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THE CITY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

By ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER

“The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast,” declared Frederick Jackson Turner in his famous paper of 1893, “it is the Great West.” Professor Turner had formed his ideas in an atmosphere of profound agrarian unrest; and an announcement of the superintendent of the census in 1890 that the frontier line could no longer be traced impelled him to the conclusion that “the first period of American history” had closed.¹ His brilliant essay necessitated a fundamental reappraisal of the springs of national development. Today, however, it seems clear that in his zeal to correct older views he overlooked the antithetical form of social organization which, coeval with the earliest frontier, has played a significant and ever-enlarging part in American life. Turner himself wrote in a private letter in 1925, though with evident misgiving, “There seems likely to be an urban reinterpretation of our history.”²

A reconsideration of American history from the urban point of view need not lead to the distortion which Professor Turner feared. It should direct attention to a much neglected influence and, by so doing, help to illumine the historian’s central problem: the persistent interplay of town and country in the evolution of American civilization. Recent historical writings reveal an increasing interest of scholars in the role of the city. It seems desirable, if only in broad outline, to develop certain of the larger implications of these studies and to indicate some of the further possibilities of the general subject for scholarly investigation.

Though agriculture occupied the vast bulk of the colonists, many of them, through personal liking or for economic reasons, preferred town life.³ Usually the first object upon reaching the

¹ Frederick J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 3, 38.

² Letter to A. M. Schlesinger, dated Madison, Wisconsin, May 5, 1925.

³ Recent works concerned with urban aspects of American colonial history include Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, *The First Century of Urban Life in*

Atlantic shore was to found an urban community which might serve as a means of companionship and mutual protection and as a base from which to colonize the neighboring country. In time these towns did duty as business centers, assembling the agricultural products of the adjacent regions for export and paying for them with imported wares. Without access to English-made goods — hardware, tools, firearms, house furnishings, medicines, books, and the like — life in the colonies might easily have approached that of the savages.

Small as these places seem by modern standards, they compared favorably in size and wealth with English provincial cities before the Industrial Revolution began to pile up their populations. As the larger American towns gained in corporate consciousness, they reached out for dependent territories and engaged in contests with one another for economic dominion. Much of colonial history might be rewritten in terms of these activities. Boston, the first to enter the race, possessed special trading advantages which enabled her for nearly a century to maintain a position of primacy, with New York, Philadelphia, and lesser centers hardly more than commercial satellites. These other towns, however, strove for their share of ocean-borne traffic and briskly cultivated their own local trading areas. Thus, the New Yorkers bitterly fought the proposal of the East New Jersey proprietors to erect a rival port at Perth Amboy, and for a time prevailed upon the provincial legislature to tax and otherwise shackle the commerce of Boston with eastern Long Island.⁴ Incidentally, the intense application of New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston to the fur trade acted as a powerful stimulant to westward exploration.

As the eighteenth century progressed, Boston's rivals, helped by the occupation of their back-country districts, securely estab-

America, 1625-1742 (New York, 1938); Ernest S. Griffith, *History of American City Government. The Colonial Period* (New York, 1938); Virginia D. Harrington, *The New York Merchant on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1935); Michael Kraus, *Intercolonial Aspects of American Culture on the Eve of the Revolution with Special Reference to the Northern Towns* (New York, 1928); and Leila Sellers, *Charleston Business on the Eve of the Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1934).

⁴ Curtis P. Nettels, *The Money Supply of the American Colonies before 1720* (Madison, 1934), 108-109, 117-118.

lished their independent right to existence. New York completed her sway over western Connecticut and eastern New Jersey as well as over her own hinterland, while Philadelphia held in thrall western New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and northern Maryland. It is evidence of the energy and enterprise of urban business that the chambers of commerce of New York and Charleston, formed respectively in 1768 and 1774, antedated all others in English-speaking lands. Beneficial as were the relations of these towns to their dependent areas, urban dominance bred jealousies and resentments which were to reach critical intensity in the later history of the nation. The ascendant city of a given district became a symbol of deception and greed. "A Connecticut Farmer," venting his spleen against New York in the *New-London Gazette*, August 17, 1770, expressed the fervent hope that "the plumes of that domineering city may yet feather the nests of those whom they have long plucked."

From the outset the inhabitants of the towns were confronted with what would today be called "urban problems." The conditions of living in a circumscribed community forced attention to matters of common concern which could not be ignored even by a people individualistically inclined. Lighting, fire protection, the care of streets, crime prevention, sewage disposal, water, community health, marketing facilities — such needs as these evoked remedial efforts which, if primitive in modern eyes, matched those of English cities of comparable size. In some places public-spirited citizens for a time maintained night watches out of their own purses, or else the towns required persons to serve their turns on penalty of fines. Sooner or later, however, policing after dark was accepted as a regular charge on the taxpayers. The removal of garbage generally devolved on roving swine and goats, while drainage remained pretty much an unsolved problem, though in a few communities householders laid private sewers. The fire hazard early stirred the municipal authorities to impose regulations as to the construction of chimneys and the keeping of water buckets. Civic spirit in the eighteenth century supplemented official efforts with the formation of volunteer fire companies which, long after the colonial period, continued to be the principal agency of fire fighting. The pressure

of urban needs also fostered American inventiveness, producing Franklin's lightning rod and the fireplace stove.

