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The City's Place in Civilization

By CHARLES A. BEARD

ANTAGONISM between the town and country, urbanity and rusticity, capitalism and agriculture, marks the long trail away from the beginning of civilization to the latest political campaign. From it have sprung endless conflicts in parliaments and forums, sometimes raging around scaffolds and flooding out on battle-fields. Out of it and in respect of it has arisen a vast literature ranging from Aristotle's *Politics*, written in the fourth century before Christ, through the works of Thomas Jefferson, down to the bill of McNary and Haugen. In a thousand subtle ways, not yet explored by the historians, this antagonism has affected our literature, our arts, and our theories of the good life. Is it not traditional that Babylon is the home of wickedness and the countryside the source of virtue?

Certainly no small part of the criticism directed against the urban business man springs from the ancient contempt which the fighting landlord had for the trader who supplied him with luxuries. Spengler's whole book on *The Decline of the West*, one of the three or four mighty books of our time, which has made such a furor in recent days, is built around this historic emotion.

Before he began to canvass for votes, Thomas Jefferson was convinced and openly said that

the mobs of the great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body. . . . Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberties by the most lasting bonds. . . . When we get piled up on one another as in Europe, we shall become as corrupt as in Europe and go to eating one another as they do there.

Even some of the statesmen who, in Jefferson's time, advocated protective tariffs to encourage manufacturing, admitted the evils of cities, but thought they were offset by the utility of industries for national defence and independence.

Vigor, love of liberty, and virtue—these are the signs of rural superiority, according to the makers of tradition. No one will deny that there were in Jefferson's day, and still are, some elements of truth in the argument. But it may now be said with safety that sanitation has made our best cities freer from disease and suffering than most of the countryside. We no longer live in the walled and sewerless towns of medieval times. Some of the worst conditions of physical decay are in the pure air and under the open sky of the country. Moreover, science and the machine have demonstrated that, by the exercise of imagination and intelligence, cities cursed by their slums and ugliness and dirt can be transformed into places of beauty and inspiration. As for virtue, that must be judged in relation to temptation, and from this point of view neither the public nor the private morals of the city suffer by comparison. County, not city, government is the most conspicuous failure of American democracy.

WHATEVER our conclusion on this point for the moment, the fact remains, Aristotle or no Aristotle, Jefferson or no Jefferson, cities overshadow the country from the Elbe to the Pacific. They increase in number, grow in size, and absorb an ever larger proportion of the population of each industrial nation. Every invention adds strength to them, every increase in production draws the sons and daughters of farmers to their homes and factories. If a boy from an Iowa farm becomes president of the United States next March, it will not be on account of his familiarity with the hoe handle, but because he is primarily an engineer and promoter of business enterprise. If he loses the contest, he will lose to a boy from the sidewalks of a great city. America has seen the last log-cabin and hard-cider campaign.

Unlike the urban centers of antiquity, the cities which dominate our social scene are not built on commerce and handicrafts but upon manufacturing, upon machinery and science, with all that implies for esthetics and the good

life. Now no one will deny that industry as developed up to our time has been a deadly foe to beauty and the love of beauty—to the finer things of civilization. If any one has doubts on this score let him compare any American manufacturing town with Oxford or Cambridge in England—especially with those English towns before the advent of the motor bus. Before the inexorable march of the machine in the nineteenth century, art and architecture crumbled into hideous ruins. Lewis Mumford is right when he exclaims:

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that from 1830 to 1890, the period when the traditional methods in all the industries were supplanted or at least modified by machine production, there is not a book, a piece of furniture, a pattern in textiles, a cup or saucer of new design, which deserves a place, except as an historical curiosity, in a museum of art.

For an even more sweeping indictment of the machine-city, we have only to turn to the writings of John Ruskin.

