

C H A P T E R T W O

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A WALKER IN
CITY JOURNAL

LET'S PULL A BACK ISSUE of the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal* off the shelf—say, the one from Autumn 2000. The first thing you notice is how attractive it is. *City Journal* is the most beautiful magazine in the world that regularly contains the phrase “housing vouchers.” It features thick, luxurious paper, the kind you would get if you were shopping for paper on Madison Avenue. The typeface is classical and bold, like the Empire State Building. Full pages are frequently devoted to photographs, something nearly unheard-of in a policy magazine, and lots of thought has clearly gone into each page's layout, design, and presentation.

There is a puritanical notion in some of the idea community that such glossy presentation is somehow superficial—that what matters are the facts, arguments, and conclusions. But this is a magazine about cities, and what are cities these days but factories for producing stimulation?

Living in a city is a pain. There are lines for movies and restaurants. There's traffic everywhere. But the payoff of city life is that it presents

you with such a series of stimulating experiences that it arouses new thoughts and ideas. City living is a sensual experience. And so: *City Journal* is a sensual magazine. It is the sort of magazine put together by the sort of people who love cities.

Some policy experts believe that cities will no longer be the main engines of economic growth in this country. That view is surely right. Far more jobs get created in the suburbs than in the cities these days. Ninety percent of the office space built in the 1990s went up in the suburbs, not in the cities. There are now five times as many companies headquartered in Santa Clara County, outside of San Francisco, for example, than in the city of San Francisco itself.

But cities still have a vital, if more modest, role. They will still be the epicenters for the creative and the adventurous. They will still be the foundries of ideas, design, culture, and the arts. As people get richer, they want to buy goods that not only serve some sort of utilitarian function; they want to buy goods that say things about who they are and who they want to become. It is city dwellers who will quite often come up with the designs and sensibilities that excite and inspire the imagination, and so in this way, too, the magazine's appearance is a message about what cities should be.

The look of the magazine is also a persuasive device. There may be some people who base their political opinions on the cold, rationalistic weighing of the competing arguments, but I have never met such a person. Most people find themselves drawn to liberalism or conservatism or any other belief system out of a more instinctive sense that this worldview, these values, these people are attractive, admirable, and right. Happiness has convinced more people than statistics.

Walter Bagehot understood this truth when he wrote in 1876: "Talk of the ways of spreading a wholesome Conservatism throughout this country: give painful lectures, distribute weary tracts (and perhaps it is just as well—you may be able to give an argumentative answer to a few objections, you may diffuse a distinct notion of the dignified dullness of politics); but as far as communicating and establishing your creed are concerned—try a little pleasure. The way to keep up old customs is, to

enjoy old customs; the way to be satisfied with the present state of things is, to enjoy that state of things. Over the 'Cavalier' mind this world passes with a thrill of delight; there is an exultation in a daily event, zest in the 'regular thing,' joy at an old feast."

Bagehot, the intellectual founder of *The Economist*, would have loved *City Journal*, not only for its Anglophilia and its commitment to economic freedom and development, but for the exultation, zest, and joy evident in its design and feel.

Optimistic Urbanists

Enough of mere appearance. Let's read the words. For those looking for arguments, there are plenty of them. The first feature in the Autumn 2000 issue, which we have pulled randomly off the shelf (and it could be any issue right through to the present, since the magazine is remarkably consistent in quality), is the letter from the editor, called "In Prospect." In this issue, editor Myron Magnet is in quintessential form. He cites the great institutions that earlier generations of New Yorkers built for their city, including the Frick Museum and the 42nd Street library. Then he notes: "How uplifting it would be to show that we can still do it—that we can match the achievements of the generous benefactors on whose legacy we have lived for so long."

If you had to pick one phrase to summarize the cast of mind that informs *City Journal*, it would be, "We can still do it." The whole magazine bases itself on the idea that while some may have concluded in the 1970s and 1980s that cities are ungovernable, they were wrong. There is absolutely no need, the writers assert, simply to learn to live with certain problems as inevitable by-products of urban life. On the contrary, it's possible to reduce crime dramatically. It's possible to reduce child poverty dramatically. It's possible to reduce joblessness dramatically. It's possible to reduce illegitimacy dramatically. Fatalism is never justified.

When the magazine started more than a decade ago, this optimism was more faith than reality. Furthermore, it would have been natural for conservatives, a tiny minority in New York policymaking circles, to feel

sour, alienated, and contemptuous. But the people who contribute to this magazine somehow managed to preserve their love affair with the cities even while urban leaders scorned everything they stood for. And in the past few years, we have seen a renaissance of cities, in part because of the influence of the ideas promulgated in this magazine (and in the many books compiled from its articles and in the adaptations of those articles that often appear in major newspapers and on websites). Now optimism, along with the intellectual style it enhances, seems utterly realistic.

As Magnet wrote in 2000, “Pulsating with opportunity, cities constantly renew themselves by attracting the talented and enterprising from everywhere else, however distant or foreign. Above all, cities are realms of freedom.” Contemplate the sensibility that informs that passage. It’s the sensibility of a young person just arrived in the city and dazzled by all that might happen there. I think of Gene Kelly in the “Gotta Dance” number in *Singin’ in the Rain*. And while Magnet is no Gene Kelly (though I have never seen him dance), he still possesses that wide-eyed sense of possibility.

He also, it should be said, possesses the hopefulness of the immigrant. Many of the best pieces in *City Journal* have been about immigrants—I’m thinking of a 1995 piece that Heather Mac Donald wrote, “Why Koreans Succeed,” and Steven Malanga’s 2002 essay “Minority Business Triumphs in New York,” among others—precisely because the striving immigrant spirit is so in tune with the magazine’s.

Beautiful Buildings

Continuing our stroll through the Autumn 2000 issue, we come across a long series of visions of what a new Lincoln Center might look like. Believing that it’s time to tear down and replace the current Lincoln Center, the editors asked several important neoclassic architects to propose alternative plans. The magazine has emerged as an important champion of neoclassic architecture, which at first seems unpredictable for a journal whose primary mission has been to investigate issues like education, housing, and welfare reform. But architecture is not out of place. Wheth-

er it is in building structures or building social programs, the writers in this magazine operate in a revivalist mode. There was a body of inherited wisdom, they argue in sphere after sphere, which, in the period after World War II, was forsaken—with disastrous effects.

For centuries, architects found that they could adapt the classical idiom to fit their own times. And then suddenly, poof! That insight was forgotten. Penn Station was torn down and glass boxes started going up, with empty plazas and windblown streetscapes. Or else, it was plop after plop of public housing monstrosities. In just the same way, rulers and civic leaders for centuries understood certain truths about family structure, poverty, character, and the debilitating affects of dependency. And poof! Those truths were discredited.

Barely an issue goes by in which there isn't an argument pointing out that despite all our condescension, the Victorians, or Edwardians, or even the New Dealers understood things that we must now relearn. In architecture, the revivalist cause is still beleaguered, as the magazine's noble (but probably doomed) effort to get New Yorkers to rethink what should go up on the World Trade Center site makes clear. As the comprehensive Autumn 2001 issue, commissioned as a response to September 11, shows, the neoclassicists want to restore the traditional New York street-and-store pattern to the site. The current plans call for plopping another suburban/Disney-style mall onto the now-vacant ground.

Policy Realism

But in some other areas, the revival is proceeding apace. As we promenade further into the issue, we find an essay by Lisa Graham Keegan, then the revolutionary head of the public schools in the state of Arizona. This is another trademark *City Journal* feature: a concrete “How To” essay by an actual public policy practitioner.

Lisa Graham Keegan is one of the most important education reformers in the country today, and this essay illustrates why. She describes her efforts to pioneer charter schools in Arizona. She also clashes with Republican orthodoxy. It is important to spend the same amount of money

on each student in a state, she argues, and the way to do that is to strap the dollars to the child, wherever he or she goes. This is egalitarianism in practice. Keegan is also honest. Many charter schools fail, she acknowledges. She had to close a dozen in Arizona. Moreover, while there are some signs that the charter schools outperform public schools, the advantage—so far anyway—is not by a large margin.

Keegan is an ardent advocate of reform, but the essay bears none of the marks of the ideologue. She is realistic and has her eyes open. In this way, *City Journal* has benefited from the social policy tone established by Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Glazer in *The Public Interest*: champion reform, but be realistic, flexible, and pragmatic. *City Journal* has been an aggressive advocate of choice in education. Sol Stern has investigated the issue from all angles (his book, *Breaking Free*, grew out of his excellent reporting for the magazine). But even vouchers, the most radical reform idea, will not transform schools for kids who come from broken homes where there is nobody at the kitchen table to reinforce the school's good work.

The fact is, social policy is complicated. The most promising approaches and individuals sometimes go nowhere. In 1999, Fred Siegel and Kay S. Hymowitz wrote an influential piece entitled “Why Did Ed Rendell Fizzle Out?” trying to figure out why the once promising reform administration of the former Philadelphia mayor stagnated in its final years. On the other hand, sometimes unpromising figures end up surprising you. Heather Mac Donald wrote a 1999 piece, “Jerry Brown’s No-Nonsense New Age for Oakland,” on the impressive things the former Governor Moonbeam was accomplishing in his city.

If you have conservative leanings in New York City, you have one of two choices. You can retreat to your little ghetto and remind yourself how stupid everyone around you is. Or you can engage with the world, looking for wisdom even among people who might disagree with you most of the time. *City Journal* has always taken the latter approach. That is a triumph of temperament as well as of intellect.

Reporting the World

Moving along in our stroll through our randomly chosen issue, we come across an essay by Heather Mac Donald on the New York Police Academy. The magazine has built itself around a half dozen or so key writers: Mac Donald, Kay Hymowitz, Sol Stern, Steven Malanga, Brian Anderson (Magnet's deputy), Theodore Dalrymple, and others.

I confess that Mac Donald is my favorite. That's not to slight the others because Mac Donald is just about my favorite journalist working in America today. She goes where it has not occurred to others to go. She is fearless. She is persuasive, observant, and she topples your notions of the way the world is. If you ever needed proof that the American media are blinkered, complacent, and biased, just consider the fact that Heather Mac Donald is not, on a weekly basis, lionized and celebrated as one of the pioneering reporters and muckrakers in America today.

The particular piece of reportage in this back issue takes us inside the police academy. There are many reports on how soldiers are trained, but how many times have you read a piece on how cops, who touch our lives directly, are trained? When on those rare occasions I am pulled over to the side of the highway for going a teensy bit over the speed limit, it has occurred to me that state troopers all have that same cool and imposing manner. But how do they get it? Why do cops behave the way they do? It transpires that this manner is taught, not simply absorbed. "It's not about us," one of the police academy instructors tells his cadets. "You are not the message. You put someone in handcuffs because they've broken the law, not because you're the police."

In the year leading up to September 11, 2001, the New York police were under assault for being brutal racists. Mac Donald was doing a series of pieces on the realities of police work, demonstrating that in fact the NYPD was doing an excellent job. The number of civilian complaints about police brutality had declined rapidly. After 9/11, the cops became heroes for everybody, but the truth was there all along. Mac Donald's essays on policing have been collected in a book, *Are Cops Racist?* In recent

articles, she has been doing for homeland security what she did for policing: using old-fashioned reporting to get at the truth.

A Unique Team

Mac Donald's writing is compelling, but she is not the only outsize personality in the magazine's pages. The magazine is full of people who really could be characters in somebody's novel. Editor Myron Magnet walks around twenty-first-century New York wearing mutton chops; I've always suspected that he changed his name from Seymour Friedberg or something because Myron Magnet just seems more Dickensian. Kay Hymowitz writes on that trickiest of subjects, social manners, with a piercing style. Theodore Dalrymple writes high—one critic calls him a "writer of genius"—but he lives low, working as a prison doctor in England. Victor Davis Hanson is a farmer in Fresno who writes about... well...everything (and is one of Dick Cheney's favorite authors). Sol Stern is a recovering radical—in fact, he was once an editor of *Ramparts*, a house organ of the sixties student Left. Stefan Kanfer is a former editor at *Time* with best-selling biographies of Groucho Marx and Lucille Ball to his credit. There is something distinct about each of these individuals, and though I don't know many of them, I can imagine a late-night party with the cast of *City Journal*—somebody pulling you aside to give you a 25-minute disquisition on the genius of Al Hirschfeld, somebody else interrupting with a scathing account of the ruination of another school system, somebody else telling an uplifting story of a former crack dealer who now runs a sports league, somebody else describing the revolution in conservative media.

If you want normal people, go to suburbia. If you want idiosyncratic people who talk too much and argue too loudly, move to the city.

We're now deep into that Autumn 2000 issue of the magazine, into the back-of-the-book section called "Urbanities." It should be clear by now that *City Journal* is all about enjoying the city, and here is where the editors let their taste buds out for a romp. This particular issue has an analysis of the *New York Times Book Review* and a short biography of Horatio

Alger. (Did you know that Alger was first a parson who had to quit the ministry after he was caught molesting boys?) Other issues may include essays on sexologists or tabloids, Cole Porter or tailcoats, *Sex and the City* or the great San Francisco fire of 1906.

The City's Future?

As you put down the issue, a troubling question occurs: Does this magazine, and the revivalist mode it represents, have a future? Many of the ideas expressed in these pages are or have been given the label “conservative.” Indeed, this magazine is one of the epicenters of compassionate conservatism that George W. Bush said he would champion during the 2000 campaign.

But how much do conservatives really care about the cities and the problems addressed in these pages? The Republican Party is growing more and more exurban and rural. Will governing Republicans take the time to champion these policies? On the other hand, will the Democratic elites pick up the reform mantle? Certainly, the Democrats are interested in urban issues, but the party is also tied down by its links to certain interest groups, such as the teachers' unions. Far from embracing the reform mantle, the party has become an ardent defender of the status quo.

A few years ago, you could point to a whole group of reform-minded administrations—Giuliani, Riordan, Rendell (it seemed), Daley, Norquist, Engler, Keegan, and, in some ways, Clinton and Bush. But my sense is that both parties have in the past year or so settled back into their own orthodoxies. The anti-reform forces have demonstrated how powerful and entrenched they are.

The folks at *City Journal*, as I have mentioned, are congenital optimists. I suspect that it will take a new burst of political energy to build momentum for their cause.