As these illustrations suggest, the people of the cities evolved a pattern of life increasingly unlike that of the countryside or the frontier. The necessary concern with the general welfare contravened the doctrine of individualism and nourished a sense of social responsibility. This training in collective action, constantly reenforced by the everyday contact of the citizens in less formal undertakings, assumed a commanding importance as the Revolution approached. Happily for the future independence of America, the new policy of the British government, begun in 1763-1764, struck deeply at the roots of urban prosperity. The business classes rallied promptly to the defense of their interests and, heedless of the possible political consequences, enlisted the support of the artisan and mechanic groups. Throughout the decade of controversy the seaport towns set the pace of colonial resistance, furnishing most of the high-pressure leaders, staging turbulent demonstrations at every crisis, and laboring to mobilize rural support for the cause. Even in agricultural commonwealths like Maryland and Virginia, the most effective steps of opposition were taken when the colonists assembled at the provincial capitals for legislative purposes. Boston's preeminence in such exertions may well have been due to the fact that, having recently fallen behind Philadelphia and New York as an emporium, she was resolved at any cost to stay the throttling hand of the British government. With the assembling of the first Continental Congress the direction of the patriot movement shifted to Philadelphia, where presently the first capital of the new republic was established.

It would be a misconception, however, to consider the colonial town merely as an expression of political or economic energies. The city, then as now, was a place where men found a variety of outlets for their special talents, an opportunity to cultivate the art as well as the business of living. Ports of entry for European settlers and goods, the larger places were also ports of entry for European ideas and standards of taste. In nearly every respect city life had a transforming effect on all who came within its orbit. A knowledge of the "three R's" was more widely

diffused there than among rural inhabitants. The urban monopoly of the printing presses, newspapers, and bookstores insured both the preservation and the extension of knowledge at many levels. In such an atmosphere men took time for thought while stirred to mental activity. The resulting spirit of innovation expressed itself in intellectual as well as commercial undertakings. It was city folk who took the lead in founding schools and colleges. The protracted battle to establish inoculation as a preventive against smallpox was fought out in the towns. The first great victory for freedom of the press greeted the efforts of a Philadelphia lawyer defending a New York editor.

The man whom a recent biographer has called "the first civilized American" was a product of not one but many cities. Boston, Philadelphia, London, and Paris, each contributed to Franklin's intellectual growth and social understanding. Few elements of modern American culture but are indebted to his fostering care: printing, publishing, *belles-lettres*, journalism, education, the postal service, applied science. All these achievements rested, in final analysis, on that interest, encouragement, and financial support which a populous community alone could provide. How sedulously Franklin utilized these advantages appears in his autobiography, which reveals the care with which he educated his fellow Philadelphians to the need of such projects as a lending library, a hospital, and the formation of the American Philosophical Society. Yet Franklin with all his many-sidedness was less "civilized" than urban society as a whole. His range of interests did not include the theater, concerts, the improvement of architecture, or an active concern with art. In all these lines the pre-Revolutionary city, with the increase of wealth and leisure, showed a growing maturity.

It would be folly to deny that the city, both in its internal life and its external relations, played a role of critical importance in colonial society. Just as the biologist learns about complex organisms from studying the simpler forms, so the historical student may enrich his understanding of the later implications of urbanism by a better knowledge of colonial conditions. Though only Philadelphia contained as many as 30,000 people on the eve of Independence, and though less than one out of every twenty-

five Americans lived in places of eight thousand or more, these towns revealed in embryo the shape of things to come.

If it be true that the percentage of townfolk temporarily declined during the troubled years of the war and the Confederation,⁵ this fact merely accentuates the pivotal influence of urban leadership in the movement for a stronger federal government. As Professor Beard has shown, the adoption of the Constitution signaled the triumph of the business and creditor classes, largely domiciled in the cities, over the debtors and small farmers of the back country. The initial Congress under the Constitution was promptly greeted with petitions for tariff protection from Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Baltimore. This event foreshadowed a conflict of interest in the new government between city and country, which led directly to the formation of the first national parties. Hamilton's so-called financial plan was designed to implement the purposes of the urban capitalists. Jefferson, imbued with physiocratic notions and himself an agriculturist, disapproved the trend of Federalist policy. "For the general operations of manufacture," he declared, "let our workshops remain in Europe." He perceived good even in the yellow-fever epidemic as a means of discouraging the growth of great cities.⁶ The contrasting social ideals and economic motives reflected in this early alignment of parties engendered divergent views as to constitutional interpretation and produced recurrent clashes over specific measures. From that day to this the chief business of American politics has been to reconcile these interests in the service of the national welfare.

The spectacular size of the westward movement beginning shortly after the Revolution has obscured the fact that the city not only soon regained its relative position in the total population, but after 1820 grew very much faster than the rural regions. In 1790 one out of every thirty Americans lived in places of eight thousand or more; in 1820 one out of twenty; in 1840 one out of twelve; and in 1860 nearly one in every six.⁷ The explanation of

⁵ *A Century of Population Growth* (Washington, 1909), 15.

⁶ Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1904-1905), IV, 86, IX, 147.

⁷ W. S. Thompson and P. K. Whelpton, *Population Trends in the United States* (New York, 1933), 20. Secondary works helpful for an understanding of urban his-

this apparent paradox is to be found in a number of factors, not the least of which is the success of the trans-Appalachian country in breeding its own urban communities. These raw western towns at first served as distributing points for commodities between the seaboard and the interior; but they soon became marts where the local manufacturer and the country dweller plied a trade to mutual advantage. Pittsburgh early began to branch out into manufactures; already by 1807 her atmosphere was described as choked with soot. Two years later Cincinnati possessed two cotton mills. Up and down the Ohio Valley many a rude settlement sought to emulate their example; the ambition to become a city dazzled nearly every cluster of log huts. The Indiana pioneers, for instance, hopefully named their tiny hamlets Columbia City, Fountain City, Saline City, Oakland City, and Union City or, flaunting their ambitions more daringly, called them New Philadelphia, New Paris, and even New Pekin.⁸

