

A Pedestrian Thinker

Sajay Samuel & Samar Farage

Confronted by the writings of Jean Robert, one experiences, or rather, senses the possibility of the derailment of one's thinking. It is as if, at first, the reader is invited to sample a pleasing smorgasbord of ideas and historical curiosities — the Greek goddess Hestia appears there, Einstein makes a showing here. In one essay, a painting by Turner is proposed as a doorway to understanding the first experience of the railway journey. In another essay, a proportion is set up so that the world of orality is to historical domesticity as literacy is to planned cities. There are some seventeen papers collected here, some published but most unpublished, arranged under broad themes — Architectural Theory, Space, Speed, and Energy— which though distinct are related. Beguiled by these riches on offer, a reader could be forgiven for skimming along the surface of his writings. Yet, when the reader carefully reads these texts, they would pose a challenge, a threat, and an invitation. These essays challenge what we take-for-granted, they threaten our self-understanding, they dare us to think afresh, which is the only kind of intellectual effort worth pursuing. The reader is then impelled to make that exhilarating and perhaps dizzying effort to discover what, if anything, holds these essays together, to uncover the red thread that runs through these writings, to identify the nerve center animating the thought in motion.

We came to know Jean Robert between 1985-1995 during his sojourns at Penn State University. He was then a member of the itinerant group of thinkers and scholars that gathered around Ivan Illich. In one respect, little has changed about Jean in the 25 odd years we have

known him. The shock of white hair atop a ruddy face marked by piercing blue eyes, the lean frame that could unfurl to an imposing height, and above all the inquisitive and fiery intellect devoted to recovering the past as a foreign country. Against the grain of a powerful prejudice to legitimize the present by “retro-projecting” (a term due to Jean) it into the past, Jean insists on tracing the fractures between now and then. This insistence on unearthing the discontinuity of the present is not born of a scholar’s conceit. Nor does it reflect the antiquarian’s curiosity. Instead, Jean suggests there is no better way to be freed of one’s mental prisons than to realize how its bars were formed. Indeed, even the choice of language in which Jean wrote these essays is an element in that cultivated attitude of estrangement. He speaks many languages fluently, but perhaps is most comfortable writing in French or German. Yet, he wrote these pages in English, to both mark the truth of his distance from the historical realities he writes about and to introduce the reader to that frisson of strangeness which, at least on occasion, may require him to sound the texts out loud.

Perhaps this attitude of foreignness to the present was formed when Jean was, as a fresh graduate of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in the 1960s, involved in designing a bank in Zurich. Or equally when a few years later he was engaged with what then passed for an incipient “urban planning” in Amsterdam. In any case, the post war reconstruction of Europe also meant the definitive erasure of the historically lived materiality of the European city. A man of his acute sensitivities could not have been unaffected by the sprawling modernist dreamscape that was reshaping Europe. But perhaps more poignant must have been the erasure of collective memory, the drying up of the fount of remembrances that once connected the past to the present. The war did not only ruin the physical city; it also obliterated the remembered city.

Some men are lead to the foreignness of the past precisely because they don’t feel at home in the present. Is it any wonder that Jean’s thoughts on architecture run parallel to and feed off the

works of Richard Sennett (*Flesh and Stone: The Body and City in Western Civilization*), Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*) and, preeminently, Joseph Rywker (*On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of a Town*). The first series of essays in this collection on architectural theory is a remarkable investigation into the coincidence of material culture and modes of perception. But above all, they present a caution to the excesses of an architectural theory that now programs daily life within computer-generated spaces. These essays alert the reader to the profound denigration of man who is coded into a built environment whose first reality is virtual.

In the mid-sixties, working as a draughtsman in an architectural firm in Amsterdam — an Amsterdam suffering the inferiority complex of being pedestrian and desperately wanting to modernize — exposed Jean to the derangement of the modern sensibility. A city full of cars and devoid of pedestrians, a city filled with the roar of buses but emptied of swish of bicycles, is what planners and politicians then wanted. The contrast with the adobe huts and smelly streets of Mexico where he ended up in the early 1970s could not be more stark. And yet, that contrast afforded him a glimpse into the chasm between the present and the past.

What are the assumptions, the cultural warps and wefts, that constitute the foundations of how we think? What are these constructs called *space* and *speed*? Are these unhistorical facts — space as the three-dimensional void to be filled and speed as the ratio of distance to time — or do they belong to a specific historical epoch? The set of essays contrasting the plenitude of place against the void of space is not only a trenchant recovery of a historical truth. It is also a call to wakefulness. The seemingly inexorable metastasis of designed spaces, of planned cityscapes (one need only think of China where some “cities” are built even before people live there) is anchored in the void of space. Spaces, argues Jean, are not habitable as are places. We are now led, as in a dream, into the world of non-places imagined by the planners and architects. In a similar vein, he

uncovers the historicity of speed. “Speed” is the hidden fuel that powers a cityscape built around bullet trains, cars, and information superhighways. Along the vector of “Speed” a pedestrian can be compared to a car driver, a mule to a Maserati. In a world built for speed, what is visible is sundered from what is physically possible. The view from the airplane or from behind the windshield of a speeding car is nothing that can be grasped. As Jean says, “speed breaks the overlapping of the visible world with my motor projects.”

The two essays on energy, while the shortest in total pages, are perhaps the most potent of them all. After all, is not “energy” at the center of our collective predicament in the so-called age of the Anthropocene? Industrial man has reshaped his conditions of existence by the use of fossil fuels. And now, clean energy, electric cars, Rio agreements, and Paris accords are some of the ways that earnest folk attempt to forestall the hour of our destruction. Jean spent a great many hours in the archives of the University of Marburg in Germany to unearth the writings of such forgotten thinkers as Sergei Podolinsky. It is by now well-established that neoclassical economics is but an inadequate copy of 19th century energetics. Yet, the effort to construct economics as a physics of society continues apace. Remarkably, what Jean Robert shows is that mid-19th century physics itself must be understood as a naturalization of economics. That is, the queen of the natural sciences was built on the principle of scarcity (think of the second law of thermodynamics), which is but a figment of economics. But more pertinently, a different understanding of “energy,” as for instance proposed by Podolinsky, could have led to a social geography scaled to man’s capacities. At the scale where man is the measure of all things, the Anthropocene could not have come into being. Nothing less than this radical insight lies at the center of these two essays on energy.

Very recently, the physicist Geoffrey West published a widely acclaimed book titled

Scale.¹ In it he reports some of his work with Dirk Helbing who is now at the very same ETH that Jean graduated from more than 40 years ago! What these scientists mean by scale is the quantitative relationship between city size and other characteristics of a city. For instance, there appears to be stable quantitative relation between the number of gas stations and city size measured in population. Regardless of where in the world these cities are, all of them exhibit a systematic economy of scale: the larger the city, the less it needs per capita of infrastructure — pipes, roads, wires, and gas stations — and the more it produces of so called socioeconomic quantities — number of restaurants, professionals, patents and...crimes!

Such desiccated calculations of power laws are certainly not what Jean means by scale when he writes of Podolinsky's "use of the energy concept as a **scale** to evaluate and measure human labor..." (emphasis in original). Here, scale refers to the objective proportion between the human body and its capacities and the built world. As such, cities built to scale would be those that are able to carry the imprints of its inhabitants, those that are shaped by the daily activities of its inhabitants, those that express the living power of its residents. Such cities would not be enmeshed in the circuits of production, distribution and consumption that now span the earth. Instead, cities scaled to the living power of its citizens would reflect their efforts to grow what they eat, to build where they live, and their search to find the appropriate relation or scale between what they want and what they can do.

For over five hundred years, many have fought the war waged against their subsisting. The expropriation of the commons is perhaps also the best metaphor of the continued stratagem of power to subdue and harness the essentially indeterminate capacities of the human animal. Historians — from E.P Thompson and Eric Wolf to Mike Davis — have recorded the diverse forms that the uprisings of peasants and poets have taken to combat being managed from afar.

¹ Geoffrey West, 2017. *Scale: The Universal Laws of Growth, Innovation and Sustainability in Organisms, Economies, Cities, and Companies*. (London: W&N publishers).

More recently, such struggles against the dispossession of land and labor has prompted a new style of politics: not a politics of office holders, of the articulation of power, of the glorification of laws and rights. Instead, like Jean and the Zapatistas — with whom he thinks and works — these fighters partake of a politics of presence, of attention, of forging in the crucible of mutual presence, a “we” that then constitutes the “you” and “me.” That the forgoing could sound mystical to some ears only underlines the extent to which the contemporary mind has been systematically trained to confuse the completely virtual (“friends” on Facebook) for the extremely concrete.

We began this introduction by asking if any principle or idea or notion holds these essays together. We now have a tentative answer: Jean Robert is a pedestrian thinker. In English, the word pedestrian appears first as an adjective (1619) and only then as a noun (1791). The adjective *pedestrian* meant then, what it does now — dull, ordinary, slow. It was first used to describe styles of writing — pedestrian writing was prosaic and ponderous, perhaps in contrast to an “equine” style of writing — which was presumably lighter and more exciting. After all, in the everyday experience of the early 17th century, only horses moved faster than people. The noun — pedestrian — refers to the one who walks or even runs. In either case, the pedestrian is a biped whose feet have not fallen into desuetude. We, English speakers, denigrate pedestrians for being slow and backward, we mock pedestrians for being pedestrian. Our denigration marks the extent to which we have been lifted off our feet. Our mockery reinforces the tar and rail roads that separate the ground from our feet. Thinking with Jean Robert requires nothing less from us than letting the scales fall away from our eyes. To read Jean Robert properly and with propriety demands that we shed the half-millennium long prejudice against being pedestrian.