Joëlle Salomon Cavin

The 'Unloved City'

In this article, Swiss geographer Joëlle Salomon Cavin, professor at the University of Lausanne, takes up a topic that has been the privileged object of her research: hostility towards the city, in the Swiss context, inscribed in a history and a culture but which covid-19 has caused to emerge with greater force.

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Covid-19 turned our everyday lives upside-down. Once we had overcome the initial shock, we gradually got used to 'barrier gestures', 'social distancing' and remote working and socialising; as teachers, we learned to deliver our classes without our students present and to speak to a screen. Many researchers were obliged to give up their fieldwork, while others seized the opportunity to challenge their theories, concepts and analytical frameworks in the light of this exceptional event.

In my case, this exercise concerned what I have termed 'the unloved city'[1] and, more broadly, the mobilisation of the categories of 'city' and 'countryside' in socio-spatial analysis. The concept of the unloved city emerged as I considered the issue of the anti-urban imaginary in Switzerland.

My first hypothesis is that the scale and duration of the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered a period of crisis, leading to the resurgence of anti-urban, pro-rural narratives.

Periods of economic or political crisis (such as wars) are particularly conducive to the emergence of hostile discourse critiquing the city. The appearance of anti-urban narratives is very often a symptom of rupture and dysfunction within society. Adopting a long-term perspective, the first anti-urban discourse can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution. A series of additional events further challenged societal values: political crises, such as the French Revolution and other national responses to monarchical or urban absolutism across Europe; economic crises, such as the agricultural crisis in the late 19th century in Switzerland or the global economic crisis that followed the 1929 stock market crash; and finally, the two world wars in the 20th century. These times of crisis exacerbated anti-urban discourse, which had always been latent.

Whether positive or negative, the values associated with the city are indissociable from those associated with the countryside, rurality and nature. The categories of 'city' and 'countryside' form an inseparable, tragic dualism, as the notion of the city is always described in relation to its symmetrical opposite: the countryside. Unlike the big city, nature and the countryside embody the permanence and reassuring stability of our ancestors. The village represents a timeless, lasting community. As changes take place in the city, nature and the countryside come to be viewed as a refuge. In times of crisis, the values associated with nature, countryside, local farmers and the land are reactivated. These include the natural relationship with the land and community life in villages, which serve as solid, unchanging landmarks that can be reassuring when times are tough.

My second hypothesis is that the categories of 'city' and 'countryside' offer a highly relevant and effective analytical framework for understanding contemporary territoriality. Despite tangible changes to the city and countryside as the urban replaces the city, these categories remain pertinent to any analysis of social and spatial phenomena due to their persistence in the collective imagination. Yet a dominant current of opinion in contemporary urban studies encourages

us to abandon these categories, echoing the famous essay 'Urban Rule and the Death of the City'[2] by urban historian Françoise Choay.

While it is clear that spatial and social transformations have blurred the traditional markers of urbanity and rurality, and the relationship between them, these categories continue to be used in public debate. In Switzerland, this can be clearly seen from the maps showing the distribution of votes on spatial and environmental issues. For example, the results of the vote on hunting in September 2020 traced a clear divide between an urban Switzerland that is hostile to the practice and a rural Switzerland that supports it.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, my aim is to challenge the categories of 'city' and 'countryside' and the notion of the unloved city. What links can be found between the pandemic and the unloved city? How has the pandemic boosted or breathed new life into the opposition between city and countryside?

AFTERIMAGES OF THE UNLOVED CITY IN THE COVID ERA

Three motifs symbolising the unloved city have been particularly prominent during the Covid-19 pandemic, each of which may be linked to a motif embodying the desirable countryside. These motifs are not new; they draw on recurring, historic, often transnational motifs of the city/countryside opposition and reinvent them.

Motifs of the unloved city and the lovable countryside in the Covid era:

UNLOVED CITY	LOVABLE COUNTRYSIDE
OVERCROWDING / OVERPOPULATION	SPACE / OPTIMUM SIZE
INSALUBRITY / THE TOXIC CITY	HEALTHY LIVING CLOSE TO NATURE
VULNERABILITY / DEPENDENCE	FERTILITY / SELF-SUFFICIENCY

1. J. Salomon Cavin, *La ville, mal-aimée : Représentations anti-urbaines et aménagement du territoire en Suisse : analyse, comparaisons, évolution*, Lausanne 2005; J. Salomon Cavin, B. Marchand (under the dir. of), *Antiurbain: origines et conséquences de l'urbaphobie*, Lausanne 2010, pp. 13-24.

2. F. Choay, Le règne de l'urbain et la mort de la ville, in La ville, art et architecture en Europe, 1870-1993, Paris 1994, pp. 26-35.

"The appearance of anti-urban narratives is very often a symptom of rupture and dysfunction within society. Adopting a long-term perspective, the first anti-urban discourse can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution."

Next pages:
Thomas Struth,
Düsselstrasse, Düsseldorf, 1979

Overcrowding / Excess

Cities, and large cities especially, were a particular target of criticism during the Covid-19 pandemic due to their role in diminishing human wellbeing. City-dwellers are perceived to live miserable lives, packed on top of one another. Overnight, urban populations found themselves confined to their homes due to the pandemic. Family cohabitation proved to be a delicate matter. The lack of space was not only linked to housing, but also to inadequate open spaces and access to outdoor public places. The city became a kind of trap or net in which residents were entangled.

By contrast, the countryside was a far more pleasant location during the lockdowns as inhabitants enjoyed more indoor and outdoor space.

The issue of overcrowding in cities is nothing new. The garden cities dreamed up by Ebenezer Howard in the late 19th century were intended to address overcrowding and promiscuity in cities that grew rapidly during the Industrial Revolution, such as London and Manchester. They would offer enough space for each individual and provide all inhabitants with access to green spaces. Howard's ideal garden city would not exceed 200,000 inhabitants. The spectre of urban overcrowding is closely linked to the question of the optimum size for a city.

In Switzerland, the notion of urban overcrowding was explored in depth by Armin Meili, one of the forefathers of land use planning in the country, who set out a holistic vision in the 1940s. One of the objectives that he identified was to use every means possible to fight the invasion of large cities and overcrowding, which would only lead to malaise among the Swiss population, as it had in the Rurh and in the London area, whose dirty streets teeming with people were immortalised in Durer's engravings. By contrast, smaller-scale places such as villages and small towns are viewed as a guarantee of harmonious development.

Finally, it is interesting to observe how Covid-19 has revived the issue of overcrowding, including in academic settings. Thierry Paquot makes reference to 'outsized' cities,[3] while Guillaume Faburel suggests 'bringing an end to big cities' and 'barbaric metropolises'.[4] Yet these authors weigh large cities against small towns, rather than against the countryside. On these grounds, Thierry Paquot calls for degrowth and a more quality-focused approach to the city.

The unhealthy city

Cities have been held up as hotbeds for the spread of viruses, with populations who mix, shake hands and touch one another. This urban mass is perceived as a perfect vector for contagion and an ideal breeding ground for all kinds of diseases.

Meanwhile, in the countryside, it appears to be far easier, a priori, to limit the number of human encounters and to protect oneself within the home.

This idea of the city as a hotbed of infection has well-known historical precedents. Many scholars have looked back at the Black Death and cholera and sought to analyse the way in which urban agglomerations have constituted hubs of infection throughout history.

The unhealthy city is a recurring motif in urbaphobia. In the late 18th century, Genevan philosopher Rousseau criticised the toxic nature of large cities, starting with Paris, as sites of major epidemics, comparing them with the healthy lives of peasants living in the countryside.

The link between the size and density of cities and mortality was debated by geographers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Jacques Levy argued that cities were no more infected than the countryside, hypothesising that the urban life-style favours 'a unique immunity'; his argument was countered by Jean Pierre Orfeuil, who declared that in most countries, the most densely populated metro-politan areas were generally worse affected than rural areas and called for urban researchers to emerge from their denial. This intriguing debate brings the opposition between city and countryside into the spotlight once again[5].

The sterile city / Vulnerability

The rush to the shops to buy basic necessities in the early hours of the lock-down has remained imprinted on people's minds. Cities suddenly appeared vulnerable places, depending on goods, especially food, that they themselves did not produce.

Figures stating the number of days remaining before stocks began to run out in the city were published on a regular basis.[6] Food is produced in the country-side, so the risk of shortages was primarily associated with urban areas despite the fact that both urban and rural supermarkets are stocked in the same way.

In Switzerland, this idea of the sterile city as opposed to the nourishing countryside echoes World War II and the food crisis feared at that time. The Wahlen Plan, also known as 'the Fight for the Fields', was introduced in the 1940s to tackle food shortages caused by the suspension of imports. During this period, the countryside was clearly identified as a place providing nourishment for city-dwellers unable to meet their own food needs during wartime.

