

Cities Are Abnormal. Edited by Elmer T. Peterson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1946. Pp. xvi, 263. \$3.00.

The essays that make up this symposium are designed as contributions to the diagnosis of the ills of America. The disease with which the authors believe America to be afflicted is cities. The prognosis is poor but the prescription offered to the patient is decentralization. If the patient will only take his medicine often enough and long enough it will make him better, if not well.

The essays are of uneven quality and they do not by any means bear equally directly upon the central thesis. Most of what the book contains is irrelevant to the thesis and for that matter irrelevant to the understanding of cities, or of our civilization. Very little has been done to integrate the chapters into a whole, and apparently very little could have been done. There is much contradictory evidence contained in the volume on the very thesis it seeks to develop, and the more cautious authors who have contributed to the symposium have apparently seen fit to refrain from committing themselves explicitly.

The message which the authors have for us is not a new one. It is reminiscent of the agrarian protest against urbanization, which is evident in the literature going back to the beginning of cities, and which has taken various forms throughout history, depending upon the rural-urban balance and the rural-urban relationships which existed. Much of this protest is, of course, not so much a protest against cities as against civilization. And since cities have arisen concurrently with civilization, and since it is almost a contradiction in terms to speak of civilization without cities, it is rather difficult to localize the specific irritations which give rise to this protest and the specific motives of the protestors.

Even among the twelve authors of this book it is apparent that a variety of orientations, interests, and points of view toward the city is represented. In so far as there is any central theme it is stated by the editor in the following terms:

The point of departure, in considering the growth and evolution of cities, is that natural or rural life is the inescapable norm. This thesis was once considered a sentimental or moral one. New facts provide new basis for appraisal. This book seeks to present facts, together with conclusions of eminent authorities in their respective fields, which argue for the decentralization of cities.¹

Of course, if we assume that nature is normal, then artifact is abnormal. It does not require a learned treatise to show that. Similarly, it is clear that there were men before cities, and that therefore some men at least must have been able to survive from the pre-city period to found cities and to live in them. If the early stages in the development of a phenomenon are regarded as normal, then obviously the later stages will be abnormal. But if cities are abnormal, so also are houses, bathtubs, indoor toilets, clothing, anaesthetics, cooking utensils, fire, telephones, educational institutions, agriculture, and virtually all the things that comprise civilized existence, for at one time or another men have existed without these and some, at least, must have survived to tell the tale. This is either self-evident or it is nonsense.

No serious student of cities would argue that the cities in which mankind now lives are perfect. For the most part they are the product of growth rather than of design. Their pattern, their organization, and administration do not embody man's highest

¹ P. 20.

technical and intellectual or artistic powers. On the other hand, neither does rural life give evidence of the best use either of the potentialities of nature or of culture.

There are, of course, a number of problems that have arisen in the course of the development of the modern city which we can afford to ignore only at grave peril. Professor Warren S. Thompson raises one of these problems in his chapter on population. He calls attention to the fact that urban society is not reproducing itself. This, he believes, "indicates a new scale of values in our urban community, since the evidence shows that a considerable proportion of all childlessness and of one-child families is voluntary." The facts he cites are unchallengeable, but the interpretation he gives is seriously open to question. He believes that the well-to-do classes in urban society have lost interest in reproduction and, as a consequence, in the future of the community, because they have little or no biological stake in it:

If the leaders of any society rather suddenly cease to organize their lives around children and instead organize them around personal desires and the use of goods which they can buy with what they save by not having children, that system will have to face a situation in which it would seem to stand but little chance of surviving. Its people will cease to belong to the "meek who shall inherit the earth."²

To this it might be replied that we do not know precisely what motives underlie childlessness, but if it be suggested that it is a set of conditions inherent in cities, the answer would be that we have not tried to improve our cities and the civilization of which they are a part to remedy these conditions. Moreover, the question still remains open as to whether there is any value in numbers, as such, and whether it is not more desirable to have a smaller human race, but that race living more humanly.

It is also true that life in cities raises grave questions concerning the health of human beings. Dr. Jonathan Forman puts this paradox very aptly when he says: "Today, because of improved health conditions, cities have, in many instances, grown so large that they are no longer healthful places in which to live."³ This is unquestionably true, but the answer does not lie in flight from the city but rather in the application of science, technology, and our capacity for organization to make cities healthful places in which to live. The conclusion to which Dr. Forman comes, that the blessings of a healthy and happy existence are incompatible with city life, is utterly unfounded.

Similarly, as the chapter on architecture indicates, there is every reason to complain of the architectural atrocities that are to be found in cities, but this again is nothing inevitable and incurable. The answer must come through city planning and urban architecture which is functionally adapted to the needs and possibilities of city life. We are only in the most primitive stage of such a potential development.

It is also true that the city exposes men in great masses to unpredictable cycles of prosperity and depression, but the answer does not lie in rural self-sufficiency. Without cities we would probably not have the kind of industrial civilization upon which even the farmer must depend for the tilling of the soil and the marketing of his crops. The answer lies rather in the reconstruction of our economic order as a whole to make it more responsive to human needs and to make it serve as a better tool for the fulfillment and enrichment of human life. Mr. McConahey seems to bemoan the fact that we are expecting a "progressively smaller rural population to spend more man hours of labor for less pay than urban dwellers in the business of providing goods, services, and basic sustenance for all of us."⁴ The fact is that with the rise of the city and of modern

² P. 73.

³ P. 95.

