

The matter of cities. Review essay

Dag Østerberg: *Arkitektur og sosiologi i Oslo* (Architecture and sociology in Oslo), Pax 1998, 145 pp.

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Summary: This important book revives core issues from age-old albeit recently half forgotten debates over urbanity, its problems and advantages. The author suggests that the city concept itself is ripe for being transcended, *socio-material condensation* serving as its successor. He further outlines a dialectics of today's *hardships* and *comforts* of city/condensation life, in the grand tradition of a Howard (1902), Mumford (1938), Le Corbusier (1935), or a Williams (1973). To-day's condensations are analysed as socio-material *sediments*, each with its political code. Sartre's thinking is the main theoretical basis. A number of hardships and their remedies are discussed and a proposal for reform outlined. As important, a whole family of new concepts are put to use, e.g. the *sub-individual*, *the imaginary*.

- We analyse the local reviews of the book as a "howl of hurt habitus": While most objections are repudiated, we

suggest that the author may yet have placed a trifle too much weight on the material side of his socio-material.

Formerly, when Østerberg spoke his opponents kept mum, but now those days are definitely over. This slim book which appeared in March 1998 made a big stir locally, spurring an extensive debate in the media¹. It received broad attention, albeit mixed positive-negative, with some preponderance for the latter so far. Several reviewers put emphasis on two pivotal points, (1) Østerberg's claim that seeing Oslo as a city is passé, "... only a representation, indeed a fixation, the task being to free us from it. Instead, an essay is made to understand it as a *socio-material condensation*." (p. 34). And (2) the impression, held by many, that in Østerberg's view, the hardships (Norw. *tyngsler*) of city life were dominant whereas its comforts (*avlastning*) were dominated, or at least, much less significant.

The present review has the benefit of hindsight, being built on the book itself plus nine earlier reviews and a number of minor comments and press releases². In conclusion, five of the nine hold that the book, however courageous and erudite, has some, possibly serious shortcomings and as a whole is not convincing. One of them, philosopher-statistician Espen Søybye, even claims that the entire book "has gone wrong".

I profoundly disagree. I shall argue that it is a most prominent part of Østerberg's considerable *oeuvre*. Not only because it is among his first in object- as against meta-sociology. It is an analysis which bears comparison, first with Raymond Williams' *The country and the city* (1973), a classic even if rarely cited today. Like Williams, Østerberg brings dialectics back to cities, highlighting that *both* glamour and filth, hardships and relief, are essential features of city life, having taken turns in the dominant and dominated position in successive

¹ No less so his next book, *The stateswoman. Gro Harlem Brundtland and neoliberalism*, co-authored with Håvard Nilsen (Nilsen & Østerberg 1998).

² All these reviews and comments are listed after the main text.

historical periods. Second, it invites comparison with Manuel Castells sub-classic³ *La question urbaine* (1972): A paradigm shift is proposed, from the city as spatial essence, to collective consumption in Castells, to socio-material condensation in Østerberg. Hence Oslo, and any present city, should no longer be conceived as cities, only degrees of socio-material density.

Sartre is applied, his theory of project, facticity, and the *pratico-inerte*⁴; not surprising for a specialist (Østerberg 1994) yet dominating to a degree which is amazing in an author of such enormous reading. Others such as Foucault appear but very much in minor roles, while Barthes and similar 'reading-the-city' semiologists may be surmised but not at all prominently. It is a material theory, not primarily one of signs and their senses.

An outline of contents

A brief review of main traits is in order. In Foucauldian, 'archaeologic' manner, Oslo is analysed as a succession of *sediments* (not segments), four in sum: the disciplinary or baroque (the fortified town), the bourgeois sediment, the functionalistic sediment, and finally, presently on top, the "Mazdaistic" sediment (urban sprawl *cum* private car commuting). A first, original or mediaeval sediment is also mentioned, in ruins today, but with an increasing movement for its revival. Each sediment has its specific political code, in sequence *absolutism*, *liberalism*, *socio-liberalism*, and *neo-liberalism* - and I suppose, with *feudalism* added as a mediaeval sediment's code.

