

From Babel on:
“The City on a Hill” in the Age of Global Village

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Two thousand years ago the proudest boast was
“civis Romanus sum.” Today in the world of
freedom the proudest boast is “Ich bin ein
Berliner.” (John F. Kennedy, 1963)

When President Kennedy visited the divided city of Berlin to offer support during the Communist blockade, he asked his West German audience to see their plight in a larger scheme both temporally and geographically, to look beyond their then-present dangers to the promise of a better future:

. . . lift your eyes beyond the dangers of today to the hopes of tomorrow, beyond the freedom merely of this city of Berlin and all your country of Germany to the advance of freedom everywhere, beyond the wall to the day of peace with justice, beyond yourselves and ourselves to all mankind.¹

From the dark, early days of the Cold War up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, no city offered a better microcosm of a world divided between socialism/communism and capitalism, between totalitarian regime and liberal democracy. But if the eyes of the world were upon this city, it was because of a distinction that Berlin did not enjoy, a

distinction thrust upon it from without, from the maelstrom of history and the clash of ideologies.

Some two and a half decades later, when Ronald Reagan offered his farewell address after two terms in the Oval Office, he closed his presidency with a focus upon a far different “city,” but a city very much like Berlin in that it offered a larger political metaphor:

The past few days when I’ve been at that window upstairs, I’ve thought a bit of the “shining city upon a hill.” The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we’d call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free.

I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That’s how I saw it and still see it.

And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was eight years ago. But more than that; after 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she’s still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.²

Reagan’s “city,” of course, is a metaphor for America itself, and he here seems to move from the image of a city (“it”) to the image of the Statue of Liberty (“she”), whose torch really was a beacon for ships filled with the

world's tired and poor, its "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." But it is imposing an anachronistic conceit to imagine the imaginings of a Puritan as leading him to the New World with the deliberate intent of founding the empire that Reagan would hold sway over some 360 years later. And even if we were to allow elision from New Jerusalem to American empire, there are certainly some changes afoot from the foundation that Winthrop envisioned.

To begin with, Winthrop and crew would be aghast were their community to be the model of a "*proud city*": pride goes before the fall and is the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. It was pride, after all, that sent Lucifer falling and Adam and Eve packing with just enough time to gather their fig leaves. The Puritans, moreover, were hardly eager to welcome "people of all kinds;" notoriously bigoted as they were zealously religious, those outside the community were seen as a threat. And yet the reference to America's Puritan heritage, Norman Rockwellized per most political discourse, certainly hit home in an increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic America, and in era that saw the beginning of the end of the Cold War. A year's time and more would find the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain torn down, the Soviet Union heading toward dissolution, and political revolutions both violent (Romania) and velvet (the Czech Republic). Bush Senior's administration would later give Reagan (and itself) credit for tumbling down the walls of the "Evil Empire," and Al Gore would famously mock this vanity as a rooster taking credit for raising the sun.

Reagan had used this "city on a hill" trope in other speeches, including one which he gave some seven years before he became President. In this speech, given at the First Conservative Political Action Conference on January 25, 1974, Reagan indulges the hubris and pets the pride of his audience:

You can call it mysticism if you want to, but I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two

oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage.

And

The culmination of men's dreams for 6,000 years were formalized with the [United States] Constitution.³

The mythos of America the Inevitable, is, perhaps, the inevitable maturation of a myth that had been long on the vine. The earliest American colonists, too, saw their projects as divinely inspired and intended, the Providential working out of history. And Reagan's self-avowed, happily patriotic "mysticism" was lifted verbatim from them—not that it hadn't been the reigning myth in the intervening centuries. The well-known turn of phrase for this myth is "manifest destiny," the concept of which had been brewing since the first half of the nineteenth century, and the collocation coined by John L. O'Sullivan in an 1845 editorial defending the United States' claim to the Oregon territory as being superior to that of Britain:

[America has] the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth.⁴

The organic metaphor may well contain the seed of its own destruction, however: trees do not live forever, and even the most far-flung and long-lived of empires, that of Rome, eventually subsided back to its own city walls.

In this essay, I juxtapose several tropes of the city which are usually seen as disparate and unrelated: "the city on a hill," "global village," and "Babel." Sometimes the "city" really is a city, at other times the term is used metaphorically to refer to larger political identities (states, countries) and even identities based upon ideologies or other forms of collective consciousness. It may be useful, then, to think first in terms of the city-state of the classic world, such as Athens or Sparta, although the most relevant and frequently compared city is that of Rome. We can indeed read America as, metaphorically, a city, just as Rome was both a city and an empire.⁵ And we can certainly recognize in the post-Cold War New World Order a Pax Americana very much like that of Pax Romana, even if the empire is itself not peculiarly American.⁶ The concept of "global village" will also be addressed and juxtaposed against the concept of the city-as-world and the world-as-city, in which the microcosm (city) captures the plurality usually found only in the microcosm (world), and in which the macrocosm (world) conveys a sense of intimacy and immediacy traditionally found only in very narrowly delimited spaces (the village). Finally, I re-examine the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel in light of these other tropes to illuminate our conceptions of political and cultural identity, of our sense of history and our place in it.

To begin with, what does it mean to speak of a "city," even metaphorically? And, given the focus of this particular issue, *City and Culture*, we should as well interrogate the concept of what "culture" means and where it comes from. Etymological considerations of these terms provide more than historical footnotes or intellectual amusement. They allow us to more deeply understand the very ideas of political compact and individual identity, and of culture as something that is organic, grows, and eventually dies.

The word "city" derives from the Latin *civis*, or "citizen" by way of *civitas*, or "citizenship." Much like in Spanish, in which *pueblo* can mean both "town" and "people" (the latter English cognate clearly

recognizable), what makes a city a city are not the buildings and features of urban infrastructure, but its folk and its density of population. In a city, a citizen belonged more to the body politic than to a location, whereas rural peasants both metaphorically and legally belonged to the soil which they tilled and to the lords who owned the land. To be a citizen (literally, to be a *civis* or legally recognized resident of a city) conferred rights that others did not possess: the vast majority of Roman subjects were not Roman citizens, and even in much more recent times, in America itself, Native Americans were not all recognized as citizens until 1924. A city, then, offers a political identity that binds people together and sets them apart from others, just as the walls that usually encircled a city (whether Troy, Constantinople, or Dubrovnik) set in stone or brick a boundary between in-group and out-group.

“Culture”—and, interestingly, “colonization”—are cognates from the same Latin verb, *colere*, to till, or farm.⁷ It is curious, then, that today we often think of culture and its products (especially popular cultural products, such as Coca-Cola or Sony televisions) as almost antithetical to nature and its processes; “nature vs. culture” is a popular binarism. And yet tilling the soil is making nature do something that it wouldn’t do on its own—a matter of “making the earth say beans instead of grass,” as Henry David Thoreau would say⁸—of fashioning nature’s means to our own ends and interests. Similarly, we usually wince when read or hear the word “colonization,” especially in today’s post-colonial critical world, for we think of colonization as having everything to do with human institutions at their worst, of continents stolen, of slavery and genocide, and not at all to do with raising food for the world’s hungry. In any case, the terms necessarily refer to place-specific cultural activities: what one reaps depends not only upon what one sows, but where one sows it. Ice wine can’t be grown in the tropics, and vanilla and coffee won’t grow in arctic climes (though the refusal of overly industrialized countries to comply with at least the Kyoto Protocols may eventually solve this problem.) Culture, then, isn’t a fighting of nature, but a cooperative coaxing of it,

and however refined the sugar or flour, whatever chemical reagents or catalysts we manipulate petroleum with, we are playing with the building blocks that nature provides. And so it is in the arts and all expressions of human culture: nothing is created *ex nihilo*.

As all things come from the earth, so they will eventually return to it. The grand cycles of nature provided humans with our first lessons in historiography, with the classical Greek scheme of a Golden Age giving way to one Silver, then Bronze, and Iron, followed again and again (in some historiographies) by similar series until the end of time. This cyclical sense of history was shattered by Roman history and by the messianic Christian one: Adam, Jesus, and the Millennium map out a linear history that moves forward inexorably. As Western societies became increasingly secularized and science was accorded an almost religious status as ultimate arbiter of truth and meaning, the perfectibility of mankind took on a decidedly anthropocentric character. It acquired, moreover, a particularly ethnocentric one as this progress towards perfection was mapped out across the globe, with its *telos* (as some would have it) found in the continent that God had hidden from mankind's view until we were sufficiently evolved to make proper use of it.

The "city on a hill" trope poses, however, a crucial problem in America's self-conception. America was terribly suspicious of European urbanity and its "storied pomp." One of the most striking ironies of America being a city on the hill was its moral identification with its pioneer ancestry. After all, what particularly distinguished the United States of America from its various European colonial roots were its ongoing frontier expansions,⁹ and cities became at once a symbol of what was culturally lacking in America and a symbol of what was happily absent. The paradox of "Nature's nation" being identified a city is matched by the metaphoric reversal of cultural parent and child, of the urban Old World happily suckling the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (to use F. Scott Fitzgerald's phrase)¹⁰:

The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the imagination. The reason is clear enough. The ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode, was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape. And now here was a virgin continent! Inevitably the European mind was dazzled by the prospect. With an unspoiled hemisphere in view it seemed that mankind actually might realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy. Soon the dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy was removed from its traditional literary context. It was embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society.¹¹

It is interesting to note the change in project here: from an exhausted, solitary retreat from the world of civilization, with all (as Freud would have it) its discontents, to an enlivened, collective struggle to change the world by example. While the critic, Leo Marx, does not focus on (or even address) this transformation (his project is to discuss the “imaginative and complex” pastoralism in classic American texts), this transformation is the more relevant point for our purposes here. The Roman myth (best embodied in Virgil’s *Aeneid*) was “an essentially political myth, the myth of ‘the city’ or ‘the republic’; a vision of life as shaped and bounded by the polis.” The pre-eminent American myth, however, was that of the New World Adam, or “Adam before the Fall”:

. . . an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.

And:

Unlike the Roman myth, too—which envisaged life within a long, dense corridor of meaningful history—the American myth saw life and history as just beginning. It described the world as starting up again under fresh initiative, in a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World.¹²

Most saliently, the Roman myth is of society, the American of an individual. And it is an individual (usually a "he") that has left behind the city and culture, to find himself in nature.¹³

But what does it mean to leave behind the "city," to abandon culture and history? Is it not really the paradoxical desire to transcend the self by stepping out of that which makes the self the self? Wherever one goes or whatever experience befalls one, whether Einstein is on the beach, or Shakespeare in love, they are Einstein and Shakespeare, they can never completely step out of themselves or their circumstances. And yet we all long to do so, to experience the world more broadly and fully in imaginative ways that we know we factually can not. It is this urge to merge our individual consciousnesses that gives rise to the humanities—to literature, drama, dance, art, and music (albeit Freud would find in "Art" the sublimated expression of a very different urge to merge). For in the story, in the art, we take on a perspective which is not our own and become someone or something else. We can ride with Don Quixote, fight battles with Fa Mu Lan, or steal the sun with Grandmother Spider. Art reflects life, and life reflects art: Disneyland's Small World was not such a leap of cultural faith for those who lived among the various communities of Southern California, even before the huge Asian and Latin immigrations in the second half of the 20th century. Disney World's Epcot Center built even more grandly in the world of wood and brick, of metal and plastic, but the virtual reality of the digital world has reduced everything to electronically encoded sequences of zero's and one's, so that

even simulacrum have become simulated. The American Adam may have wanted to leave the Old World behind culturally, and indeed did so at great pains geographically, but today if one is weary of one's own culture, he or she need not possess much actual wanderlust to endure the trouble of really going anywhere.

The romance of travel with which more adventurous souls are stricken still tends our footsteps to paths well worn. What makes Rome "Rome" or Kyoto "Kyoto" are well-known cultural icons—the Roman coliseum, Kinkakuji—that indicate place and culture. One might spend a whole week at a conference in Kyoto, but if all she saw were the hotel's conference rooms, and not its famous temples, shrines, and gardens, she might as well be in Nebraska. Even the daily-life Kyoto or quotidian Rome that people living in these places actually experience is not "Rome" or "Kyoto." But cultural icons even of cities need not be architectural; they might involve certain foods, works of art, handicrafts, occupations, modes of transportation, and a multitude of other cultural traces that have become part of an international iconic language. As such, these icons *become* the place so far as participants in the simulacrum are concerned. (As the absurdities of Las Vegas are already well-enough known, consider marriage halls in Japan: presumably, couples want the ambiance and romance of Florence, say, but the convenience and price of a wedding in Aichi. Hang a convincing-enough copy of Botticelli's *Venus*, a few basket-bottles of Chianti, and *presto!*) There is as well the increasing phenomenon (if not danger) of places becoming too much alike globally. This is often referred to as Westernization or Americanization (or in America, "Los Angelesization"): too many McDonald's, KFC's and Domino's—though one would we hard pressed to find a home-delivery pizza topped with seaweed, squid, octopus, and salmon roe in the lair or belly of this presumably cooker-cutter beast, or anywhere else outside of Japan.

As the world has been moving to an integrative model, in which trade and other barriers come down, the insistence upon differences and local

sovereignty may seem rather wrongheaded and anachronistic, even downright xenophobic. The euro, the currency of the EU, foregrounds the economic basis for much of the experiment in Europe. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which the "little man with big ears" (Ross Perot) pooh-poohed and Bush Senior and Clinton endorsed, saw the beginning of a common market in the Americas. Many have criticized the World Trade Organization (WTO) for usurping the power of the United Nations (UN), and the anti-globalization protesters in Seattle (1999), Cancun (2003), and Davos (against the World Economic Forum in 2001 and 2004) may have had good reason to regard the WTO as the handmaiden of, to use Niall Ferguson's phrase, "a damnably resilient international capitalism."¹⁴ But it is clear that the genie of globalization will not go back into the bottle, and we had better direct our energies to determine what kind of global community we want, rather than tilting at simulacrum of windmills at Epcot Center and pretending that we are taking down "the Mouse," or vandalizing McDonald's because it's *trop américain*. By the same token, the many restaurants in America that changed their menus from "French Fries" to "Freedom Fries" in this past year to protest France's all-too-eager efforts to trip up American military intervention in Iraq are simply preaching to the choir, who would all be better off anyway without another supersized portion of potatoes deep fried in lard. There are, after all, two ways of looking at the concept of "global village"—the world as village, and the village as world—and in each we may find both opportunity and crisis.

That the world has become a village is the original sense of the phrase "global village." And what is a village? A tightly-knit community, in which one's circumstances and welfare and the circumstances and welfare of others are immediately knowable and relevant. This is both a curse as well as a blessing, for a village offers nowhere to hide and keeps everyone hammered down like the proverbial nail into his or her proper place. Just as everyone knows who's sleeping

with whom and everything else about everybody else in a traditional village, so everyone knows everything about certain, select Everymen or Everywomen representative of the village, and this takes the form in the global village of celebrity or pseudo-celebrity. When “Bennifer” (Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez) broke up, or Britney Spears got married—and divorced—in less time than it takes sumo’s Konishiki-san to finish a freezer full of ice cream, “everyone” knew (and a few actually cared). The “frenzy for renown” causes even the most unlikely of Everyman or Everywoman to emerge from off their potato-chip littered couches and parade their lives and hormones before all the world to see in the newest craze of television programming, reality shows. Indeed, Marshall McLuhan, who coined the phrase “global village” in the 1960’s, was thinking particularly of the transcendent power of television: “The new electronic interdependence creates the world in the image of a global village.”¹⁵

Fortunately, the global village largely concerns itself with matters more pertinent and global than with matters more intimate and local. Throughout the world, regardless of culture and geography, we share a common humanity, common crises, and common aspirations and needs. Acid rain from the industrial Northeast of the United States doesn’t stop at the Canadian border, and the fallout from Chernobyl radiated throughout much of Europe and Scandinavia. Whether mad cow disease or avian flu, SARS or AIDS, epidemics force us to shelve our differences if we are to effectively confront them. The outsourcing of jobs from richer to poorer countries, from the United States, Europe, and Japan to China and India, is increasing dramatically, and whether one sees this as a positive development (cheaper goods and services) or a negative development (higher unemployment, lowering of wages) depends upon whether one wears pinstripes or overalls. And from the perspective of the Chinese factory worker (exploited and underpaid though she be), there are more opportunities in the industrial parks of Guangzhou or Shenzhen than in the barren plains of her native, rural village—partly, ironically, for the very

same reasons that the unfairly subsidized agribusinesses of developed countries have embraced globalization.

At the same that there is a centrifugal force that pulls us all out of isolated circumstances and into an international matrix, there is a concurrent, centripetal force in which the world comes rushing in to the tiniest of hamlets. The internet is the best example of this paradigm: ubiquitous everywhere, yet existing really nowhere but in cyberspace. When Yahoo, an American company, ran afoul of French law forbidding the display of Nazi emblems or memorabilia (which someone had posted for sale in an online auction), the questions of agency, of accountability, of free speech, and of national sovereignty came crashing into one another and revealed that we are no longer citizens of a solitary, sovereign state, but cyber-cosmopolitans bound by the laws and mores of every state—an impossible burden, to be sure. Yet even before the internet revolution, we find examples of the village as world, of cultural microcosms more than mere simulacrums set within a larger community.

Ethnic neighborhoods are both islands of culture (isolated, excluded) and cultural life preservers.¹⁶ What would San Francisco be without its Chinatown, New York without its Little Italy, or Los Angeles without its Little Tokyo? Tourist traps all, to be sure, and yet they are the “real” thing—products of discrimination and exclusion, authentic sites of immigrant cultures and communities—and no one could imagine America the better or richer without them. This may be a rather saccharine lemonade made from the unfortunate lemons of racism, but America has moved beyond these boundaries as acts of legislation or official containment, and most Americans regardless of race or ethnicity live where their financial wherewithal takes them (some, especially Asian Americans, more successfully than others, especially African Americans).¹⁷ To use an ice cream metaphor, we can find today both Neapolitan and Rocky Road communities—communities with discernible, mutually exclusive boundaries (vanilla, strawberry, chocolate); and communities in which the nuts, marshmallows, and chocolate pieces are

all jumbled together into a common matrix. What could be more apple pie American than two scoops on the same (i)con(e)?

Loosened from their cultural moorings, icons may become meaningless like rosaries or other religious paraphernalia peddled on the street of Roppongi, or monstrous threats like King Kong swinging from the heights of Manhattan. (And yet because of Hollywood, King Kong has become an icon of New York: one couldn't put him, say, in Paris, for his grasp of the Eiffel Tower would seem a silly and tenuous grasp indeed.) And why is Godzilla always bashing Tokyo? Doesn't he ever make his way to Shanghai or Los Angeles? Short answer: Tokyo represents Japan; and the monster from across and beneath the water, the sleeping giant awakened by an American underwater nuclear detonation, represents the devastation of war and America. Thus, each of the earlier Japanese Godzilla movies ends with its "*Yokatta!*" moment: embattled, overwhelmed, and against all odds, the *gambaru* spirit of the Japanese military successfully pushes the horrific *gaijin* off of Honshu and back where he belongs. Certainly after the unspeakable horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the greater loss of life in the fire bombings of Tokyo, Japan deserved and needed catharsis and to express its pain. And as an occupied country, Japan could hardly have enjoyed the status of subjugation, however beneficent the intent and results of it might be. And so the Godzilla epic offers a fantasy ending to World War II, with a fantasy beginning or *causus belli*, one might add. For the beginning of *Godzilla* refers to and yet inverts the grammar of history and the meaning of Admiral Yamamoto's words, "I fear we have awakened a sleeping giant and filled him with a terrible resolve." And when after 15 years of cinematic slumber the Toho production company decided to reawaken the beast for his 30-year anniversary production, *Godzilla 1985* (released as *Godzilla* in Japan in 1984)—made near the height of Japan's bubble economy, when Japanese banks were buying up the ripest plums of American real estate, Japanese auto manufacturers were eating GM's lunch, and the appraised value of Tokyo alone was approximate to that of

the entire continental United States—Godzilla found himself in a very different Japan than the one he first visited in 1954. Perhaps that is why he later decided to visit what he believed to be his still less fortunate friends stateside, when he made his next big production appearance in 1998 (awakened this time by the then international bad guys of nuclear testing, the French) and New York became his stomping grounds. A street-savvy bully, Godzilla knew that the best victim was one that already considered itself a victim: a Japan that could say “No” was no longer an easy mark, and he remembered that the last time he checked, America was still licking its wounds from the trade wars.¹⁸ But, alas, Godzilla van Winkle was again an approximate decade behind the curve, for now the United States was enjoying its bubble economy, Japan was in a protracted recession, and American banks were beginning to gobble up the plums of Japanese portfolio assets.

If empire is now gobbling up the world regardless of cultural boundary or national border, the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel offers an etiology for the multiplicity of tongues and the mass migrations that now constitute this empire:

Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, . . . “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.” And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.¹⁹

Rome and America are frequently cited as the pre-eminent empires of this scattered world, past and present, but the history of another empire, than of Britain, offers an intriguing double inversion of the Tower of Babel story: monocultural exodus and polycultural influx. Some 20 million people left the British Isles between the early 1600's and 1950's, the largest mass migration in history: "This Britannic exodus changed the world. It turned whole continents white." In the intervening half century and more, a different pattern has emerged:

Since the 1950s flows of migration have of course reversed themselves. More than a million people from all over Britain's former Empire have come as immigrants to Britain. So controversial has this "reverse colonization" been that successive governments have severely restricted it.²⁰

While some governments may do their best to stem the tide of immigration, whether for reasons of economics or cultural and ethnic purity, critics intent on dismantling the empire of the status quo find in it a political ally. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, find virtue in "nomadism and miscegenation," considering them "the first ethical practices on the terrain of Empire." And they have prodigious hopes of these forces' ultimate offspring: "a multicolored Orpheus of infinite power." But the program that these critics envision reeks of a Millenarian inebriation: "As in a secular Pentecost, the bodies are mixed and the nomads speak a common tongue."²¹ Migrations are based upon the needs of those who migrate, of their children and their yet-unborn descendants, and not upon the guiding hand of a global, political Providence. Miscegenation should similarly be respected as the result of

an intimate expression of love that transcends boundaries “in spite of” not “because of;” otherwise it seems a kind of scandalous slumming or “Nob Hilling,” an unseemly notching of bedposts.

At this point, it is useful to map out a few key similarities and differences among the three terms focused upon in this essay and the implied narratives that these terms contain:

Babel: A linguistically and culturally unified population, intent upon a unified goal, is frustrated in its intent because of its blasphemous pride and insolence. The punishment is plurality—linguistic, cultural—and Diaspora (which leads, presumably, to further plurality and racial and ethnic divergence).

The City on a Hill (American version): A linguistically, culturally and racially unified population, intent upon a unified goal, endures what it sees as a temporary, self-imposed exodus to the New World to right the blasphemous wrongs of the Old. The mission becomes lost in the sweep of history, secularization, and immigration and Diasporas of many peoples and tongues, but its tropes survive the centuries. Plurality—linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic—becomes celebrated, and political and economic success are seen as just rewards and a call to right the political and economic wrongs of the world.

Global Village: A linguistically, culturally, racially, ethnically diverse and geographically dispersed population is inextricably interconnected and interdependent, both in real space and in cyberspace.

“The City on a Hill” is one of the most sustained images that America has of itself, a lighthouse to show other nations the way to freedom and prosperity. Not that America has an exclusive claim on this trope or similar ones, however. When The Labour Party unseated the Conservatives in Britain’s general election in 1997, the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, proudly boasted and proclaimed of a newly resurgent Britain, “Today, I want to set an ambitious course for this country: to be

nothing less than the model twenty-first-century nation, a beacon to the world.” He would come back to this image a few more times in the same speech: “We are free to build that model twenty-first-century nation, to become that beacon to the world;” and “Help us make Britain that beacon shining throughout the world.” Apparently, the H.M.S. Britannia made sure it’s Ship of State had upped the wattage at a number of lighthouses since Margaret Thatcher, in her victory speech some 22 years earlier, pined, “so many of our people, some of the best and brightest, are depressed and talking of emigrating.”²²

The view from on top—from the presidential or prime ministerial podium—is an easy-enough point of reference to criticize from a too-PC angle of vision. And yet the view from the putative “bottom” (i.e., of academics celebrated, however tenured or immured), looks, perhaps not surprisingly, every bit like the view from the top. Wrenching their hands over the spectacular failure of Marxism, Hardt and Negri perform what they believe to be an induced delivery, but looks all the world to be a post mortem:

We can certainly recognize real obstacles that block the communication of struggles. One such obstacle is the absence of a recognition of a common enemy against which the struggles are directed. Beijing, Los Angeles, Nablus, Chiapas, Paris, Seoul: the situations all seem utterly particular, but in fact they all directly attack the global order of Empire and seek a real alternative. . . . A second obstacle . . . is that there is no common language of struggles that could “translate” the particular language of each into a cosmopolitan language. Struggles in other parts of the world and even our own struggles seem to be written in an incomprehensible foreign language. This too points toward an important political task: to construct a new common language that facilitates communication, as the languages of anti-imperialism and proletarian internationalism did for the struggles of a previous era. Perhaps this needs to be a new type of communication that

functions not on the basis of resemblances but on the basis of differences: a communication of singularities.²³

It seems as if the world’s various populations have all bumped against the same walls of history, which might leave rational scientists to conclude that they are therefore most likely not the products of culture, but of an inescapable human nature. If so, an ineluctable necessity descends upon us, for we can never cease to be human. And yet it is a strange kind of magic that Hardt and Negri propose, a magic in which one’s incantations of protest conjure up the very demon one is trying to defeat or at least subdue. For they seem to be in danger of proposing an answer which itself is complicitous in the problem. Does not their project itself assume a kind of theoretical hegemony, and as well their desired political Esperanto—shoving aside the particular to found a universal which is, paradoxically, somehow able to transcend isolated particularity by universally communicating that which is particular? And yet assuming this is possible, who the Archimedes and what the lever upon which the world will be moved? Or, should the world need movement of another kind, trapped as it were in a costive history, what it needs perhaps is not a nudge but a nozzle, not a political language but a political laxative. The common language sought by Hardt and Negri refers, of course, to a political medium of ideas through which people of different tongues can communicate. And yet even here we run into some tricky terrain, for thought and language are not so easily dissociated. To the ancient Greeks, *logos* referred to both thought and speech, and any writer knows that writing—using language—is often a process of discovery, in which ideas emerge, become clarified, and developed, only in the act of writing (or, for the same reasons, in the act of speaking). Polyglots in particular are acutely aware of this thought-language nexus, as not only their ideas but their very identities and behaviors become modified to fit the language in which they are communicating. (Even *gaijins* bow when they say “*Hai!*” on the telephone.) Applying this to a political language, we may

talk the talk and walk the walk in work boots, Birkenstocks, or fashionably liberated pumps to a necessary or convincing degree, but a polyglot world of myriad cultures requires an equally polyglot political approach and a sufficiently flexible discourse to keep the privileged “rigorous” from turning a pedantic *rigor mortis*.