Criticism of the city is by no means confined to its esthetic aspects. The shrewd French observer, M. Siegfried, declares that America "is a materialistic society, organized to produce things rather than people, with output set up as a god." Our material prosperity, he continues,

can only be obtained at a tragic price, no less than the transformation of millions of workmen into automatons. "Fordism," which is the essence of American industry, results in the standardization of the workman himself. Artisanry, now out of date, has no place in the New World, but with it have disappeared certain conceptions of mankind which we in Europe consider the very basis of civilization.

It would be denying the noses on our very faces to reject such criticism as wholly unwarranted and unfounded. With no little justification, such critics might add that, compared with our capacity to imagine and design, every industrial city in the western world is a disgrace to humanity, in spite of the amazing things already accomplished in public works and city planning. But without attempting to measure the exact degree of damnation that ought to be meted out to our machine-cities, we may properly ask, What is to be done about it?

ONE school of thinkers, believing that no good can come out of the machine, bid us destroy the steam engine and return to handicrafts and agriculture, the balanced and self-sustaining economy of olden times. Doctors of this persuasion point out the beauty of the old crafts, idealize the dignity enjoyed by the independent workman under that system, and in contrast paint a dismal picture of the standardized automaton of the machine-shop who spends his days making standardized motions and his nights in the jerry-built house of our industrial slums. It is impossible to ignore the appeal that lies in this scheme of thinking or the attractiveness of the ideal society which it outlines for us.

But whatever may be the heart's answer, the head makes a clear-cut reply: "Economically it is impossible to go back to handicrafts, to restore the self-sufficient community. Whether we like it or not, the machine drives relentlessly forward, crushing the old order to earth." If a return to the handicraft system is economically impossible, then a return to its arts is equally impossible. Dreamers may try to reproduce the beautiful old squares, churches, guild halls, and towers of medieval Europe, but as the best German city planners well say, all such efforts are artistic failures, simply because it is impossible in the modern age to reproduce the spirit of the artists who did the old work. The best of

modern Gothic, if technically correct, is lacking in the indefinable aura which softens down the austerity of stone and crowns the noblest conceptions of the middle ages with a glory that commands silence. No, the lesson of the middle ages seems to be that beauty is not a ginger-bread decoration added to utility, but is basically an expression of the esthetic sense working through the whole structure of economy from top to bottom.

THERE is one other lesson in the cities of olden times, not to be ignored. It is that the pictures usually drawn of handicraft and commercial, or pre-machine cities, are false to life, or rather leave out of account the mass of the people. Nearly everybody in America knows about the glories of ancient Athens, the temples, public buildings, and sculptures. How many of them ever asked themselves about the homes and streets of the city, about the art and beauty of the countless thousands who slaved, labored and trafficked in that metropolis? Nearly every American has been to Rome by this time and has delivered an oration to his neighbors on the marvels of the Forum, the triumphal arches, and the Pantheon. How many of them ever stopped to inquire, How did the mass of the people who toiled and moiled around those centers of glory actually live and work?

Speaking of the masses in Rome, numbering about 300,000 in the age of Cicero, W. Warde Fowler tells us that we know little:

The upper classes, including all writers of memoirs and history, were not interested in them. There was no philanthropist, no devoted inquirer like Charles Booth, to investigate their condition or try to ameliorate it. The statesman, if he troubled himself about them at all, looked on them as a dangerous element in society, only to be considered as human beings at election time; at all other times merely as animals that had to be fed in order to keep them from becoming an active peril. The philosopher, even the Stoic . . . though his philosophy nominally took the whole of mankind into its cognizance, believed the masses to be degraded and vicious and made no efforts to redeem them.

Cicero, so well known to our boy orators,

when in actual social or political contact with the same masses could only speak of them with contempt or disgust. These multitudes lived in huge tenement houses; and the tenement house, adds Fowler, must have been simply a rabbit warren.

Cicero himself, like many of the best families of Rome, had money invested in slum property and we know from his letters that it was not always in a good state of repair.