In a review entitled "Black holes" one reviewer of note, Christian Norberg-Schulz, has managed to read the section on the bourgeois sediment as nothing but a load, such as "the unpleasant National Theatre". It is amazing indeed that a bourgeois by profession as well

³ Mentioned in passing by Østerberg himself, p. 26.

⁴ Adapted from Marx, Husserl, Heidegger.

as by life-style can fail to see Østerberg's veneration for the period, his text here (pp. 46-53) a catalogue of buildings and monuments giving life and body to Habermas' celebrated but much too abstract *The structural transformation of the public sphere*⁵.

The author expresses his preference for the the socio-liberal code and the functionalist sediment (p. 43): Clear lines and clean, unornamented surfaces, a lack of respect for the past, a style for the labour movement. Fair enough yet there is a contrast here to the recent work of Bourdieu's team (1993), who situates *la misère du monde* largely to functionalist housing estates (*grands ensembles*). Functionalism may still "signify liberation", but its buildings and style alone has clearly not prevented urban decay and grave social problems. To which Østerberg agrees entirely; the solution of the contradiction must be that what elevates as a form may yet restrain as matter. Following Sartre he writes that East Enders' lives - dwellings, shops, restaurants etc. - are *destiny* (p. 82); whereas well-to-do people can choose, should they want to, an East End life, most East Enders cannot choose the detached suburban lifestyle.

An energetic newcomer to urbanist discourse, Fossen, has advanced that Østerberg may have overlooked a fifth, the contemporary sediment, the *post-modern* or *post-industrial*. He doesn't elaborate but assuming that Fossen refers to a 'young adult' culture - similar but presumably broader than the yuppie label - of outgoing, non-commuting, city center residents, it sounds reasonable that a man of Østerberg's age (60) may be less familiar with that. It remains to be seen, however, whether this is a new and a lasting phenomenon. Young people's affinity to city center life has been a well-known fact for long (cf. Gans 1968:45, 54-5), as has the suspicion that for many, this is a cohort life-cycle phase, not a lasting stage. But the more important question is, if this is a sediment on par with the previous four to five, does it have a political code of its own? Fossen, evoking

⁵ *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 1962/1989; the title in Norwegian translation is *Borgerlig offentlighet*, (Bourgeois public sphere, 1971).

Castells (1996) and Deleuze (1980) would probably suggest the rhizome, network or web code, with the Internet as its main materialisation. *Meinetwegen*, there is indeed a possibility that web culture will come to dominate the world like private cars before it, for better or worse. But it may also end as an *infra-culture*, in the way of radio amateurs for example, a smallish set of very great enthusiasts; the role of the 'AmCar' movement, not mass motoring.

Next comes Østerberg's core chapter "Experiences of hardships and comforts", 51 pp. or 35 % of the text. The author has made the point that the number of pages allotted to each is exactly the same. Nevertheless, the hardships, strains and tensions come first, and relief or pleasures second. His catalogue of strains sounds plausible enough; I've yet to hear anybody favouring urban features such as peak hour traffic and tube rides, parking problems, spaghetti junctions, the vulnerability of pedestrians and bikers, queues, overcrowding, and noise. Following, however, is Sartre's distinction of ethical *demands* vs. *appeals* applied to our material environment. Three forms of "demand materiality" are contrasted, that of "massivity semiotics", "surface semiotics", and private property (pp. 71-84). Plausible as well, but not quite as much, perhaps, as those previously mentioned. Many will agree that large publicity posters are designs on us, "a demand masking itself as an advice" (p. 78) and likewise that private property will limit free movement - for those who are not themselves great proprietors.

But agreeing that heavy, stone or concrete, high-rise (blocks of) buildings are more demanding, more constraining than small, wooden, detached ones is less easy. True, feeling trapped, "fenced in" or simply small in narrow city streets are regular experiences. But at other times, one may feel "lifted" or exhilarated in the same situation. Essential Marx, isn't it, seeing the social character of our work embodied behind the fetichism, difficult but feasible. Imagine Østerberg and his (near) contemporary fellow northerner, career editor Per Egil Hegge, both taking strolls down *Akersgata* (Oslo's very modest Fleet street) back in

the early 60ies, the latter with the idea 'I can work my way up there' - unstrained, 'growing wings'. Whereas the former, 'I oppose such powers and will never go up there' - weighted down or 'both feet on ground'. My sympathy is entirely with the oppositional stand, yet I find it difficult to agree that the tension or downbeat feeling resides in the weight, density, volume or form of the city's built environment alone, invariable from one time or one streetwalker to another. - We'll return to this point after finishing our overview of the main stream of arguments in the remaining text.

