

Shuxue Li

LEWIS MUMFORD

Critic of
culture and
civilization

Peter Lang

Introduction: Mumford as Writer-critic

Lewis Mumford (1895–1990), one of the great American critics of culture and civilization, has been relatively neglected. When Mumford died in 1990, he was claimed as a philosopher, planner, historian, cultural and political commentator, literary critic and essayist.¹ Though Mumford has been discussed in specialized disciplines, and in one or two collections of essays, monographic criticism has been very rare.

Richard H. Pells in his *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* claims, as does Eddy Dow in an important essay in *American Literature*, that Mumford's books of the 1920s were "very much in the tradition of Van Wyck Brooks". The primary argument of those books is that America had "sacrificed its aesthetic and spiritual heritage to the pressures of manufacturing and money-making – with the result that the artist could never find his proper audience, and 'culture' became synonymous with a middle-class hunger for status, and most people remained content to worship at the altar of power and success".² However, both Pells and Dow believe that from *Technics and Civilization* (1934) and *The Culture of Cities* (1938), when Stuart Chase went to Mexico "to examine the mores and outlook of 'men without machines'",³ and the Southern Agrarians gathered together at Vanderbilt University to "revolt against the liberal capitalism" with the "militant title"

1 *Journal of American Planning Association*, 56 (Spring 1990), p. 160.

2 Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 106; Eddy Dow, "Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford: A Confluence in the Twenties", *American Literature*, 45:3 (November 1973), p. 408.

3 Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, p. 101.

of their published book *I'll Take My Stand* (1930),⁴ Lewis Mumford took another course. Pells claims that, from *Technics and Civilization* onwards, Mumford seeks to extend the essentially cultural preoccupations of critics like Joseph Wood Crutch, Waldo Frank, Stuart Chase, Edmund Wilson, and the Southern Agrarians to broader social and economic questions and tries to integrate culture and politics with the values he associated with organicism and technics.⁵ Pells pins down Mumford as more than a socialist but a socialist who invested socialism “with a mission beyond economic reform and revolution”⁶ to include changes of values. But, writing from the Left, Pells also objects that Mumford’s ideas have a “curious static quality”:

At bottom [*Technics and Civilization*] was characteristically weak in matters of strategy and tactics – not a minor flaw in a period interested in moving from the present into the future. Significantly, Mumford avoided all ideological categories, both liberal and Marxist.⁷

I may add, here, that this could be a strength in Mumford’s thought as long as the categories are kept active in Mumford’s mind. It is my aim, in the chapter on utopianism, in which categories are converted into projects and proposals, to show how Mumford does indeed keep ideas in an active tension. However, Pells accuses Mumford of “technological determinism”, and the failure to locate “the specific engines of change”. Pells continues: “Nor were classes, parties, or programs given a prominent role in bringing socialism to America. ... Thus ... Mumford’s readers were offered a picture of the promised land but not a map for getting there.”⁸

Pells is probably right when he judges that Mumford was neither a liberal nor a Marxist. However, to accuse Mumford of technological determinism is perhaps beside the point. Though he touched upon economic and political issues as part of his criticism of American culture, Mumford

4 Ibid., p. 103.

5 Ibid., pp. 106–8.

6 Ibid., p. 110.

7 Ibid., p. 110.

8 Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, p. 110.

is primarily a cultural critic with economic and political concerns, but is not actually a political theoretician or economist per se. No wonder that Mumford diagnosed the ailments of American society, but came out with no adequate political and economic prescriptions. Though Mumford is sympathetic to socialism in his political perspective, he is not a socialist. His origin of thought, rather than coming from liberalism, actually derives from divergent sources, among which we can include a more inclusive body of thought that we can call republicanism.

Rosalind Williams, in her essay "Lewis Mumford as a Historian of Technology in *Technics and Civilization*", has claimed that "Mumford set out to write a critique of the Machine Age, not a history of the machine." She continues: "Mumford is a moralist ... strongly influenced by Patrick Geddes" and not Karl Marx, at least in the "organizing concepts" and the "theoretical assumptions" of the book.⁹ Although Williams is correct in claiming that Mumford is not a straightforward historian of technology but, instead, has a moral perspective that homes in on the pervasive impact on thinking and behaviour of the Machine (with a capital letter), to go on to say that Mumford "decisively" rejected Marxism prematurely rules out aspects of Marx's thought, in favour of that of Patrick Geddes, and also risks missing the way in which he draws on a variety of influences and perspectives.

