

PROBLEMATIZING THE MODERN CITY A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE FRAMEWORKS OF JACQUES ELLUL AND SAID NURSI

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ABSTRACT

My aim in this paper is to present the concept of the “city” as a problem that is not only sociological in nature, but also theological. Given the contested viewpoints over what defines a “city”, I have approached the concept from the perspective of the French historian and sociologist Jacques Ellul who defines it as a theological construct within a particular Christian worldview. The “city” from the Ellulian view is symbolic and represents an act of rebellion against God, an act of despair and denial of God’s Mercy, and an arrogant desire to be independent of God and provide one’s own security. All this results for Ellul, a city as a cursed theological construct which invites warfare and vice. Yet despite this, Ellul sees the city reconciled in Christ and ultimately used by God, eschatologically speaking, to bring out redemption and as a means to bring about a Holy City free from the vices of man’s rebellion. Ellul’s “Meaning of the City” blends theology with sociology with respect to its problematizing the timeless qualities of the “city” as well as examining the manifestation of materialism, and rationally efficient “technique” in the modern city. With this in mind, I aim to examine how this problematized and particular definition of the city as a corrupting force have parallels in the writings of Islamic thinkers, such as Ibn Khaldun and, focussed on in this particular paper - that of Said Nursi. I argue that like Ellul, the Nursian city has a dialectic counterpart with a city that is heavenly, that its current earthly problems lie in its being the most complete representative of aggressive materialism and negative naturalism. However, unlike Ellul - Nursi’s conception of urban civilization is more nuanced. His writing uses imagery and metaphor that pertains to palaces and cities as potential positive places that reflect the harmony of God. This is in contrast to his criticism of primitive nomadic peoples who are ignorant of “civilization”. Yet, Nursi’s work contains strong criticism of the modern city as a manifestation of the worst aspects of man’s rebellion against God. It is only this “civilized” man and his comforts who is so enabled to deny God. In this respect I examine Nursian solutions towards counteracting the ills of the city, as a means of trying to connect it with the more idealized city of the “heavens”. Thus I argue that like Ellul (despite their differences), Nursi’s conception of modern social life addresses the human “city” as a problem- to be interrogated both sociologically and theologically.

Key words: Risale-i Nur, Globalisation, Materialism, The City, Jacques Ellul, Nursi

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The aim of this paper is not to discuss the oft-problematic idea of “civilizations” but rather to shed light on what manifest form that so-called ‘civilizations’ imply. For this I have chosen the concept of the ‘city’ as the embodiment of civilization. True enough, it is also a debated term and is mired with considerable subjectivity. Regardless, I have decided to pose the city as both a sociological and theological problem. My decision arises from the source material of much of my academic thesis; that of the French historian, sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul. Someone who is among the most important critics of our contemporary modern condition. His work on the concept of “la technique”, *The Technological Society*, and other works such as “The Humiliation Of The Word”, show, by employing a dialectical historical analytical approach (inspired by Hegel, but more particularly by Karl Barth and Kierkegaard), that rational systematization and technology imposes itself over culture in the westernized spaces of the world. In turn, the once prominent place of language, of print-based culture, of imagination, of storytelling, of ritual, of symbolic meaning-making in a landscape charged with holy or ancestral significance - have all been crushed and humiliated by the ascendant hegemony of the image. It is technology that has catapulted the image to its prominent place in shaping social and cultural discourse and relations, and in turn - meaning-making. From a Nursi or Risale-i Nur perspective, this “humiliation of the word” represents the triumph of the self-referential externalism of the rationally efficient mechanistic technological society that has little place for the symbolic, little place for the other-indicative which language itself represents.

The city is the embodiment of such a society, a place where ironically images dominate, even within a visual urban landscape that communicates no meaning except that of power and efficiency. Sociologists such as Richard Stivers have stated that this image-society is the irrational dialectic counterpart (or reactionary response) to the overly-rational systematic context that people are forced to live in, within such an urbanized global techno-culture. Yet my paper is not geared, however, towards a faithful scrutiny of either Jacques Ellul or Said Nursi’s analyses of language, meaning, or “technique” - though I will touch upon these. Rather, my brief talk will serve as a comparison of how both Nursi and Ellul come to interrogate the modern “city”, the true signifier of self-referential globalised materialism, and whether they both share in the view that the city is of eschatological significance, a lost ideal ready to be redeemed either temporally in this world or in some other ideal realm.

