

Chapter 11

American Cities: The Grid Plan and the Protestant Ethic



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Abstract By expanding on the relation between space and culture, this chapter scrutinizes the interaction between the grid plan and the Protestant Ethic. Moving between a critique of religious philosophy and the psychology of the urban form as a social construct, the chapter exemplifies the entanglement of cultural values with the spatial order. The author argues that this entanglement and its particular realization in the very form of U.S. cities has had a powerful effect on modern vision, just as, in Max Weber's formulation, religious techniques of self-regulation continued long after religious faith had waned. The chapter suggests that the American grid plan was a sign of a peculiarly modern form of repression based upon the denial of meaning and difference through the production of abstract urban spaces of neutrality.

Keywords Grid plan · Symbolic power · U.S. cities · Capitalism · Repression · Neutrality · Max Weber · Protestant Ethic

The Making of Grids

The Egyptian hieroglyph which the historian Joseph Rykwert (1988, 192) believes was one of the original signs for a town is \oplus , transcribed as "nywt." This hieroglyph is a cross within a circle, and suggests two of the simplest, most enduring urban images. The circle is a single, unbroken closed line; it suggests enclosure, a wall or space like a town square; within this enclosure, life unfolds. The cross is the simplest form of distinct compound lines; it is perhaps the most ancient object of environmental process, as opposed to the circle, which represents the boundary defining

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environmental size. Crossed lines represent an elemental way of making streets within the boundary, through making grids.

The Babylonians and the ancient Egyptians made cities by planning straight streets to meet at right angles, thus creating regular, repeating blocks of land on which to build. Hippodamus of Miletus is conventionally thought the first city builder to conceive of these grids as expressions of culture; the grid expressed, he believed, the rationality of civilized life. In their military conquests the Romans elaborated the contrast between the rude and formless camps of the barbarians and their own military forts, or *castra*. The Roman camps were laid out as squares or rectangles. The perimeter was at first guarded by soldiers, and then, as the camp grew into a permanent settlement, the four sides were walled in. When first established, a *castrum* was divided inside into four parts by two axial streets, the *decumanus* and the *cardo*; the meeting point of these two principal streets was where the principal military tents were placed in the early stages of settlement, and later the forum was placed just to the north of the crossing. If the encampment did indeed prosper, the spaces between the perimeter and the center were gradually filled up by repeating the overall idea of axes and centers in miniature. For the Romans, the point of these rules was to create cities on the pattern of Rome itself; wherever in the world a Roman lived, he was at home.

In the subsequent history in Western urbanism, the grid has been of special use in starting new space or in renovating existing space devastated by catastrophe. All the schemes for rebuilding London after the great fire of 1666—Hooke's, Evelyn's, and Wren's—made use of the Roman grid form; these schemes influenced Americans like William Penn in conceiving the making of a city from scratch. Nineteenth-century America seems a whole nation of cities created on the principles of the Roman military camp, and the American example of "instant" cities in turn influenced the new city building in other parts of the world.

In its origins, the grid established a spiritual center. "The rite of the founding of a town touches on one of the great commonplaces of religious experience," Joseph Rykwert writes in his study of the Roman city,

The construction of any human dwelling or communal building is in some sense always an *anamnesis*, the recalling of a divine "instituting" of a center of the world. That is why the place on which it is built cannot arbitrarily or even "rationally" be chosen by the builders, it must be "discovered" through the revelation of some divine agency. (1988, 90)

The ancient writer Hyginus Gromaticus believed that the priests inaugurating a new Roman town must find its place in the cosmos, for "boundaries are never drawn without reference to the order of the universe, for the *decunami* are set in line with the course of the sun, while the *cardines* follow the axis of the sky" (Rykwert 1988, 90–1). However, no physical design ever dictates a permanent meaning. Grids, like any design, become whatever particular societies make them represent. The Romans saw the grid as an emotionally charged design, while the Americans used it for a different purpose: to deny that complexity and difference existed in the environment. The grid has seemed in modern times a plan which neutralizes the environment.

The Roman military city was conceived to develop in time within its boundary, designed to be filled in. The modern grid was meant to be boundary-less, to extend block after block after block outward as the city grew. In contriving the grid plan of 1811 which has since determined modern Manhattan above Greenwich Village, the planning commissioners acknowledged “it may be a subject of merriment, that the Commissioners have provided space for a greater population than is collected at any spot on this side of China” (Bridges 1811, 30). But just as Americans saw the natural world around them as limitless, they saw their own powers of conquest and habitation as subject to no natural or inherent limitation.

The Romans imagined from the sense of a distinct, bounded whole how to generate a center at the intersection of the *decumanus* and the *cardo*, and then how to create centers for each neighborhood by imitating this crossing of principal axes in each subsection. The Americans tended more and more to eliminate the public center, as in the plans for Chicago devised in 1833, and San Francisco in 1849 and 1856, which provided only a handful of small public spaces within thousands of imagined blocks of building. Even when the desire for a center existed it was difficult to deduce where public places should be, and how they should work, in cities conceived like a map of limitless rectangles of land. The humane civic spaces in Colonial Philadelphia created by Penn and Holme, or at the opposite pole, the brutal slave market squares of *ante bellum* Savannah—both workable spaces for organized crowd life—faded as models during the era when vast sums were poured into urban development.

The American grids inflected, it is true, a certain intensification of value at the intersections of streets, rather than in the middle of blocks; in modern Manhattan, for instance, tall buildings in residential neighborhoods are permitted at the corners, whereas the middle of the block is kept low. But even this pattern, when repeated often enough, loses these powers of “imageability,” which the urbanist Kevin Lynch sought, powers of designating the character of specific places and of their relationship to the larger city.

