While reading ancient Greek political treatises, Middle Age writings, the humanists of the Renaissance, or even futurological novels, we suddenly realize that what those authors are writing about is also occurring, or being imagined, in urban areas. This theme also mirrors Western culture and thought. In the ancient world, the Sumero-Elamites believed that their cities had sidereal prototypes based on star patterns. In other words, the Sumero-Elamites imagined that their cities were intimately related to the astronomical constellations. For example, they associated the city of Nineveh with the Big Dipper and Assur with the star Arcturus. What patterns underlie these belief systems, and how can they be explained? These questions are interesting and viable, especially if we suspect that such phenomena are universal.

There can be many interpretations presented, but today I will concentrate upon three of them: biological, psychological, and mythological.

**Interpretation No. 1: Biological**

A biological interpretation may be as follows: The concept of a “city” is the most unique and adequate model of the way in which nature adapts and conquers. It is notable that cultures that have not been involved in an urban (or proto-urban) lifestyle haven’t stood out against the biogenic landscape. Moreover, nomads (e.g. the Huns, the Goths, and the Vandals) who fought against urban forms didn’t stay too long on the scene of world history. In contrast, urban cultures (such as the Greeks, the Romans, and the Etruscans, for example) reached a high level of material and intellectual culture.

**Interpretation No. 2: Psychological**

Here, we turn to the theses of Sigmund Freud, who asserted that culture acts as a kind of strait-jacket for human desires and wishes. To Freud, “urbanity” translates to a cage for violent human behavior. Since humans are biological species, life is determined by our instincts of pleasure. In order to save the world from anarchy and global chaos, culture has been “invented.” The city, therefore, is a cultural form of human existence. Urban space allows us to sublimate our innate violence and direct this primitive energy into activities that are considered to be more socially and culturally acceptable.

**Interpretation No. 3: Mythological**

We also call upon urban archetypes a la Carl Jung. According to Jung, “urbanity” is a preconceived idea of a perfect place, a utopia, in which one may uncover individual skills and potential. Several hundreds of human generations have strived toward creating a city even though that city may not have had the necessary infrastructure in order to reasonably live in it. Archetypes are basic psychic patterns that arise from the unconscious collective that allows people to organize their experience into connected patterns. A “city” is the archetype, which is why it can be found as the main element in fairy tales, myths, and legends, with cities such as Troy and El Dorado being analogous.

These approaches are important for anthropology because they allow us to examine urban problems devoid of dogmatic or one-sided views, unlike determinism. Determinism, either geographically or economically, is a doctrine that implies that all events, including human actions and choices, are fully determined by preceding events and the state of affairs, making freedom of choice illusory. Yes, we anthropologists shouldn’t ignore such doctrines, but we also shouldn’t absolutize them. Anthropology is a compromise among several extreme points of view, and draws from a multiplicity of disciplines outside the field. Take, for example, the American scientist Louis Wirth. Though he was a sociologist, Wirth made important and valuable contributions in the subfields of urban anthropology, including human ecology, urban ghettos, national minorities, mass communication, and the difference between rural and urban. The breadth of Wirth’s insight amazes everyone who studies his works. This coalescence of different disciplines, approaches, and ideas to the study of culture is one of the main means of any anthropological activity.

Further reading:


