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One Foot on the Soil

Louis Bromfield



IT IS a long estab-
lished belief of histo-
rians that vast
concentrations
of populations in cities are one of the
principal factors in the weakening
and eventual decline of great na-
tions. Behind the theory—which is
perhaps a good deal more than a the-
ory—lie many factors, not the least
that life in great cities is an unnat-
ural life beset with perils to health,
physical and mental development, as
well as economic and social peace and
prosperity. It is not for nothing that
the great preponderance of the lead-
ers of every modern nation have come
from small communities or agricul-
tural areas. Much of the instability
of our modern life, political and social
as well as intellectual, has undoubt-

edly come out of the crowding into
cities of millions of people who find
there neither economic stability nor
moral standards, nor decent housing.

Our own great cities have grown up
not by plan or design, guided by any
wisdom or understanding, but wholly
by accident in the immense scramble
for economic and industrial develop-
ment which has made the record of
American development a fantastic
chapter in the history of the world.
Our cities grew up, helter-skelter, over
night; here because there was a deep
harbor suitable for shipping and world
commerce, there because coal, water
and iron ore met at a central shipping
port. Into these cities were poured,
during the nineteenth century and the
beginning of the twentieth, vast
“herds” of cheap immigrant labor
drawn from the economically de-
pressed and politically oppressed areas

* LOUIS BROMFIELD has been named “America’s greatest story-teller” by leading literary critics. *Early Autumn*, his sixth book, brought him a Pulitzer Prize in 1926. Since then his reputation has grown with a steady procession of novels and short stories. When he writes of the soil Bromfield is at home because of his large fund of practical knowledge gathered on his modern farm near Lucas, Ohio. This article, and the second part to be published next month, will soon appear as a chapter in *Cities Are Abnormal*, edited by Elmer T. Peterson and released by the University of Oklahoma Press.

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of all Europe. It must not be overlooked that the bulk of these were encouraged to come here in order to keep down labor costs.

For nearly half a century these unfortunate people found they had merely exchanged one kind of oppression in the old world for another kind in the new. They were no better housed; indeed, all too often the tenements and shacks into which they were moved were worse than the buildings which had sheltered them in Europe. They were paid starvation wages and acquired the name of "Hunkies," "Dagoes" and "Polacks" among the native American population. They were crowded together in dismal areas where their only social life ranged from the church on Sunday to the pool-room and saloon during the rest of the week. Many of them never learned to speak any English, and for at least a generation or two no process of assimilation whatever took place in these ramshackle built cities, where skyscrapers, handsome bank buildings and museums existed side by side with slums as dreary as could be found in Liverpool or Warsaw or Bombay and Calcutta. And presently, speaking their own language or dialect, reading their own native language newspapers, they achieved a disrepute which, if not entirely undeserved, had been produced, not out of the elements of the stock which they represented but much more out of the abominable conditions in which they were forced to live from birth to death. The Irishman, politically inclined by na-

ture, got the name for corruption in politics, the Jew and the Italian for being the source of most of our gangsters, bootleggers and black market operators. The truth is that all of them huddled together under abominable living conditions, with permanent poverty and the periodical threat of starvation hanging over them, with only the street corner, the saloon and the pool-room as a social background, never had a chance. A few individuals emerged as active, good citizens and leaders, but the greater number were never able to overcome the abominable handicap of their environment.

This may appear a harsh statement but it is, I believe, no more or less than truth. Responsibility for the situation must be placed largely upon our great disorganized, unplanned cities.

It was inevitable that one day the nation should have to pay for the curse of her ramshackle cities in terms of crime, of social unrest, of class bitterness, of bossism, of a decline in the standards of health, intelligence and morality. I have never yet found that Emerson was wrong in his philosophy of compensation, and under that law we are paying off now, and will continue to pay off in the years to come, for the greed, the recklessness, the economic distortion of our exploitation of the fabulous natural and human resources of America. The greed for cheap labor crowded more and more people into already congested areas; the greed of individuals and corporations brought inevitably into existence not only crime and ill-health

but the growth of violent political and economic ideas imported in essence from areas in Europe where they were born of both political and economic depression.

IT IS already apparent that the great development of industry during the past century and a half has been made at a heavy cost to the human race—in over-production in certain fields and at certain times, in faulty distribution, in living conditions, but most of all in the economic instability of larger and larger segments of our population. Outside of the areas with shipping facilities for world commerce, industry alone has been responsible for the growth of that monstrosity, the modern city, for which there is no explanation save that of greed, haste and a lack of all planning and common sense or conscience.

I think it can be said with justice that the only element of the population which has made any real gain through the concentration of industries into vast cities like Detroit or Pittsburgh is that minute segment of the population which owned the earth upon which such cities were built. And in any decentralization of such cities, that is the only element of our population which would not gain in every possible sense. Consequently the single taxers would assert they have no right to special consideration or protection. Followers of Henry George would hold that most of these owners of real estate are not entitled to the vast fortunes which they have acquired, not through their own initia-

tive, brains or enterprise, but simply through the fact that they happened to own the land or purchased it, speculating upon the results of the brains, initiative and honest hard work of more worthy citizens. In any process of decentralization this tiny element of our nation, the urban speculators, will be the only ones to protest, and their outcry is scarcely worth consideration in face of the immense gains to be achieved by a more reasonable distribution of population.

I have not overlooked the fact that the problems implicit in any sudden process of decentralization are not quite so simple as they might appear at first glance. They involve reduction in tax income to the city itself, reduction of income from the shares of certain real estate corporations and the dislocation of certain banking enterprises. But all of these are adjustable over a long period of time, and the rewards to the nation as a whole in terms of health, living conditions, citizenship and individual economic security far outweigh them.