Unlike Pells, who concentrates on the social and political dimension of Mumford's work, Casey Nelson Blake offers a different perspective again. He claims Mumford as one of the "radical critics of modern culture".¹⁰ Blake believes that the unifying theme in the works of Mumford and other Young Americans was not, as it was in his contemporaries, a "therapeutic conception of the self, or cultural nationalism", but, rather,

- 9 Rosalind Williams, "Lewis Mumford as a Historian of Technology in *Technics and Civilization*", in *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual*, (eds) Thomas P. Hughes and Agatha C. Hughes, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 44.
- 10 Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford*, Chapel Hill and London: University of Carolina Press, 1990, p. 2.

“a communitarian vision of self-realization through participation in a democratic culture”.¹¹ Blake thinks that the political perspective of the Young Americans’ criticism is not liberal or socialist but romantic and humanistic. Blake also thinks that Mumford’s criticism of capitalism and modernity is far from Marxism. While affirming the Young Americans’ critiques of industrial capitalist American culture, Blake nonetheless criticizes their “holistic understanding of culture”. Blake thinks this romantic indictment of capitalist modernity was valuable as a source of cultural criticism, but it proved altogether inadequate as a guide to a politics of democratic renewal and cultural revitalization. Like Richard Pells, Blake also thinks that Mumford’s transcendental “wholeness” and “visions of cultural prophecy” led to purely aesthetic solutions to political problems.¹²

Casey Blake groups Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank and Lewis Mumford as a distinct group of critics of American industrial culture. Blake notes the shortcomings of the previous generation of historians to separate their writings in cultural criticism from their political writings and autobiographies and tries in his research to amalgamate all their different genres of writing into an organic whole as cultural criticism. Blake refutes the conventional view of treating the Young Americans as “cultural nationalists”, and dismisses their writings as “lyrical” or sentimental. He thereby seeks to rescue these Young Americans from this biased view and finds the connections between their personal concerns and their political and cultural concerns. Blake also disagrees with the view of the Young Americans as representatives of a cultural transition from Victorian values of character-building and self-reliance to a consumer ethos emphasizing therapeutic growth within the structures of a corporate capitalist society. He takes these writers seriously as “radical critics of modern culture” and holds that the unifying theme in their work was this “communitarian vision”.¹³ Blake identifies the roots of the Young Americans’ work in their own crisis of personal identity in

11 Ibid.

12 Blake, *Beloved Community*, p. 6.

13 Ibid., pp. 1–2.

connection with Victorianism or the “genteel tradition”, and continues to claim that the “Young Americans’ reflections on their own moral or spiritual predicament in a corporate society prompted their explorations of the conflicts at work in their country and their culture.”

However, this claim might be correct for Van Wyck Brooks and Waldo Frank, but it may be less appropriate for Mumford. If we read Mumford’s work of the 1920s and 1930s, we simply cannot find the personal crisis, though Mumford’s animosity against “the genteel tradition” is obvious. The contribution of Blake is to have identified the Young Americans’ radical critique of the industrial division of labour and its cultural consequences. Hence his claim that in their writings, “calls for cultural renewal were joined with attacks on the factory system, which by undermining craftsmanship had deprived men and women of the cultural resources necessary to participation in a democratic community”.¹⁴ Considering Mumford’s work in the 1930s, however, though Mumford attacked the excessive standardization of the factory as undermining craftsmanship, yet it is not, in his view, the factory system that damaged culture and therefore participation in a democratic community, it is capitalist private ownership and the built environment that deprived people of their rights and opportunities to live a good life. From Mumford’s perspective, Blake is right to say that the ideal of a revitalized American culture could only be realized in a society that “returned aesthetic experiences to the center of everyday life by reversing the industrial division of labor”.¹⁵ And he is very helpful to my analysis when he identifies two distinct intellectual sources of the Young Americans’ critique of capitalism. One is romantic tradition and the other is republican tradition.

The romantic critique of capitalism “found its most coherent expression in the work of the English radicals John Ruskin and William Morris but it had significant parallels in the American Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and Walter Whitman”.¹⁶ Here, potential links can be explored between Mumford’s discussion of Morris

14 Blake, *Beloved Community*, p. 3.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

in *The Story of Utopias* (1922), and the way he puts the main antebellum writers at the centre of “the golden day” of American culture. The second source is a “radicalized type of civic republicanism, the tradition of public humanism reaching back to Aristotle”, coming through Thomas Jefferson and which, “in the late nineteenth century inspired a series of populist attacks on industrial capitalism, most notably in the work of Henry George”.¹⁷

Considering Mumford’s work in *The Golden Day* and *The Culture of Cities*, Blake’s claims might be quite right. In *The Golden Day*, Mumford follows the tradition of the Transcendentalist writers Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, in their critique of industrialism and in *The Culture of Cities*, and, indeed, advocates what we know now as regionalism and the building of the small-scale communities characteristic of republicanism. However, Blake neglects the utopian strand in Mumford, in the tradition of Plato, William Morris, Edward Bellamy and even that of Karl Marx. This strand can be discerned not only in *The Story of Utopias* but, less obviously, in *Technics and Civilization*. Apart from his romantic and republican critique of industrialism and modernization, Mumford has also inherited the tradition of utopian thinking to imagine an ideal alternative society, a republican “Beloved Community” that is different from capitalist industrial society.

