

Cities are Living and Organic Beings: The Ontological Implications of the Modern People's City

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Abstract: *“Cities are living and organic beings” constitutes an ontological definition of the essence of the city. Grounded in Marx’s historical materialism, an examination of the ontological implications of this proposition reveals three theoretical dimensions: homology, differentiation, and people-centeredness. In this way, it transcends the functionalist, instrumentalist view of the city prevalent in Western urban theory, establishes a philosophical position that identifies people-centeredness as the ultimate source of urban vitality, and provides a theoretical foundation for the construction of the modern people’s city.*

Keywords: Urban living organism, Ontology, Marxist urban theory, People-centeredness.

1. Introduction

“Cities are living organisms and organic entities” is a core judgment in Xi Jinping’s important expositions on urban work. At first glance, it appears to be a figurative metaphor. However, when examined within the problematic field of urban philosophy, it addresses precisely the most fundamental question of urban theory: What essentially is a city?

Western urban studies have long been dominated by the functionalist paradigm. The city is reduced to a “machine” — a container for production activities; defined as a “market” — a site for exchange; or understood as a “growth machine” — a tool for capital accumulation. While these metaphors each possess explanatory power, they share a fundamental flaw: all regard the city as an inanimate, arbitrarily disassemblable instrumental entity. Even scholars such as Howard, Geddes, and Saarinen, who described cities as “organisms,” largely confined their usage to biological analogy — the city’s “organicity” was interpreted as structural similarity to biological organisms, rather than an inherent attribute of the city itself. The functionalist metaphor framework fails to answer a crucial question: Why is a city “alive”? Where does its vitality originate? In what sense does the proposition “the city is a living organism” transcend the above understandings? Answering this requires returning to the intellectual lineage of Marxist urban theory.

Marxist urban theory provides the philosophical tools to move beyond functionalist metaphors. Unlike biological analogies that treat “organicity” as a given structure, historical materialism reveals urban vitality as an emergent property of social labour, class relations, and the contradictory unity of productive forces. The city lives because people produce, exchange, and struggle within it. Thus, before elaborating the three ontological implications—homology, differentiation, and people-centeredness—we must first recover Marx’s own insights into the historical genesis and organic nature of the city.

2. Marx’s Revelation of the Historical Generativity of Cities

2.1 A Historical Materialist Interpretation of Urban Origins

In *The German Ideology*, Marx outlined the inherent logic of urban origins: cities arose from the separation of industrial and commercial labor from agricultural labor. As handicrafts broke away from agriculture as an independent sector, and commerce further differentiated from handicrafts, densely populated human settlements gradually evolved into cities.

This indicates that the city is not a pre-existing spatial form, but one historically generated in the practical activities of human production and daily life. Its birth, growth and transformation are closely bound up with specific social formations at every historical stage. It is precisely this historical generativity that constitutes the fundamental basis for the city’s vitality. A city is no static spatial container, but a socio-historical product evolving continuously with the development of productive forces, undergoing its own process of germination, growth, maturity and transformation.

The proposition that “a city is a living organism” must first be understood on this historical materialist footing: the life of a city is not a biological phenomenon of nature, but a concentrated spatial projection of the deepening social division of labor, the advancement of productive forces, and the transformation of production relations.

This historical materialist perspective directly opposes any essentialist or naturalist view of the city. Unlike biological organisms that follow predetermined genetic programs, the city’s “life course” is shaped by contingent historical conditions, class struggles, and technological revolutions. Recognizing this historicity is crucial: it prevents us from reifying the city into an eternal, immutable form. Instead, we see that what a city is and what a city can become remain open

to human praxis. Consequently, the vitality of a city is not a mysterious vital force but the accumulated outcome of generations of productive and reproductive activities.

This implies that urban form and function are never fixed. As productive forces evolve—from agrarian to industrial to digital—cities undergo corresponding transformations in their spatial logic, social hierarchy, and relation with nature. Marx's historical materialism thus rejects any attempt to define the "essence" of the city in a transhistorical manner. Instead, the organicity of a city is always historically specific: it expresses a particular configuration of labour, technology, and class relations at a given stage of development. To understand a city's life, we must therefore examine the concrete social practices that constantly produce, maintain, and challenge its material structure.

2.2 Methodological Implications of the Social Organism Theory

Marx put forward a famous assertion in *Das Kapital*: "The present society is not a solid crystal, but an organism capable of change and constantly in the process of change." Though this statement addresses society as a whole, its methodological implications apply equally to cities.

From Marx's perspective, the social organism is characterized by wholeness, systematicity and dynamism. It consists of interdependent and interactive elements, none of which can operate in isolation from the whole. As the concentrated spatial manifestation of the social organism, the city shares these attributes. It possesses its own skeletal structure (institutions and infrastructure), flesh and blood (people's daily activities), and functional organs (various functional systems). Rather than being mechanically juxtaposed, these systems are interwoven and closely interconnected.

The more developed a city becomes, the more complex and prominent the organic connections between its systems. Its rise and fall result from the interplay of productive force development, deepening social division of labor, and the transformation of production relations, following inherent internal rhythms and logical laws.

This organic methodology also implies that urban analysis cannot stop at disaggregated indicators—such as GDP, population density, or transportation efficiency—taken in isolation. Instead, it demands a holistic, dialectical examination of how these elements interact, reinforce, or inhibit one another. For instance, a new subway line is not merely a piece of infrastructure; it reshapes labor markets, social segregation patterns, land values, and daily life rhythms. A machine-model approach would treat such an intervention as a local, reversible adjustment. But an organism model recognizes that any significant change triggers systemic feedback loops, some adaptive and others pathological. Understanding these dynamics requires historical materialist dialectics, not mechanical engineering metaphors.

Furthermore, the organism methodology draws attention to the dialectical relationship between a city's parts and its whole. A malfunctioning transport system, for example, is not

an isolated technical problem but may reflect deeper contradictions in land use, class segregation, or uneven development. Treating the city as an organism means that partial reforms must be evaluated by their systemic effects—whether they strengthen or undermine overall urban health. This holistic perspective is precisely what distinguishes Marxist urban analysis from mainstream planning approaches, which often reduce urban issues to technical or managerial challenges. The organism metaphor, when understood dialectically, becomes a critical tool for exposing and resolving urban contradictions.

2.3 The Dialectical Movement of Urban-Rural Relations

The dialectical movement of urban-rural relations further deepens the understanding of the urban vital attribute from another dimension. Marx revealed that urban-rural relations follow the evolutionary logic of primitive unity—separation and opposition—integrated unity.

In early historical stages, cities had not yet differentiated from the rural matrix, and the two maintained a symbiotic state. With the advent of class society, urban and rural areas gradually separated and drifted toward sharp opposition under capitalist conditions. In future society, urban and rural areas will ultimately achieve integration at a higher developmental stage.

The profound implication of this judgment is that cities and countryside are not two inherently opposing spatial types, but share the same fundamental vital root. Ultimately, the vitality of cities derives from the sustained production and life practices of the people amid urban-rural interactions. Marx's analysis elevates urban-rural relations beyond a simple description of spatial distribution to the level of the dialectical movement of the unity of opposites. Differentiated from the rural matrix, the city transcends the countryside while always relying on its nourishment.

Scholars summarize the common attributes of the social organism as "wholeness, systematicity, growth and dynamism". As the spatial embodiment of the social organism, the city likewise conforms to these laws.

Thus, Marx established a historical materialist interpretative approach for the organicity of cities. As scholars have pointed out in interpreting Marx's theory of the social organism, the fundamental reason for the existence of a social organism is that "society is the sum of human activities". Similarly, the "life" of a city is not abstract self-operation, but the aggregation and condensation of human practical activities in the spatial dimension.

The proposition that "a city is a living organism" inherits and innovates this ideological tradition. It transcends the cognitive paradigm that regards the city merely as a material structure or functional unit. In a refined and concise manner, it transforms Marx's theoretical insights into the ontological foundation for contemporary urban construction in China, elevating "organicity" from a mere rhetorical metaphor to theoretical consciousness with profound methodological implications.

