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Cities: Imagining Cosmopolis

Eric Sheppard and William S. Lynn

When we think of cosmopolitan cities, we think of places like London or Toronto. Contemporary globalization has opened up cities of all sizes to new and rapidly changing influences from the world at large, including a profound diversification of city populations. This is not only occurring in global cities like New York and London, but also in small towns in Midwest North America or central Europe. Urban landscapes are being transformed by their diversifying populations, whether temporarily, as when London's Caribbean population celebrates their distinct heritage in Notting Hill during Carnival week, or more permanently, as diverse groups of residents in cities like Toronto seek to express and reinforce their presence by creating distinctive urban neighborhoods. And then there is Harmony, a city whose planners are making it animal and pet friendly by incorporating, amongst other things, dog parks, wildlife corridors and pet therapy. Might this new urbanist community in Florida be more cosmopolitan than London?

To answer this question, we need to consider what cosmopolitan might mean. The idea of a cosmopolitan city has received much attention in recent years. It draws on the notion that a cosmopolitan person is a 'world citizen', aware and engaged with the well-being of the world lying within and without her place of birth. A cosmopolitan city is envisioned as a place whose residents are open to and accepting of the world. It is the opposite of xenophobia, the all too common reaction to a way of life challenged by the diversification of a city's residents. Cosmopolitanism is seen as an antidote to such parochial interests and perspectives, as well as a justification for respecting diversity and pluralism in urban society. In this view, multicultural cities such as London and Toronto provide a vision for a more cosmopolitan future.

But where does the non-human world figure into this? Ancient thinkers originally conceived of the *cosmopolis* as a way of thinking about how humans and the natural world coexist. While they made a distinction

between cosmos and polis, what today we might translate as nature and culture, they also believed that a universal reason pervaded all natural and human phenomena, pulling the cosmos and polis into a common orbit of ethical meaning. This was the basis for an ethics that 'followed nature', as well as a 'natural law' binding on all human communities. Together, nature and culture constituted a cosmopolis. Today, some scholars use this idea as an interpretive frame for understanding the ethics of being human in a predominantly non-human world, and challenging the privileged placement of any one group or species in ethical-political thought and practice. In this view, the cosmopolis is a prerequisite for exploring what it would mean to have justice and well-being for all members of the mixed human and non-human community. It serves both as a metatheory to guide human understanding of our place in the natural world, and as a signifier of particular instances of such understandings.



'Puppy' by Sue Coe.

This latter understanding of the cosmopolis has not yet been widely applied to cities. The neglect of the non-human world in discussions of the cosmopolitan city is symptomatic of how cities long have been conceived as in opposition to nature. This opposition between 'civilization' and 'wilderness' is reproduced within the city when we make rigid

distinctions between the built-form of urban spaces (e.g. buildings, streets, sidewalks), as opposed to the parks, gardens and other green spaces that seem more natural. The first is termed artificial, the latter is called natural, and when taken together, the artificial and natural are believed to be in a state of uneasy coexistence. A dichotomy of this kind neglects the fact that urban open space, no matter how green and full of life, is structured by and predominantly for people. There is, therefore, a continuity between artificial and natural in urban areas. Thus, modern strategies for urban sustainability envisage a rearrangement of the city so that urban and natural landscapes inter-penetrate via corridors that promotes the health of native plants and wildlife, domestic pets and people. This is the vision held forth by the city of Harmony, Florida.

Coexistence and continuum do not, however, fully describe the relations between people, animals and the rest of nature in urban settings. In some ways, cities and the non-human world are completely inseparable in thought and practice. Take the example of the domestic animals most familiar to urban dwellers, cats and dogs. The house, neighborhood and city are, for them, the natural environment from which they get food and sustenance, and where they deposit their waste. Urban landscapes also contain a surprising diversity of wildlife, including song-birds, raptors, ducks, geese, mice, rats, squirrels, rabbits, weasels, minks, racoons, deer, and fox. There are an increasing number of metropolitan areas in North America learning to live with large predators, such as alligators, coyotes, pumas, and bears. Some of them, like domestic animals, are dependent on the landscapes of cities, and others simply treat this as another ecological niche. Thus cities serve the same function for them as agricultural and other landscapes do for humans: Our urban culture is their nature. Habitats range from backyards to graveyards, isolated rooftop gardens to networks of public and private lands, and resource-poor urban cores to resource-rich wetlands. At smaller scales, even those corners of the urban landscape most transformed by human action may contain vibrant ecologies: spider webs in dark corners, fungi in damp spaces, and bacteria everywhere (Stephen J. Gould's candidate for the most evolutionary successful beings). These are reminders that many successful natural landscapes look nothing like the green spaces that we associate with 'nature' in cities. Some non-human landscapes are not green at all, such as glaciers, deserts, volcanoes and oceans. From this point of view, both humans and cities are a part of nature, and should be conceived as an important and active component of the ecosystems that we help generate and live within. In short, our separation of humans and cities from the

non-human world does not hold up to scrutiny.

All this does not mean that the distinction between humans and the rest of nature can or should be eliminated. For better or worse, humans have come to dominate the non-human world. Despite the possibility that some anthropocentrism may be unavoidable in our thinking about the place of humans within nature, society has an asymmetric relationship with, and peculiar responsibility towards, animals and the rest of nature. A cosmopolitan sensibility about urban life should therefore sensitize us to the moral issues that mediate the connection between nature and culture. And a cosmopolitan resident in a city should value both its cultural and biological diversity. This entails a rejection of invidious exclusions and oppressions based on race, class, gender, ethnicity or species. Still, there are no straightforward or universal ethical principles to guide our conduct. Seeking a cosmopolitan city implies a situated moral understanding of the needs and values of human and non-human beings in urban landscapes, and how we respond to those needs and values will be an open question. Yet cosmopolitan thinking about the landscapes of cities welcomes the diversity of non-human life into these landscapes, and poses significant challenges to the processes of urban politics, economics and planning that for so long have shaped the city and separated it from nature.

Photo Credit

'Puppy', watercolour from *Pits Letter*, © Sue Coe 1999.

Further Reading

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991).

David Harvey *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, 2000).

Lynn, William S. (2002) *Canis Lupus Cosmopolis: Wolves in a Cosmopolitan Worldview*, *Worldviews* 6 (3), 300-327.

Leonie Sandercock, *Towards Cosmopolis* (London, 1998).

Jennifer Wolch, 'Living in Harmony: A City for People and Animals', *Sustainable Cities Program Newsletter*, 3 (April 2001), p. 6.