

The City: The Hope of Democracy

Most critics of American politics, including even so able and impartial an observer as Mr. Bryce, have agreed that the government of our cities is the one conspicuous testimony to the very partial success, if not to the failure, of our democracy. Yet Mr. Howe, with an appearance of paradox worthy of George Bernard Shaw, asserts that the city is not the despair but the hope of democracy.*

He accepts joyously the predictions of Mr. H. G. Wells as to the extension of our cities, and is not appalled by the prospect of the whole of Manhattan Island becoming "a mountainous pile of sky-scraping buildings, devoted to banking, business, wholesale establishments, offices and public purposes," the population being driven for residence "far out into New Jersey, Connecticut and New

* *THE CITY: THE HOPE OF DEMOCRACY.* By *Fred-eric C. Howe.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$1.50.

York State." He foresees Pittsburgh and Cleveland with two million inhabitants each, and "the intervening region, as well as the southern shore of Lake Erie, one long succession of manufacturing towns, like unto the midland cities of England." But the squalor, ugliness, vice and misery of those same English midland cities, the blasting of human life in the inferno between Birmingham and Wolverhampton, he expects to see prevented in America and eliminated in Europe by the beneficial action of democracy, and yet more democracy.

In language fervent with conviction and faith, and somewhat too profuse and over-emphasized for literary effectiveness, he sketches a program of possible advance which will give the next generation an earthly paradise instead of an inferno in urban districts. Not that the most incorrigible optimist can be blind to the terrible cost of city life to-day, to the social wreckage—the diseased and the criminal, the family decay and extinction—caused by the uncertainty of employment, the unrelenting stress, and the high rents and incidental charges in crowded areas. But in the very places where a few years ago the gloom was deepest the evidences of a dawning day of social uplifting are at present brightest. Just that crowding of humanity, that excitement and rush which break down the weakest, produce the political ferment and force the recognition of social solidarity which are bringing a cure.

Not among the fields and the mountains, but in the hotbeds of humanity, has the spirit been born which promises to transform our political and social life. Even since Mr. Howe's book was written a new birth of democratic rule has been celebrated. "Today," he says, "Boss Cox rules the servile city of Cincinnati as a medieval baron did his serfs." Already that boss has retired, wounded unto death in the great battle of November 7, when also other bosses equally strong and hoary in sin went down before the hosts of the reformers in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Delaware and New York.

Most valuable is Mr. Howe's exposition of the controlling part that franchise corporations play in the debauching of our politics. He shows "with cogency that municipal ownership and

operation of public monopolies alone will remove the temptations to the subsidizing of bosses, the bribing of voters and the corrupting of legislators. So long as "business men," connected socially with the "best" sections of the population, have a chance to reap unearned harvests of fabulous richness by controlling the monopoly in city services, so long will the interests and the conscience of the educated and the powerful be in conflict and the way of the reformer be hard. But speedily the plain folk, whose vision is undazzled with the gleam of "made dollars," are setting themselves to remove this irresistible temptation from before their "betters," as the votes in New York, Cleveland and Chicago have recently shown. They are determined to brave the risks of inefficient management, high wages for municipal employees and low charges for consumers rather than continue to pay incalculable millions to money-mad magnates for their corrupting services. Even the influence of civil servants in elections they are willing to face in preference to the influence of franchise owners.

Along with the new democratic program of municipal operation goes a strengthening determination to furnish the lowliest citizens, by collective effort, with the means of education, recreation and health on a scale never before imagined. Parks, baths, vacation schools, gymnasiums, lectures, concerts, theaters, technical institutes, civic centers under city control—these and a score of other things to make a full human life easy to every city dweller—must be furnished out of the common purse.

"But how shall they be paid for?" the alarmed taxpayer will ask. Mr. Howe has a complete answer. The unearned increment of land values, which a thriftless public now allows the private landlord to appropriate, shall be reserved for its creator—the community. The amount of that increment is colossal beyond the dreams of the unheeding. New York city's bare land is worth the unthinkable amount of \$184,884,430 per annum, and increases each year by about \$140,000,000 in capital value. The full value would pay for a track of farms worth \$50 an acre which should be a mile wide and girdle the entire globe four times.

Philadelphians pay their landlords for the use of the city's site some \$44,000,000 a year and allow these favorites of earth to add \$19,000,000 each twelve months to their fortunes as the result of the joint exertions and necessities of their fellow citizens. "That stupendous monument of jobbery, the City Hall, which has been in process of erection for years, could have been paid for in sixteen months out of this annual increment alone." Chicago, San Francisco, Cleveland and every other city makes a similar exhibit. Why should an awakened democracy continue to lavish these more than regal gifts upon a few land owners while its own children by the millions are starving for better opportunities of life? Notice that our author does not propose to recall the reckless gifts of the past; he only suggests that we cease to waste our substance in the future. True, he does argue for the transfer of all city taxes from buildings and personal property to land values; but such a scheme nobody would call confiscatory, any more than the higher charges upon realty caused by the present lax collection of personal taxes is confiscatory. And since such a change would make all taxes easy to collect and would stimulate house building and so reduce rents, an alert community is likely to adopt it.

Every leader in city politics will find facts and arguments in this book to stimulate his hope and to pilot his activities.