3. Three Ontological Implications of the “City as a Living Organism”

Drawing on Marx’s theoretical legacy, the proposition that “a city is a living organism” can be interpreted from three dimensions: homology, differentiation, and people-centeredness. These three implications resonate with the common characteristics of “wholeness, systematicity, growth, and dynamism” revealed by Marx’s theory of the social organism, together forming a systematic understanding of the essence of a city.

3.1 Homology: Cities and Countryside Share a Common Vital Root

The first implication lies in affirming the homology of cities and countryside. The two are not two inherently opposing spatial types, but different forms growing from the same vital root. Marx’s exposition on the “primitive unity” of urban and rural areas has revealed this: in the early stages of human society, people settled near water sources and farmed according to the land, with settlement patterns deeply intertwined with agricultural production methods. A city is not an independent creation external to the countryside, but gradually differentiated from the rural matrix.

As analyzed by scholars from the perspective of Chinese culture, a city “remains the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humans, a product created by humans for their own survival and development”; it is always an organic component of nature as a whole. Xi Jinping emphasizes that “urban development is a natural historical process,” which inherently affirms this homology.

The theoretical significance of urban-rural homology is that it provides an ontological basis for breaking the urban-rural dual opposition. If cities and countryside are inherently connected at the root, then the pattern of urban-rural opposition cannot be attributed to inherent essential differences between the two, but should be understood as a distorted form of spatial relations in a specific historical stage.

In elaborating on modern cities of the people, scholars have pointed out that we should “build a community of life for urban and rural areas and achieve their symbiosis and common prosperity”. Urban-rural integration, therefore, is not a matter of one side drawing close to the other, but a return to their inherent relationship as a community of life—this is the deepest theoretical foundation for contemporary integrated urban-rural development.

3.2 Differentiation: The City as an Organism with Leapfrogging Complexity

The city’s differentiation from the rural matrix is not a mere quantitative addition, but a qualitative leap. Differentiation constitutes the second implication of “the city is a living organism”: the city is a more complex, compact, and advanced organism.

Marx pointed out that a city represents the concentration of population, means of production, capital, enjoyment, and needs. This high-density aggregation gives rise to refined

division of labor, technological innovation, and cultural progress, but also brings about highly complex governance. As scholars have analyzed, a social organism “possesses its own skeletal structure, flesh and blood, as well as tissues and organs”; “the more developed society becomes, the more complex and intimate the connections among its hierarchically structured, interwoven systems, and the more pronounced its organic characteristics”.

As a spatial node where diverse systems converge, cities exhibit faster metabolism, tighter internal connections, and greater sensitivity to external shocks. This provides an ontological explanation for why urban governance needs to be “as meticulous as embroidery” — crude management methods cannot govern the functioning of a complex organism. Similarly, cities must adhere to intensive development rather than sprawling expansion, because living organisms have inherent growth limits; unlimited expansion inevitably leads to functional disorder and organic decline. Scholars summarize this concept as the development model of urban living organisms, advocating that “cities should be regarded as organic wholes characterized by self-regulation, dynamic balance, and continuous evolution”. This is the underlying logic behind China’s urbanization shift from quantity-based expansion to quality-based improvement.

This organic view of urban differentiation also challenges the mechanistic planning paradigm that treats cities as static, modular systems. Unlike a machine, which can be disassembled and reassembled without loss of function, a living organism has internal memory, path dependency, and irreplaceable historical tissues. Therefore, urban renewal must respect the city’s own “genetic code” — the accumulated layers of social practices, cultural imprints, and spatial narratives. Any intervention that disregards these organic continuities risks inducing urban pathologies such as social fragmentation, loss of place identity, or ecological dysfunction. Recognizing differentiation as an ontological feature thus mandates a shift from top-down blueprint planning to adaptive, evolutionary governance. This is precisely why contemporary Chinese urban policy emphasizes “repairing the city with organic renewal” rather than wholesale demolition. In this sense, the organism metaphor is not merely descriptive but prescriptive: it tells us how a city grows, heals, and regenerates.

Recognizing differentiation as an ontological feature also implies that urban systems cannot be reduced to linear inputs and outputs. Each city, as a unique organism, possesses a distinct historical trajectory, cultural memory, and social metabolism. Therefore, policy models successful in one city cannot be mechanically transplanted to another without adaptation. This challenges the homogenizing logic of neoliberal urban development and supports the Chinese approach of “city-specific policies”. In this light, the living organism proposition provides a philosophical justification for place-sensitive, context-aware urban governance.

3.3 People-Centeredness: The Ultimate Source of Urban Vitality

If homology and differentiation reveal the city’s attributes in the relationship between humanity and nature, people-

centeredness points to the city's social essence. Ultimately, urban vitality stems not from the accumulation of physical facilities or the expansion of economic output, but from the people's practices in production and daily life.

In Theses on Feuerbach, Marx proposed that human essence "in its reality is the sum of all social relations". As a space for human aggregation, the city's essence is the spatial embodiment of social relations. Scholars elaborating on Marx's theory of social organisms emphasize that "humans, as subjects of social activities, are both the premise and product of history"; urban development has always been the result of human agency. Xi Jinping explicitly states that "citizens are the subjects of urban construction and development"—a contemporary application of this ideology.

From a Chinese cultural perspective, scholars further argue that "urban vitality is the manifestation of the city as an organism. Cities exist for humans, who represent the highest value in urban affairs; the quality of individual life experience is the natural measure of urban civilization". This is the deepest implication of "the city is a living organism": the city's "life" is not an abstract self-sustaining process, but a collective pulse formed by countless individual daily practices. Without the people, a city is merely a soulless shell.

The dimension of people-centeredness fundamentally distinguishes the "urban living organism" concept from the Western functionalist "organism" metaphor. While the latter's "organicity" is merely a structural analogy, the former binds urban vitality to the people's subjectivity. Scholars characterize this as a defining feature of modern cities of the people: "upholding a people-centered value logic rather than a profit-driven capital logic". This represents both an ontological innovation and a value declaration: the city's life is bestowed by the people, belongs to the people, and serves the people.

This people-centered ontology has concrete governance implications. Urban policies must be co-constructed through participatory mechanisms, public spaces designed for diverse social interactions, and developmental outcomes measured by human flourishing rather than economic aggregates alone. When people become both the authors and beneficiaries of urban life, the city truly breathes as a living organism.

4. Conclusion

The proposition that "cities are living organisms and organic entities" is not a perceptual description of urban form, but an ontological definition of urban essence. Rooted in historical materialism, it provides a complete interpretive framework composed of homology, differentiation, and people-centeredness.

The theoretical innovation of this proposition stands out distinctly when contrasted with the Western functionalist view of the city. It no longer treats "organicity" merely as a rhetorical metaphor, but endows it with solid socio-historical foundations. It breaks the ontological opposition between urban and rural areas, laying a philosophical foundation for urban-rural integration based on "urban-rural homology". It establishes people-centeredness as the ultimate source of

urban vitality, realizing the theoretical leap from a material-oriented to a people-oriented view of the city.

As scholars have noted, Marx's theory of the social organism "carries important enlightening significance for building socialism with Chinese characteristics, advancing the path of Chinese modernization, and promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity". As an iconic proposition of the Sinicization and modernization of Marxist urban theory, the notion that "the city is a living organism" embodies this theoretical inspiration concentratedly in the urban domain. While viewing the city as "a machine" or "a market" only captures its instrumental attributes, regarding the city as "a living organism" directly points to its essential attribute: the city is alive, and its vitality resides in the people.

The practical implication of this ontological connotation is equally clear. Understanding urban development rejects eagerness for quick success; urban governance rejects simplistic and crude methods; urban renewal rejects large-scale demolition and reconstruction. A city is a living organism that follows objective laws, and more importantly, a living organism embodying the wisdom of the people. Only by respecting objective laws and rooting urban development in the people can urban construction advance along a correct path.

The ultimate enlightenment of "the city is a living organism" lies in this: a city is not a cold spatial container, but a vibrant homeland that exists for the people and is empowered by the people. This ontological reorientation calls for urban planners and policymakers to cultivate the city's organic vitality through participatory governance and long-term ecological stewardship, rather than short-term engineering fixes.

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