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Bülent Senay

PHILOSOPHY OF DIFFERENCE, HYPERMODERNITY, AND THE CITY OF “HAPPINESS” IN AL-FARABI’S “AL-MADINA AL-FADHILA”

The text describes the relationship between the three concepts – Philosophy of Difference, Hypermodernity, and the City of “Happiness”. Starting from the notion of city as space, the author considers how knowledge economy, information and virtual reality shape our perceptions of, and insights into, the meaning of life. Cities are spaces of “cultures” and culture in plural means difference. Identities are constructed within cultural boundaries. Processes of differentiation in constructing identities require a kind of philosophy of difference, as we live in a hypermodern urban space. It is spoken in detail about 21st century urban space as more and more multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious. In such an urban environment, identity constructions need a certain philosophy. This philosophy can only be a philosophy of difference. Difference and differance here points at the idea of living together with “others” who are different than us in culture, worldview and religion. The author comes to the conclusion that our biggest challenge in cities is to make our cities centres of wisdom and happiness through education and moral decision-making processes based on a philosophy of difference and reflexivity.

Keywords: philosophy of difference, hypermodernity, the city of happiness, multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious.

I would like to speak about the relationship between the three concepts that the title of this paper points at, namely, Philosophy of Difference, Hypermodernity, and the City of “Happiness”. I am aware of the fact that it is not an easy task at all, and goes beyond the borders of a paper presentation. In the context of the ‘philosophical problems of information society, and cities in conditions of information society’, this presentation is focused on “City policy and the conditions of information society”.

Starting from the notion of CITY as space, I would like to briefly look into how the speed of “knowledge” and “information” economy creates differences that require a strong philosophical positioning in dealing with the uncertainties and risks of the 21st century’s “hypermodern” urban space. In doing so, I will use two philosophical reference points. I will start with contemporary French-Italian philosopher Paul Virilio’s ideas on the hypermodern city, which are also elaborated in his book City of Panic (Paul Virilio is the writer who coined...
“dromology”), where he speaks about how knowledge economy, information and virtual reality shape our perceptions of, and insights into, the meaning of life. Then this discussion will be evaluated in the context of al-Farabi’s famous theory of “al-Madina al-Fadhila – the Virtuous City”. This brings us to the idea of “philosophy of difference” in the city of the 21st century.

Cities are spaces of differences. Difference is a key concept of philosophy, denoting the process or set of properties by which one entity is distinguished from another within a relational field or given conceptual system. With their differences, cities are large, densely populated human settlements, often with a degree of governmental autonomy from the national state. Today there are even mega-cities with populations above twenty million. Istanbul, where I took my flight from, is over 15 million daytime. Citing Michel Foucault, James Donald argues that the modern state uses two rationalities in maintaining its power: that of state reason, or governance; and that of policing, which classifies and identifies population. Donald writes: ‘The population became the target of both surveillance and welfare’. Cities generally comprise a diversity of peoples and cultures, with highly differentiated modes of life between which there often is only the faintest communication, the greatest indifference and the broadest tolerance, occasionally the bitterest strife, but always the sharpest contrast.

Cities, by definition, are spaces of “cultures” and culture in plural means difference. Identities are constructed within cultural boundaries. Culture is one of the ‘most complicated words in the English language’. Cultural and religious differences define 21st century urban spaces. Culture is where philosophy and practice meet. Philosophy without practice dissolves very easily into air . . . practice without philosophy turns into myopic, mindless practicism. If philosophy were an enterprise of asking questions from birth to death, then we could say, as Jacques Derrida indeed does, that what comes before question is “being”. The very sense of “Being” is something that is lost in the hypermodern city. Hypermodernity refers to any contemporary social process containing a greater and faster than usual amount and speed of various elements relating to the quality or state of modernity. Differences, cultural or otherwise, become either confrontational or lost in such speed, that is, in the hypermodern condition. Hypermodernity is modernity with excessive speed. I shall come back to that later on.