Meanwhile, in the East, scores of new cities sprang into being, generally at the fall line of the rivers, where water power was available for utilizing the industrial secrets which sharp-witted Americans had recently filched from Britain. It has often been

tory from 1783 to 1860 include Robert G. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port, 1815-1860* (New York, 1939); Lewis E. Atherton, *The Pioneer Merchant in Mid-America* (Columbia, 1939); Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (New York, 1913); Beverley W. Bond Jr., *The Civilization of the Old Northwest, 1788-1812* (New York, 1934), chaps. xii-xv; E. Douglas Branch, *The Sentimental Years, 1836-1860* (New York, 1934); R. A. East, *Business Enterprise in the American Revolutionary Era* (New York, 1938); James Ford et al., *Slums and Housing with Special Reference to New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), I, 54-149; Bessie L. Pierce, *A History of Chicago* (New York, 1937-), I (to 1848); Sidney I. Pomerantz, *New York: An American City, 1783-1803* (New York, 1939); and Robert R. Russel, *Economic Aspects of Southern Sectionalism, 1840-1861* (Urbana, 1924).

⁸ Note also Burns City, Cambridge City, Clay City, Coal City, Lincoln City, Hartford City, Michigan City, Monroe City, Rome City, Shirley City, and Switz City, not to mention numerous place names ending in "town," "burg," "port," and "ville," and the designation of the capital of the state as Indianapolis. Few of these "cities" ever attained the minimum census definition of a city (2500 inhabitants). In J. K. Paulding's novel, *Westward Ho!* (New York, 1832), II, 179, Zeno Paddock, coming upon one of these aspiring midwestern settlements, found "on the very spot where the court-house stood on the map, a flock of wild turkeys gobbling like so many lawyers . . . but the founder of New Pekin swore it was destined to be the great mart of the West, to cut out St. Louis, Cincinnati, and New Orleans, and to realize the most glorious speculation that was ever conceived by the sagacity or believed by the faith of man."

remarked of the early days of New England manufacturing that the farmers' daughters went to the mill towns while their brothers sought the fertile West. But it is clear that, in this section as well as in the Middle Atlantic states, many a farm lad also joined the urban procession; for, long before the great foreign immigration of the forties, the leading cities began to increase rapidly in size. To such places went young men gregarious in temperament, or of a mechanical bent, or ambitious of gain, or fond of book learning. Much study remains to be given this early movement from country to town and to the related subject of the migration from city to city. As Professor Albion has shown, newcomers from New England dominated the business activities of New York City from about 1820 to the Civil War. "It is a singular fact," wrote a New Yorker in 1863, "that a foreign-born boy, or one from the New England States, will succeed in this city, and become a partner in our largest firms, much oftener than a born New York boy."⁹

With the settlement of the trans-Appalachian hinterland, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore engaged in a mighty struggle with one another for the conquest of western trade. Content no longer with near-by tributary districts, they sought to carve out economic dependencies and spheres of influence in the more distant country. This conflict of urban imperialisms was most strikingly evidenced in the rivalry for transportation routes connecting with the West. It is unnecessary here to do more than recall the main weapons with which this prolonged contest was waged — first with turnpikes, then with canals and, finally, with the all-conquering steam railroad. Meanwhile middle-western cities, inspired by the eastern example, entered upon a somewhat similar struggle for power, each seeking to enlarge its orbit of trading operations at the expense of rivals and to benefit from the new ties with the seaboard. With a view to the commercial possibilities of the farther West, Chicago, St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans pushed competing plans for the construction of a Pacific railroad, a maneuvering for position which had im-

⁹ J. A. Scoville (Walter Barrett, *pseud.*), *The Old Merchants of New York City* (New York, 1863), I, 194, cited with other evidence in Albion, *Rise of New York Port*, 241-252.

portant national political repercussions, notably in the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

This protracted strife for transportation facilities in the pre-Civil-War era determined the trend of future urban growth in all parts of the North. The Erie Canal, reenforced by the later railroad construction, established conclusively the preeminence of New York on the seaboard and in the nation. As the new lines of communication penetrated Middle America, they expedited settlement and energized cities into being; oftentimes the railroad ran through the main street.¹⁰ The rise of populous centers increased the market for foodstuffs, accelerated the invention of labor-saving implements such as the steel plow and the reaper, and thus furthered commercial agriculture, which in turn contributed to city growth. Chicago, though still far behind New Orleans, St. Louis, and Cincinnati in size and wealth, had by 1860 already acquired the economic sinews which would make her New York's chief rival before the century closed.

If the urban advance be measured in terms of the size of cities abroad, it is instructive to recall that in 1800 London, the largest European city, possessed around 800,000 people, Paris somewhat more than a half million. Philadelphia, then America's chief center, had less than 70,000, New York only 60,000. Though both London and Paris trebled in size by 1860, New York with 800,000 inhabitants (not counting Brooklyn) ranked as the third city of the Occidental world, while Philadelphia with nearly 565,000 surpassed Berlin. Six other American cities contained more than 100,000, four of them west of the Appalachians.

To master the new intricacies of metropolitan living called for something more than the easy-going ways of colonial times. Yet the municipal authorities, loath to increase taxes, usually shouldered new responsibilities only at the prod of grim necessity. It required the lethal yellow-fever epidemics of the 1790's to induce Philadelphia to set the example of installing a public water system. But with the speeding up of urban concentration after 1820 improvements came thick and fast. Over a hundred

¹⁰ "With the exception of such cities as Chicago, St. Louis and Cincinnati, settlers can hardly be said to have chosen their own localities," wrote Anthony Trollope, *North America* (New York, 1862), 441.

municipal water works were introduced before the Civil War, though in every case ignorance of the germ theory of disease necessarily centered attention on clear water rather than pure water. In 1822 Boston inaugurated gas lighting, and the following year she installed the first public-owned sewerage system. About the same time, regular stagecoach service was begun on the streets of New York, to be followed in the next decade by the introduction of horse-car lines. The primitive system of fire fighting by volunteer companies, however, continued everywhere until Boston in 1837 established a paid municipal department.

These civic advances were, of course, unevenly distributed. The smaller cities felt less keenly the pressure for change, while even the larger ones tended to subordinate community need to ulterior considerations. Thus, New York and Philadelphia, daunted by the political power of the volunteer companies, delayed the creation of fire departments until 1865 and 1870. Nor did any city try to combat the evil of slums which began to flourish along the seaboard in the 1840's as a result of the enlarging influx of immigrants. Recruiting their strength from the slum dwellers, the criminal classes, and the fire companies, political machines came into being, trafficking in franchises for the new municipal services and preparing the way for the notorious misrule of cities after the Civil War. The use of municipal offices for partisan purposes long antedated the introduction of the spoils system into state and national politics.

Despite such deterrent influences, it was from the cities that issued most of the humanitarian impulses of the pre-Civil-War period. The compactness of living dramatized all inequalities of condition, facilitated the banding together of the tender-hearted, and sometimes enlisted the support of wealthy philanthropists. The Tappan brothers of New York City spread their largess over a wide variety of reform causes. From the cities came the effective energies behind the establishment of free public education, the more humane treatment of the insane, penal reform, the beginning of free public libraries, and the woman rights' movement. Such places also exerted an important influence on the struggle for manhood suffrage, the effort to abolish war, and the antislavery cause.

In the cities, too, were felt the first stirrings of the labor movement. For the increasing numbers of urban wage-earners the so-called safety valve of the frontier failed to work. "The wilderness has receded," declared an eastern observer in 1840, "and already the new lands are beyond the reach of the mere laborer, and the employer has him at his mercy."¹¹ In self-protection the workingmen early in the 1830's organized trade unions, first along the seaboard and then in such inland cities as Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and St. Louis; and for a time the principal centers combined in a national federation of labor. Though the depression beginning in 1837 shattered most of the unions, the hard times turned men's thoughts to other schemes for curing the "diversities of extreme poverty and extreme wealth"¹² which city life rendered so glaring. Some fared forth into experimental communities where, by grace of Fourier, they hoped to demonstrate the practicability of just and humane living conditions.¹³ Others like George H. Evans and his group proposed to drain off the excess urban inhabitants by means of free homesteads. This thought figured prominently in the early discussions of the subject in Congress.¹⁴ Evans' suggestion of providing free transportation for settlers failed to gain support, however, and soon the whole homestead question became enmeshed in the slavery controversy.

The determined purpose of the city reformers to employ the power of government to remove social inequalities heightened the contrast between urban and frontier conceptions of democracy; the lag of the rural sections in cultural achievements marked an even wider gap between the two ways of life. The enlargement and multiplication of urban centers not only insured a greater appreciation and patronage of arts and letters, but immensely broadened the field for the recruitment of talent. To such communities were drawn many of the best minds of the

¹¹ Orestes A. Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," *Boston Quarterly Review*, III, 1840, p. 372.

¹² E. H. Chapin, *Humanity in the City* (New York, 1854), 20.

¹³ For a vigorous indictment of urban "incoherence and waste," see Albert Brisbane, *The Social Destiny of Man* (Philadelphia, 1840), chap. vii.

¹⁴ Fred A. Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus," *American Historical Review* (New York), XLI, 1935-1936, pp. 641-643.

countryside, for, as Dr. Holmes remarked, every considerable town had its "intellectual basin, or *suction-range*," as well as its economic gravitation field.¹⁵ The people in the cities, too, were the first to feel the stimulating impact of new currents of European thought.

A varied and vital intellectual life resulted, of which any nation might be proud. Magazines proliferated until every taste and interest was regaled; newspapers became legion; publishing houses sprang up to supply the unprecedented demand for books. The story of this richly creative period in American letters can be told almost wholly in terms of Boston and its environs and of New York. Imaginative literature, however, also had its devotees in Cincinnati, St. Louis, and other inland cities. In the related arts the urban record showed less distinction; yet, apart from architecture, American civilization made fresh advances. Architecture suffered because the mushroom growth of cities required new construction at a rate that caused utility and pretentiousness to overshadow aesthetic considerations. Progress in music consisted chiefly in the broadening of musical appreciation, though in Stephen C. Foster Pittsburgh supplied a composer of genius. The theater became firmly established as an urban institution, and players like Charlotte Cushman and Edwin Booth won a repute in England as well as at home. Painters no longer felt the urgent need of seeking inspiration and support abroad. Their prestige was high, the products of their brush found a ready market, and, with the formation of the National Academy of Design in 1826, New York became the nation's art center.

Whatever the benefits accruing to the higher life, the waxing importance of the city occasioned increasing fear and resentment among country dwellers. This was especially true of the years from 1820 to 1860, which saw the urban population grow elevenfold. Country ministers denounced big cities, "cursed with immense accumulations of ignorance and error, vice and crime"; farm journals exhorted young men not to sacrifice their independence in order to "cringe and flatter, and . . . attend upon the

¹⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* (Boston, 1892), *The Works of Oliver W. Holmes*, I, 127.

wishes of every painted and padded form of humanity.”¹⁶ The printing press poured forth books, such as Clement Robbins’ *Vampires of New York* and the anonymous paper-back series published by C. H. Brainard on the *Tricks and Traps* of New York, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago. Writers of popular fiction, sensing the sales possibilities, eagerly embroidered upon the theme. George Lippard’s melodramatic novel, *The Quaker City . . . A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery and Crime* (1844), ran through twenty-seven editions in five years.¹⁷ Whether the net effect was to lessen or enhance urban fascination would be difficult to say. Byron, it will be recalled, wrote of “Saint Augustine in his fine Confessions, which make the reader envy his transgressions.”

Politics also reflected the deepening rural distrust of city domination. The western opposition to the second United States Bank sprang largely from alarm at the control of credit facilities by the branch banks at Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Likewise, the widening breach between South and North rested in considerable part on differences between rural and urban ways of life. The South, possessing few sizable towns and believing itself yoked to agriculture by slavery, became increasingly isolated from the currents of civilization flowing through the northern cities. It did not join in establishing free public schools; it feared and misunderstood the social experimentation rampant in the urban North; and, lacking the necessary nerve centers for creative cultural achievement, it fell far behind in arts, science, and letters. Moreover, southern economic life lay under constant tribute to northern urban enterprise. “It is a hopeless task,” affirmed William Gregg, “to undertake to even approximate to the vast sums of wealth which have been transferred from the South to the North by allowing the Northern cities to import and export for us.”¹⁸ For twenty years before the war southern commercial conventions sought ways

¹⁶ Quoted in Harold F. Wilson, *The Hill Country of Northern New England* (New York, 1936), 70-72.

¹⁷ George A. Dunlap, *The City in the American Novel, 1789-1900* (Philadelphia, 1934), 67.

¹⁸ William Gregg, “Southern Patronage to Southern Imports and Domestic Industry,” *De Bow’s Review* (New Orleans), XXIX, 1860, p. 82.

and means to escape this subordination, but their hope of building their own trading centers had no chance for success so long as lands and Negroes held a superior attraction for capital.

Historians might well give greater attention to the question of the extent to which southern secession was a revolt against the urban imperialism of Yankeedom. The grievance of the planting elements seems clear; and the bitter comment of the *Charleston Mercury*, May 20, 1858, that "Norfolk, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, are only suburbs of New York," suggests the rankling resentment of the population centers.¹⁹ As Professor Russel's researches show, the southern towns and cities gave their powerful support to the movement for separation. Even New Orleans, despite its large admixture of northerners and foreign born, chose twenty secessionists and only four unionists to the state convention. According to the *Missourian*, John B. Henderson, the business class of Charleston believed that, once outside the Union, "Charleston in the course of ten years will become a New York. The merchants of Savannah . . . the merchants of Mobile and the merchants of New Orleans have the same opinion."²⁰ It is significant that one of the early acts of the Confederate and state authorities was to outlaw the accumulated indebtedness of many millions owing to northern merchants, bankers, and manufacturers.²¹

The years following the Civil War ushered in the modern era of cities.²² In the East and the Middle West urbanization proceeded apace. By 1890 New York-Brooklyn with nearly two and a half million people rivaled Paris, and Chicago and Philadelphia with more than a million each ranked as the sixth and seventh cities of the Occident. Hardly less significant was the rise of cities in the Far West and the New South. If most of

¹⁹ For the means employed by New York in "enslaving the cotton ports," see R. G. Albion, *Square-Riggers on Schedule* (Princeton, 1938), chap. iii.

²⁰ Russel, *Economic Aspects of Southern Sectionalism*, 184, 239-243, 251, 284-286.

²¹ Contemporary estimates of the amount varied from forty to four hundred million dollars. John C. Schwab, *The Confederate States of America, 1861-1865* (New York, 1901), 110-123.

²² Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Modern America, 1865-1878* (New York, 1927), and Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (New York, 1933), Arthur M. Schlesinger and Dixon R. Fox, eds., *A History of American Life*, VIII, X, explore many aspects of the new role of the city.

them seemed small by the new yardsticks of urban magnitude, their rate of growth was spectacular, and even their size would earlier have gained them respect. Thus, Los Angeles jumped from less than 5000 in 1860 to more than 100,000 in 1900, and Denver from nothing at all to 134,000, while Memphis with 23,000 in the earlier year exceeded 100,000 in the later. In the nation as a whole, the proportion of people living in towns of eight thousand or more grew from one out of every six persons in 1860 to about one out of four in 1880 and by 1900 to one in every three. Moreover, of this increasing horde of urban dwellers, considerably more than half resided in places of twenty-five thousand or more.

The city had at last become a national rather than a sectional institution. This development rested on the occupation of the Great West and the economic rehabilitation of the post-war South and, in all sections, on an application of business enterprise to the exploitation of natural resources such as the world had never known. To recount this material transformation at length would be to recite an oft-told tale. The urban dynamic, grotesquely magnified, was the governing force. Railroads, industrial combinations, financial power, legislative favors, formed the instruments of conquest. A complex of city imperialisms arose, each scheming for dominion, each battling with its rivals for advantage, and each perforce yielding eventual tribute to the lord of them all. "Every produce market, every share market," declared James Bryce, "vibrates in response to the Produce Exchange and Stock Exchange of New York."²³

As urban centers grew in size and wealth, they cast an ever-stronger enchantment over the mind of the nation. Walt Whitman, returning after a short absence to New York and Brooklyn in September, 1870, hymned the "splendor, picturesqueness, and oceanic amplitude and rush of these great cities." Nature's triumph lay in her mountains, forests, and seas, but he observed, "The work of man too is equally great . . . in these ingenuities, streets, goods, houses, ships — these hurrying, feverish, electric crowds of men."²⁴ Little wonder that young men and women

²³ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (2 vols., London, 1888), II, 692.

²⁴ Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (London, 1888), 13-14. Dr. Holmes, weary

yielded to the potent allure. "We cannot all live in cities," wrote Horace Greeley in the *New York Tribune*, February 5, 1867, "yet nearly all seem determined to do so. Millions of acres . . . solicit cultivation . . . ; yet hundreds of thousands reject this and rush into the cities."

Historians in their preoccupation with the dispersion of settlers over the wide expanse of the public domain have given little attention to this countermovement which even more profoundly altered the tissue of American life. In many parts the pull of the city depopulated the countryside. Over two-fifths of the townships of Pennsylvania, three-fifths of those of New England, and more than two-thirds of New York's suffered depletion between 1880 and 1890,²⁵ while the cities in these states grew by leaps and bounds. Similar rural losses occurred in the Middle West, though there the attraction of free homesteads doubtless played a larger part. The rapid dwindling of the open frontier during this decade came with little shock to a people who for many years had shown an increasing preference for city life and an eagerness to avail themselves of its social amenities and expanding economic opportunities. From 1790 to 1890 the whole population of the republic had grown 16-fold, the urban population 139-fold. The historic announcement of the superintendent of the census in 1890 was significant less as marking the end of an old America than as a long-overdue admission of the arrival of a new one.

If, as Walt Whitman thought, the city was the most comprehensive of the works of man, its lusty growth created problems which tried to the utmost the resourcefulness of the inhabitants. In some measure European experience furnished a guide, but to an increasing extent, notably in rapid transit, lighting, and communication, America pointed the way for the Old World. The record is extraordinary. Hardly had New York undertaken the first elevated railway in 1868 than San Francisco contrived the cable car, and hardly had this new means of conveyance begun to spread than Richmond demonstrated the superiority of the

of hearing sentimentalists quote Cowper's line, "God made the country, and man made the town," retorted, "God made the *cavern* and man made the *house!* What then?" Holmes, *Works*, V, 303.

²⁵ Josiah Strong, *The New Era* (New York, 1893), 167.

electric trolley system, and presently Boston added the subway. The need for better lighting led to the invention of Brush's outdoor arc-light and of Edison's incandescent bulb for indoors. Still another application of electric power, the telephone, laced the urban population into the texture of a neighborhood. By means of the multicelled department store, cities simplified the problem of shopping; and by means of the steel-framed skyscraper, they economized ground space by building their business districts upward.

This civic advance, however, entailed a shocking degradation of political standards. Americans had gained their experience in self-government under rural conditions; they had yet to learn how to govern concentrated populations. Preyed upon by self-interested men eager to exploit the expanding public utilities, municipal politics became a saturnalia of corruption. As Francis Parkman wrote, "Where the carcass is, the vultures gather together."²⁶ The Tweed Ring in New York was the symptom of a disease that afflicted Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and other communities as well. In Andrew D. White's measured opinion of the conditions, "With very few exceptions, the city governments of the United States are the worst in Christendom — the most expensive, the most inefficient, and the most corrupt."²⁷

Against the entrenched forces of greed and graft the reformers fought undismayed. Defeated at many points, they at least awakened the nation to the growing problems of social maladjustment and human misery which the teeming cities exhibited. Through a concerted attack on the slum evil they induced the New York legislature to adopt a series of laws for better housing, though the results proved disappointing. They replaced the indiscriminate alms-giving of early times with scientific principles of charity, and established social settlements and playgrounds. Organized religion, harking to the need, responded with slum missions, institutional churches, and the preaching of the social gospel. In the cities, too, the modern labor movement

²⁶ Francis Parkman, "The Failure of Universal Suffrage," *North American Review* (Boston), CXXVII, 1878, p. 20.

²⁷ Andrew D. White, "The Government of American Cities," *Forum* (New York), X, 1890-1891, p. 357.

was born, wresting concessions from the employing class through sheer bulk of numbers, joining with the humanitarians in securing factory legislation, and organizing labor's strength on an intercity, nationwide basis. Occasional voices speaking with a foreign accent cried up the advantages of socialism or anarchism, while Edward Bellamy, appalled by the ever-greater contrast between wealth and want in urban life, produced an American version of communism in his fanciful description of Boston as it would be in the year 2000.

The increasing tension of city life was reflected in a variety of ways. Hordes of people habituated to a rural environment had suddenly to adapt themselves to the frantic pace of urban communities. To this circumstance is to be attributed the startling growth of nervousness or neurasthenia, designated by one contemporary as "the national disease of America."²⁸ A New York medical authority, writing in 1881, descanted learnedly on the effects on the human organism of the heightened speed of movement, the constant struggle for survival, the discordant sounds of the streets, and the ceaseless mental excitements and endless distractions.²⁹ It was from this swelling number of nerve-racked urban folk that Mary Baker Eddy secured most of her converts to the new religion of Christian Science. It was partly due to the same reason that city dwellers for the first time turned to the systematic development of organized sports. If flabby muscles kept most of them from direct participation, each year saw greater throngs seeking an anodyne for their cares while watching professional contests.

Urban communities, however, made their greatest contribution as a cultural force. The larger cities now rounded out their cultural equipment. The establishment of art museums, the multiplication of public libraries, the increase of publishing houses, the founding of art schools, conservatories of music, and new universities — these were signs of urban maturity which deeply affected all who came in contact with them. Statistical studies, concerned in considerable part with men who won note

²⁸ Edward Wakefield, "Nervousness: the National Disease of America," *McClure's Magazine* (New York), II, 1894, pp. 302-307.