Equally incomplete is Blake’s statement that the Young Americans launched a “moral, aesthetic and above all, personal” critique of modern society. “It was the personal failure of modern industrial life – its inability to give meaning and satisfaction to individuals – that was its most damning feature from the perspective of those raised on a republican conception of citizenship and a romantic belief in the authority of the creative imagination.”¹⁸ This statement is neither suitable for Randolph Bourne nor adequate for Mumford. Mumford and Bourne’s critique of capitalist society is not merely moral, aesthetic, personal, but, equally, social and political. Mumford, in his critique of the industrial capitalist society, has

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Blake, *Beloved Community*, pp. 3–4.

always taken the workers' rights into consideration, and always advocates the fair distribution of social wealth and the welfare of the workers' housing in his urban planning.

Blake notices the link between the Young Americans' synthesis of romantic and republican anti-capitalism and the contradiction and tension that the nineteenth-century European social scientists found between the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*; that is, the pre-industrial organic community and the rational industrial capitalist society. Blake, however, does not go into depth and explore how the Young Americans are indebted to their predecessors. Mumford actually is very much indebted to key social theorists, such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, in his view of the declension of rational industrial society from the organic society of the pre-industrial Middle Ages when humans lived a leisurely, aesthetic fulfilment of community life. This question is explored in depth in Chapter Four on *Technics and Civilization*.

Blake thinks that what distinguished Bourne, Brooks, Frank and Mumford in the early years of the twentieth century was their "relentless attempt to find a home for 'the freely speculating mind' in the social practices of a revitalized democratic community".¹⁹ Yet, for Mumford, the attempt is not only to find a home for "the freely speculating mind", but, more importantly, for the fulfilment of the material body. Mumford not only demands the small local communities brought about by a regional and decentralized federation of governments that can allow the individuals to live a free democratic life, but also makes demands for space, for parks, playgrounds, and community centres in urban planning, in order that people can have a public space to rest their tired bodies and have face-to-face communication and participate in social and political democracy. So Mumford's demands are not only spiritual, literary, and cultural, but also materialistic, spatial and geographic. This spatial dimension of Mumford's republicanism is explored in depth in my Chapter Five on *The Culture of Cities* and *The Urban Prospect*.

19 Ibid., p. 4.

In 1996, Robert Wojtowicz's *Lewis Mumford and American Modernism* did a great service to Mumford, and has helped to give him the credit he deserves. Wojtowicz mainly traces Mumford's growth from his youth to a prominent architectural critic and his contribution to American architectural modernism. Though Wojtowicz, in dealing with Mumford, has brought in most of Mumford's books such as *The Story of Utopias* (1922), *Sticks and Stones* (1924), *The Brown Decades* (1931), *The City in History* (1961) and *The Myth of the Machine* (1967) to establish Mumford as an architectural critic, he has mainly confined his attention to architecture and urbanism, and relies for most of his comments on Mumford's life on Mumford's autobiographies *Sketch from Life* (1982) and *Findings and Keepings* (1975) and also upon Donald Miller's *Lewis Mumford: A Life* (1988). The contribution of Wojtowicz is not only in affirming Mumford's historical position in the architectural history but also in detecting the current practical significance of Mumford's contribution. Wojtowicz is especially interested in the contemporary relevance of Mumford's dire warnings about technological warfare, environmental destruction and his concerns about the significance of human element in modern architecture and community planning.

Although Wojtowicz's research is comprehensive, his comments on the influence of Patrick Geddes and Sir Ebenezer Howard, the founder of the British Garden City Movement, are very common issues that Frank G. Novak, Jr and Clive Bush explored in their respective works, *Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes: The Correspondence* (1995) and "The Person in Place: Lewis Mumford, Pioneer of Cultural Criticism" in David Murray's collection, *American Cultural Critics* (1995). Though Wojtowicz has explored Mumford's unpublished papers in the Special Collections of Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania and provided the later researchers with an exhaustive bibliography on Mumford, his comments on Mumford's published works tend to be fairly routine accounts of the content of the book without much analysis. For instance, Wojtowicz's comments and analysis on Mumford's *The Golden Day* are rather descriptive and simplistic: "Mumford identified a pantheon of five writers at the center of this efflorescence: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walter Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville."