

SOCIOLOGY

City-Dwellers Are Ghosts

Sociologist Sees Life in a Big City as Unreal; Will Lead to Dictatorship, Disaster Unless Checked

By EMILY C. DAVIS

IF YOU live in one of the great cities in this civilization of ours, you have a mere ghost-like existence!

So declares Lewis Mumford, sociologist, in a startling volume on "The Culture of Cities."

Writing in dark-blue pessimism, this modern Jeremiah reports that the world's cities grow steadily bigger—and worse. Life in a big city is far from the enviable adventure it appears to folks on the farmhouse porch or on Main Street. Contrariwise, the greater the city, the less real living a human being can experience in it. The city man's brain bulges with knowledge about things. But pin him down, and his life story is pretty meager.

Says Mr. Mumford: Passive crowds know life by reading, looking, listening. They are bordering on a pathological state.

But cheer up, for the worst is yet to come.

Giant cities are proving as unmanageable as monster Frankenstein. Their ugly traits are running wild. People who put their trust in metropolitan greatness are being dragged down in a whirlpool of graft and privilege-seeking, and racketeering and gangster dictatorships, and fear and moral apathy.

Foresees Ruin

And if nobody stops the vicious downward spiral, Mr. Mumford foresees that New York, London, Chicago, and scores of other great cities may end up bang! in the messy ruined state of Babylon and Tyre.

It sounds unlikely. But then Babylon-on-the-Euphrates probably looked durable, too.

There is one ray of hope. The sociologist says the thing to do is "cast off the dead form of the metropolitan order."

It sounds like a staggering big job. Boiled down to specific suggestions, what he advises is regional planning. Dispersing human ant-hills, with their swarming millions, he would create new centers of industrial and civic life which fit more solidly into the natural surroundings of a given region. The garden city

fits into this scheme of things. But that is only a small part of the planning required. Mr. Mumford believes that we can't patch up our present system. We must give up our worship of skyscraper magnificence. No more giant cities. No more haphazard efforts to farm untamed land just because nobody is using it. Whole countries would be rebuilt to the new pattern of regional development.

Whether this will be done remains unguessable. It is no more vast and overwhelming than the reorganization Soviet Russia has tackled. Mr. Mumford thinks it will come because the great invention called The City has turned out so badly. The big question before the western world, he says, is this: "whether disintegration must be completed before a fresh start is made."

The evolution of the city has been a downward trend, it seems, ever since the Middle Ages. Stoutly defending

medieval cities, Mr. Mumford declares they were more livable than any built since. We hear people talk of typical medieval dirt and overcrowding. But that is just gossip that started in the Renaissance, after the Middle Ages, and is still being repeated.

Our skyscraper cities can trace a direct family line back to those medieval towns. Starting about the tenth century, a huddle of frightened country folk sought their feudal lord's protection, and came to live close to his castle wall.

On market day, in such communities, the fishermen, craft workers, and peasants gathered for trading, and presently they had the idea of enclosing suburbs and castle with a great wall, and putting themselves inside it for permanent safety. Considering what Viking raids and feudal gangsters were in those days, it was a wise thought.

The towns which developed in the next five centuries are praised on the grounds that they were surprisingly adequate. Houses generally had sizable gardens at the rear. There were orchards



GONE

Great Babylon doubtless seemed like an everlasting city to its inhabitants. Where is Babylon now?



IS THIS DOOMED?

The hanging gardens of Babylon-on-the-Hudson. To Mr. Mumford they are only a pain in the eye.

and parks and fields inside the city walls, and people enjoyed more usable open space than city people have seen since, except in modern suburbs.

Sanitation was crude, though not necessarily bad. And so far as the horror stories of plague go, Mr. Mumford is ready to remind you that there is no proof that plague visitations were much worse than in American or European towns of the early nineteenth century. And don't forget the flu deaths of 1918, either!

In medieval towns, he says, you could wake to the singing of birds and the chiming of bells—and people got up in those days, probably, when the music began. Almost everybody sang at work, and there were even work songs for each craft. Buildings were not quaint. That's just our modern idea. They were fresh-painted and colorful. And the people went about their city full of the normal excitement of living. The city was theirs. In Florence, citizens voted on the type of column to adorn their Cathedral.

There is a good deal more to be said for medieval town life. But perhaps you get an idea of why this sociologist thinks those were the good old city days.

It didn't last. Times changed. The pattern of city life altered. And community spirit turned sour.

Skipping along the sad story—it be-

gins to be sad from here on—Mr. Mumford tells us that Renaissance towns were made elegant for the gentleman. But then, and later, as much as one-fourth of the city's people, by estimate, were casuals or beggars. Until nineteenth century humanitarian feeling was aroused, it was taken for granted that a sizable part of a city's people would be destitute. Thousands begged, did odd jobs, picked pockets or otherwise lived by their wits. Such was life in seventeenth and eighteenth century in London, Paris, Vienna, Madrid, Berlin.

The poor who could afford a roof over their heads crowded into tenements. Land speculation had shut them out from the chance of owning a house and a garden. Slum properties were profitable for the wealthy. The city was a two-faced world of grand avenues and fetid slums.

Came the industrial age, and factories with grand new machinery sprang up.

Progress? Far from it. Industrial towns had a standard of housing—the standard was one room to a family.

Says Mr. Mumford scornfully: "A pitch of foulness and filth was reached that the lowest serf's cottage scarcely achieved in medieval Europe."

William Cobbett, the great English reformer of the early nineteenth century, could think of London only in terms of

a repulsive tumor. His preferred name for the city was "The Wen."

Even upper classes came to take overcrowding and dark, dingy quarters for granted. They lived in slums, though they would have been shocked to hear you say so.

As for the beautification of these machine age cities—well, Mr. Mumford has a name for the clutter of Swiss chalets and Italian villas and Moorish palaces that the Victorian era complacently admired. He is not complimentary. He calls the industrial city of the nineteenth century the Old Curiosity Shop.

Megalopolis

And now, coming to our own resplendent era, you can see what Mr. Mumford calls by a Greek coined name, Megalopolis—the Big City. And when he calls a city Megalopolis, he doesn't smile. He means that it is swollen to abnormal gigantism—a monster.

Thanks to machine age inventions, Megalopolis is a curious blot on the landscape, according to his way of thinking. Elevators and skyscrapers make it possible to squeeze an incredible number of people onto a pocket-handkerchief scrap of land. Subways and fast trains lure city people out to suburban homes; but as the suburbs grow, the city grows with them, and still more people crowd in.

Subways are traveling prisons, in which people spend vast amounts of time "upon an activity that has flatly no value in itself." Think that over. It's worth pondering.

To get the tremendous water supplies needed, a city like New York has to tap sources a hundred miles away. That's a wartime danger the average person never thinks of. Mr. Mumford warns us:

"Should an enemy disorganize the water supply of the metropolis for as much as three days, the result would be a far more horrible loss of life than the worst conceivable vomit of poison gas from the skies."

And yet, even with Mussolini's cheery forecast that all the big cities may be pulverized in the next war, city dwellers generally imagine themselves reaching for a gas mask, diving for a cellar and being fairly safe.

Right now, without waiting for any war, the city dweller is practically living a ghost life, in a world that he knows only through the powerful medium of white paper.

Believe it or not, the swish and

crackle of paper is more typically the theme song of city life than the whine of machines. There's a name for that, too. This sociologist calls our vast recording and reading enterprise—all the books, card catalogs, newspapers, press agent activities, deeds, contracts, letters, propaganda—a ravaging flood of paper—the White Plague.

The masses, unable to live well rounded lives, fall back too heavily on reading, and the movies, and listening to the radio, and watching professional sports, and otherwise experiencing life at second hand.

The cycle of city evolution, if unchecked, leads on downward. Over-expansion of industry and questionable speculations are followed by depressions. Imperialistic wars, that we hear so much about, result in starvation, disease, and uncertainty that affect widening circles far beyond battlefields.

Dictators

To restore a semblance of order, come forward the dictators such as Mussolini and Hitler, who make martial law and wartime emergency discipline the everyday life for millions.

This stage ends in a deliberate cult of savagery, warns the sociologist. The arts and sciences cease to flourish. Barbarian invasions threaten, within and without. An exodus from the cities begins.