Perhaps the most striking grids made in this fashion were in the southern rim of settlement in America, in the cities developed under Spanish rule or influence. On 3 July 1573, Philip II of Spain laid down a set of ordinances for the creation of cities in his New World lands, the “Law of the Indies.” The key provision is the decree that towns will take form symmetrically through defining their centers, a decree expressed simply and rigorously:

The plan of the place, with its squares, streets, and building lots is to be outlined by means of measuring by cord and rule, beginning with the main square from which streets are to run to the gates and principal roads and leaving sufficient open space so that even if the town grows it can always spread out in a symmetrical manner. (Royal Ordinances Concerning the Laying Out of New Towns, cited in Reps 1965, 29)

Beginning with cities like St. Augustine, Florida, royal decree was meticulously obeyed, as it was along the entire Spanish rim during the course of nearly three centuries. An early plan for Los Angeles in 1781 would have looked familiar to Philip II or for that matter, to Julius Caesar. Then, suddenly, with the coming of

railroads and massive doses of capital looking for a home, there came a break in towns on the Spanish rim with the principles enunciated in the “Law of the Indies.” The square ceased to be a center; it no longer was a reference point in generating new urban space. Town squares became random dots amidst block after block of building plots, as in a plan for Santa Monica as part of the “new” Los Angeles in 1875, and then they disappeared entirely, when the “new” Los Angeles on paper became a fact a generation later.

The twentieth century completed both these geographic processes at work in the making of grids, even when development occurred by building a thousand houses along arbitrarily twisting streets which could be called “Willow Lane” and “Old Post Road,” or by digging out lumps of industrial park, office campus, and shopping mall on the edges of highways. In the development of the modern “megalopolis,” it has become more reasonable to speak of urban “nodes” than of centers and suburbs. The very fuzziness of the word “node” indicates the loss of a language for naming environmental value: “center” is charged with meanings both historical and visual, while “node” is resolutely bland.

This American pattern is in many ways the extreme toward which other forms of new development tend; the same kind of settlement has occurred in Italy and France, in Israel, in the Soviet Union beyond the Urals. In all of these, development lacks a logic of its own limits and of form established within boundaries; the results of amorphous building are places without character. The grid in particular doesn’t “cause” this blandness; neutrality has changed its form from an endless city of regularly intersecting lines to winding housing developments, shopping strips, and clots of offices or factories. But the recent history of the grid reveals what might be called the nastiness underlying blandness; in making an environment, as in conducting a life, neutrality is often a weapon of passive aggression. The dull city, like the life consecrated to routine, is a way to deny that, in the end, other people, other needs, matter very much.

In April 1791, Pierre Charles L’Enfant was courageously engaged in combating Thomas Jefferson’s plan to create the new American capital according to a grid-iron plan. L’Enfant wrote to President Washington:

Such regular plans ... become at last tiresome and insipid and it [the grid] could never be in its origin but a mean continuance of some cool imagination wanting a sense of the real grand and truly beautiful. (cited in Kite 1929, 47–48)¹

A capitol should reverberate with symbolic power, and L’Enfant imagined the regularities of the grid as empty of such reverberations. It was neutral space, in the sense of being empty. The following century was to show, however, that these neutral environments were perfect spaces in which to practice the denial of difference.

The American urbanists used grid planning to deny even elemental disturbances prompted by geography. In cities like Chicago, the grids were laid over irregular

¹Pierre Charles L’Enfant, “Note relative to the ground lying on the eastern branch of the river Potomac.” Undated, but necessarily written between 4 April, when President Washington forwarded Jefferson’s ideas to L’Enfant, and 10 April 1791, when Jefferson accepted L’Enfant’s control of the planning of the new national capitol.

terrain; the rectangular blocks obliterated the natural environment, spreading out relentlessly no matter what hills, rivers, or forest knolls stood in the way. The natural features which could be levelled or drained were the obstacles which nature put against the grid; the irregular course of rivers or lakes was ignored by these frontier city planners, as if what could not be harnessed to this mechanical, tyrannical geometry did not exist. Often, this relentless imposition of a grid required a willful suspension of the logical faculties. In Chicago, the grid created immense problems of transport across the river cutting through the center of the city; the lines of the streets suddenly end at one river bank only to continue on the other side, as though the river were spanned by innumerable, if invisible, bridges. A visitor to the new town of Cincinnati noticed, in 1797, if the “inconvenience” of applying the grid to a similar river topography; further,

if they had made one of their principal streets to face the river and other at the brow of the second bank ... the whole town would have presented a noble appearance from the river. (Baily 1856, 226, as cited in Wade 1959, 24–25)

Cincinnati bore an ancient name but was no Greek city; these urban plans imposed arbitrarily on the land rather established an interactive, sustaining relation to it.

Though it was one of the oldest cities in America, New York’s planners treated it during the era of high capitalism as if it, too, were a city on the frontier, a place required to deal with the physical world as an enemy. The planners imposed a grid at one blow in 1811 upon Manhattan from Canal Street, the edge of dense settlement, up to 155th Street, and then in a second stroke in 1870 to the northern tip. They imposed the grid more gradually in Brooklyn east from its old harbor. The settlers on the frontier, whether from fear or simple greed, treated the Indians as part of the landscape rather than as fellow human beings; on the frontier nothing existed, it was a void to be filled up. Planners could no more see life outside the grid in New York than they could in Illinois. The farms and hamlets dotting nineteenth-century Manhattan were expected to be engulfed rather than incorporated as the grid on paper became building in fact; little adaptation of the plan was made in that process, even when some more flexible arrangement of streets would make better use of a hill or better suit the vagaries of Manhattan’s water table. And, inexorably, development according to the grid did abolish whatever existing settlement was encountered. In this Neoclassical age, the nineteenth-century planners could have built as Romans, or nearer at hand, like William Penn, laying out squares or establishing rules for where churches, schools, and markets were to go. The land was available, but they were not so minded. Economic development and environmental consciousness were inseparably linked in this neutralizing denial. The New York Commissioners declared that “right angled houses are the most cheap to build, and the most convenient to live in” (Bridges 1811, 25). What is unstated here is the belief that uniform units of land were also the easiest to sell. This relationship between the grid city and capitalist economics has been stated at its broadest by Lewis Mumford thus:

the resurgent capitalism of the seventeenth century treated the individual lot and the block, the street and the avenue, as abstract units for buying and selling, without respect for historic uses, for topographic conditions or for social needs. (1961, 421)