I. THE CITY AS REBELLION

In his pioneering book “*The Meaning Of The City*”, the Christian sociologist Jacques Ellul paints a fascinating portrayal of human civilization. For Ellul, the cities built on the face of the earth by the hands of men, are not simply explicable by naturalistic forces which most anthropologists would resort to. Instead, they are essentially a theological construct. Through his rebellion against God and rejection of God’s Promise of being a Merciful Provider to mankind, Cain built his city of Enoch. This was the first city mentioned in the Bible, and for Ellul - the first city built on the face of this earth. A symbolic opposition to the Garden and its natural provisions. A city based on arrogance and despair about God’s Mercy. It was now man who would launch his own destiny and protect himself and forge his own vision with God in the backseat. No longer did he trust that God would protect him outside the new gates and walls that he built for himself.

The cities that then ensued from the creation of Enoch thus became places of fortification, defined often by warfare, and later - by wealth acquisition, social division and strife. Yet, despite the fact that the city is “cursed”, it is still a place that awaits God’s redemption. God lets man build his palaces of stone, to produce his arts, his sciences and his philosophical ruminations. For Ellul, God will use man’s rebellion to eventually redeem the city once it all collapses and decays in a pile of hubris. But it will not be a city governed by the will to power or the will to “technique”. But the will to Love and the will to communion, mustered through the redemptive power of Christ. This is the real meaning of the city, as encased within Ellul’s particular theological framework. Thus the curse of the city is indeed the curse of human civilization and it is something that is an inevitable part of the Fall. Such a theological worldview of a “cursed” human civilization does not necessarily exist in Islamic theology, but I believe there are important lessons to learn here from Ellul’s conception. For the first city was built by a murderer, Cain. Other cities mentioned in the Bible such as Nineveh and Resen were associated with power, civilizational arrogance and frequent warfare. Human violence and city-building as well as human vice go hand to hand. All lie in rebellion from the sanctuary of the garden. The towering walls of the human city are made out of material that is almost dead - i.e. stone, cement, iron and steel. Yet, despite this curse God uses and incorporates man’s actions into His own Plan. The city need not remain as a theological reality of rebellion against God.¹

Such a vision of the city lies in contrast with those that developed within Muslim philosophical schools of thought. These schools of thought were highly influenced by the views of the ancient Greeks particularly that of Plato and Aristotle. Al-Farabi, for instance,

1 J. Ellul. *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1970).

had a vision of the city (or the city-state) that was almost utopian or perfect. He posited that it should be led by a philosopher King whose character was of the utmost refinement. He also thought that village life was not sufficient for human beings to attain full development or reach their potential and thus the city was his ideal unit of social and cultural potential. Yet, he was aware of the problems of cities, and for him - this was manifested in the “ignorant city” and the “wicked city”. This was a place where people associated happiness with following their base and material desires as well as competing for status hierarchy and power. Al-Farabi didn’t really have a positive view of democracy and saw it as part of the vices present in the “ignorant city”. Democracy did not reign-in peoples’ passions and lowly desires, and so some form of benevolent elite was required to rule over the people and inspire them towards goodness.² Yet, judging by the condition of cities in al-Farabi’s time - is it possible to discern if there were any cities meeting the criteria of the ideal or “excellent city”? Perhaps in peering into the work of the Greeks he was seeking a solution to the urban problems of his time and attempting to marry Islamic principles with those from the Greek experience. For al-Farabi, the city is the only means of achieving human happiness. Yet, we should again ask to what extent this was attainable or whether it can ever be attainable. We should also consider the size of the sort of cities of al-Farabi’s age and how they contrast to the cities of latter periods and the modern world. Has happiness been attained?