After that, one more picture: war, famine, and disease wracking both city and countryside, and the cities go down in ruin like the ancient fallen ones—Babylon, Nineveh, Armageddon, Antioch, Troy—

That may be averted, as we told, if human beings will shake off their inertia, and do something. Our civilization has drifted along, exploring and experimenting, and feeling happy over its success in taming the wilderness. But now, it begins to be possible to look back and see what's been done. And the picture is less lovely than we supposed.

What with forests recklessly demolished, grasslands washed bare of vegetation, slum-ugly patches in every city, and all the rest of the things that have

gone wrong, the sociologist's suggestion is that we must re-settle our planet.

North America is recognizing this need, he says, returning to forest and grazing land some of the lands that were never good for farming. There are large and small efforts to clean out alleys and build homes. The business of rising above our machine age and creat-

ing a new environment offering a good life to the millions is being seriously studied in countries everywhere.

It is a job that would have baffled Hercules. But the twentieth century may have to swing it.

This article was edited from manuscript prepared by Science Service for use in illustrated newspaper magazines. Copyright, 1938, by Every Week Magazine and Science Service.

Science News Letter, October 15, 1938

FORESTRY

Rebuilding of Ruined Forests Confronts New England

With Half of Trees Down in Southern Part of State, Cooperation of State and Federal Agencies Is Secured

REBUILDING of the hurricane-ruined forests to their former estate as a prime natural resource is an outstanding task now being undertaken by New England as the people turn to the task of reconstructing their battered communities. Representing New England's forestry interests, Ward Shepard, director of the Harvard Forest, has been in consultation with the U. S. Forest Service, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration and other government agencies, discussing Federal participation in meeting the present emergency and in setting up a long-time reconstruction program.

At present, about half of southern New England's trees are down. What once were forests and farm woodlots are tangled heaps of splintered trunks and limbs piled like giant match sticks and waiting for sparks to turn a literal inferno loose. The second tropical disturbance, which poured heavy rains on the ruins, was a cause of thanksgiving to the anxious watchers, for it gave insurance against forest fires for a week or two.

In the meantime it is hoped to get the emergency fire-prevention program into operation. First step will be the recruiting of officers and personnel. U. S. Forest Service experts are already on the ground, and companies of the CCC and WPA are being moved up to the front. As far as practicable, emergency worker corps from adjacent states will also be moved into the area of action, and the knots of official red tape will be cut to the limit.

A five-fold scheme of attack has been laid out: (1) Forty-foot strips will be

cleared of down timber along all highways. (2) Roads and fire-lanes will be reopened through the forested areas as fast as axes and saws can be plied. (3) Extra men will be put on fire patrol. (4) Fire lookout towers (they are all down now) will be rebuilt. (5) Down timber will be removed.

The last of these five jobs is of course the biggest and the most difficult to carry out. Yet it must be completed, with saw and axe where possible and with controlled burning where necessary, for the tangled heaps of dead trees are not only an immediate fire hazard but they will in time come to harbor terrific concentrations of insect and fungus pests that will menace trees left standing and the new growths of timber that will soon spring up.

Not only that, but these blown-down masses contain a great deal of cash value if it can be salvaged. The wind took New England's biggest and best trees, which were in many cases the farmers' savings accounts. Government labor will salvage as many of these valuable trunks as possible, and government-backed credit will help the owners to market them gradually instead of dumping them in distress sales.

For the long pull, the U. S. Forest Service has been asked to aid in planning an entirely new set of woods for the devastated regions. All of southern New England's timberlands are privately owned; the only national forests are in northern Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. This means that woodlands are predominantly in small parcels, and that the timber is of high importance to the farmer-owners. Credit and tax

If You Are Interested in Better Health and Longer Life Read

TROUBLES WE DON'T TALK ABOUT

By Dr. Joseph Franklin Montague
Well Known New York Intestinal Specialist

11 Cloth, 142 Pages Illustrated

● COLITIS ● CONSTIPATION
AND MANY OTHER AILMENTS

The HOME HEALTH LIBRARY, Inc. 518-5th Ave. New York City