In the history of nineteenth-century New York, the matter was in fact more complicated, because the economics of selling land were very different in New York in 1870 than they were in 1811. The city at the beginning of the century was a dense cluster of buildings set in the wilderness. Land sales were of empty space. After the Civil War, they were of places which would soon fill up. To sell land profitably required a social reckoning: where people should live, where transport should most efficiently be located, where factories should go. Looking at a map which shows only blocks all the same size answers few of these questions. The grid was rational as an urban design only in an abstract, Cartesian sense. And, therefore, as was true of investments in rails and industry, the latter economic history of the grid is as much the story of disastrous investments as of large profits. Those who sought to profit from a neutral environment shared the same necessarily blank consciousness of its character as those like L'Enfant who hated it.²

Denial of Meaning

Whenever Americans of the era of high capitalism thought of an alternative to the grid, however, they thought of bucolic relief, a leafy park or a promenade, rather than a more arousing street, square, or center in which to experience the complex life of the city. The construction of Central Park in New York is perhaps the most bitter example of this alternative, an artfully designed natural void planned for the city's center in the expectation that the cultivated, charming territory already established around it—as bucolic and refreshing a scene as any city-dweller could wish for within a few minutes drive from his house—would be razed to the ground by the encroachments of the grid.

Its designers Olmsted and Vaux themselves wanted to obliterate the simplest reminder that Central Park was located in the midst of a thriving metropolis. This reminder would occur, for instance, in seeing or hearing the traffic crossing it. These Americans therefore built contrary to the makers of the Bois de Boulogne, who made traversing the Bois a pleasure even for those who had business which required the journey. Olmsted and Vaux hid such people away, literally; they buried the traffic routes in channels below the grade of the Park. In their own words, these roads are to:

be sunk so far below the surface ... The banks on each side will be walled up to the height of about seven feet ... and a little judicious planting on the tops or slopes of the banks above these walls will, in most cases, entirely conceal both the roads and the vehicles moving in

²The reader interested in the irrational course which was the actual process of “the logic of capitalism” might want to read Marcuse (1987).

them, from the view of those walking or driving in the park. (cited in Olmsted and Kimball 1928, 214–232)

These were the dualities of denial: to build you act as though you live in emptiness; to resist the builder's world you act as though you do not live in a city.

Some of this denial of meaning to the American city has a uniquely American source, derived from the sheer visceral impress of our natural landscape made upon all those who travelled in it, Americans and visitors alike. This natural world once was immense, unframed, boundary-less. The impress of a boundary-less world becomes clear, for instance, in comparing an American painting of wilderness, John Kensatt's "View near West Point on the Hudson" of 1863 to Corot's "A View of Volterra" of 1838, two paintings organized around roughly similar views. What we see in Kensatt's painting is limitless space, a view bursting its frame, the eye going and going and going without obstruction. All the rocks, trees, and people in the painting are deprived of substance because they are absorbed into immensity. Whereas, in Corot's painting, we feel the vivid presence of specific things in a bounded view, or, as one critic has put it, "a solid architecture of rocks and even of foliage to measure the deep space" (McCoubrey 1963, 29). It seemed that only the most arbitrary imposition could tame the American vastness; an endless, unbounded grid. This effort of will, however, rebounded: the arbitrary spoiled what it tamed, the grid seemed to render space meaningless—and so sent an eye like Olmsted's searching for a way to recover the value of nature, seemingly free of the visible presence of man.

The nineteenth-century grid was horizontal; the twentieth-century grid is vertical; it is the skyscraper, and its powers of neutrality extend beyond the American scene. In cities of skyscrapers, Hong Kong as much as New York, it is impossible to think of the vertical slices above street level as having an inherent order, like the intersection of *cardo* and *decumanus*; one cannot point to activities which particularly ought to happen on the 6th floor of buildings. Nor can one relate visually 6th floors to 22nd floors as opposed to 25th floors in a building. The vertical grid lacks definitions of both significant placement and closure. However, as historians assure us, history does not repeat itself.

By the time homes for families were built in vertical grids, their makers knew that something was wrong. In America, they felt, it is true, the echo of a peculiar past, of that nineteenth-century practice in which families used hotels as semi-permanent residences. Such families wandered from hotel to hotel, the children only occasionally allowed to run in the corridors, the families dining in the same large rooms with commercial travellers and foreigners and unknowable women. But, more broadly, planners have come to believe that the apartment house is also a vertical grid of inherently neutral character. An editorial in the *New York Independent* newspaper argued in 1902 what was coming to be felt by the Garden City planning movement in England, and by socialist planners under the sway of face-to-face community ideals in France and Germany, namely, that large apartment houses destroy "neighbourhood feeling, helpful friendships, church connections and those homely common interests which are the foundations of civic pride and duty." In

New York, this view was codified in the Multiple Dwelling House Act of 1911, which treated all apartment buildings as similar in social function to hotels; the “lack of fundamentals on which a home was founded” could be perceived, as late as 1929 in one of the first books on apartment house architecture, to derive from “a building of six, nine, or fifteen stories, where the plan of one floor is repeated exactly throughout the entire building; individuality is practically non-existent” (cited in King 1980, 181). A skyscraper is no place for Ruskin’s Dream.

