal with those unknowns. They specialize in looking at possible failure in order to secure success.

This gives the following expression:
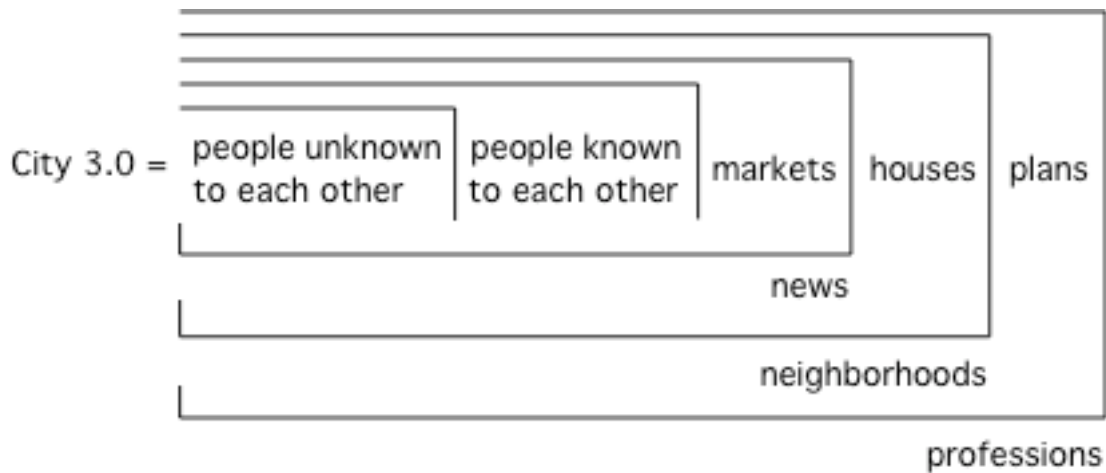
Plans are non-trivial. They demand to become routine and to be rationalized in order to be able to both enter into print and to withstand the criticism emerging from comparisons between different plans being printed. They give rise to strategies of domination if only by becoming the object of suspicion by other people. Professions are a legitimation device, which knows how to handle both plans and the suspicion they arouse (Foucault 1965, 1973, 1991; Abbott 1988).

Note that city 3.0 with French enlightenment's *philosophes* invents intellectuals as people taking care of a kind of writing that is supposed to still be able to control printing, which of course it is not. Intellectuals add their writings to the printing press's output, thereby calling forth further plans which turn modernity into a project of its own, expected to triumph with respect to its own success, helped along by one or the other revolution, or doomed to fail with respect to its own cultural decadence, social shortcomings, and ecological unsustainability.

VI.

Next society adds computers and their derivatives to printing, writing, and language. Control projects emerge, which have to compete with those implemented within computer grids. Borrowing a term from Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's book *Empire* we speak of "posses" that produce the singularities which cross networks to hack and recode resources, ideas, and people (Hardt/Negri 2000, p. 408). Posses are known as police task forces and rap groups, but by now come in as political campaigns, businesses' strategic communications, terrorists' strikes, and artists' projects as well. In architecture and urban planning their impact may be called a big one in that "bigness" consists in destroying and beginning anew at the same time (Koolhaas 1998, p. 511).

From posses of all kinds crossing the functional systems known from modern society emerge creative economies which combine the debris of those systems into networks which all have a certain touch of surprise to them. That is why they are called creative in the first place.

Our Spencer-Brown expression coding city 4.0 thus may read as follows:
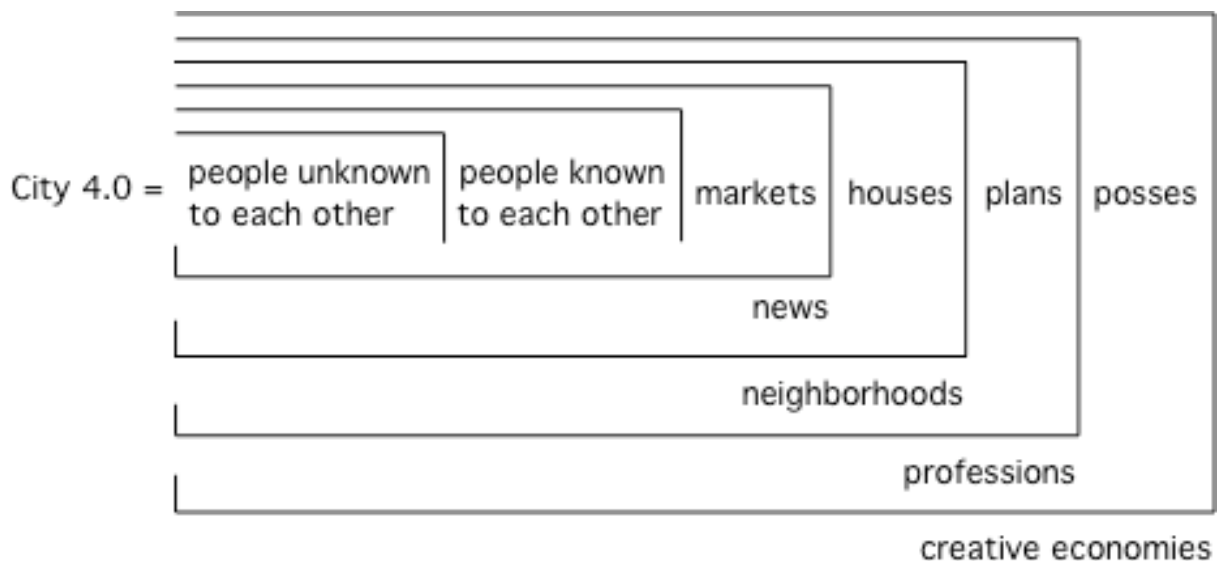
Posses cannibalize on markets, houses (homes and businesses), and plans. They rely on news, they combine and recombine neighborhoods, now called networks, and they simulate and dissimulate professions, a competence called spinning. Yet, they cannot avoid even if they try, to give rise to a new kind of corporate action which consists in re-embedding posses within creative economies. Those creative economies make use of computers and compete

with them. They bet on printing devices of publication, most notably cell phone messaging, being quicker and more flexible in combining resources, ideas, and people into new forms each of which indicates its own space of possibilities.

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