²⁹ G. M. Beard, *American Nervousness* (New York, 1881).

during these years, merely confirm what has already been evident as to the relation of urban birth to leadership in fields of achievement. Based on analyses of *Who's Who in America*, *American Men of Science*, and similar compilations, these investigations show conclusively the advantages resulting from concentrated wealth, superior educational and cultural opportunities, the friction of mind on mind, and the encouragement given to arts and letters. One student found that towns of eight thousand or more produced nearly twice as many persons of distinction as their proportionate share.³⁰ In particular fields, such as science, literature, art, and engineering, the urban differential was far greater. Such findings, however, understate the significance of the city, for they leave out of consideration the countless gifted individuals who, born in rural districts or in other nations, found in the urban world their Promised Land.

Statistical generalizations suggest the broad base of the city's cultural pyramid rather than its height. Only a full historical survey could disclose the emergence of towering figures in nearly every field of science, learning, arts, and letters during these years. Suffice it to say that the present generation gladly attests its indebtedness to the creative efforts of such men as Simon Newcomb in astronomy, J. Willard Gibbs in physical chemistry, Lester F. Ward in sociology, Charles W. Eliot in education, Augustus Saint-Gaudens in sculpture, H. H. Richardson in architecture, Edward A. MacDowell in music, and William Dean Howells in literature.

As the city forged ahead, imposing its economic fiat on the rest of the nation, developing ever more sharply its special way of life and opening new vistas of civilization, the rift between town and country reached threatening proportions. This antagonism has generally been conceived by historians in broad geographic terms. An accredited scholar, writing in the 1890's, saw the issue

³⁰ F. A. Woods, "City Boys versus Country Boys," *Science* (Cambridge, Mass.), N. S., XXIX, 1909, pp. 577-579. S. S. Visher, *Geography of American Notables* (Bloomington, 1928), *Indiana University Studies*, XV, no. 79, an illuminating analysis, lists other important studies in the footnotes to pages 7-8. Frederick J. Turner's discussion of "The Children of the Pioneers" in *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York, 1932), chap. x, fails to distinguish between midwestern notables of rural birth and those born in the towns and cities.

with clearer eyes. The "new sectionalism," he affirmed, is geographic only "in so far as the East is the section of the cities, while the South and West are the sections containing the bulk of the farmers." The decisive difference everywhere, he asserted, lay between urban and rural communities. "The people on the farms and in the villages in the East have shared no more in the advancing wealth of the past quarter of a century than the people on the farms and in the villages of the South and West." He estimated the average wealth of urban families at nearly three times that of rural families.³¹

If the typical country dweller had little conception of these larger economic factors, the passage of years brought him a growing sense of deprivation in his daily round of living. Contrasted with the rewards of urban life, he felt cheated of his due share of opportunities, comforts, and pleasures. Herbert Quick, looking back on his childhood days in Iowa, spoke particularly of the farm women, "pining for neighbors, for domestic help, for pretty clothes, for schools, music, art, and the things tasted when the magazines came in."³² Though many of the younger generation escaped to the cities, this rendered life all the more irksome for those who, unable to leave or preferring the land, believed themselves saddled with unfair handicaps. Undoubtedly the farmer accepted too readily the urban estimate of his calling. That opinion had changed with the increasing dominance of cities. In the words of a contemporary, "The tiller of the soil, who in the days of our fathers was the embodiment of economic independence," is now the "stock figure . . . only of the humorist . . . The 'sturdy yeoman' has become the 'hayseed.'" ³³

To this rural feeling of inferiority, this deepening sense of frustration, the historian must look for the basic explanation of the recurrent agrarian uprisings. Tangible economic grievances, particularly in times of agricultural depression, merely stirred

³¹ Charles B. Spahr, *An Essay on the Present Distribution of Wealth in the United States* (New York, 1896), 44-49. He drew the line between country and city at towns of 4000 inhabitants.

³² Herbert Quick, "Women on the Farms," *Good Housekeeping* (New York), LVII, 1913, pp. 426-436, esp. 427.

³³ Anon., "The Political Menace of the Discontented," *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston), LXXVIII, 1896, p. 449.

the smoldering embers into blaze. Such grievances assumed a variety of forms, but all of them represented extensions of urban imperialism at the cost of rural welfare. Farm leaders likened the big cities to giant cuttlefish running out their suckers into the blood stream of the countryside. It was left to the greatest of the agrarian champions, addressing the Democratic convention of 1896, to hurl the ultimate challenge to urban pretensions. "Burn down your cities and leave our farms," he cried, "and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."³⁴ In the election that followed, the great cities of the North and West responded by casting decisive majorities against Bryan and free silver.³⁵

Few persons in 1900 could have foreseen the trends of urban development which the twentieth century has brought forth. These attest the vast recuperative powers of American society. One of the most notable advances has been the concerted effort to bridle the predatory forces which, in James Bryce's phrase, had made municipal government "the one conspicuous failure of the United States."³⁶ To this end, four hundred and fifty cities have adopted the commission-manager plan. A radical departure from the clumsy nineteenth-century form which had been based on the analogy of state governments, the new system seeks to apply to complex urban communities the principles of expert management rendered familiar by business corporations. Along with this change have occurred the first systematic and sustained attempts to substitute forethought for drift in the development of cities. Dating from 1905, the movement has spread in every direction, yielding rich dividends for community welfare and civic sightliness. In its wider consequences city planning

³⁴ William J. Bryan, *The First Battle, A Story of the Campaign of 1896* (Chicago, 1896), 205.

³⁵ *Nation* (New York), LXIII, November 12, 1896, p. 358.