So, too, of the idealized medieval city. It would be easy from authentic records to draw a far from beautiful picture of the life of the nameless masses who lived in fever-infested hovels under heaven-searching spires and glorious town halls, in the old days before the advent of the machine. Unfortunately for social science, we do not know much about these nameless masses, but we know enough to warn us against any vain imaginations, idealizing the handicraft city. Moreover, living examples can be found today in all parts of China. If any one wants to see such an object lesson, he can find it there with his own eyes—and nose.

The challenge of the agrarians, I frankly accept. Their right to their economic reward must be freely conceded. The necessity of maintaining a fair balance between agriculture and capitalism is, perhaps, the most important issue of our age, in Europe and America.

But the city is not inherently a menace to civilization,

as Jefferson believed. On the contrary, it is from the urban centers that the national economy of the future will be controlled, whether we like it or not, and it is the culture of urbanism that promises to dominate the future.

Indeed, we may well ask: What great book, painting, imaginative work, or invention has ever come from the country? Sir Isaac Newton was the son of a farmer, but he developed his talents at Cambridge. Gibbon was the son of a landed proprietor, but he wrote his immortal work in London and Lausanne. The talents of the old South were exhausted in oratory and politics. Dr. Long, of Georgia, one of the discoverers of anaesthetics, failed to make great achievements because he was without the laboratory and hospital facilities furnished by urban centers. Matthew Maury, one of our great scientists, a son of Virginia, unfolded his powers in Washington where the city furnished equipment for his researches, and a government job the leisure and opportunity. Noble virtues flourish in the country, but creative, inventive, and imaginative talents must have the facilities and stimulus of urbanism, certainly more or less, if they are to develop into great powers.

What, then, is our obligation and our mission? If we cannot go back to the pre-machine city or recover the arts of the handicraft age, what roads are open before us?

First of all, many things appear to be inevitable, and with the inevitable we must work. Cities will continue to grow; electricity will make it possible to remove many of the worst offenses against the esthetic sense; motor roads, released from the cramping limits of steel rails, will spread in every direction, bringing the city and country closer together; urban centers will expand into urban regions, breaking down for millions the old antithesis between town and country; city planning, having grown into regional planning, will be merged into state and nation planning, with technology as its basis. In other words, we are even now in the very midst of transforming the city inherited from the Augustan age of General Grant and Marcus A. Hanna. Only those whose business it is to observe tendencies have any idea of the magnitude of the processes already at work. Moreover, as Mr. Mumford, Le Corbusier, and the new German architects point out, the signs of a new and powerful esthetics, appropriate to the machine age, are already here, promising beauty as well as strength. That is not all; the vision of the new city takes in those masses ignored or scorned by the upper classes of antiquity and the middle ages.

OUR first task, then, is not to run from the machine, but to stand fast in its presence, to explore its significance, and to make ourselves master of it. Our second task is to nourish the imagination in the threefold aspects emphasized by Ruskin: associative, penetrative, and regardant or contemplative, and to keep burning his seven lamps of architecture: sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory, and obedience. Our third task is to encourage bold and imaginative thinking about the potentialities of the city, having faith that there is more hope in exuberant radicalism than in deadly conservatism. If radicals are usually

wrong, it must be confessed that the conservatives who suppose things will never change are always wrong. Finally, let us accept the criticism of the European esthetes that ours is a mass civilization—for it is—and let us see what we can do with it, thus offering at least novelty to an old world heavily laden with other experiments.