The common-sense view of change is that when people become conscious of an evil they react against it. A more realistic account is that people act out the evils they discover. They know what they are doing is wrong and yet they move closer and closer to making it happen, in order to see if what they think or perceive is real. Certainly this is true in our time among those who have built vertical grids for families. It was with a fear of the loss of family values in neutral, impersonal spaces that architects and planners like Robert Moses began in the 1930s to build the great housing projects in New York which would eventually realize these very fears. There are, perhaps, no devils in this story; the housing project is a reformist dream dating back to nineteenth-century efforts to build healthy homes *en masse* for workers. Only, the visual vocabulary of building betrays another set of values, one which converts old ideas about unbounded space into new forms of denial.

Housing projects meant for the poor, like those along Park Avenue in Harlem, are designed according to the principles of the unbounded, amorphous grid. Everything is graded flat; there are few trees. Little patches of lawn are protected by metal fences. The Park Avenue apartments are relatively free of crime but, according to the complaints of the residents, are a hostile environment for the conduct of family life. That hostility is built into their very functionality; they deny one is living in a place of any value. They are, in this, passive-aggressive spaces.

It is disconcerting to hear this denial given voice in the bars on the edge of a Harlem project like the one along upper Park Avenue. (There are no places to drink in public within the forest of towers itself). It is strange because the language of sociability is so broken into fragments. I used to think it was because I was present, but in these Park Avenue bars after a while people forget about a stray, balding, familiar white. These are family bars, cleaning ladies and janitors drinking beer; places which are more lively are for people living on the shadows of the underworld. The bars next to this project seldom have an actual bar; they are just rooms where someone has put bottles on a table. Here it is as though time has stopped; the day hangs in dust roused by the commuter trains shuttling in and out of a tunnel next to the buildings, the bar at night has a television turned on without sound, there is the ebb and flow of police sirens, a fan in summer. This is the space that talk filled, but I came to understand it was enough: the drops of sound made for a consciousness of presence, of living, if barely audible, *here*. These words came eventually to impress me more than the most inflamed political rhetoric: they came from the desire to make a place in which it mattered to speak, if this mattering place were constructed from no more than broken chairs and the stained plastic table shoved into an abandoned storefront which people called their bar. This construction countered the functional, neutral places made for them in which they were nowhere and no one.

Neutrality, as a space of social control, seems to explain a great divide between nineteenth-century European planning and those more modern practices which first took shape horizontally in nineteenth-century America and are now more universally deployed in the skyscraper. Baron Haussmann was engaged in remaking Paris during the era in which Central Park was created. Haussmann confronted a congested city a thousand years old whose twisted streets were a breeding ground for, in his mind, the unholy trinity of disease, crime, and revolution. He imagined a traditional means of repression in the face of these dangers. The cutting of straight streets through a congested Paris was to make it easier for people to breathe, for police, and if necessary, troops to move. The great streets of the Haussmannian era were, however, to be lined with apartments over elegant shops, in order to attract the bourgeoisie into previously working-class districts; the economy of local working class life, he hoped, would become therefore, dependent upon servicing the bourgeois who dominated the *quartier*; he imagined a kind of internal class colonization of the city. At the same time as he opened the city mass transport to the swift flow of traffic, he also hoped the working classes were to become more locally dependent. This paradox expresses perhaps the contradiction of every bourgeois, that mixed desire for progress and order. Haussmann was a man who mixed neighborhoods, who diversified, all in the name of re-establishing local bonds as though the respectable businessmen and professionals could become a new class of squires. He sought to create a Paris of steady if demanding customers, of concierge-spies, and a thousand little services.

American urbanism during its great flowering has proceeded by another path of power, one which repressed the overt definition of significant space in which domination and dependence were to occur. No building form like the Haussmannian apartment house with its courtyard of artisans. Instead, both horizontal and vertical development proceeded among us as a more modern, more abstract operation of extension. In the making of the grid cities, Americans proceeded as in their encounters with the Indians, by “erasure” of the presence of an alien Other, rather than by colonization. Instead of establishing the significance of place, control operated through consciousness of place as neutral.

Denial of Difference

Withdrawal and denial are two allied means of repressing differences. The one acknowledges that complexity exists but tries to run from it. The other tries simply to abolish its existence. In our cities homes are places of withdrawal, grids are places of denial. It was given to the greatest foreign observers of nineteenth-century America to understand how withdrawal and denial might come together. The young Alexis de Tocqueville’s family were among the band of aristocrats of 1830 who refused to participate in the new regime, and made the *émigration intérieure*. He arranged his famous voyage to America as a way out of his own difficulties in taking

the regime's Oath of Loyalty. His first days in New York were for him clues to what he would have to explain.

In his time, the usual way for a foreigner to journey to New York was to sail into the harbor coming up from the south, a route which afforded the voyager a sudden view of the crowd of masts along the packed wharves, behind which spread offices, homes, churches, and schools. This New World scene appeared to be a familiar European one of prosperous mercantile confusion, like Antwerp or the lower reaches of London on the Thames. Tocqueville instead approached New York from the north, coming down through Long Island Sound. His first view of Manhattan was its bucolic upper reaches, still in 1831 pure farmland dotted with a few hamlets. At first what excited him about the view of the city was the sudden eruption of a metropolis in the midst of a nearly pristine natural landscape. He felt the enthusiasm of a European coming here who imagines he can plant himself in this unspoiled landscape like a city, that it is fresh and simple and Europe is stale and complex. And then, after that fit of youthful enthusiasm passed, New York began to disturb him, as he later wrote to his mother. No one seemed to take where they lived seriously, to care about the buildings through which they hurried in and out; instead the city was treated by its citizens simply as a complicated instrument of offices and restaurants and shops for the conduct of business.