In the many years after the likes of Farabi, the Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun perhaps had a more realistic and balanced picture of the city. For him, the city was a creature of pragmatism and an inevitable construction of humanity. Without going into detail, the introduction to his “Muqaddimah³” details how cities are the basic goal of the nomadic tribes of the region of North Africa that he is historically and geographically familiar with. For Ibn Khaldun, it is inevitable that nomads will eventually develop the desire to settle down and produce the habits of sedentary life. If they do not produce their own cities, they will inevitably encounter the city in other ways - often by conquering its inhabitants. When they ride in from the desert on camels or on horses, they seek to conquer the city and establish their own dynasty and settle into sedentary life. The strong social and cultural bond that held the nomadic tribe together allows them to create a strong ruling dynasty and political class. Yet, over time this sense of “group consciousness” reverts to a form of political nationalism as wealth and power consolidation are sought by the ruling elites. What binds people to the ruler is no longer the old tribal “group consciousness” but money, power, status and bribes. While the city allows the

flowering of several crafts, obtainment of luxuries and other achievements - it soon leads to the degradation and moral weakening of the elite and the denizens of the city at large. Thus for Ibn Khaldun, the seeds that enable the city to flower and prosper are also the seeds of its own destruction and dissipation. With its decline, the city becomes conquered by new nomadic tribes who then establish a new dynasty that is stronger and more united but then the cycle begins over again. Thus the city in Ibn Khaldun’s world is a bitter-sweet reality, it never really flowers. It is, not too unlike the vision of the city posited by Jacques Ellul - i.e. as a seemingly cursed theological construct signifying the Fall from the garden and as a rebellion against God. It is destined to decline. It is destined to suffer the cumulative forces of human weakness and vice.

II. SAID NURSI’S VISION

The muslim theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi witnessed, in a sense -the very forces of decline and human vice manifested in the cities of the late Ottoman Empire. Wealth and power were certainly attained as a result of Ottoman expansion over the centuries, but in the early part of Nursi’s life he witnessed the despotism of the state and the collapse of former glories coinciding with its rule. Nursi’s aim was not to try and renew the old Ottoman Empire but at the same time, he did not want to throw away the foundational Islamic principles which had enabled it to flourish. He wanted a nation united by the bonds of islamic brotherhood, industriousness and co-operation and for the muslim ways of life to be protected. Rather than invest in reactionary politics or political factionism, he focussed his concerns on ensuring a strong social and civic fabric where the faith and religious life of the people was protected and nurtured. He espoused the virtue of consultation and dialogue as opposed to dictatorship and autocracy. Importantly, he didn’t focus on espousing this at the national level but also put considerable level to spread religiously-guided democratic principles at the village level as well as at the level of the town and city. Still, Nursi’s main concerns were always at the level of the community and the maintenance of healthy social and religious bonds at the grassroots. With the rise of aggressive secularism and the new religion-stifling force of Kemalist republicanism, Nursi’s mission gained further urgency. He was imprisoned and persecuted and held in house arrest for much of his life because of his drive to protect peoples’ religiosity against the onslaught of an aggressive secularism which was largely a product of materialism. The father of such materialism arose from the forces of modernism inspired, as Nursi puts it - from the development of the French Revolution and the disregard of the sacred in public and civic life.

While Nursi’s actions and struggles played a significant role in saving the fundamental

² Acmad Toquero Macarimbang. *Envisioning a Perfect City: An Introduction to al-Farabi’s Political Philosophy*, [WWW Document], n.d. URL <http://www.rima.sg/commentary/envisioning-a-perfect-city-an-introduction-to-al-farabis-political-philosophy-by-acmad-toquero-macarimbang/#.V3e7haLTbE8> (accessed 7.2.16).

³ <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ik/Muqaddimah/>.

religious faith of the people of Anatolia, it can be argued that his mission is yet to be fully realised in its truest sense. For if the faith of the people is renewed and internalised, then certainly their way of life will manifest, as Nursi put it - in a “collective personality” of true sincere brotherhood. Yet, in the cities and towns of modern Anatolia and Turkey (as well as the world at large) it is clear that the collective-personality that predominates is that of the forces of material culture rather than the culture of the sacred. We have very much become the collective-personality of the smart phone user perpetually immersed in its virtual distractions, our working lives dictate the rest of our lives and so our mosques are peripheral to our high-streets, restaurants and our shopping malls. We walk through the streets or drive through them, but we want to escape into our own world of distractions or anesthetize the stresses of modern working life with the sedative of the television and the shisha bar. We are in every sense, being slowly put to sleep by the cold desacralising forces of “technique” and by modern civilization itself.

A) NURSI'S COSMIC CITY AS A MODEL FOR THE EARTH

It can be said that the two World Wars of the 20th century were a manifestation of the sort of “curse” apparent in the human city as conceived by Jacques Ellul’s “Meaning Of The City”. It seems almost that humanity must wait until the return of Jesus Christ for the city to be renewed and redeemed in a way that is in accordance with God’s ideal city. For Nursi, the two world wars were a “manifestation of Divine Wrath in punishment for the vice and misguidance of civilization”⁴. Nursi knew that co-operation, brotherhood, and love were needed as a remedy to the dark forces of competition, rivalry, and enmity which inevitably lead civilization down the path of decay. Nursi also believed that frugality and gratitude were necessary as a means of fending off the forces of rampant consumerism and decadence present in the cities of modern civilization. If anything, such a principle of frugality and gratitude runs polar opposite to the corporate and capitalist vision of the urban denizen - a being who works long hours just so that he can eat and amuse himself. Nursi writes that “through wastefulness, misuse, stimulation of the appetites, and such things as custom and addiction, present-day civilization has made inessential needs seem essential, and in place of the four things which someone used to need, modern civilized man is now in need of twenty”⁵. He deemed modern western civilization as riddled with philosophical currents largely opposed to the spirit of the Qur’an. Yet, despite this scathing assessment of the modern world - Nursi was not advocating a return to the past. Instead, he was more concerned about choosing the right future. The right

future takes into account principles that worked in the past and carries them forward into a new reality. Nursi was thus not opposed to technology such as the radio, train, cinema and automobile. He was also certainly not opposed to scientific pursuits. He was more concerned with their appropriate use and adoption. Such appropriate adoption meant that they should be employed for Islamic principles and to increase the appreciation of and enable contemplation towards God’s Names. Instead, such science and technology has been appropriated towards ideological distractions away from Quranic principles and as components within a globalised seemingly sacred culture of material “technique” (as Ellul puts it).

Since so far I have attempted to paint the “city” as an encapsulation of what “civilization” ultimately entails, it may also be worth looking at Nursi’s attitude towards such an entity. Nursi seems to show in the *Risale-i Nur* - that God is the true Builder of the ideal city and that the universe is “a well-ordered city, a first-class apartment-building and guest-house”. Since for Nursi, the universe is conscious and alive with angelic beings and in constant praise of God; it is thus like a giant city or collection of cities all populated with different luminous beings carrying out different duties. All denizens of this cosmic city are harmoniously connected with each other via mutual aid and all are in remembrance of God and manifesting His Order perfectly. This is in contrast to the elemental cities that exist on the Earth, a place which (unlike the heavens and stars) consists of a muddled mixture of good and evil. Nursi writes in the *The Fifteenth Word of the Risale-i Nur*:

The silence and tranquillity of the heavens, and their order and regularity, and vastness and luminosity, show that their inhabitants are not like those of the earth; they are obedient, they do whatever they are commanded. Because the country is vast there is nothing to cause overcrowding and disputes. Their natures are pure, they are innocent, their stations are fixed.

On the earth, opposites come together, evils are mixed with good, and disputes start between them. For this reason, conflict and suffering are born. And from them examination and competition are set. And from them progress and retrogression occur.

Thus while the heavens and earth are intimately connected, for Nursi, they are different realms. The sort of civilizations and cities built on earth do not represent the degree of order and balance of those in the heavens. The cities on the earth have often been the seat that have nurtured both offensive and defensive warfare, but those of the heavens are only for that of defense of evil forces arising from the earth. Nursi states in particular that the heavens are a “castle or city arrayed with towers on which sentries are posted”. As Ellul wrote in his “Meaning Of The City”, it was warfare and rebellion that defined the human city but the holy

⁴ Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikası*, 80-81.

⁵ Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikası*, ii, 97-99.

city marked by the return of Christ will be redeemed in every sense as a place of peace and justice. Perhaps such a sign and example of a redeemed and holy city lies in the populated communities of the heavens? Perhaps the heavenly cities currently above our heads - are a sign of what may ultimately come to those of the earth, if God wishes it. Indeed, this heavenly/astronomically inspired vision of what a human civilization or city is supposed to be - seems to be what Nursi advocates. Yet, what we see around us is more a human civilization largely based on competition and mutual rivalry, which Nursi saw as counter to God's wishes. In addition, Nursi states in *The Thirty Second Word* that "I consider happiness in this world and life's pleasures, and the progress of civilization and perfection of arts as all lying in refusal to think of the hereafter and to know God, in love of this world, in absolute freedom and license and in relying exclusively on myself". It is this predominance of ego and individualism that inherently lie at the heart of the problem of modernity which is so widely spread in its material outlook.

B) THE NUR DERSHANE AND ESNAF/GUILD IN THE NURSIAN CITY

Nursi's way of Sincerity and Brotherhood is also a way of striving and of frugality, and it is not about seeking rewards in this world. Importantly, it challenges the "big lie" of nationalism which was rightly characterised by Benedict Anderson as essentially an "imagined community".⁶ For the materialists and deniers of religion; Nursi's communal approach offers substantial challenges to them. It takes aim at the dogma of self-centeredness which so govern much of the ideas of the atheists and the ugly implications that they yield. In addition, Nursi's calls for frugality in living - raises a serious challenge towards the capitalist and consumer economies of much of the world; where survival of the high-street itself lies in jeopardy should enough people follow the frugal path. While there is the existing "Dershane" system of communal living amongst modern Nur students in many cities and towns throughout Anatolia - it is still only the first step towards rectifying the problem of modern living. While the "Dershane" offers benefits in ameliorating the sort of social isolation, competitiveness and antisocial behaviour amongst the youth⁷ - it is still very much enmeshed within the economic, political and socio-cultural framework of the modern city. The social life of the "Dershane" is dictated by the demands of the politics and economics existing in the society outside its walls, rather than the other way round. In the same way, the attendance and activities being held in the mosques are all restricted and dictated by what happens outside its walls. Since our

cities are not built to be mosque-centric or religion-centric, inevitably even the "Dershanes" and mosques struggle to solve the unique stresses of modern urban living. The human body for example, is not designed to live in such crowded and built-up environments or to work for the increasingly unnatural long hours that our modern cities demand⁸. Indeed, our demands to work continuously day to day purely for material ends; are eroding the vibrancy of our religious life and communal life.

One of the enduring myths of the capitalist ideology is the notion that it has reduced the amount of hard-work, labour and human suffering in the world. Harvard University researcher Juliet Schor documents these myths in her book titled "The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline Of Leisure". She details how working hours in America have increased significantly since the 70's (for both men and women) - with people willing to choose these longer working hours in order to maintain their incomes and consumption-based lifestyles. This is quite a contrast to a history where workers would rather spend more free-time at the cost of lower wages. More significantly, she explores the history of working hours several centuries prior to the advent of capitalism. For example, she describes how the pre-capitalist lifestyle consisted of a more leisurely pace of work and frequent holidays. With the increase in the incomes of wage-labourers, came a reduction in their spare time. She cites the work of Oxford Professor James E. Thorold Rogers; who (through his detailed research) found that the medieval workday did not exceed eight hours. Thus, the people worked considerably fewer hours than modern day Chinese labourers. The medieval context also varied from nation to nation. For example, the ancien régime of France guaranteed ninety rest days and thirty-eight holidays. The Spanish had eras where holidays totalled five months per year. Back in England, there are records from the 13th century which show that peasant families did not work on their land for more than 150 days per year. This left more time for leisure once other basic needs (such as fuel and water) had been gathered for the day. Other records show farmer-miners only worked for a maximum of 180 days a year, with the rest of the time devoted towards religious, communal and familial activities. Indeed, in the past there were many more opportunities for religious, communal, intellectual, and creative works that were outside the demands of the market and the corporate framework of the city. This is not to say that the past was ideal, far from it - but it can be argued that humanity has exchanged much of their mental and psychological health for that of material and physical benefits and a sense of security.

