

## Comparing Urban Ethoses

Response to Alexander Tzonis' Review

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**Responding to Alexander Tzonis' review of *Spirit of the Cities*, the book on urban ethoses he wrote with Avner de-Shalit, Daniel A. Bell defends their way of doing political theory and some of their unconventional qualitative methods of exploring the experience of urban life.**

Confucius famously said: "In strolling in the company of just two other people, I am bound to find a teacher" (*The Analects*, 7.22). The point is that we should make a life-time commitment to self-improvement, and we should always be open to the possibility of learning new things from other people. In the same vein, we should read books and articles with the aim of learning something new. So I was disappointed when I first read Professor Tzonis's review of *Spirit of Cities*. My first reaction was that Professor Tzonis didn't understand the book, perhaps because he didn't read it closely. Upon further reflection, however I realize that I can learn something from his review. But first, let me clarify what we actually say in the book. Mutual learning can only take place on a foundation of mutual understanding.

As a matter of methodology, we do not "vehemently reject the "positivist" academic ways of political science and papers." We ourselves write academic papers and we think it's a perfectly legitimate way of doing things. In the introduction, we explicitly say: "In principle, we should do our best to use 'hard' science to write about values and cities." We do make use of public opinion polls and values survey data.

The problem is that most surveys compare countries, not cities (hence, there is more data on Singapore, the only city-state in the book). Several chapters also draw on accounts of city planners who explain what values motivated what they did. And we suggest other ways of doing more scientific research, such as comparing the distribution of resources in city budgets.

But we also make a case for more qualitative methods of research. Personal experience matters: if I have lived in a city for twenty years, I am likely to have a good sense of its dominant ethos, or “habits of the heart”. We scheduled interviews with people of different classes, ethnic groups, and genders in different cities: we tried to find out if they argue about similar things (e.g., religion in Jerusalem, language in Montreal, national-level politics in Beijing) and what they say about those things. Finally, we made use of the strolling method: random strolls and chats with strangers can shape and refine hypotheses about the ethos of a city, especially cities we know less from personal experience.

In short, our aim is most certainly not to produce “fiction (almost dreamlike)”; in fact, we use those words (on page 17) to describe Italo Calvino’s novel *Invisible Cities*, not our own method! We make use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, although we relied more on the latter because there is not much quantitative data available that sheds light on our research question. We’d be thrilled if social scientists can help with more objective tests and studies in the future.

Professor Tzonis also seems to have misunderstood our advice about how to read the book. He claims “the authors advised their readers to go through the text without necessarily following the book’s sequence” and he seems to have taken it to mean that we endorse random skimming of the book. But our point is that while the chapters need not be read in order, we certainly hope that individual chapters will be read in order. The reason is that each chapter has an *argument*. For example, the point of the Jerusalem chapter is not to make the banal case that people argue about religion;

rather, my co-author argues for an interpretation of religion that is gentle and spiritual and that respects people rather than things. Avner argues that this account of religion is reflected in the lifestyles of many Jerusalemites, but he also recognizes that it's an uphill struggle to combat more dogmatic and institutionalized forms of religion. The chapter on Montreal is more optimistic, because the morally defensible way of thinking about the value of language has slowly become the mainstream way of thinking and living. The chapter on Hong Kong argues for an interpretation of materialism that is based on concern for the well-being on others and that's the context for the discussion about vigils to commemorate the victims of the June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989 massacre. In short, we try to argue for a particular *interpretation* of an ethos in each chapter, one that can be defended from a moral point of view.

It's odd that Professor Tzonis seems not to have noticed our mode of argumentation (we did try to summarize the main argument of each chapter in the introduction and at the start of each chapter). We discuss stories and impressions in the context of an argument about what the ethos is and what a morally defensible interpretation of that ethos should be. Hence, if Professor Tzonis wants to challenge our argument, it does not suffice to just point to different experiences he may have had in each city (in fact, some of his examples support our arguments: he claims that he was interrogated about his political views when he applied for a teaching position in Montreal which is not surprising given that he taught there at the height of the language wars in 1970-71; he taught in Singapore in 2006-07 and he wasn't interrogated which is not surprising because, as noted in the Singapore chapter, things have lightened up there since the early 1990s). To challenge our argument, he would need to write a historically informed account of a different ethos supported by quantitative and qualitative methods. Or else he can criticize our view that there is an ethos by drawing on quantitative and qualitative methods without providing an alternative account of a different ethos, that's fine too.

In terms of our motivation, Professor Tzonis is incorrect to claim that our aim

“was simply to write a “story” without any political agenda.” We are political theorists and we are explicitly concerned with normative issues, so yes, we do have a political agenda, or more precisely, a moral agenda. It is not a contradiction to note that we hope cities with an ethos can counter the homogenization of globalization; in fact, such an agenda inspires our project. We have other agendas too. We also hope that a strong city identity (what we call “civicism”) can counter the excesses of nationalism: most people have a need for community grounded in particularity (few of us are attached to our local McDonald’s), and we think it’s less dangerous for city-zens to feel attached to cities than countries. We also think that cities with an ethos can accomplish political goals that are harder to achieve at the level of the state: for example, “green” cities like Hangzhou and Portland take pride in their environmental ethos and go far beyond what the state can do to combat global warming. And we think a city’s ethos can inspire social and political theorizing of global importance.

In short, we are most certainly not “relativists”. But we do think – as we argue in the introduction – that we should respect the ethos of a city, so long as it does not involve the violation of basic human rights. Hence, Professor Tzonis is wrong to claim that we prefer the ethos of New York to that of Singapore and that “New York is a prototype which can be used to improve Singapore.” The main ethos of Singapore is of course nation-building, and we try to explain the historical origin of that ethos and its development till the present day. We “pass judgment” on this ethos not to criticize the ethos itself, but rather to show how the policies of the government have served to undermine the cause of nation-building. And we end on an optimistic note, showing that Singaporeans have nonetheless developed a strong sense of national identity. The point of the argument is not that Singapore should adopt a New York ethos of individual ambition instead of an ethos of nation-building, but rather to suggest more effective and morally desirable ways of realizing the ethos of nation-building.

So what did I learn from this review? Professor Tzonis’s point about an implicit ranking of ethoses is not correct, but maybe we should have said more about

the potential benefits of comparing ethos of different cities. Singapore could perhaps learn from the New York ethos because New York-style ambition is underpinned by a strong sense of community that manifests itself in times of crisis; there may be lessons for nation-building in Singapore. And maybe there are opportunities for mutual learning in times of transition, when an ethos is not clearly defined or when competing ethos are dueling for dominance. This is an area of potentially fruitful research and I thank Professor Tzonis for (inadvertently) bringing it to my attention.

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