Chapter 3

Putting Cities First: Remapping the Origins of Urbanism[1]

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The development of society is conceivable only in urban life, through the realization of urban society.

Henri Lefebvre, translated from *Le droit à la ville. Éspace et politique*, 1968

What I am saying is that every city has a direct economic ancestry, a literal economic parentage, in a still older city or cities. New cities do not arise by spontaneous generation. The spark of city economic life is passed on from older cities to younger. It lives on today in cities whose ancestors have long since gone to dust... These links of life may extend – perilously tenuous at times but unbroken – backward through the cities of Crete, Phoenicia, Egypt, the Indus, Babylonia, Sumeria, Mesopotamia, back to Çatal Hüyük itself and beyond, to the unknown ancestors of Çatal Hüyük.

Jane Jacobs, *The Economy* of Cities, 1969

To investigate the city is therefore a way of examining the enigmas of the world and our existence.

Lea Virgine, in Mazzoleni, *La città e l'immaginario*, 1985[2]

My intent in this brief essay is not simply to re-explore the ancient origins of cities, but also to encourage a critical rethinking of the ways scholars have written about cities and the role of urbanization in the historical development of human society. The sequence of quotes presented above sets the scene for this double enquiry, beginning with Lefebvre's assertive premise that the development of society is conceivable only in urban life, in and through the creation and realization of a specifically urban society. Jane Jacobs expands on this to connect contemporary urbanism and the "spark of city economic life" to a virtually unbroken chain of urban societies stretching back over 10,000 years to her choice for the first known city, Çatal Hüyük in south-central Anatolia. The concluding premise is even bolder and more challenging. It expands the scope of urban studies well beyond its traditional domain to suggest that investigating the city leads to new ways of understanding the "enigmas of the world and our existence," the ultimate aim of all practical and theoretical knowledge.

The Precession of Urbanism: Putting Cities First

The conventional picture of the origins of cities begins around 15,000 years ago in Southwest Asia. After the retreat of Pleistocene glaciation, egalitarian hunting and gathering bands began to intensify their exploitation of wild plants and animals and to settle in more permanent camps. Between 9,000 and 10,000 years ago in such places as Jericho and Çatal Hüyük, plant and animal domestication had advanced to the point of intentional cultivation and herding, leading to a more stratified and larger-scale social order. Farming villages multiplied and spread through a T-shaped region from the Taurus to the Zagros Mountains (Turkey to Iran) and south through the Levant to the Lower Nile Valley, initiating the first great breakthrough in the development of human societies, the Agricultural or Neolithic Revolution.

In these now agrarian societies, organized around kinship ties and small "village states," innovations and adaptations to the environment increased. Villages became larger and larger, but there were no true cities until agricultural development shifted, around 6,000 years ago, from the highland arc of Mesopotamia to the fertile alluvial valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates in the area known as Sumeria. Symbolized and stimulated by the local invention of writing and larger-scale irrigation technology, the city, the state, and class-structured urban society "crystallized" together in the first city-states, giving birth to what we call today "civilization," from the Latin *civitas*, or city. From this base in Sumeria and the lowland "Fertile Crescent," the so-called Urban Revolution spread in many different directions, including into Europe where Western scholars argue that the city-state and civilization reached its most advanced early forms in classical Athens and Rome. In this process and its historical extensions and reinventions, the monarchial and patriarchal state and empire, and much later the nation-state, increasingly subsumed the importance of the city as a developmental force in human society.

