

Adna Ferrin Weber, "The Growth of Cities in Nineteenth Century America" (1899)

The modern city had its defenders during the nineteenth century. The following excerpt, from a pioneering study in urban sociology, applied Darwin's concept of natural selection to "document" the advantages of urban life over rural life.

...SOCIAL CAUSES—To enumerate the social advantages that the cities possess as compared with the country would demand too much space, but most of them will be found to be embraced in the following classification:

- (1) Educational. The city alone must be the residence of those who study art, medicine, music, etc. Even in the matter of primary education, city advantages are superior to those of the rural districts, though not to those of the villages. . . .
- 2) Amusements. The opera, philharmonic concerts, art exhibits, etc., may be classed as educational advantages or mere amusements, but there are many other forms of recreation afforded by the city and not by the country, which come under the head of amusements alone.
- 3) The standard of living. The desire for a higher standard of life, for purely material comforts and luxuries, brings many people to the city. Food is to be procured at prices almost as low as in the country, and in vastly greater variety; while everything else is cheaper. The buyer enjoys a larger consumer's rent, as the economists say; that is, he can buy at prices much below those he would be willing to give if pressed, thus deriving a surplus of enjoyment. Then there are conveniences to be had, in the city which in many cases could not be obtained in the country, on account of the small numbers to bear the heavy expenses.
- 4) Intellectual Associations. The village is dull not only to the man pursuing light amusements, but to him who seeks cultivated associations, for in these days the cities are the centers of intellect as of wealth. Even the college town with its intellectual atmosphere is to many high-minded people less stimulating than the city, where intellectual ability is to much more varied.

Such are some of the advantages of city life; some of them are modern, and some are as old as civilization. Not the least important factor in city growth is gregariousness or the social instinct itself, which appears to be stronger than ever before in these days of restlessness. . . . Another thing to be reckoned with is the passion for "the crowd, the hum, the shock of men," among

those who have once lived in the city. One of the trying difficulties of social workers in their efforts to improve the housing conditions of the tenement population is the strong desire of these poor people to be among their associates, and their absolute refusal to settle in more comfortable homes in the country or in the suburbs.

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Finally, we have to take into consideration the forces which in recent times have spread a knowledge of the advantages of city life among all classes of the community. Education has a great deal to do with it, especially the half-education which prevails in the rural districts and gives the farmers' boys a glimpse of a more attractive life, without teaching them how to attain such a life at home. Then the newspaper comes in to complete the enchantment, with its gibes against the "hayseed" and "country bumpkin." Thus the spread of information, made possible by nineteenth-century improvements in communication, creates a distaste for country life, and more especially for rural life; while easier travel enables young men lightly to abandon the distasteful life. . . .

Socially, the influence of the cities is similarly exerted in favor of liberal and progressive thought. The variety of occupation, interests and opinions in the city produces an intellectual friction, which leads to a broader and freer judgment and a great inclination to and appreciation of new thought, manners, and ideals. City life may not have produced genius, but it has brought thinkers into touch with one another, and has stimulated the divine impulse to originate by sympathy or antagonism. As the seat of political power, as the nursery of the arts and sciences, as the center of industry and commerce, the city represents the highest achievements of political, intellectual and industrial life.

The rural population is not merely conservative; it is full of error and prejudice; it receives what enlightenment it possesses from the city. Nor is the small city free from the same reproach; while it performs the useful function of an intermediary between the progressivism, liberalism, radicalism of the great city, and the conservatism, bigotry, of the country, it is the chief seat of the pseudo-bourgeois Philistine. . . . Americans of the present generation are destined to see this provincialism vanish before the powerful influences of large cities, which the introduction of manufactures and commerce on a large scale will in a short time produce. The South will be brought into contact with the current of world-thought. To the negro, race justice will at length be accorded, and a stronger feeling of fraternity toward the North will grow up, strengthening the bonds of patriotism.

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The city is the spectroscop of society; it analyzes and sifts the population, separating and classifying the diverse elements. The entire progress of civilization is a process of differentiation, and the city is the greatest differentiator. The mediocrity of the country is transformed by the city into the highest talent or the lowest criminal. Genius is often born in the country, but it is brought to light and developed by the city. On the other hand, the opportunities of the city work just as powerfully in the opposite direction upon the countrymen of an ignoble cast; the boy thief of the village becomes the daring bank robber of the metropolis. . . .

. . . Even if the "fittest" members of society did perish earlier in the struggle for existence in the city than in the country, it would be open to doubt if society would not gain more by their

residence in the city where they can find scope for their abilities than in the country without opportunities for performing the highest social service of which they are capable. But with the modern combination of city business life and rural residence, or at least open air holidays and recreation periods, and the opportunities that cities alone offer for the carrying on of athletic sports and games, the best blood of the race is not liable to extinction.

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[From Adna Ferrin Weber, *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century: A Study in Statistics* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), pp. 218-22, 439-42, 444-45.]