In the Western philosophy, from Leibniz to Kant, the idea of difference was addressed in various ways: Leibniz used the indiscernibility of identicals (principium identatis indiscernibilium) and Kant used Leibniz’s principle in an empirical framework in his Critique of Pure Reason. Much of the philosophical work moved towards structuralist thought in Western academia. Structuralism is a theoretical paradigm in sociology, anthropology, linguistics and semiotics positing that elements of human culture must be understood in terms of their relationship to a larger, overarching system or structure. It works to uncover the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel. Yet, French philosopher Jacques Derrida both extended the scope and profoundly criticised the application of structuralist thought to the processes by which meaning is produced through the interplay of difference in language, and in particular, writing. Whereas structuralist linguistics recognizes that meaning is differential, more structuralist thought, such as narratology, becomes too focused on identifying and producing a typology of the fixed differential structures and binary oppositions at work in any given system. In his work, Derrida sought to show how the differences on which any signifying system depends are not fixed, but get caught up and entangled with each other. Writing itself becomes the prototype of this process of entanglement, and in Of Grammatology (1967) Derrida coined the term diff?rance (a deliberate misspelling of difference) in order to provide a conceptual hook for his thinking on the meaning processes at work within writing/language. This neologism is a clever play on the two meanings of the French word diff?rer: to differ and to defer. Derrida thereby argues that meaning does not arise out of fixed differences between static elements in a structure, but that the meanings produced in language and other signifying systems are always partial, provisional and infinitely deferred along a chain of differing/deferring signifiers. In a similar fashion, Gilles Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition (1968) was an attempt to think about difference as having an ontological privilege over identity, inverting the traditional relationship between the two concepts and implying that identities are only produced through processes of differentiation. This is also a familiar understanding in the Eastern philosophical traditions. There is more emphasis on “being”, that is ontology, in Eastern and Asian philosophy, than on metaphysics. Eastern ontology starts with recognition of diversity and difference.

This is where the contemporary city life becomes a matter of concern. Processes of differentiation in constructing identities require a kind of philosophy of difference, as we live in a hypermodern urban space.

I would like to point out that one of the several challenges that the 21st
century presents to our urban condition is the earlier mentioned hypermodernity. Not modernity, not postmodernity but hypermodernity. Hypermodernity is the type of modernity that can be associated with post-secular and post-rational urban life. In hypermodernity, emotions are important. Identities are also influenced by emotions. Contemporary society is becoming more and more hypermodern. We live in a world at risk, as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens claim. In our hypermodern cultures, the latter half of the twentieth century has been described as an age of flux, uncertainty and rapid social change in parallel to the de-sacralisation of everything in hypermodern setting. (Nasr, 1995; Bauman, 1991; Marwick, 1990). When there is deep uncertainty in urban psychology, it means there is also need for a philosophy of difference.

Uncertainty is very much related to the sense of speed in history and an unmatched level of relativity in social and political life. Uncertainty is about having more unknowns in one’s life than “knowns”. 21st century urban space is more and more multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious. In such an urban environment, identity constructions need a certain philosophy. This philosophy can only be a philosophy of difference. Difference and difference here points at the idea of living together with “others” who are different than us in culture, worldview and religion. This is where I would like to go a little deeper into the idea of speed as speed makes a fundamental impact on our urban lives. Virilio argues that what makes the city “panic” is the fact that technological progress and virtual reality go faster than political reality, and out of political control.

When we speak about speed, we encounter with the question of “relativity” in human life. As Paul Virilio argues in his “dromology”, we live in a society of SPEED and ACCELERATION. Virilio emphasizes the importance of speed in history, and thereby of acceleration, which is also related to speed. According to Virilio, we have become de-territorialized. We’re all going through the gates of relativity. We live it through mobile phones, “live” programmes on TV, telecommunications media, Virtual Reality (VR), cyberspace, video-conferencing, supersonic air travel and so on. We do that through our calendar, time planning, relationships, or even involvement in love affairs. We do that through phone conversations, education, and “tele-learning”. This is how we live “relativity” and have therefore been de-territorialized.

I quote Paul Virilio here: “...what remains in order to interpret our world? Nothing but relativity! Not the physicists” relativity, but our relativity, the relativity of our own lived lives, for which we are responsible, and of which we are the victims, at the same time. Relativity is no longer the exclusive domain of (natural) scientists, it has become the property of all those who live in the modern world.”

According to Virilio’s The Information Bomb we are under the influence of digitised information and communication so much that our identities are torn into pieces. We are in-between ideas and positions all the time. According to Armitage, current hypermodern and globalitarian hypermodern(organ)ization are not merely technological but also social and cultural in character. Hypermodernity lies in the realm of the ‘in-between’. The in-betweenness provides a mental confusion with regard to life. Those who live in hypermodern cities are fearful and confused about their future. This hypermodern analysis is centred on the ‘uncertainty principle’ that connects ‘dromology’, or the logic of speed, to the intensification and complex networking of contemporary organizations and institutions. The hypermodern city is a city of risks, depression and frustration. The reason is what Virilio calls “technological fundamentalism”.