Throughout his American journey Tocqueville was struck by the bland and insubstantial character of American settlement. Houses seemed mere stage-sets rather than buildings meant to last, there seemed nothing permanent in the environment. And this physical scene has a political consequence. The very lack of physical constraints made the masses of people feel they could do whatever they wished, or so it seemed to Tocqueville in the first volume of the *Democracy*, written in the heat of his travel impressions and published in 1834.

In this first volume the young writer, reflecting upon American blandness, was still very much a child of his own past. The masses of America in which all are equal appeared to him as the mob of the Great Revolution had appeared to his noble parents. This mass, the majority, was an active body; it trampled the rights of dissent, it admitted no contrary voice to its own will, sought to impose itself, like an intolerant mob, upon the minority:

I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America ... In America the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he please, but woe to him if he goes beyond them ... he yields at length, overcome by the daily effort which he has to make, and subsides in silence, as if he felt remorse for having spoken the truth. (Tocqueville 1945 [1850], vol. I, 273–274)

The city, as Tocqueville perceived in America, helped arouse this mob passion:

The lower ranks which inhabit these cities constitute a rabble even more formidable than the populace of European towns ... they also contain a multitude of Europeans who have been driven to the shores of the New World by their misfortunes or their misconduct; and they bring to the United States all our greatest vices. (1945 [1850], vol. I, 299)

And against the mob, the forces of order built in wood. The blandness of the American environment made it easier for mob passion to rule—nothing “out there,” no stones of history or forms of ritual, will chasten the mob and hold them back.

The second volume of the *Democracy in America* was written after Tocqueville had tasted a few years of the new regime in France. It was published in 1840 and is quite different in outlook, and enters the story we have to tell. The author returned to his own society of pear-shaped men. He saw a whole generation withdraw in disgust at the competitive, cynical world epitomized by Louis Philippe’s stirring appeal to his people, “*Enrichissez-vous!*”—get rich! He witnessed the *émigration intérieure* take place among his childhood friends, indeed his entire generation; they were a depressed generation, and increasingly withdrawn rather than provokingly sarcastic in their disillusion. Their depression made him rethink his own past.

His memories of America passed through the prism of the present and now he remembered America as the harbinger of this new danger in European society; across the ocean there was a country suffering in more modern ways than from mob violence restrained only by wood. In his travel notes, Tocqueville had recorded how much one place looked like another, how little variation the local economy, climate, and even topography seemed to matter in constructing a town. Tocqueville had at first explained this homogeneity in building a city as the result of unbridled commercial exploitation. Now he inclined to a more tragic view: these were the signs of a people who willed their built environment into a neutral state for the same reasons they willed their lived into this condition. The famous American “individual,” rather than being an adventurer, is in reality most often a man or woman whose circle of reality is drawn no larger than family and friends. The individual has little interest, indeed, little energy, outside that circle. The American individual is a passive man, and monotonous space is what a passive society builds for itself.

Tocqueville enters our story at the point at which he conceived that denial of and withdrawal from difference might go hand in hand. The action a passive society takes is to neutralize—to sand the grain smooth. Smothering discord in toleration and understanding, like Norman Mailer with his graffiti, is a modern Tocquevillian instance. In space, the shipping strip, the endless repetition of glass and steel skyscrapers, the ribbon highway, the reduplication of the same stores selling the same goods in city after city, the reign of discrete, unobtrusive good taste, or that soft high-tech called by New Yorkers “eurotrash”—all these are modern Tocquevillian signs. A bland environment assures people that nothing disturbing or demanding is happening “out there.” You build neutrality in order to legitimate withdrawal.

Tocqueville was the first of the thinkers about mass society—Ortega, Huxley, Orwell. He condemned neutrality as the invisible sign of a tired conformism rather than a rampaging mob:

The reproach I address to the principle of equality is not that it leads men away in the pursuit of forbidden enjoyments, but that it absorbs them wholly in quest of those which are allowed. By these means a kind of virtuous materialism may ultimately be established in the world, which would corrupt, but enervate, the soul and noiselessly unbend its springs of action. (Tocqueville 1945 [1850], vol. II, 141)

But, in looking at the fatigue of his own generation, who were themselves becoming more passive, turning a more bland face to the world, he came to a further conclusion. The psychological aristocrat is really much more a brother to the American individualist than the European would like to think. They both withdraw, and they both suffer because they withdraw. Once people succeed in neutralizing the outer and withdrawing into the interior, Tocqueville believed they would gradually experience a loss of self-control. War, economic disaster, violent crime are all experiences in which a loss of control happens *to* someone. Neutrality has a different, more insidious character. Physically it is a lack of stimulus, behaviorally a lack of demanding experience; without these, people begin to feel disoriented. They then start to come apart from within. Nothing coheres in blandness.

There are bars everywhere in New York, bars devoted to heavy drinking and bars which are a mere afterthought, like the bar in the Museum of Modern Art; there are bars in discos, bank buildings, brothels as well as improvised in housing projects. The great bars are in hotels—the Oak Bar in the Plaza, the bar of the Algonquin; they are panelled and filled with large comfortable chairs, like the clubs nearby, but there is no discreet murmur of voices here. A great bar is a place where you have to shout to make yourself heard. Few New York bars though, even in the center of the city, are great. Instead they are resolutely neutral, especially in places of power, for instance in the bar of the Hotel Pierre, on Fifth Avenue just where Central Park begins. The physical contrast between this bar and the room up in Harlem with a table crowded with bottles is so extreme as to be meaningless. The Pierre bar, with its ample tables, flowers, and subdued lights, has always conveyed a peculiar discretion; people come here who need to do business without being seen to be doing it. This is evident in little details: when people recognize others here, they seldom table-hop; at most there are brief nods of recognition. The drinks at the Pierre are mostly for show. Two men will sit for an hour nursing the glasses in front of them; the waiters are trained not to hover.

It is a nervous bar with so many people paying careful attention to one another. The Pierre bar is neutral in the way a chess board is; it serves a grid for competition. And yet in this power center, among these men in their quiet, expensive clothes, sunk deep into their leather chairs, the atmosphere seems more charged by fear than entrepreneurial zeal. The men are afraid of giving away too much. “Control” is a meaningless word uptown; here it is a synonym for anxiety. If you don’t pay careful attention, things will come apart.

To the ordinary New Yorker, the reality of these fears must forever be a mystery; all that the ordinary New Yorker can know is that these deals are cut in neutral surroundings, decorated in “Eurotrash” or “Olde English”—rooms whose very blandness does not distract the players from their anxieties.

The scene represented by the bar at the Hotel Pierre is a puzzling element, it must be said, in Tocqueville’s story. Tocqueville imagined a mass society of equals suffering from the very acts which made them equal. The equalizing, in the sense of neutralizing of the environment, causes them to lose their bearings. He saw this lack of cohesion in the “restlessness unto death” of Americans, for instance, their inability to take seriously and to enjoy whatever part of the common life they possessed

at the moment. They were, and are, always thinking about moving, even though other places might be almost the same. In modern New York, the cultural illnesses of making everything the same, or neutralizing, appear, however, in a society of deep material inequality. Tocqueville, no less than St. Augustine, taught us to take seriously how things look. Thus, if nothing coheres in blandness, the saying may be as true of making money as of suffering poverty—but the phenomenon of neutrality cannot be the same for both rich and poor.

We could pose this puzzle abstractly as a question: how can the cultural denial of difference operate in a society in which social and economic differences are becoming greater and more extreme? The leveraged-buyout specialist doing a deal at the Pierre denies that the loss of thousands of jobs in the course of financial restructuring is part of the reality in which he is involved. We can understand that his soothing physical trappings reinforce his desire to proceed as if nothing is real other than the numbers on his papers. Freud, like Tocqueville, tells us people suffer from their denials. How, eventually, is the leveraged buy-out specialist going to suffer from having denied that other lives than his own mattered? He is a realistic adult; he knows that retributive justice seldom strikes back at the rich. No one punished the New York Commissioners, either; while they were alive their work was treated as a model of progressive planning.

It may seem peculiar to turn to the history of religion again to explore how a culture denying difference persists in a society of great economic, ethnic, and racial differences. But one lingering presence of religion in modern life is to give people the faith that the worldly pains you deny *can* be denied. If religion once offered people a concrete sanctuary into which to escape, something like a smoldering religious sentiment offers another, more comforting if less material refuge: nothing “out there” is real. You can make it go away. And, by no stake of divine retribution, certainly, people who do believe they can make outside reality go away eventually do begin to come apart within.

“My Civil Wars Within”

The God-ghost who lives in the faith that you can make differences go away appears in the most prosaic fact. We remarked that American grids, unlike their Roman predecessors’, lacked boundaries. The age that built churches was much occupied by the question of whether, without boundaries of all kinds, a human being can have a center. Learning the limits of human desire and the boundaries of human knowledge revealed to men and women where they stood in the divine chain of being, in the hierarchy God has established, we must take our places, Aquinas said, on God’s ladder. This theology taught a psychological lesson: the modest soul, aware of its own limits, feels secure; it is the security of the Priest in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* who is at home in the world because he is at home in himself:

And though he hooly were and vertuouus,
 He was to synful men nat despitouus,
 Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne,
 But in his techung discret and benygne

[And yet, though he himself was holy and virtuous, he was not contemptuous of sinners nor overbearing and proud in his talk; rather, he was discreet and kind in his teaching.] (Chaucer 1971, original 357, translated 10)

From this inward moral centeredness a city could be made. Chaucer literally meant to evoke a sense of place when he described the priest's virtues as those of a "good man of the church": they were parish virtues rather than the virtues of the wandering mystic. What would happen to the comforts of faith when Mankind no longer lived in a bounded world?

It was this problem of Mankind unchained, the maker of its own life in a constantly shifting, materially expanding society, that the sociologist Max Weber took up in his famous study of the "Protestant Ethic." The early Protestant, in Weber's view, took everyday life much more seriously than his Catholic forbears, who consigned it to the links of the unplanned and the chaotic. The Protestant instead saw the life of the street as a place in which competition against others meant something about his own self-worth. But this new Christian couldn't allow himself to enjoy what he earned; he was afraid pleasure would corrupt him. Thus he was both worldly and ascetic, aggressive in making money and then denying its power to make him more comfortable, fatter, elegant, or amusing. The most daring thing about Weber's picture of this new businessman was to see him as a Christian. "Christian asceticism," Weber wrote in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

at first fleeing from the world into solitude, had already ruled the world which it had renounced from the monastery and through the Church. But it had, on the whole, left the naturally spontaneous character of daily life in the world untouched. Now it strode into the marketplace of life, slammed the door of the monastery behind it, and undertook to penetrate just that daily routine of life with its methodicalness, to fashion it into a life in the world, neither of nor for this world. (as translated by, and cited in, Green 1974, 152)

Christianity thus took to the streets to find its truths; the religion lost its earlier certainty about the division of this world from the next. Perhaps people might make gains in this world which would bear on their life in the next. Yet also, one's fate, one's election or damnation came to seem more uncertain when it became tied to the flux of the street.