³⁶ Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, I, 608. Recent works shedding light on the twentieth-century city include Harlan P. Douglass, *The Suburban Trend* (New York, 1925); Murray H. Leiffer, *City and Church in Transition* (Chicago, 1938); William F. Ogburn, *Social Characteristics of Cities* (Chicago, 1937); Roderick D. McKenzie, *The Metropolitan Community* (New York, 1933); Thompson and Whelpton, *Population Trends in the United States*; and Urbanism Committee of National Resources Committee, *Our Cities, Their Role in the National Economy* (Washington, 1937).

has stimulated interest in county planning and state planning, and helps to account for the recent emphasis on regional and national planning.

The new municipal ideals, operating with varying intensity in different parts of the nation, made progress in face of the continued headlong rush into the cities both from the countryside and from foreign lands. With a third of the people living in places of eight thousand and upward in 1900, approximately half did so by 1930.³⁷ In the latter year nearly a third of the population resided in centers of one hundred thousand or more. During the three decades the country population gained less than eleven and a half million while the city population leaped more than thirty-five million. In reality, urban preponderance was bigger than these figures indicate, thanks to the rise of great metropolitan districts in all parts of the nation. These supercommunities had begun to form in the nineteenth century as swifter means of transportation and communication flung the population outward into the suburbs. But it was the coming of the automobile and the motor truck that raised them to their paramount position in the national economy. The census of 1930 disclosed ninety-six metropolitan districts, composed of one or more central cities with peripheral towns and rural communities, each district comprising a territory united by common social, industrial, and financial interests. The metropolitan areas of New York City lay in three states, embracing a region twice the size of Rhode Island and containing 272 incorporated communities. Greater Chicago in 1930 included 115 incorporated places, and greater San Francisco, 38.

These urban provinces, new to the American scene, possess greater economic, social, and cultural unity than most of the states. Yet, subdivided into separate municipalities and often lying in more than one state, they face grave difficulties in meeting the essential needs of the aggregate population. Some students of local government, despairing of any other solution,

³⁷ By using the census definition of a city as a place of 2500 or more, 51.4 per cent of the people instead of 43.8 may be regarded as urban dwellers in 1920, and 56.2 per cent instead of 49.1 in 1930. The back-to-the-land movement, which affected perhaps a million persons during the years 1930-1933, seems to have been only a temporary effect of the Great Depression.

have proposed separate statehood for the largest metropolitan districts without regard to existing state lines.³⁸ It is clear that new and unanticipated strains are being placed on the federal system framed by the Fathers for a simple agricultural economy.

Of all the new trends in urban development, however, none has had such profound effects on American civilization as the altered relationship between country and city. Historians usually ascribe the subsidence of the agrarian revolt of the nineties to the discovery of fresh sources of gold supply. But perhaps a more fundamental explanation lies in the amelioration of many of the social and psychological drawbacks of farm life. The last decade of the century beheld an ampler provision of rural educational facilities, a rapid extension of the good-roads movement due to the bicycle craze, the penetration of the countryside by an increasing network of interurban trolley lines, the introduction of rural free delivery, and the spread of farm telephones following the expiration of the basic Bell patents. All these events helped to break down the ancient isolation and loneliness, and lent a new attraction to country existence.

Yet these mitigations seem small, compared with the marvels which the present century has wrought. The automobile has shortened all distances, while the radio and the movie have brought urbanizing influences to nearly every rural home. At the same time the tractor and other labor-saving devices have lightened the drudgery of the day's task.³⁹ Between 1900 and 1935 the mechanical power used in agriculture grew nearly eight-fold. Moreover, both the state and national governments have increasingly employed their powers to improve the economic and social status of the farmer. Some of the farthest reaching New Deal policies, such as the Tennessee Valley development, the triple-A effort, and the rural-electrification program, have had this as a major purpose. Though many inequalities remain, the country dweller has achieved a position in American society of which his Populist forebears could not have dreamed.

While the farmers have shared more richly in advantages once

³⁸ Howard W. Odum and Harry E. Moore, *American Regionalism* (New York, 1938), 127.

³⁹ E. G. McKibben and R. A. Griffin, *Changes in Farm Power and Equipment: Tractors, Trucks, and Automobiles* (Philadelphia, 1938).

confined to townfolk, urban life in turn has become increasingly ruralized. Parks, playgrounds, and tree-lined boulevards have multiplied far out of proportion to the growth of population, while enlarging numbers of city workers have used the new means of transit to go farther and farther into the rustic suburbs. Retail trade has also felt the centrifugal pull, and even factories have shown a tendency to move outward into villages where taxes are low, and food and rent cheap. The extension of giant power will doubtless accelerate this diffusion and afford an increasing number of wage-earners a chance to work and live in semi-rural surroundings.

When the city encroaches sufficiently on the country and the country on the city, there will come an opportunity for the development of a type of civilization such as the world has never known. The old hard-and-fast distinction between urban and rural will tend to disappear, and a form of society take its place which, if America is to realize her promise, will blend the best features of the two traditional modes of life.

From humble beginnings in the early days of settlement the city has thus traced a varied course. In Europe the urban community emerged by imperceptible stages out of the town economy and culture of the Middle Ages; by comparison the American city leaped into being with breath-taking suddenness. At first servant to an agricultural economy, then a jealous contestant, then an oppressor, it now gives evidence of becoming a comrade and cooperator in a new national synthesis. Its economic function has been hardly more important than its cultural mission or its transforming influence on frontier conceptions of democracy. A force both for weal and woe, the city challenges the attention of scholars who will find in its ramifying history innumerable opportunities for rewarding research.