Under the pressure of this urban technological fundamentalism in the setting of cultural and religious diversity/plurality, we can understand that, city also provides a basis for philosophy to be born and shaped as well as for our ethical choices to be made. In order to allow a philosophy of difference to be born, what we need is “reflexivity”, the practical wisdom that is lost in the hypermodern virtual reality. It is through the sense of reflexivity that we can develop a philosophy of differences. What is reflexivity?

We can trace the idea of reflexivity all the way back to the Aristotelian concept of “phronesis” (practical wisdom through VIRTUE by leaders of the “city” and the “state”), which he used in his Nicomachean Ethics. The notion was later developed in a more hermeneutical discussion by al-Farabi in his al-Madina al-Fadila/The Virtuous City (or state) and al-Siyasah al-Madaniyyah/The Political Regime.

In order to understand the idea of reflexivity, we need to understand the idea of reflexive modernity. The earlier mentioned German social philosopher Ulrich Beck believes industrial modernity has reached its limits and is undergoing a period of transformation, moving irreversibly to a new historical epoch which he labels as “reflexive modernity.” Beck, while not the originator of the term ‘reflexive modernisation’, has used it extensively in his writings and has been one of the leading exponents of its use. The idea of reflexive modernisation describes, at its simplest, the notion that we are moving into a third stage of social development within modernity.

Beck has subitled his influential book Risk Society ‘towards a new modernity’, which Paul Virilio defined as hypermodernity. Basically what Beck says is that modernity becomes reflexive, “a theme and a problem for itself”. This “new modernity”, that is, Virilio’s hypermodernity, has
– to solve the human-constructed problems which arise from the development of industrial society;
– to tackle how the risks produced as a consequence of modernity can be everted, minimised, dramatised, or channelled.

And this is what makes it “reflective”. For the purposes of this paper, reflexivity is taken to be a deeper and broader dimension of reflection. It is essentially a conscious attitude of “self-critique and personal quest”. Self-critique and personal quest is possible within a philosophy of difference, which is the basis of the ontological recognition of “differences” and “otherness”.

How can we be reflective enough? If we listen to Virilio, “I feel we have indeed tended to forget everything that’s invisible. In the past, the invisible was present through religion and mythologies. The invisible world was an important element of reality. With the onset of materialism, of the Age of Enlightenment, of the political history of the nineteenth century, the Invisible was, I would say, censored. It signified the old customs; it was an archaic vision. The visible and the material were privileged to the detriment of the invisible, as the deeds of society are not all old customs; it was an archaic vision. The visible and the material were privileged to the detriment of the invisible, as the deeds of society are not all visible.”

Elsewhere, Virilio also says, “One cannot come to grips with the phenomenon of cyberspace without some inking of, or some respect for, metaphysical intelligence.”

This metaphysical intelligence that Virilio is referring to is what this paper calls “philosophy of differences”. A city can be a city of happiness if there is enough reflexivity, and metaphysical intelligence, that is, if it is sensitive about cultural, ethnic, and religious differences among its residents.

I can hear the question that persists here; What is then philosophy of difference in the urban context?

This presentation proposes that the “urban philosophy of difference” should be based on the already mentioned Aristotelian notion of phronesis and al-Farabi’s notion of al-Madinah al-Fadhiha. Phronesis, the practical wisdom of Aristotelian philosophy, interpreted as “al-hikmah al-ammaliyyah” by Muslim philosophers, is concerned with the particulars of the city (Ethika Nikomacheia, VI.8.1141b20-30).

According to Aristotle, phronesis is a reasoned capacity to work toward human ends in life (ibid., VI.5.1140b20). If a society/a city started “lacking reasoned capacity”, “aql and irfan”, we would end up living with less or no happiness. Both intellectual and moral virtues are involved in a happy life. In order to attain the knowledge of this happiness, practical wisdom is necessary (ibid., VI.13.1144b30).