Weber, as we know from the very title of his book, sought to connect this new spiritual value placed on competition to the origins of modern capitalism. He did so in the most straightforward way imaginable: the competition for wealth, immemorial and universal in all societies, now became also a demonstration of virtue. It could be so, however, only as long as it was a demonstration, only so long as it didn't result in pleasure or the love of the things one earned. The hedonist may be greedy, but he lacks discipline and so he is likely to lose. Thus, in a competitive society, inequality appears to be denial. Those who are better self-deniers are more likely to succeed.

What is subtle about Weber's analysis is that he understood that denial is a double-edged experience: you develop the strength to deny yourself immediate gratification only by denying that anything out there right now is of real value, or to be taken seriously for its own sake. Making money one does not spend, holding back—these acts we now call “delayed gratification” neutralize radically one's emotional attachments by neutralizing the value of what we desire; he-she-it wasn't worth my time. The person good at competition is good at denying the reality of anything else.

The early Protestants engaged in delayed gratification for the sake of God. God made competition a virtue, the denial of reality real. Unfortunately God was also unknowable, and one's sin was infinite. How much success and how much denial would demonstrate that one was a good person worthy of being saved? The question was unanswerable, and one felt driven to go on, to compete and succeed more, delaying gratification even longer, hoping in the future at last to find an answer which never came. The restlessness Tocqueville noted among Americans who were, puzzlingly, also so indifferent to their surroundings, Weber explained as the very last consequence of this religious stew cooked up with denial. To save and to be saved; to deny the present so as to be deserving of the future; to compete ruthlessly against others so as to prove one's worth; to deny concreteness for the sake of innerness; to live in a state of endless becoming. Weber had, I think, more to do with Freud than Marx here, for the mechanics of capitalist competition, as Weber understood it, was a demonstration of Freud's thesis that people suffer from their own denials.

Just before he wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber travelled to America, in the age in which the Vanderbilts had dinners for seventy served by seventy powdered footmen. The luxury-loving capitalists of Weber's day seemed an aberration of the species. In time, men of power would learn to protect themselves by not flaunting their wealth. Culturally, they would seek to be just “one of the boys,” as we would say, they would seek to fit in. Yet in fact they would remain adversaries to others; Weber's genius was to understand that they would feel driven to compete long after they were financially secure. The man who would treat others as a pawn was a man struggling with his own demons: its form first became visible in the Protestant movement to make consciousness of one's inner state the focus of faith. The genius of his idea was, again, to understand how people might try to resolve doubts about their inner worthiness by a certain kind of exercise of power, in which the person wins but does not enjoy the victory. This self-denial proves that someone has a strong character—stronger than others, and strong enough to stand up to the temptations of desire within himself. Weber wanted to explain what the competitive person proving to himself was proving.

To demonstrate the unhappiness underlying competition, Weber took an extreme to represent and dramatize the mean: he cited Calvinists and the small band of Puritan Protestants of the seventeenth century, particularly those refuted in America as evidence for the impact of Protestant conscience upon the world. Like Tocqueville, Weber saw the lives of these Americans as a talisman of what Europe would become.

He imagined the Puritans to be heroic neurotics, people wrecked with inner doubt by the life-long struggle to prove themselves worthy.

In one way they were hardly suitable for his story. The places in which the Puritans had lived would have been instantly recognizable to their contemporaries as traditional European villages, a nucleus of houses packed tight around a green. Beyond this traditional village, the pastures and fields extended out to the township lines. In the later seventeenth century, this traditional village pattern begins to give way, and for reasons that would be painted for the next two hundred years. Once the village nucleus was established, “in land division the settlers abandoned the conservatism which had characterized their street plans. The allotment of wilderness seemed to ridicule humble European field systems” (Garvan 1951, 52). And by the eighteenth century, these tight-knit villages had unraveled, as the bulk of the population moved out to live on the land they worked.

While they lasted, these nucleated villages were highly co-operative rather than competitive. The Salem Village Church Covenant of 1689 states, in part:

We resolve uprightly to study what is our duty, and to make it our grief, and reckon it our shame, whereinsoever we find our selves to come short in the discharge of it, and for pardon thereof we humbly to betake our selves to the Blood of the Everlasting Covenant.

And that we may keep this covenant, and all the branches of it inviolable for ever, being sensible that we can do nothing of our selves.

We humbly implore the help and grace of our Mediator may be sufficient for us.
(as cited in Rice 1874)

This covenant declares that inner distress and mutual co-operation are inseparable. “Neutrality,” “indifference to others” are not the operative words of these settlements; at first, the little New England villages hardly seemed to be the environment for the social denials of the Protestant Ethic.

And yet the people in them also came to live out the drama of denial through neutrality, lived out that drama and suffered on a heroic scale because of it. The Puritan imagined himself in need of removal from the worldliness in which he was born due to the unhappy warfare within his breast. His salvation or damnation was predestined by God, who had also, with a twist of the divine Knife, made it impossible for the Puritan to know whether he would be saved or damned. He was obliged, in the words of the American Puritan, Cotton Mather, “to preach the unsearchable Riches of Christ,” but he was all too human, he was a man who wanted to know his fate, in search of evidence (as cited in Silverman 1985, 24). The world’s daily sins and temptations were no more within his power to control—he lacked even the Catholic belief of absolution for sin. Nothing could be known ultimately, nothing could be absolved—his god was like a sadistic Fortune. Conscience and pain became, therefore, inseparable companions.

Perhaps the most graphic expression of this inner conflict was a popular poem of the early seventeenth century by George Goodwin, which reads in part:

I sing my self; my civil wars within;
The victories I hourly lose and win;
The daily duel, the continual strife,

The war that ends not, till I end my life
 (as cited in Bercovitch 1975, 19)

From such misery the Puritan was tempted by the wilderness, by a place of emptiness which would make no seductive demands of its own upon him, in order that he try to get his life under control, however forlorn that hope. Cotton Mather's father, Increase Mather, one of the first generation of Puritans to set sail, wrote the following on the title page of his diary:

Give me a Cell
 To dwell
 Where no foot hath
 A Path
 There I will spend
 And End
 My wearied years
 In tears (as cited in Hall 1961, 352)

The first Americans were ravaged human beings. Mundane labels like "the first colonists" or "English adventurers" don't account for the motives that would drive people to make hazardous voyages in order to live out their lives in a cold, mosquito-infested, rocky landscape. The Puritans were the first Americans to suffer the dual need to "get away from it all" and to attempt to "get control of your life." This duality was flight from others in the name of self-mastery.

The churches in the centers of traditional European villages and towns made it obvious where to find God. These centers defined a space of recognition. God is legible: he is within, within the sanctuary as within the soul. On the outside there is only exposure, disorder, and cruelty. The Puritan "inside" was illegible, a place of war, conscience at war with itself; this terrible business of "finding oneself" will only become more confusing if the outside, other people, other confusions intrude. The Spaniard came to the New World as a lord, conversion and conquest, all of a piece; he came as a Catholic. The Puritan came as a refugee; conversion was a duty, conquest a necessity for survival, but neither of these was his reason for coming. The place he arrived at had to be treated like a blank canvas for the double compulsion to play itself out, to start again somewhere else by getting more control over himself.

Language frequently failed to express what passed within the breasts of the people embarked on this purifying experiment; a deadly failure in which Salem was the true witches brand: silence. But more generally in our culture the failure of words to reveal the soul was tied to a heightened self-awareness in an immense, alien place. Failing a language adequate to inner experience, the life of each would be more and more locked within, impossible to declare, perhaps at best intimated by the rendering of an impression. The inner space of medieval Catholicism was physical, it was a space people could share. The inner space of the Puritan was the space of the most radical individualism and was impalpable. The Puritan eye could only see within itself.

For the Puritan, emptiness therefore signified spiritually. Even in the early knots of village houses, he was alone with the conundrum of himself. Later observers who

wondered at the relentless push westward of people who could have been richer, and more content, cultivating what they already possessed, were observing one form of the Protestant Ethic—the inability to believe that whatever is, is sufficient. Somehow, by changing, the man so moved believes he will find himself—the very hardship of the struggle seems to give it that inner value. He is competing for the sake of pain, and competing ultimately with himself.

Faith at first made the nature of this inner struggle clear: good did combat sin. The nature of that inner struggle became less and less clear as people undid the European knot and moved out on their own. In a classic American text of our Western movement, the novel *The Little House on the Prairie*, the family uproots every time another house becomes visible on the horizon, without anyone in the family being able to explain why another roof-top is an intolerable sight, and yet they all feel threatened; they keep moving. This is the beginning of the suburban story: whenever you can afford it, move farther away from other people. Density is an evil. Only in emptiness, in neutrality, only without stimulation or “interference” with others can the psyche wrestle itself. This is the duality of flight from others and the struggle for self-control.

It may seem a very American story, indeed a story bound to a small seventeenth-century sect. Yet in the way that we sometimes find an illumination in the lives of people far distant from ourselves, who never intended to mean anything to us, so this land wrestling with “civil wars within” speaks to the present. Tocqueville mistook in one way the character of individualism; he thought it was simply indifference to other people—a generous mistake, it might be said, in reading a more modern reality. In fact the code for establishing self-control, as it first developed in our country, contains a deep hostility toward the needs of other people, a resentment of their very presence. They interfere; to get in control, nothing “out there” can count. This hostility now marks the way, in many cities, in which those who are homeless or mentally disturbed are treated on the streets—resented because of the very fact that they are visibly needy and they do not go away. More, it stands behind that competition in identities which made its appearance on the graffiti-smearred subway cars of the city, which is a competition for recognition. The Puritan could answer the question, “Recognition by whom?” We lack his belief in God, and so can give no comparable answer to this question, but still we feel the Puritan need to be validated. The ancient shadow lingers. It obscured the presence of others.

In our history the relentless use of grids found its place in casting that shadow. The grid seemed to resolve the threat of environmental value by an act of geometric repression: there was nothing “out there” to account for, in laying down a grid. The cultural problems of the city are conventionally taken to be its impersonality, its alienating scale, its coldness. What I am suggesting is that there is more in these charges that meets the eye. “Impersonality,” “coldness,” “emptiness” are essential words in the Protestant language of environment. They are words which express a certain interest in seeing; the facts of separation, exclusion, coldness are treated as reasons to look within for value. The story the Protestant Ethic tells about this interested perception is not a happy one. It is a story of value scarcity. Indeed, it is a story in which men create the very conditions and circumstances which they then feel to be

cold or empty. Such is the perverse consequence of denial. A person deals neutrally with the outside and then feels empty by doing so. This perversion is as applicable to the creation of space as to the creation of capital.

As it has become built into the fabric of everyday secular life, however, this Protestant conscience of space is no longer a heroic neurosis.

In sum, the relation between grid space and the Protestant Ethic is an instance of the way, more generally, space and culture can be related. Just as Weber did not conceive religion to determine economics but rather to interact with it, so do cultural values intersect equally with the spatial order. This particular intersection has had a powerful effect on modern vision, just as, in Weber's formulation, religious techniques of self-regulation continued long after religious faith had waned. Neutrality in the planning of visual space establishes a field for competition. On this field, the players are morally withdrawn into themselves. The American grid plans were the first sign of a peculiarly modern form of repression, one which denies value to other people and specific places by building neutrality.

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