The comforts or relief (*avlastninger*) are considerable too, starting with reduced toil, for example in transportation during quiet hours: cramped as the tube ride may be it is less strenuous than walking and less expensive than taxis. Other relief is due to a number of other infrastructural services — indeed, Castell's collective consumption, today present in rural, i.e. socio-materiel of lower densities as well, but in different form and much greater concentration in high density areas (villages will never build Tubes). Less obvious is protection from *encounters* — an essential pleasure of human life but also strenuous, hence a need for avoiding some of it. Østerberg speaks of *anonymity*, *typicality*, and *sub-individuality* as the main protective forms. We may disappear in the crowd, act typical in a chosen or in an ascribed, stereotypic way. Or we may find unsuspected selves in sub-individual states, a counterposition to Durkheim et *cie.*'s collective consciousness, a dissolved self sort of, almost somnabulistic as in an exhilarated crowd of spectators at a show, concert, game etc.

Following is the *esthetic gaze*, the attitude typical of professional urbanists abstracting away strains and weight and delighting in the beauty of cityscapes instead, pleasant but definitely elitistic too. Further nature as in parks or woods, *bois*, and the experience of community, real or anticipated as in a carnival, national day, mass meetings or manifestations, concerts and spectacles, promenades, flânerie, restaurants and 'going out'.

Hegel's *Sein für Anderen* is applied next: "Any socio-material field of action has its being-for-itself and its being-for-the others" (p. 98), high-density sub-fields no less than the rest. The role of the Others rises in importance – visitors, tourists, and with them guides and all kinds of second-hand accounts or narratives. And locals learn to "take the role of the other", see their site as the visitors do. Enter Imagination⁶, ideas of 'the glorious city', its monuments, history etc. Further, enter the *Imaginary*, or leisure-time apparatus making no difference for routine, everyday lives – busking, nightlife, hallucinogens etc (pp. 129-31).

The final sections starts by introducing Oslo as a relatively 'green city', a 'vegetable stew' - plain good fare but not costly (p. 114). Then, enter Deformation, areas of 'pure facticity' or counterfinality, not urban decay but the experience of loss of form, and the loss of concern for one's built environment. On this note, the book concludes with a proposal for policy: Redevelop the *Grorud* valley as a city in the city of its own! This substantial area, some 4-6 square miles of post-1950 construction, is a mix of train, tube and main motorway throughfares, big housing estates, industry and storehouses - meriting a 'deformed' label fairly enough, a fact which leaves many people unconcerned, most typically non-locals.

The proposal has been ridiculed, partly as Østerberg's by allegation 'exaggerated view' of urban destitution, partly as hopelessly unrealistic. Yet the idea of a new park built around *Alna* or the valley's 'forgotten river' is eminently feasible, and plans for new activity and communication centers are under discussion.

⁶ "Fantasy doesn't follow the laws of reality" (p. 106). True, yet fantasy as a genre works according to rules of its own, strict ones at that. At its heart is contrast, surprise, shock, all of which wear out surprisingly soon. So the art of it lies in inventing new, unsuspected contrasts etc., a rare art indeed. Small wonder most 'real fantasies' are pure stereotype.

The author's aphorism-like *bons-mots* liberally sown all over his text bear special mention. For example: tears of joy are tears of privation⁷ (p. 97), wisdom resides in accepting one's being-for-the-others (p. 102), the individual's definition is negation, being what the others are not, and not being what they are (p. 91), shame has to do with damaged identity (p. 90), the poster bids for my freedom without having any freedom I can bid for (p. 79), the car is an interest for the few and a destiny for the many (p. 66), the parking fine under the wiper says: You shouldn't have been here! (p. 66), transport in essence is something we would rather go without (p. 64), boredom is facticity as dead time, the absence of activity as a project (p. 38).