⁴ P. 160.

industrialism with which it is associated the standard of living of the farmer too has been raised. We are no longer living in an age where cities are a parasitic growth subsisting on the exploitation of the countryside. Surely, an agricultural policy which provides for parity prices has done something to remedy rural and urban inequalities, and if the studies of recent years can be said to be at all reliable, they show that an even smaller proportion of people is needed to produce the necessities of life on the farms than was needed a generation ago. This is due to the improved agricultural techniques and tools which are in large part the product of science, which in turn must at least in part be ascribed to urban civilization. It is probably true, as Mr. McConahey says, that the "highest degree of economic safety and security for the average family unit may be secured in a direct occupancy of small land plots and the opportunity to produce a large part of basic sustenance with its own labor while taking advantage of industrial and urban employment when available."⁵ But it should be noted that such a scheme involves the existence of cities and of the industrial employment which they furnish. We cannot very well have our cake and eat it too.

The chapter on "Social Man and His Community" reviews some of the other problems of cities, namely, those connected with what the sociologist would call disorganization, such as crime and insanity. It is true that the city has crime and insanity, but so does the country, though there it is often called by another name if it is discovered at all. But there is no proof either in this book or in any other that these phenomena are inherent in city life and that mankind is incapable of coping with these problems.

The historian, H. C. Nixon, calls attention to the difficulty of maintaining democratic self-government in the city. The students of the city have not underestimated this difficulty. But when Mr. Nixon says: "The county is the most effective and most nearly universal unit for the preservation of local institutions,"⁶ he is obviously indulging in an unwarranted generalization. At least in an urban civilization the county can be as much of an obstacle to effective local government as is the municipal corporation. What we need, rather, is units of government which are commensurate with the scope of the problems with which government is called upon to deal. The ideal unit for this is the metropolitan region, for the creation of which most metropolitan communities have not been able to obtain the necessary legal powers from their rurally dominated legislatures.

The book also contains a chapter by Mr. Louis Bromfield, who has long been known for his nostalgia for a rural way of life, which, incidentally, has never existed in modern times and which, if it had, would certainly be irrecoverable. He repeats the ancient superstition "that vast concentrations of population in cities are one of the principal factors in the weakening and eventual decline of great nations,"⁷ and then goes on to show that the herding of immigrants into cities is associated with slums, poor citizenship, exploitation, crime, and many other ills. There has no doubt been exploitation, but the way to stop it is by stopping it rather than by tearing down our cities. It is doubtful whether writers even like Mr. Bromfield would have achieved the audience for their products which they have achieved without the level of leisure, of sophistication, of literacy, and of civilization which cities make possible. The answer to the evils of cities lies in making cities better places in which to live, to work, and to play. It is doubtful whether we could retain the advantage of modern industrialism without them.

⁵ P. 169.

⁶ P. 180.

⁷ P. 183.

This is not to say that urban civilization as we now find it meets legitimate expectations, and that dispersion of industries over wider areas in smaller units is not possible and desirable. The "curse of bigness," to which Justice Brandeis referred, has afflicted cities as it has other units of social life, including corporations, but the answer lies not in fragmentation of these larger units but rather in the invention of appropriate methods of control to make them the effective servants of man which they can become with the application of intelligence, of good will, and of planning. The attack that needs to be made is not on cities but on the unnecessary stupidities that men practice by building cities and living in them. If we were to spend half the time that we now waste in the futile task of protesting against cities, as such, in making our cities fit for men to live in, there would be some hope for the future.

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The Concentration of Economic Power. By David Lynch. New York: Columbia University Press, 1946. Pp. x, 243. \$5.50.

The Government Printing Office is the most important and by far the most exasperating publishing house in the United States. Its lists are full of items indispensable to the study of social life. Nowadays, its books and pamphlets are well printed and well made. But the problem of tracing or keeping up with government publications has become almost unmanageable, what with totally inadequate catalogues and indices, and the Office's amiable refusal to answer its mail. To follow government publications in any one field requires at a minimum a full-time secretary, an expert research assistant, a genius in cataloguing, and an experienced Washington lobbyist. Such facilities are unhappily beyond the reach of most academicians and of most libraries.

If the Government Printing Office were even tolerably effective in marketing its product, Dr. Lynch's book could have been half its present size, and presumably half its present prohibitive price. For in large part it is a descriptive guide to what happened in the course of the TNEC investigation between 1938 and 1941. That extremely important and symptomatic inquest into American economic life is reported in eighty-one volumes, issued with the austere stamp of the G.P.O., and generally out of print. Dr. Lynch's study deals exclusively with the thirty-seven volumes of Hearings, and the Committee's Report, leaving the forty-three valuable monographs either to speak for themselves, or to wait another descriptive index.

The Temporary National Economic Committee was authorized by Congress in the wake of the "Recession" of 1937-38. That catastrophe, more severe in many ways than the drop after 1929, thoroughly bewildered the government and the public. Partly out of a natural desire to focus blame on others, partly out of its laudable interest in finding out what was wrong, the Administration proposed, and the Congress adopted, the unusual constitutional procedure of an investigation by a joint committee representing both Houses of Congress and the executive departments.² The structure

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² Prof. Theodore J. Kreps, the TNEC's Director of Research, points out that the conception of the investigation existed before the Recession of 1937. 36 *Am. Econ. Rev.* 938, 941-42 (1946). But surely it was public concern with the apparent endlessness, and the recurring virulence of the depression which created the momentum necessary to carry the project through Congress.