This is exactly what Farabi spoke of too. And today Ulrich Beck and Charles Taylor knowingly or unknowingly continue arguing for the same practical wisdom through the idea of reflexivity. Merging Plato’s “Republic” with Aristotle’s “Polis”, 1000 years ago Farabi spoke of a lack of “aql”/reasoned capacity, which is exactly what Ulrich Beck says today: there is not enough reason and practical wisdom in the city. Cities thus become “ignorant cities”, despite the information technology, or as Paul Virilio says, technological fundamentalism.

According to Farabi, lack of enough “reasoned capacity” creates a society of JAHILIYYAH / ignorance. Lack of “reasoned capacity” means lack of reflexivity. Reflexivity is necessary for an urban society with more happiness and less fear of risks. This is what Descartes (in Discourse on the Method and in Meditations on First Philosophy) was also talking about when he banished ignorance; he also discarded awareness of ignorance. We do not know if Descartes ever read al-Farabi’s “Virtuous City” (al-Madina al-Fadila) or “Politics of the City” (as-Siyasat al-Madaniyyah), but we do know that Farabi, presented us the dangers of risk in the city when he spoke about “ignorance of the city”, and also about “ignorant cities” long before Descartes.

According to al-Farabi, there are ignorant cities. The ignorant city misses the right path through faultly judgment. The ignorant city is the city whose inhabitants do not know true happiness and the thought of it never occurs to them. Happiness for them is the total of bodily health, wealth, enjoyment of pleasures, freedom to follow one’s desires and being held in honour and esteem. This is also what Paul Virilio, Ulrich Beck, Charles Taylor and others point at. What Paul Virilio calls technological fundamentalism is perhaps the leading source of the lack of happiness in the city.

For Al-Farabi, happiness is the highest degree of human perfection. Once we attain happiness, we are in need of nothing else to accompany it. Just like the rank, happiness is the preferred good, the greatest and the most perfect end that man has ever desired. Al-Farabi’s conclusion was that, we attain happiness only when we come to possess the noble dispositions through the discipline of philosophy; and philosophy comes about through excellent discernment; and excellent discernment comes about through potentiality of the mind to perceive what is correct; and the potentiality of the mind belongs to us prior to all of this. Al-Farabi emphasized that it is only through a city that a person achieves happiness. This is through actions which requires the use of the body and senses; through accidents of the soul such as appetite, pleasure, joy, anger, fear, desire, mercy, jealousy and other feelings; and through discernment by use of the mind.

At the end of the day, all what al-Farabi talks about is a balance between “being happy” and “making happy”. Being happy is about “tahseel as-
saadat“(obtaining happiness - is“aad) for yourself whereas “making happy”(ta“seed) is related to “as-siyasa al-madaniyyah”, that is, city politics based on metaphysical intelligence and philosophy of difference.

Conclusion

There is no conclusion. It is a thought in process I wanted to share with you. Cities are “threshold”s for challenges. Threshold means “a point of entry or something which marks the start or end of something”. Our biggest challenge in cities is to make our cities thresholds/centres of wisdom and happiness through education and moral decision-making processes based on a philosophy of difference and reflexivity. We need to bring ethics and wisdom back into our Urban Space. What we need then is a Sophia-polis / City of Wisdom / real City, not a Techno-polis only. As Paul Virilio says, we need metaphysical intelligence for happy cities, that is what this paper calls “philosophy/ethics of differences”. A city can be a city of happiness, in the sense al-Farabi elaborated, if there is enough reflexivity, and metaphysical intelligence, that is, if it is sensitive about cultural, ethnic, and religious differences among its residents.

Footnotes

7Armitage, J. Ibid., p.36.
8Armitage, J. Ibid., p. 79.
Філософія різниці, гіпермодернізм і гіпермодернізм у місті

У статті аналізується проблема зростання впливу машини та техніки на суспільство та людину. Вивчається нова форма організації простору, яку М. Бердяєв називає «автомато-людство» або «машино-людство». Філософ наголошує на тому, що загроза механізації, автоматизму є великою небезпекою, яку зазнає людина. Разом із машинизацією суспільства та життя починає змінюватися і сама людина. Вона вже не уявляє себе без технічних приладів, чітко сконструйованих способів життя та побудови соціокультурного простору. Знайшовшись у межах міста, людина відчуває себе залежною від нього, людина вкорінюється у ритм життя міста та починає змінюватися й сама. Таким чином, формується та відбувається криза у свідомості людини.

Ключові слова: машинна, «машино-людство», суспільство, творчість, людина, криза, місто, дух, культура, свобода, М. Бердяєв.