An unconstrained dialogue

In discussion, first two common criticisms that miss the point: "he says Oslo is not a city!" No he does not, he says that our *idea* of Oslo as a city is passé. With almost general urban sprawl and commuting it is now banal that the idea of a socio-material condensation is more apt. But there is no denial that *degrees* of condensation will still exist within it⁸. The critics may have missed this point, vaguely hurt to see their 'Shropshire Londonism' come to nothing. Østerberg's 'city' criticism does not aim at the term in common usage; his suggestion is letting it go as a sociological concept, in the first place. In Simmel's day, cities were marvels; now they're just common places. - We'll return to the question whether the urban, if lost as an idea of socio-material condensation, may yet survive as a *cultural* entity.

Second, consider Norberg-Schulz claim that Østerberg's reading of architectural classics old and recent is superficial, even "embarrassingly naïve". In manuscript the title was *Strains and relief in the Oslo area* - changed later, I guess, on the publishers' request. It

⁷ Attributed to colleague Øyvind Pålshaugen.

⁸ A student suggested that 'massivity semiotics' implies missing the less massive - the rural or non-urban. A nice point, but that which is, implicitly, missed might just as well be a different, a lower density urban.

isn't really a treatise on architecture; it is once again on socio-material condensations. So Norberg-Schulz is mistaken; he might as well blame himself for reviewing Østerberg with 'painfully naïve views and poor if any reading of sociological classics'⁹. It is only a question of a poor title, marketable perhaps but also somewhat misleading, even for a reviewer of merit.

Returning now to the question of strains and relief, three questions arise: (1) Does the text in sum maintain that there is a dominance of strains over relief in current city life? (2) If so, had we better agree? And for those who do, (3) why has agreeing proved so utterly difficult for a number of others?

The main thing is not balance but dialectics, as I see it. Hardships and comforts are both there, in constant strife. Yet within this strife it would seem that strains and toil have the upper hand, so to say; an equal number of pages but with the sections on hardship first in sequence. And strains are seen as 'experience' whereas relief is mainly 'possibilities'. If balance were the conclusion, the sequence had better be reversed, or changed into antiphone, 'call and response' form.

So I maintain that in sum, the author's intention is to state that contemporary condensation, or city, life e.g. in Oslo is mainly a struggle - toil and moil, even health risks aplenty. Relief may relieve but not by far compensate entirely. His is an essay in Bourdieusian *rupture* – an effort of breaking with conventional, received, *doxic*, knowledge, hence liable to rise anger among those who see leisure city life as one big happy effervescence, a 'movable feast'.

This certainly agrees with my personal experience during forty years: Numerous pleasures but no less a continuous struggle, toil and moil indeed, from the dwelling to the kindergarten or school, job, shops - and then 'going out' to the extent you've any energy left. *Boulot*,

⁹ Excepting old Parsons, abundantly covered in his *Intentions in architecture* 35 years ago (1963). No comment on his philosophy reading: pointillistic?

métro, dodo as the Parisians have it, or job, tube, beddie - that's all or not far from it. Opting for a family life is on the decline, but not substantially, so it's hard to believe that this experience is very atypical. Have a look at the faces in public transport: rare indeed are those who reveal happy anticipation in the morning and satisfaction in the evening; the more common thing is being worried before work and worn out after. Shopping likewise: some will have us believe that it's mainly "love and ritual" (Miller 1998); more often it's plain hard work, another chore - a strain on one's time and budget.

Comparison with another classic work is at hand: Local medical professor, later university rector, Axel Holst, authored a very different report with a similar conclusion back in 1895¹⁰. In almost positivist fashion Holst's team measured the volume of air per habitant in Oslo's working-class housing and came to the conclusion that it was far below that of contemporary London, then the 'sick city' above - or rather below - all. Surprise, shock and heated debates ensued but in the end, Holst's work triggered Oslo's (then Kristiania's) first public housing policy, with us for a most of a century albeit of marginal impact today.

Østerberg himself made the point years ago, in characteristic *bon mot* form: *To point to hardships is to call for remedies*. Small wonder that attacks abound. For those most struck by the hardships tend to have 'defined them away' as a 'cognitive dissonance'¹¹, while those not touched anticipate being called on to pay for costly remedies. I contend, however, that we can see Østerberg as a contemporary Holst, pointing to neglected but grave problems. If there is one thing I miss, it's a discussion of air pollution, to-day's probably most damaging

¹⁰ Here cited after Hegna, K. "Lykkelige byer" - materiell, ideologi og diskurs i Kristiania", in *Sosiologisk årbok/Yearbook of sociology*, 1998.2.

¹¹ I've encountered *pytt-pyttisme* - 'pooh-pooh-ism' - as a conscious ideology with a therapeutical motive among personel caring for the severely handicapped, e.g. the brain damaged. All well and fine in that context whereas the more widespread, less conscious variant 'This isn't good but we can take it', fading over into 'this isn't too bad after all' is not. You learn, not to cope but to forget real problems.

health risk of city life - with asthma and allergies of pandemic proportions well under way, due mainly to unrestricted mass motoring. Today's cholera is no better for being turned upside-down: A choking throat instead of a running bottom.

Subliminal suffering or real coping?

On the critical side, I think that Østerberg's hardships or strains could be subdivided in different *degrees of workability*. One *schlect* (or bad) type which involves adaptation by overlooking, 'pooh-poohism' or 'just getting used to it', in the absence of all external change, regardless of health risks, a shortened or poorer life. But in addition, isn't there a *good* alternative, one of real coping, learning to deal with a strain which, with knowledge proves to be surmountable, without any real danger or damage? Take mastering a ladder, for example. A person suffering from vertigo will avoid it, fearing both his/her actual downfall, and the fear of that fear, involving nausea, sweat, shaking knees etc. Both fears are real enough, falling off and getting hurt or even killed is a real possibility, more likely perhaps given your fear. Yet if you have to, and can take your time - one step at a time so to speak and wait till the dizziness gives way - you may end up feeling confident and fairly comfortable on the top of a high ladder, eventually with a freshly DIY painted house. The danger is still there, it was only exaggerated in the first place; you've learned to cope while not forgetting the risks.

Many strains or problems on Østerberg's list would seem fixed on the *schlect* side of workability. But take this aspect of tube travel for example: The idea that "there is nothing to look at" (p. 64) the moment there is nothing visible *outside* the wagon is slightly on the strange side coming from a sociologist. Are not fellow travellers as interesting a study as any outside "dwellings, a sports ground, a park" (p. 63-4)? Staring, of course, is informally yet rather strictly forbidden. But if that is the problem, "skilled urbanites" (Lofland 1973) will know ways, for example utilising the darkened windows as mirrors for

discreet closer study of fellow passengers, approaching almost the 'one-way screens' of labs. This, then would seem to be a form of real coping which does not involve resigning to any loss, privation or damage, only ridding oneself of an anxiety that proves to be unfounded.

Similarly for narrow city streets with towering heavy buildings. I agree that there is a 'semiotics of massivity', that material in itself expresses something: 'you'd be safe in here - if we let you in', say¹². Hence the depressed or elated feeling of passers-by cannot reside in the material form or weight alone; it is also a matter of routinely assessing one's - different - chances of access. Both feelings, I hold, are *acquired*, not instinctive, automatic, or external - learned through a great number of encounters with streets broad and narrow and buildings great or small, light or heavy. And, they are typically learned in a different way from language learning, which involves repeated association of the spoken word and the entity spoken about¹³. Repeated association is involved, of course, in the case of material attitude learning or habit formation as well. But language learning has much stricter limits. We cannot Humpty-Dumpty our way through life trying to insist that words mean what we want them to, as nothing but a matter of 'being in power'. A street or a house also builds meaning by association, but in a much *less* restricted way. What is a slum for one may be another's dear childhood playground; what is one's 'just another throughfare' another's 'street where you live' etc. And that which is one's experience of feeling small or weighted-down may be another's feeling lifted or elated.

Briefly, *matter matters*. The degree to which it *coerces*, however, is less obvious, and likewise whether a coercion affects everyone

¹² It could also be read as 'You'll be trapped if you venture in here' – tube-rides, remember.

¹³ Or as often, the word associated with a trusted "language master" who guarantees that e.g. "a bear" is a large, omnivorous, furry animal living in distant woods - even if neither have actually seen this entity.

equally. For example, any driver of a private car is coerced not to rise up or stretch out arms while his/her car is moving. But some will thrive at 100 mph. while others shudder above 50, or vice versa. So matter for one may be quite another matter for another.

This is an objection, valid and interesting I think, yet definitely not a major one, involving only one among the many hardships listed. In sum, then Østerberg's analysis stands unimpaired: Modern city life involves on balance very serious strains; time for remedies! It's just his socio-materiel which on this point is just a trifle too little socio, too much general or abstract materiel.

We are in a position now to answer our last question, why it has proved so difficult for many to agree that city life involves more strain than relief. For matter according to Østerberg is not an abstract or purely external force, it's a *situated degree of socio-material density*, remember, analysed in terms of Sartre's facticity and project. We learn to deal with it, in somewhat different ways perhaps but we all learn, we all form habits. Which is where Bourdieu's *habitus* concept comes handy, albeit not cited by Østerberg in this text. Thinking in such terms reminds us that matter, tools, technology are better analysed as parts of the *illusio* or play within social fields, as elements of actors' capital - economic, cultural and social - or incorporated as habitus, structured patterns of action which structure but do not determine future action.

A Battle of Habitus

Briefly, anyone's dealings with different aspects of city life tend over time to become elements of habitus¹⁴. But although Bourdieu speaks of "the space of tastes", the struggle for distinction, or "the space of

¹⁴ The habitus concept, a comparative newcomer to social science, has perhaps been treated with excessive reverence, almost as if holy, or 'consecrated' in Bordieusian terms. It should not, there is plenty of room within habitus for ideology; *l'idéologue est celui qui donne pour universel, pour désintéressé, ce qui est conforme à son intérêt particulier* (Bourdieu 1994:165).

power", city life cannot well be analysed as one field. Urban life is better analysed as consisting of numerous more or less distinct fields or sub-fields, each with their specific capital forms, habitus, discourses and *doxa* or 'self-evident', taken-for-granted belief. When that is hurt, when the *doxa* 'loses its innocence' and heterodoxy can no longer be overlooked, then orthodoxy sets in - the field's self-defence, often frantic. And habitus are incorporated structures, hence when they're hurt almost bodily pain results.

In these terms, the response to Østerberg's book becomes readily comprehensible: He's challenged at least two distinct social fields, that of professional, elite urbanists (Norberg-Schulz) and that of their young, 'post-modern' would-be successors (Fossen, Lending, Søybye). Both fields share a tacit disregard for poverty as destiny; the latter because they're working – frantically indeed – to escape that destiny by personal climbing, whereas the former, the urban aesthete, never cared notably for ordinary people's houses.

A third field, silent so far, is that of politicians, property developers, investors and professional city planners. A sub-field, however, that of social-liberal reformers, *gauchisant* architects etc. (Carlsen, Øvrelid) has responded positively.

Regardless of the field a habitus of ease and relaxed ways is hard to win; more so if you're trying to increase your distinction and dominance. Therefore, a challenge, especially from a highly respected source, will tend to trigger aggressive responses of habitus self-defence, particularly from the less relaxed - the really confident will tend to overlook it. This agrees perfectly with the picture of this debate; established, heavy actors keep their calm and stay out¹⁵, leaving the skirmishes to lesser fry, aspiring or coming wo/men. For example, only two reviewers are of Østerberg's own age or above (Carlsen, Norberg-Schulz); the rest are, not yuppies but certainly

¹⁵ With the possible exception of Norberg-Schulz, very well-known in his circles yet with an air of the dark horse or outfield player about him.

'young adults'. As such, they deserve every juvenile comfort, *meinetwegen* once again, but, I fear, live literally on borrowed time: In later life-cycle phases, we can only hope that city life will still please them as much, with children, mortgage, heavy debts and a less than secure income added to it¹⁶.

Particularly nasty is the review by Søybye. He deserves praise for his painstaking exposition of a number of errors of detail - ten out of his eleven pages – most of them insubstantial, though. Following, however, is but half a page about the central chapter (on strains and relief), dismissed with the label "a very good chapter", before alleged errors of detail take over once again. Worse, however, for a professional philosopher is his very brief intimation that Østerberg is less than clear on Sartre's being inspired by Heidegger, *in casu* the relation between facticity (Sartre) and *Uneigentlichkeit* (Heidegger). Very interesting, but a philosopher worth his salt had better elaborate this point thoroughly¹⁷, rather than fuss over shortcomings of minor fact – a proof-reader's, not an author's errors. All of which in sum reduces his review to a boring patricide.

In another recent work Østerberg writes:

As against structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss and Foucault... Bourdieu holds that reflection has a capacity for (social) change. His idea of a cultural sociology involves a "socio-analysis" in analogy with the Freudian "psychoanalysis". It may provoke resistance, anger and animosity, or embarrassing emotions of shame and guilt, yet exactly through such means effect liberation. Not

¹⁶ Three novel themes are telling, Agnar Mykle's "youth is something only young people have which only older people can use"; Dag Solstad's *Verdigris! Green!*, on getting caught in 'being young' as role distance; but above all Boris Vian's magnificent if disconcerting *L'écume des jours*, on the impossibility, both of two lovers' sharing an external project, and of their sharing nothing but the union of lovers.

¹⁷ Continuing the discussion between the two on this point, was, it appears, first proposed, then dismissed.

only is it possible to change one's habitus, doing so is even a moral duty..." (Østerberg 1997:41).

Noone can dispute that that's exactly what has happened - 'resistance, anger and animosity' indeed - a prolonged howl of hurt habitus. So in the end the author has had his way, as against his critics - so far, for to what extent liberation will be effected remains to be seen.

In this light, the question remains of whether the city as a professional concept is or is not transcended. Personally, I do agree that in 'absolute' sociomaterial terms this seems to be the case, or a movement well under way. But the idea remains counter-intuitive to many people, not all of them non-professionals. So in terms of 'culture' or habitus, must we speak of degrees of condensation rather than degrees of urbanity or rurality? Or is this an empirical question of different habitus' different symbolic capital, different degrees of *aisance*, of feeling in control, at ease, when experiencing different shades of sites? A relaxed habitus requires work, knowledge, familiarity, skill. If, today, persons from marginal local hamlets will regularly have acquired such skill on par with any, if s/he will really feel as much as ease in the metropolis as most native metropolitans – more perhaps than these very city natives should they visit their hamlet – then we may safely conclude that the 'city' concept has been transcended on the level of habitus of practice, as well. If not, well, not quite yet¹⁸.

Remaining, finally, is the question of the author's own, personal habitus. Over the decades he has passed from erudite outsider to respected professorships, and presently to a position of general high esteem, as a philosopher, a musicologist, a cultural historian and a sociologist - most quoted, and I should think most admired, of all contemporary Nordic colleagues. His text here is personal in style yet

¹⁸ In addition, the question of metropolises of different size arises: If a hamlet local takes to Paris, say, as easily as a native of Oslo, then yes, transcended - if vice versa, not yet once more. They may also be equally *ill* at ease, in which case a *hierachy* of more or less metropolitan habitus is a fitting model, know as *frons urbana* in last century's Norwegian literature.

impersonal in form. But there is an undercurrent of very personal *voix et regards* - a habitus if you like, founded in the lifestyle of a confident yet retiring, sophisticated yet somewhat shy, very intellectual intellectual. This of course may give rise to little mistakes of its own. Dearly required as the critique of 'imaginary' city life may be - speaking now for myself, not for him - I do surmise my occasional tinge of what Johan Galtung once called 'the older person's aggression' here, the fox and the raisins, say, or even a good Faust dismissing Mephistoteles and sticking to his study. On the other hand, a more common and widespread mistake may hide behind the words of a much younger colleague: 'If Østerberg is right I've been living in false consciousness for years'. Yes, exactly! Forcing you to face that is intentional. Small wonder your habitus hurts.

A comparative disregard for detail is a conscious choice; instead, an audacious grasp of totalities is valued. So, despite criticisms, his present book will contribute to secure him a position, not of top rung *enfant terrible* but rather, one of *public conscience* - in the style of a Bertrand Russell, a Bourdieu, and of course a Sartre. This is in all probability a result of Østerberg's personal struggle over the years with "the moral duty to change one's habitus". May he persevere!

We can only hope that the efforts of having this book published in English will succeed soon. Not only because his analysis raises very important general issues. It is also a text full of lively observations. For all its hardships, Oslo remains a charming site, with a marginal exotism of its own.

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