The nourishing countryside forms part of a physiocratic vision of society and the economy. This economic theory, which was advocated from the mid-18th century by French economist François Quesnay, among others, is based on the notion that the land is the primary economic resource, making peasants the productive class while the other classes merely transform the resources produced by them. In short, the city consumes while the countryside produces. The city sustains the non-productive, sterile classes.

3. T. Paquot, Mesure et démesure des villes, Paris 2020.
4. G. Faburel, *Pour en finir avec les grandes villes : Manifeste pour une société écologique post-urbaine*, Paris 2020 ; Id., *Les Metropoles Barbares - Poche - Demondialiser la Ville, Desurbaniser la Terre*, Lyon 2019.

5. J. Lévy, L'humanité habite le Covid-19, AOC. 25 March 2020, https://aoc.media/analyse/2020/03/25/lhumanite-habite-le-covid-19/ (consulted on 5 August 2021) – J.-P. Orfeuil, Densité et mortalité du Covid-19 : la recherche urbaine ne doit pas être dans le déni !, in 'Métropolitiques', 19 October 2020, https://metropolitiques.eu/Densite-et-mortalite-du-Covid-19-la-recherche-urbaine-ne-doit-pas-etre-dans-le.html (consulted on 5 August 2021).
6. One widely circulated statistic concerns Paris, which is estimated to have three days of food autonomy (https://ile-de-france.ademe.fr/expertises/alimentation-durable, consulted on 30 July 2021).

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‘LONGING FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE’

When the lockdown was announced, many city-dwellers who were able to do so sought refuge in their country houses before they were prevented from moving by the lockdown measures. Remote working became widespread in certain sectors, making it possible for people to continue their professional activities from a different location. For many others (supermarket cashiers, for example), arrangements of this kind were impossible.

In the case of second-home owners, this exodus from the city was temporary but it is also present in more long-term life plans. Following the first lockdown in spring 2020 and the ongoing public health crisis, online searches for detached homes for sale in the countryside rose dramatically.[7] In regions like the Jura, houses in isolated areas were purchased during this period despite having remained unsold for years.

The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have triggered a longing for the countryside among city-dwellers.
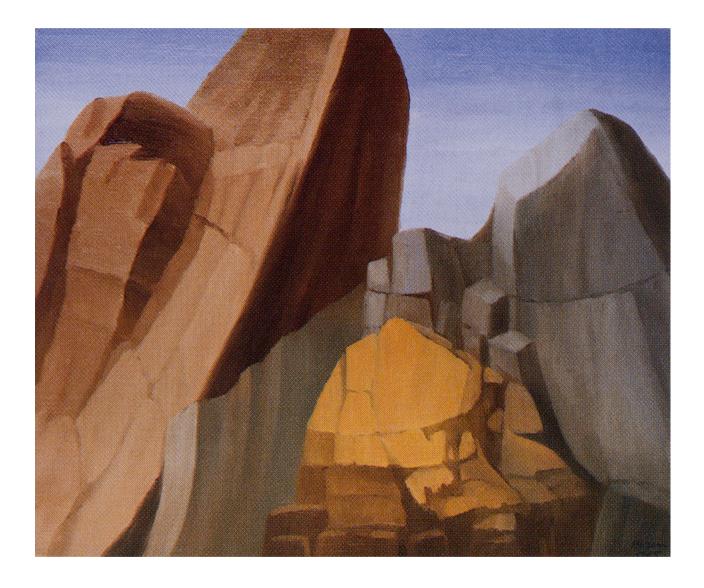
The pull of the countryside and its verdant nature is associated with unsatisfactory living conditions in the cities, which were made more apparent by the pandemic. Families with children found themselves coexisting in sometimes cramped apartments and couples were obliged to spend the whole day in each other's company, without the breathing space of everyday activities outside the home.

The desire to escape the city and the appeal of the countryside appear to have driven residential mobility during the pandemic.

Longing for the countryside is far from a new phenomenon, especially in Switzerland. In her series of paintings *Bonheur Suisse* [Swiss Happiness] (1989), Emilienne Farny depicts the material outcome of this longing for the countryside in a rather derisive manner, painting portraits of individual villas sometimes hidden behind a solid wall of cedars.

With this exodus from the cities, the tangible consequences of the unloved city and the city/countryside opposition become apparent.

Augustin Berque[8] highlights the tragic paradox of contemporary urban development. Like many other countries around the world, Switzerland is becoming more urban precisely because of the appeal of the countryside and the flight from the city leads to urban sprawl. Berque describes this peri-urban sprawl as ‘city-countryside’, ‘to emphasise that in this phenomenon, the city

7. The Immoscout platform registered almost 25 million requests in June 2020 alone, which represents an increase of 60% compared to 2019.
8. A. Berque, Ph. Bonnin, C. Ghorra-Gobin (eds.), *La ville insoutenable*, Paris 2006

João Hogan, *Untitled*, 1985

is experienced as if it were the countryside'. The 'city-countryside' is 'an urban dynamic, but one in which it is a rural type of habitat, rich in space and close to nature, that is sought'. The paradox is tragic because flight from the city and longing for the countryside contribute to unsustainable development in more rural areas.

Migration to areas located further away from cities may be motivated by many other factors, including improved access to property, but the fact remains that the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the powerful appeal of the countryside for city-dwellers at the present time.

AGRARIANISING THE CITY

During the Covid-19 pandemic, vegetable gardens sprung up on balconies and rooftops, in courtyards and public spaces. Alongside hair salons and DIY shops, garden centres were among the first businesses to reopen to customers in April 2020 and were overrun by crowds of enthusiastic gardeners. Newspapers widely reported a 'call of the land' with the potential to reconnect city-dwellers with nature.

Urban gardening practices and urban agriculture are nothing new. Allotments have existed since the early 20th century and communal gardens began to emerge in Switzerland from the 1990s. However, these urban gardening practices have become more prevalent in recent decades and are now more widely visible. Through these agricultural practices, the city/countryside dualism plays out once again. They embody the agrarianisation of the city: a process of agricultural and rural reclaiming of urban areas.

Particularly in media discourse, this agrarianisation of the city is often portrayed as a reconciliation between city and countryside. The city is no longer viewed as an inanimate, sterile environment when compared with the fertile countryside, but rather as a space where fruit and vegetables can be produced on reclaimed ground. Urban agriculture projects offer a way of boosting the city's appeal by providing countryside amenities there. The motif of the fertile city represents a city penetrated by the countryside, whose charm is restored in the process.

This agrarianisation of the city has received far more attention than the opposite process: the urbanisation of agriculture. As cities become more agrarian, they continue to eat away at rural land. The urbanisation of agriculture refers to the way in which urban development conquers agricultural spaces, sometimes even to the extent that they disappear.

João Hogan, *Untitled*, 1988

CONCLUSION

Despite recent challenges, the categories of 'city' and 'countryside' continue to resist dissolution into a generalised 'urban' category. The social and public health crisis triggered by Covid-19 has played a central role in the re-emergence of an anti-urban, pro-rural imaginary that had always been latent. People fleeing cities and seeking refuge in the countryside is a clear example of this. However, the 'agrarianisation of the city' in the form of an upsurge of gardening activity during the pandemic reveals that the city and countryside are not polar opposites, but can also be interlinked and contribute to the construction of imaginaries of a pleasant city. Far from being sterile, cities have been applauded for their surprising fertility.

Similarly, the more positive motif of the sustainable and inclusive city should not be overlooked in the focus on the negative motif of overcrowding. Urban density has proven to be a useful resource allowing an urban 'care' imaginary to develop. Everyone recalls the daily applause for healthcare personnel from people's balconies. This applause had a greater impact in the city than in other parts of the country, as it was more concentrated and visible. Solidarity with the poor in the city took the form of food distribution and home shopping delivery services, while concerts and artistic performances were organised in different neighbourhoods. I myself experienced the vitality of urban care in Geneva when my son began to deliver shopping to elderly people and concerts were held on my street each week. Balconies became places for socialising, enabling visual contact between people who had once taken great care to ignore one another and providing opportunities for communion through shared musical enjoyment.

The association of the city with opposing motifs – a city that is too large yet shows solidarity, sterile yet fertile – reminds us that the categories of 'city' and 'countryside' remain relevant to the analysis of socio-spatial phenomena and that what they represent must be neither reified nor essentialised: the values and images associated with them are complex, constantly changing and often paradoxical. Depending on the situation and the context, the city may be condemned or lauded and the countryside longed for or despised.

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