Long after the first Puritan migrations of the early 1600’s yet well before America won its independence, a later generations of Puritans would praise John Winthrop as “the Puritan Moses” who led his chosen people into the American wilderness. (Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Tubman could comfortably wear the mantle in the 19th century, as African Americans were led out of slavery.) Reagan may have indulged the vanity that he was a 20th-century American Moses leading the American people out of the moral wilderness of the Nixon administration (Watergate, Vietnam), the political wilderness of the Ford administration (the accidental presidency), the diplomatic wilderness of the Carter administration (the Iran hostage crisis) or the economic wilderness of all three (ongoing recession and inflation), yet the Iran-Contra scandal, unprecedented budget deficits, the Savings and Loan crisis and bailout, and Black Monday would belie this vanity. Americans are inveterate optimists, however, and the contagion of confidence in life may well be the flip side of this hubristic coin, even if it does usually bear the resemblance of Presidents on one side, and national monuments on the other.

The “city on the hill” trope often presents itself as a trans-cultural paradigm, free of the parochial and particular. Universal and timeless, like *Roma aeterna* (to which all roads, of course, lead), it is the inevitable state promised by a purposeful history, paradoxically both a culmination of human history and an exemplum for later generations to emulate, even if history has itself “ended.”²⁴ Unfortunately, it may also, like Shakespeare’s Rome in *Coriolanus*, “whose course will on the way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs . . . asunder,”²⁵ trod underfoot those in its path

in its Providential march toward the future. Nowhere in world history is this march more dramatically and tragically displayed than in the Europeanization of the Americas—especially in North America, where the indigenous peoples of an entire continent have been uprooted, decimated, and displaced. Surely this is not a destiny to be proud of. We should, then, keep in mind the original reference of Reagan’s city on a hill, a reference that was already some 1600 years old by the time the Puritans employed it. For Winthrop’s imagery is not original, but comes from scripture, Matthew 5:14-15, in which Jesus says to his disciples:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.²⁶

What are the lessons that we, living in a global community, can learn from this city, and from Babel?

One is that we should consider what it means to be a divided city, and whether this condition is the result of unwanted outside forces, or free expressions of difference of its residents. A divided Berlin was a political construction of the Cold War, but the issues facing cities, regions, and states torn apart by ethnic cleansing, such as Sarajevo or Kosovo, or cobbled together of a variety of peoples and beliefs, such as Afghanistan or Iraq, are more substantive and essential.²⁷ Samuel P. Huntington keenly observes that “culture is both a divisive and a unifying force,” and however we scholars or critics may differ on how to slice the global pie into its constituent cultural parts, his observation remains useful:

In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural. Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic questions humans can face: Who are we? And they are answering that question in the traditional

way human beings have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most to them. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations.²⁸

If only because of these substantive differences, the success of peaceful coexistence in the world and in regions racked is all the more meaningful. We may one day find Kabul or Baghdad well-deserving the epithet “city on a hill,” worthy of emulation. After all, the Mesopotamian empire was based in what is today Iraq, as was Babylon with its ziggurats, which inspired the story of the Tower of Babel. What a wonderfully poetic symmetry, then, to find here a free, world-embracing community, respecting differences and the unique identities of individuals and sub-communities. The more important lesson of Babel is an ironic one indeed, as we have come back by moving forward. For while the warning against overreaching pride remains more relevant than ever, especially for those living in “cities on hills,”²⁹ the curse laid upon the people of Babel seems more like a blessing to us today. We are wont to exclaim “*Viva la différence!*” Babel isn’t so bad, after all. It’s the babble of wolves in sheep’s clothing that we should be wary and weary of. So far as the perfectibility of mankind is concerned, should we climb to the heavens, let it be by the light of godliness and goodness, and not giddy pride.

Notes

¹ John F. Kennedy, speech, Berlin, 11 June 1963, *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches*, ed. Brian MacArthur (New York: Penguin, 1999) 322-23.

² Reagan, “Farwell Address to the Nation,” Washington D.C., 11 Jan. 1989, online, reaganfoundation.org.

³ Reagan, speech, First Conservative Political Action Conference, 25 Jan. 1974, online, presidentreagan.info.

⁴ O’Sullivan, “The True Title,” *New York Morning News* (27 Dec. 1845).

⁵ If America sought to be Rome (city of hills), it also aspired, iconographically, to be Olympus itself. The architects and urban planners of America’s true city on a hill, Washington, D.C., deliberately laid out a complex of Roman structures with godlike statues and friezes of Washington, Lincoln, and others, and huge expanses of lawn in between them, as they were all floating in the sky on distant clouds of green. To this end, the site for Capitol Hill, or simply “the Hill” in common parlance, was aptly chosen. It is equally fitting that Lincoln sits on a throne of Zeus-like grandeur, and Washington stands transubstantiated into a towering obelisk (or, per his epithet, “Father of Our Country,” a giant white phallus).

⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri offer the following: “*The United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project. Imperialism is over. No nation will be world leader in the way modern European nations were.*” Instead, a new form of sovereignty “composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single rule of logic” has arisen, “a *decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm.” *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) xiii-xiv, xii (original emphasis).

⁷ The related term, *agriculture*, means “cultivating the fields or open spaces.”

⁸ Thoreau, *Walden, The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. William L. Howarth, et al., vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) 157.

⁹ For the celebrated “frontier thesis” see Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920). Turner first offered this thesis in

a paper read before the American Historical Association in 1893, when he declared the frontier “gone” and the first period of American history “closed.”

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Cambridge UP, 1991) 140.

¹¹ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1964) 3. The phrase “virgin continent” has been criticized as being blind to genocide; Francis Jennings offers the term “Widowed Land,” yet even this is blind to sexist conceptions. See his *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1975).

¹² R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955) 4, 5.

¹³ For gendered perceptions of the American landscape, feminized by male explorers and adventurers, see Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: U of Carolina P, 1975).

¹⁴ Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons of Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) xxii.

¹⁵ See Leo Brody, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986); McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). The sensational tripe that often occupies the media reminds one of why Thoreau criticized the media of his day (the post, telegraph, and newspapers) more than 150 years earlier. See *Walden*, 92, 94-5, 109.

¹⁶ In some sense, these communities may be read as captured in a kind of menagerie, for peoples who have experienced discrimination were often seen as inferior or somehow less than human: “Look at the ethnic people.” Condescending and patronizing as the metaphor is, the “cultural zoo” paradigm is a kinder one than what some critics apply to the performative self-Othering that members of their own ethnic communities at times engage in: “pornography.” Moreover, all of us are ethnics outside our own *ethnos* or native hegemonic in-group: “Naked Apes” all, encaged, yet free to learn about others. As we do care more about what we know,

about what we are familiar with than with what is far away and abstract, we may be all the more likely thereby to respect one another in our common Ark.

¹⁷ Care must be taken to distinguish those groups and communities that have “made it,” and those which are still trapped in barrio and ghetto.

¹⁸ See Shintaro Ishihara, *The Japan That Can Say No: Why Japan Will be First Among Equals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

¹⁹ Genesis 11:1-9.

²⁰ Ferguson 60, 62.

²¹ Hardt and Negri 362-63.

²² Tony Blair, speech, Brighton, 30 Sept. 1987, *Twentieth-Century Speeches* 512, 515, 517; Margaret Thatcher, speech, Brighton, 10 Oct. 1975, *Twentieth-Century Speeches* 411.

²³ Hardt and Negri 56-7. The cities they here cite refer to the following crises: “The Tiananmen Square events in 1989, the Intifada against Israel state authority, the May 1992 revolt in Los Angeles, the uprising in Chiapas that began in 1994, and the series of strikes that paralyzed France in December 1995, and those that crippled South Korea in 1996” (54).

²⁴ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1992). In this sense, history is read as a narrative with meaning, purpose, direction, goal, or *telos*; once this is achieved, the narrative ends. Though commonsensically we tend to equate history and time, we should observe that when fairy tales end, “And they lived happily ever after,” the tales’ characters don’t suddenly fall down and die just because their story has ended.

²⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus, The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) I.i.70-71.

²⁶ As the Puritans sought to fire the spirit, they didn’t keep their candles under bushels, and it seems that the American public grows restless of keeping theirs under Bushes—whether George Herbert Walker or George W. Indeed, much of the world would insist that the mythology of the American Adam persists to this day (and not simply in the addled vanities of weekend warriors), with America’s so-called “Cowboy President” leaving “Old Europe” and the United Nations behind in his “go-it-alone” determination to “round up them bad guys.”

²⁷ Sadly, many divided cities and states can be found. Yet Budapest (divided in the middle by the Danube) long ago used to be two warring cities—Buda and Pest—and we can only hope that similarly situated cities, such as Slavonski Brod (Croatia) and Bosanski Brod (Bosnia Herzegovina), divided by the River Sava, will normalize relations.

²⁸ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996) 28, 20.

²⁹ The principle targets of September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, were chosen by Osama bin Laden in part because of what he considered their proud height. But if they represented a contemporary Tower of Babel, it was of a globally inclusive kind, with the tragic loss of life touching everyone in the global community. The fatal irony of terrorists presuming to lay the judgment of God upon others whose success or prominence may make them appear too presumptuous creates a cycle of violence that the truly pious of whatever faith find reprehensible. We need to recognize, however, that being a “city on a hill,” or “*the* city on a hill,” carries with it a tremendous burden of responsibility and that the role of “Globocop” is a thankless one.