With respect to Nursi's call for "positive action", what would indeed be the solution for our current malaise? One of the dangers of looking towards the past for answers is that it can result in a "rose-tinted spectacle" perspective. In other words, the virtues and the good nature of things in the past may well end up being exaggerated or distorted. According to the

⁸ <https://lsecities.net/media/objects/articles/urban-stress-and-mental-health/en-gb/>

⁶ Anderson, B., 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.

⁷ S. Aziz. "An Examination of The Dershane Phenomenon: Observations Of Its Embodiment In The Us And Turkey", Unpublished Ph D Thesis, City, University, 2015.

German historian Oswald Spengler; it is only a civilization in terminal decline which starts looking more towards the past for inspiration than the present or future⁹. The current interest in Ottoman history and language in Turkey at present may perhaps be a symptom that the nation has run out of ideas, that it has ran out of anything new or innovative to say. Still, Nursi's observation of the despotism of late Ottomanism make it clear that while we shouldn't try to return to the past - we should at least, learn from it and choose the right future. It is my contention that we have chosen the wrong future. We have not taken what worked in the past and kept those principles. We have not removed or ironed out what was failing or retarding intellectual and scientific development. We have not learned from the political mistakes, neither have we really learned from the Ellulian vision of the city as inherently a place that is "cursed" and thus suffering continual upheaval. Yet, we are not called by God to abandon the city as a principle or to permanently flee to the hills and forests. In the Nursian vision, the human city can be a place reflecting the general city of the universe which is far more ordered, beautiful and free of conflict. Through the means of sincere brotherhood, of reflection on the universe through its "other-indicative" aspect, and of frugality - our current materialist rut may well be alleviated.

In the Ottoman Empire there was the "esnaf" or "guild" system which worked as an independent regulatory institution and as a system of social support and worker training. It offered moral as well as career guidance and also helped workers when they were sick. It prevented people from simply establishing businesses anywhere they pleased mainly because nothing could be established outside the social and civil framework of the "esnaf" system.¹⁰ This was a system unique from both state socialism and capitalism and is in fact closer to the medieval distributist model of economy¹¹. A new "esnaf" or guild system where workers live together, pray together, eat together, and read together could be combined with the Nur Dershanes system. This would create a kind of "Nur Esnaf" where the Dershanes and the Esnaf system become combined. For this to work, there would need to be a widespread social commitment towards making religion and Nursian "tefekkur" (contemplation) the very centre of life, as opposed to the demands of material attainment. The latter often impedes the ability to reflect and clouds the mind particularly when the worker is too tired to engage in a religious life due to the demands of an exploitative economic system. There is much hope in making the Nursian principles of communal brotherhood, frugality and mutual support as the principles of future societies at whatever scale they may be. "Deprived" villages and small towns exist

in many parts of the world where the youth are afflicted with drug addiction, crime, lack of employment and lack of education. Nursi came out of the poor villages of eastern Anatolia and engaged thousands of poor people with the beauty of knowledge and in transmitting knowledge. This knowledge, being in the form of Qur'anic knowledge - transformed the life of communities and became their new hub and centre. For Nursi, the very purpose of the human being is to worship God and to reflect on His Names and read the Book of Creation. Unfortunately, our societies have built walls around the access to knowledge and stifled the enthusiasm for it and made it into an issue of class and privilege. It is the hope that a "Nur Esnaf" or "The Guilds of Light" may serve as a revitalizer and life-giving stream to dying and deprived communities lost in the addictive glut of materialism and addiction as the only resorted alternative to religious and economic loss. This is as I see it, the only compelling way forward for the current civilizational crisis and as a means to avoid the "despair and hopelessness" which Nursi strongly warned against.

9 <https://archive.org/details/Decline-Of-The-West-Oswald-Spengler>.

10 Murad, A.-H., n.d. Abdal-Hakim Murad - Spiritual Life in Ottoman Turkey [WWW Document]. URL http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/AHM-Ottoman_spirituality.htm (accessed 7.2.16).

11 <http://distributistreview.com/capitalist-monopolies-vs-distributist-guilds/>.