Many archeologists and prehistorians describe the crystallization of the first cities and city-states as a "synoecism." In *The Emergence of Civilization* (1990: 155), a text that creatively reflects and expands upon the canonical sequence described above, Charles Keith Maisels defines synoecism (pronounced sin-ee-sism) as "interdependence arising from dense proximity" and uses it to explain the urban origins of state government and administration based on writing, the hallmark of civilization. In *Postmetropolis* (2000) I adapt this term to refer more generally to *the stimulus of urban agglomeration* and call it *synekism*, to recapture the hard k-sound of the original Greek *synoikismos*. In ancient Greek, *synoikismos* literally meant the condition arising from dwelling together in one house, or *oikos*, the root term for such words as economics, ecology, ecumene, and ekistics, coined by the Greek architect and planning theorist Doxiades to describe the comprehensive study of all human settlements from the household to the global scales. More expansively, *synoikismos* was used to describe the union of several smaller urban settlements under a dominant or "capital" city, thus implying some form of urban-based governmentality and a regional network of settlements (region derives from the Latin *regere*, to rule). Combining these meanings, synekism connotes the economic and ecological interdependencies and the positive as well as negative synergies that arise from the

purposeful clustering and collective cohabitation of people in space, in a "home" habitat.

Aside from its obvious affinities to notions of "agglomeration economies," this expanded idea of synekism relates to several other concepts of significance in contemporary urban studies. As a force shaping political governance, economic development, social order, and cultural identity, synekism has a definite *regionality* in the sense of occurring within a multilayered hierarchy of nodal regions, an *urban system* of settlements. There is also a kinship here to the original Greek term *metropolis*, literally "mother city," the dominant *polis* of a colonized constellation of cities, towns, villages, and less densely settled hinterlands that defines a regional or territorial *homeland*, a larger scale *oikos*. Even the first cities can thus be seen as inherently metropolitan, as dominant nodal centers of a network of settlements defining a *city-region*. The concept of synekism also focuses attention on what can be called the *spatial specificity of urbanism* and its role in the dynamic processes of innovation, development, and change associated with what can be broadly defined, following Lefebvre, as the *social production of cityspace*.

There has been a long debate among urban scholars concerning the spatial specificity of urbanism, hinging on the question of whether the city and cityspace can be the specific object of theoretical inquiry or whether it is merely the outcome and reflection of more general social processes. When seen only as fixed spatial forms arising from externally generated forces (social, ecological, historical), cityspace becomes little more than a receptive container, a place in which and to which things happen, with no intrinsic theoretical significance. Cityspace and its specific geography are thus something to be explained, not a source of explanation in and of itself. But seen as a dynamic and problem-filled process of "making geographies" that are capable of generating innovation, growth, and both societal and individual development from within their regional domain, the synekistic social production of cityspace and the evolving spatial specificities of urban life take on a more powerful theoretical and explanatory significance. Building on these more robust conceptualizations of urban spatiality, we can return with a different perspective to the debates on the origins of cities.

A first step in rethinking the geohistory of cityspace is to release the force of synekism from its confinement to the moment of city-state formation, and to see it as a fundamental and continuous factor in the entire history of human society, from the deepest past to the immediate present. When this is done, the traditionally defined sequence from hunting and gathering to domestication and the formation of farming villages to the full-blown Agricultural Revolution and only then to the Urban Revolution becomes open to alternative interpretations. There is now sufficient evidence to suggest the possibility, at least in Southwest Asia, of *putting cities first*, that is, pushing back the origin of cities to a time before the Agricultural Revolution, and recognizing synekism, the stimulus of urban agglomeration, as one of the indispensable foundations not only for the development of agriculture but also for the appearance of agricultural villages, rural life, pastoralism, large-scale irrigation systems, writing, class formation, and the state. In opening up this revisioning, I am not suggesting that the conventional sequence must be discarded, but rather that another course of originating events may also have been involved, unrecognized by scholars who have overly narrowed the definition of the city and synekism, as well

as the importance of a critical spatial perspective, in understanding the historical development of human societies. To illustrate and develop this argument here, let us look at the remarkable site of Çatal Hüyük.

Learning from Çatal Hüyük

Çatal Hüyük (alternatively Çatalhöyük, the mound or *tell* of Çatal, pronounced cha-TAHL-hu-yook) since its major excavation in the 1960s has become the focal point for a much larger interpretive literature not just on the origins of cities but on more general aspects of the human condition. Although its peak development was probably predated by the biblically trumpeted Jericho, it is today widely recognized as the world's first significant urban center and for the key role it played in the early development of agriculture and many other major technological, social, and artistic innovations. Leading its first round of excavation was James Mellaart, a British archeologist who first brought this remarkable site to worldwide attention in an article in *Scientific American* in 1964, entitled "A Neolithic City in Turkey."

As Mellaart states, beginning at least 9,000 years ago the central Anatolian Plateau became the most culturally advanced region of the Neolithic world, with a developing network of settlements spread over thousands of square miles and a local urban society which he described as having "a definitely metropolitan air." Trade was already well developed, based mainly in obsidian, the hard volcanic glass used primarily for tools, but also involving wild varieties of cereal grains, legumes, and animals. Recent DNA evidence has confirmed that there was a remarkably concentrated rush of plant and animal domestication between 10,000 and 9,500 years ago, centered in eastern Anatolia but extending throughout the T-shaped region mentioned earlier. Found in and around this area are the first "founder crops" of domesticated barley, wheat (einkorn, emmer, and bread varieties), chickpeas, vetches of various sorts, peas, lentils, broad bean, grapes, olives, and flax, as well as the first domesticated sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs. Less than a hundred sites have been excavated in this Neolithic core region, but Çatal Hüyük is among the oldest and is by far the largest, with a population that some now estimate to have been as many as 10,000 permanent residents.

This is a significant point, for Jericho and Çatal Hüyük certainly did not originate as agricultural villages and *no specialized agricultural villages have yet been discovered anywhere in the world that predate them*. In other words, the city and urban life appear to have come first, built by sophisticated and relatively egalitarian bands of hunters, gatherers, and traders. Full-scale agriculture and agrarian society came later, more as a consequence than a cause. Not only does this "precession" of the urban challenge the established model of human sedentism (moving from kraals to more permanent camps to hamlets and villages growing ever larger to become towns and then cities), it goes against the grain of those interpretations of history that emphasize social relations of production. What is suggested here is not that an agricultural surplus was necessary for the creation of cities, but that cities *were necessary for the production of an agricultural surplus*. Also contrary to many contemporary expectations is another implication, that major innovations and substantial societal development can come from relatively egalitarian, weakly stratified, and nonpatriarchal communalist cultures.

Many contemporary archeologists contend with these possibilities by simply rejecting the definition of Jericho and Çatal Hüyük as cities, even with the recent estimates of the latter's population size. This may work for some to sidestep the challenge, but there is much more evidence to be noted that sustains the view that an extraordinary synekism was operating in these first cities. The pueblo-like settlement of Çatal Hüyük, unlike Jericho, was never surrounded by massive stone fortifications. Cityspace consisted of a dense agglomeration of attached houses without any streets or paths between them, at least at ground level. Access and movement within the settlement occurred on the laddered roofs, with defense against human and natural intrusions provided simply by the continuous perimeter of timber-reinforced and doorless house walls. There was at least one public square, which may have served as a marketplace, and many small open courts probably used mostly as refuse pits. There was also an abundance of shrines, about one to every four houses, but no indication of a dominant religious center or temple. The shrines and many homes were elaborately decorated with wall paintings, plaster reliefs, small cult statues, animal heads, and bull horns.

Female deities and cult statuettes become more prominent over time in Çatal Hüyük, and wall paintings depicting hunting scenes decline significantly in number in favor of realistic and abstract representations of fertility symbols, agricultural production, and urban life. These changes suggest not only the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture but also the consolidation of a new gender-based, and possibly matricentric, division of labor associated with the early stages of urbanization. Permanent and stable urban settlement made women's work and especially their religious and secular power more central to the production and reproduction of urban spatiality and sociality, leading Mellaart to conclude that the religious culture of Çatal Hüyük was mainly created by women. The relative openness of the town plan, the absence of monumental fortifications such as those at Jericho, the fact that no signs of violent death were found among the abundant skeletal remains excavated, and other indications that urban society in Çatal Hüyük was remarkably peaceful and productive for nearly a millennium, probably continued to enhance, and also to be enhanced by, the social power of women, at least until the rise of the first more formally institutionalized Mesopotamian city-states around 4,000 BC.[3]

Within this built environment was an extraordinary collection of highly skilled artists, craftworkers, manufacturers, and merchants, among them the first known weavers of cloth and tapestry, the first crude pottery-makers and carvers of elaborated wooden bowls, the first metalworkers along with the beginnings of a substantial weapons industry, and the carvers of some of the best religious statuary of the Neolithic, including the now famous "Mother Goddess." Perhaps even more iconically revealing, here we also find the first handcrafted mirrors, hemispheres of polished obsidian backed with plaster, and what all major art history textbooks, as well as the *Guiness Book of Records*, recognize as the first painting of a humanized landscape. The latter is of particular significance in the geohistory of cityspace. This very special – and very spatial – fresco was found on a wall in one of the oldest shrines, and brilliantly expresses the emerging popular awareness of the spatial specificity of urbanism. It depicts in the foreground a creatively cartographic representation of cityspace, stunningly detailed yet abstractly perceived, with about

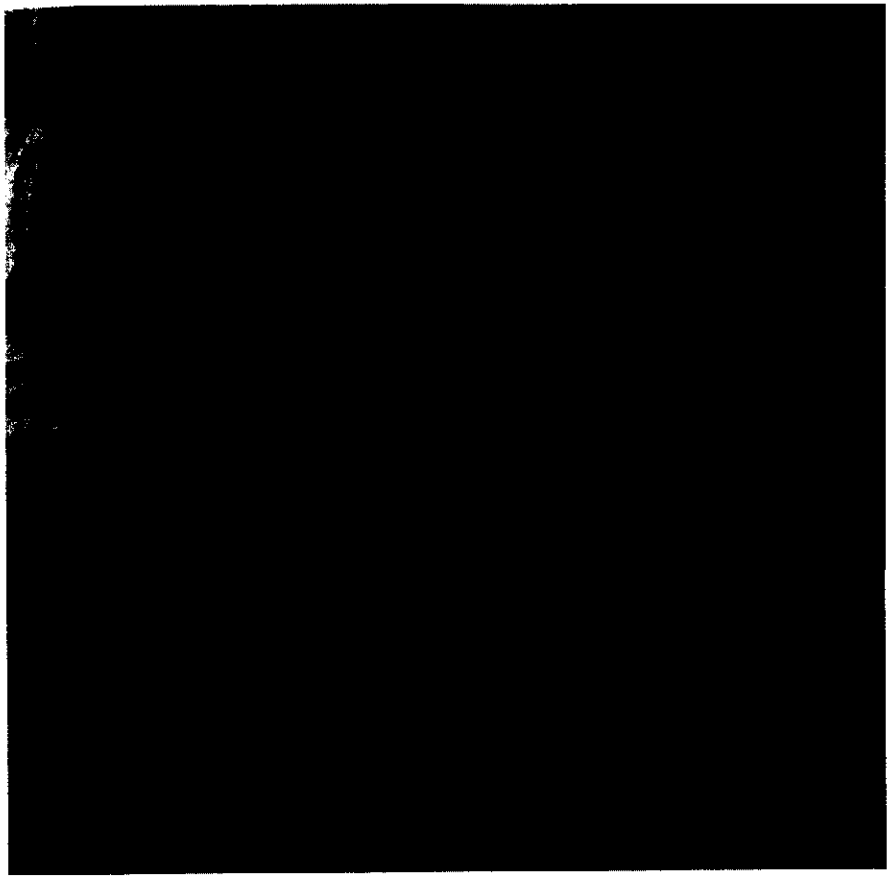

Figure 3.1 Reconstruction and original of cityscape painting at Çatal Hüyük (Source: (*top*) James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük* 1967: Plate 60; (*bottom*) de la Croix, Tansey, and Kirkpatrick, *Art through the Ages*, 9th edn, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1991: 46, figure 2–8, landscape with volcanic eruption (?), detail of a copy of a wall painting from Level VII, Çatal Hüyük, ca. 6150 BC)

75 separate building footprints set against a backdrop dominated by a gently erupting vermilion-colored volcano: the world's first known example of a self-consciously panoramic urban art form. What is even more remarkable is that the Çatal Hüyük panoramic cityscape remained the only true painting of the humanized landscape to be found anywhere in the world for the next 7,000-plus years.

In *The Economy of Cities* (1969), Jane Jacobs drew on Mellaart's work to launch her own richly imaginative revisioning of the Urban Revolution and the evolution of cities. She describes New Obsidian, her ancestral site for Çatal Hüyük, as a "pre-agricultural city of hunters" established more than 11,000 years ago and centered around the crucial obsidian trade. New Obsidian was not simply a home base for

hunting and gathering but also a performatively urban agglomeration that was capable of generating economic growth from its own internal resources, from the construction of a cityspace that both stimulated and reflected economic innovation, new forms of productive work, and an expanding division of labor, the hallmarks of her definition of the urbanization process and very close to what I have called synekism. Of particular interest is her detailed tracing of the endogenous process that led to the domestication of wild cereal grains and the subsequent development of intentional cultivation and full-scale agriculture, as well as the budding off of the first farming and herding villages as satellites of the City.[4] For Jacobs, the product of this synekistic social and spatial process is the specifically *urban* origin of the Agricultural Revolution and along with it the development of subordinate networks of agricultural, pastoral, trading, and service settlements, and the beginnings of what we define today as rural life.

Jacobs's imaginative scenario, increasingly supportable in the light of recent archeological findings, contains within it not only the seeds of such contemporary ideas about economic expansion as import-substitution strategies and export-base models, but also, by putting cities first, she constructed a comprehensive, powerful, and pervasively spatial theory of agglomeration economies that would significantly influence a more contemporary generation of geopolitical economists and economic geographers. It was not agriculture that was the salient invention of the Neolithic for Jacobs, but rather the stimulus of urban agglomeration, "the fact of sustained, interdependent, creative city economies that made possible many new kinds of work, agriculture among them" (1969: 34). This self-generating capacity of city-regions, the "spark" of city economic life, emerges directly from the social production of cityspace, from the purposeful clustering and collective cohabitation of people in distinctively urban-regional agglomerations. In *The Regional World* (1997), Michael Storper updates our understanding of synekism, the stimulus of urban agglomeration, in a theory of "conventions" and "untraded interdependencies." He centers this work around the notion of economic *reflexivity*, defined as the ability to shape the course of economic evolution through reflexive human action and what he calls "competitive learning." This ability to reflect creatively on the human condition (I am reminded here of the first mirrors of Çatal Hüyük), is most acute in the "context of proximity" that is the city-region. Although Storper concentrates his attention on contemporary urban-regional worlds of production and globalization, what he has to say echoes back 10,000 years to the origins of the city and urbanism as a way of life, to use that famous phrase of the Chicago School. Combining the past and the present enables us to understand better the title and head quotes of this chapter, "Putting Cities First." The mention of globalization also makes me recall the first sentence in Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* (1961), still the standard work on the subject despite Jane Jacobs's valiant attempt to revise its underlying premises.[5] Mumford writes, "This book opens with a city that was, symbolically, a world: it closes with a world that has become, in many practical aspects, a city." It is this quote that begins the first chapter of my *Postmetropolis*, which by no coincidence has the same title as the chapter you are reading.

An interesting epilog to the story of Çatal Hüyük is unfolding today in the Çatalhöyük Research Project, conceived and directed by Ian Hodder, a former

student of Mellaart and one of the English-speaking world's leading critical and creatively postmodern theoretical archeologists. For more than 20 years, Hodder has been constructing what he calls a "postprocessual" and "contextual" archeology based on new theoretical perspectives derived from critical theory, structuralism, neo-Marxism, hermeneutics, and, more recently, poststructuralism, the new ethnography, feminism, postcolonial critiques, and critical postmodernism.[6] Through these contextual readings, the objects studied by archeologists are seen as both materially and conceptually constructed, simultaneously real-and-imagined, to refer back to the phrase I have used to describe the critical study of lived spaces in *Thirdspace* (1996). The Çatalhöyük Research Project is Hodder's first major attempt to put his theories to work at what he calls the "trowel's edge." The entire project is now online, taking advantage of multimedia technology to keep its work open to the world and to multiple forms of interpretation, reflecting one of the principles of postprocessual archeology.[7]

Thus far relatively little that is new and surprising has been found at Çatal Hüyük and nothing significant has been added specifically to the debate on putting cities first.[8] What is most notable, however, is not the preliminary findings but rather that this site is being excavated and interpreted by archeologists and other scholars who are unusually well informed in critical theory; acutely aware of the relevance of the past to contemporary issues of democracy, citizenship, gender, race, and class; assertively spatial in their outlook and methods; and equipped with a salient "postmodern attitude," which Hodder describes as an openness to difference, alterity, multivocality, and experimentation aimed at "the empowerment of marginal political and cultural constituencies"(Hodder et al. 1995: 241–2). Very rarely has the distant past become so vitally relevant to contemporary debates not only in specifically urban studies but also with respect to our more general understanding of the "enigmas of the world and our existence." This adds significantly to the ways we can learn from putting Çatal Hüyük first.

NOTES

1. Extracted from Introduction to Part 1 and chapter 1 in *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, US: Blackwell, 2000.
2. Quoted in Chambers 1990: Some Metropolitan Tales. Chapter 3 in *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity*. London and New York: Routledge. 51.
3. Çatal Hüyük and its Mother Goddess statues have become an important symbolic focus for academic feminist critiques of established patriarchal religions and androcentric power, as well as for the recent expansion of popular interest in Goddess theories and cults. See, for example, Gimbutas 1974 and 1989.
4. Jacobs sees this process of domestication as arising from selective trading and planting of wild cereal grains in the local household economy, leading to full-scale intentional cultivation. She also speculates that the first village settlements were not primarily agricultural but based on animal herding, which demanded much more space than farming and could not so easily be maintained in the vicinity of the city.
5. Mumford and Jacobs were probably the best known and most competitively combative urban critics and public intellectuals writing about the city in the 1960s. *The City in History*, first published by Harcourt, Brace in 1961, appeared before Mellaart's major

publications on Çatal Hüyük and before the most explosive period of urban crises and uprisings, both of which had a significant influence on Jacobs and her writings.

6. Through his position as Professor of Archeology at Cambridge University, Hodder has had many contacts with Anthony Giddens, until recently Professor of Sociology at Cambridge and now Director of the London School of Economics. Giddens's work features prominently in Hodder's retheorizations of archeology. For some of his more recent publications, see Hodder 1991; Hodder 1995; and Hodder and Preucel 1996.
7. The web pages for the project can be found at http://catal.arch.cam.ac.uk/catal. Of particular note are "Discussions with the Goddess Community" and the papers presented at a Liverpool conference in 1996 on "Postprocessual Methodology at Çatal," which include Hodder's keynote address engaging with current ideas about globalization and critical postmodernism entitled "Glocalising Çatal."
8. The first major publication of the project's early findings is Ian Hodder (ed.) 1996: *On the Surface: Çatalhöyük 1993–1995*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archeological Research, and British Institute of Archeology at Ankara.

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