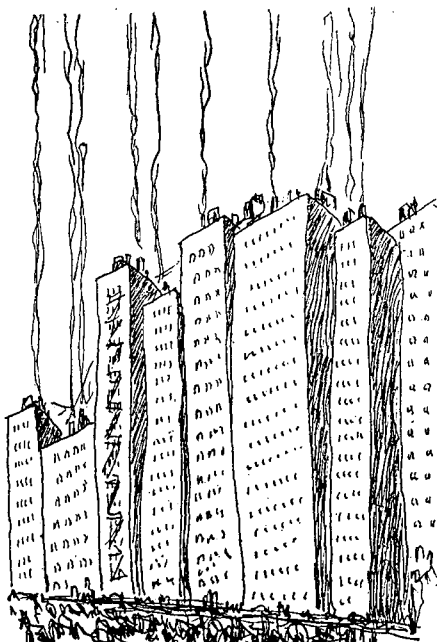
But in taking this view, we are not merely American. Many of the best city planners of Europe have frankly accepted steel, concrete, and machinery, and are clothing their dreams in new materials. If it is not sacrilege, I must confess that some of the new working-class houses built by the socialist administration of Vienna are to me more beautiful than most of the old Hapsburg piles, borrowed, copied, and ginger-breaded from half a dozen civilizations and expressing no creative sincerity at any point. Furthermore, it is about as thrilling to see working people living decently as to see upper classes living softly. This is merely personal and does not commit the National Municipal League under whose auspices this paper was first given.¹

THERE is high authority for the position taken above. The authority of an artist no less distinguished and competent than Le Corbusier. His fundamental position is that we must accept the machine and do our best with it. And in his sketch of a plan for Paris, he has had the courage to outline the field of the coming battle between ideas and materials. He flatly says:

The new event is the machine, which has reconstructed modern society from the ground up. However, we have not yet measured its significance. A revolution opposed to all previous centuries! No revolutionary spirit reigns, but we stand in the presence of revolutionary relations. We will formulate no revolutionary solutions but will adjust ourselves to a revolutionary state of affairs. If this adjustment does not take place soon, the growing sickness now threatening us will shatter social life.

After this preface, Le Corbusier boldly pictures the new Paris—a Paris that will conserve the beauties of the past while eliminating the consumption-ridden areas now spread all around the glories observed by travelers—a Paris that will make use of standardization, steel, and concrete, a Paris Taylorized. Yes the artist dares to invoke the shades of the American efficiency engineer! Then, without pronouncing any revolutionary formulas relative to private property, he indicates that the rigidities of landlordism will have to yield to the exigencies of productive industries and the requirements of a decent life.

If the task here outlined is staggering in its complexity and beset with oppressive doubts respecting our powers, still it must be admitted that it is as interesting as driving from one gasoline station to the next. Even the contemplation of its possibilities is as worthy of human nature as meditation on the chances of slipping into heaven through the narrow gate of personal perfection.



The city streets. Drawn by Hendrik Willem Van Loon for the Quarterly of the Women's City Club of New York

¹ From an address delivered at the annual meeting of the National Municipal League at Cincinnati, on October 16, 1928.

The Spirit of Social Work

By J. EDGAR PARK

ANY one who undertakes to modify the arrangements of human society must feel like the small boy who was trying to lead a St. Bernard dog up the road. When he was asked "Where are you going to take the dog?" he answered breathlessly, "I'm going to see where he wants to go first!"

There have been three attitudes of mind habitual to those interested in what is known as social work: The first is the *feudal*. The second, from which we are perhaps just emerging, is the *scientific*. And the third is the *humanistic*.

The feudal attitude of mind was characterized by patronizing. The visitor in the poor family informed them, "You are unhappy because you are bad."

The scientific attitude was characterized by the filling in of many forms and the accumulation of statistics. Here the inspector informed the poor family, "You are unhappy because you are ignorant."

The humanistic social worker is perhaps more likely to meet the poor family in her own home than in theirs, and her attitude of mind may be understood from her remark to them, which is: "*We* are all unhappy because we are inhuman."

The first wishes to do something for them; the second, to do something to them; and the third, to do something with them.

Many humorous stories are told of the days when the patronizing feudal attitude was in vogue. A recently published diary of a pious lady of the early eighteenth century tells of her care of the poor in her neighborhood. She always kept a jar in her larder into which she deposited the tea-leaves remaining in the tea-pot at the close of her afternoon cup. These second-hand tea-leaves were afterwards, she explained, distributed to the poor. A charming incident, which, if criticized today, might perhaps bring the retort that the modern woman of fashion does not care enough for the poor even to go to the trouble of keeping a jar of denatured tea-leaves for them.

Perhaps the patronizing attitude is even better represented by the story of the small boy who lived next to a large orphan asylum. He made friends over the fence with some of the orphan boys, and when he was scolded by his mother for making himself sick by eating so many apples he gave as his excuse that the orphans wanted the cores.

There was something delightfully comfortable in the feudal attitude toward social betterment. Punch once had a scene in which a district visitor is shown entering the cottage of a poor woman. The visitor is evidently new to the business and somewhat embarrassed.

The cottager says: "I'm quite well, thank yer, miss; but I ain't seed you afore. Y're fresh at it, ain't yer, miss?"

"I have never visited you before, Mrs. Johnson."

The woman dusts a chair. "Well," she says, "yer sits down here, an' yer reads me a short psalm, yer gives me a shillin', and then yer goes!"

There are still remnants of this comfortable, superior attitude in the world today. It was only a few years ago when, in Tunbridge Wells railway station in England, I saw a dear old deaf lady alight from the station hack, count out into the cabby's hands the exact fare, and then

adjure him in a voice heard all over the station, "Now, my good man, don't spend that in drink."

But as usual, the feudal charity visitor has been laughed out of court. Her whole demeanor appeals to our sense of the ridiculous. I attribute this change in part to the influence of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas and the spirit of Robert Louis Stevenson. Although Gilbert and Sullivan did not have very much to say about social service, their whole influence was against the pharisaic, smug, unreal point of view of which the feudal visitor is the fruit.

Gilbert and Sullivan's services to humanism are not yet fully recognized. How many bubbles besides the House of Lords almost burst in the hilarious gale when that procession of peers passed:

Loudly let the trumpet bray!
Proudly bang the sounding brasses!
As upon its lordly way
This unique procession passes.
Bow, bow, ye lower middle classes,
Bow, bow ye tradesmen, bow ye masses!
Blow the trumpets, sound the brasses,
We are peers of highest station,
Pillars of the British nation!

And Stevenson's Child's Garden of Verses is full of gentle sarcasm directed against that superior pose.

Added to this was the rebellion of the worm itself. The Buffalo charity visitor who was greeted at the door of the house of poverty with the words, "If it wasn't for the likes of us the likes of you would be out of a job," reminds one of the Irish peasant who said to a similar intruder, "Get along. You can't save your soul off of us."

Succeeding this stage came a very bad attack of scientific charity work with its attempt to treat individuals as cases and to evolve on general principles a science of relief. Thousands of rolltop desks and typewriters almost automatically evolved this period. Questionnaires were looked upon as the source of all knowledge, and charitable relief lost even the romantic glamor that it had in feudal days.

"What, give the poor cat a piece of meat? That would pauperize the cat. Always help a mendicant to help himself. Scatter some crumbs on the sidewalk—maybe the cat will catch a bird."

THE scientific method of charity relief made it necessary to raise money for it by mechanical means. Scientific charity is uninteresting insofar as it is dehumanized. Instead of giving an extra helping to Oliver Twist, you subscribe to a community chest. This simplifies the financing of charity for the time being, but it remains to be seen whether the method has in it enough red blood to stimulate continued giving in times when giving means self-denial. Oliver Twist was told to bow to the board, and seeing no other board but the table he bowed to it.

The defects of the scientific method were that it generalized too easily from insufficient knowledge of the intricacy of human nature; secondly, that it committed the age-long fallacy of believing that information is the universal means of salvation; and third, that it is apt to become stultified in its own mechanics, abandon the business in order to get