The idea of decentralization of cities is by no means new. Economists, sociologists and philosophers have thought and written upon decentralization for more than thirty years in America, and in European countries for an even longer period; but in the past the discussion has been limited largely to the realm of theory rather than of practical application and fact. The plans, the purposes, the results have been largely the concern of the theorists rather than the *doers*, of the professor rather than the working-

man, the industrialist and the white collar and professional citizen who are the ones directly affected. But recently the whole idea of decentralization has come forward upon a new basis, gaining its support from the practical rather than the theoretical planners. That this movement has been spontaneous and over a wide field makes it the more important and the prospect of final achievement far more likely and immediate.

Henry Ford, himself partly responsible for the insane concentration of the vast automobile industry in Detroit, was one of the first to understand the perils and disadvantages of huge industrial urban concentrations. For years past he has been an active supporter of the "one foot on the soil" plan of industrial development, and the experiments he has made with establishing factories in small towns and agricultural areas have been eminently successful on the score of economic stability, security, better health and less social restlessness. Recently other industrialists have come to believe that in factories established in uncrowded areas, where better housing, living and educational conditions and more individual economic security were possible, there is certain to be greater working efficiency, both in

quantity and quality, and a good deal less trouble from strikes and labor disputes. Not the least evil effect of cities is the tension provoked by the noise, the congestion and the constant petty annoyances of daily life in overcrowded and unhealthy areas.

It has long been Ford's idea that every working man should have a house and five acres or more of land which he *owned*. Ford, like many other thinkers, sees such an establishment both as an economic anchor and a cure for the migratory, hand-to-mouth, fly-by-night character of much of our industrial labor. The land holdings of the Ford employees in rural areas are not limited to five acres. Many of his employees operate average-size farms successfully, an enterprise which today is possible with the eight-hour, five-day week and improved agricultural machinery. Many of the workingmen look upon their agricultural activities not as work but as exercise and recreation.

FROM the point of view of economic security, the European workingman, with his ancient tradition of "one foot on the soil," is in a far better situation than his more highly paid American brother. It is not only that in normal times his living costs are less, and very

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often in exact ratio to his wages on a different level from that of the American workingman, but that he has that individual economic security which comes of owning land and a home, the kind of economic security which is and must always be the bulwark of democracy. In this country large segments of our industrial population, crowded into the great cities, or migrating from city to city in search of seasonal employment, have arrived at a point of ultimate economic insecurity in which the worker has no individual savings, owns nothing, and the moment he is laid off finds himself upon the public relief or the equivalent of some half-dole, half-made-work program. The evils of the instalment plan, which in normal times keeps a high percentage of this nation constantly in debt, flourish in the big metropolitan industrial areas.

Let us take the case of the fairly typical industrial worker in America. For the sake of making a point, I shall take an extreme case. Let us call the man Joe Smith.

Likely as not, and especially in boom times with high wages, he and his family live in a rented house and buy absolutely everything they consume. Much of this—furniture, automobiles, even clothing—is bought upon the instalment plan or upon some form of credit. Nearly always Joe Smith is in debt for his wages at least a month, perhaps many months ahead. Suppose that suddenly, perhaps for some minor reason, production in the factory where he works is cut and he is laid off. The very next

day he and his family are virtually in the street, their credit cut off, the furniture and automobile only partly paid for. The furniture and automobile can, by law, be taken back by the dealer because payments are uncompleted.

A man and his family can live without an automobile. They *can* live in a wretched fashion without furniture, but they cannot live without shelter, without clothing, without food. The articles partly paid for can be reclaimed by the dealer, who does not want them and, if there is an economic decline in progress, can find no market for them as secondhand commodities. Joe Smith loses the money he has paid on instalments and the dealer or manufacturer loses what has not been paid.

The case of Joe Smith multiplied a few times begins starting a small depression or accelerating one which has already begun, cutting down markets and consequently production, thereby causing more men in the same precarious state as Joe to be laid off. Too many of these city-dwelling men represent the same problem as Joe Smith and contribute to the growing sum total, and presently what at first is only a small hole in the dike becomes a flood of economic disaster and depression.

But the story does not end there. Joe Smith and his fellow workers, with their families, perhaps hundreds of thousands or a few millions of them, have to be taken care of, either by outright relief or by some expensive make-work program. And this bur-

den can be paid for only in higher and higher taxes, further depressing enterprise, markets and production, affecting not only industry but banks, agriculture, distribution service, invested money and the whole of the economic structure.

Since the Civil War we have never had any real prosperity in America but only a series of booms and depres-

sions, each in its essence equally destructive, each beginning with the economic instability of the individual and pyramiding on the one hand into a speculative economy based on credit or the instalment plan (which produces only a fictitious and unstable prosperity), or on the other pyramiding into a colossal and catastrophic depression.



Automatic Venders—200 B. C. Style

MOST of us regard the automatic vending machine as a comparatively new invention. Not so. The first machine of this type of record was invented two hundred years before the birth of Christ, by Ctesibius, also the inventor of a siphon and engine operated by steam.

These vending machines were placed at the entrances to Egyptian temples and dispensed purifying waters to the worshippers.

The machine was a very clever arrangement, having a small opening in the top through which five drachmae were dropped onto a flat disc. The weight of the coins opened a valve, allowing a small amount of liquid to flow into a container held at the bottom of the dispenser. The coins then slid off the disc into a bank, thus closing the valve and cutting off the flow of water.

Contributed by J. W. IRVING



»I hold if the Almighty had ever made a set of men that should do all the eating, and none of the work, He would have made them with mouths only and no hands, and if He had ever made another class that He had intended should do all the work and none of the eating, He would have made them without mouths and with only hands.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN