

---

# Why Great Cities?

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Feb. 1893), pp. 108-112.

The first city we read about was built by Cain, the first murderer, who went forth with a murderer's mark upon him. This murderer's first born was a son, and Cain being a doting father named the city he built Enoch, in honor of his son, who bore that name.<sup>1</sup> Such was the beginning of cities, as recorded in the scriptures.

All cities, from the first accounts we have of them, were dens of iniquity, and it is not surprising, therefore, that the declaration was long since made that "God made the country, and man the city." Men are gregarious animals; they delight in herding together, and the more vicious they are the more compact do they seek to have their abodes. It seems to have been characteristic of human animals from the beginning, and it further appears that all of the great cities of remote ages were centers of wickedness — conspicuously, Sodom, Gomorrah, Zeboim, and Admah — in all of which infamous practices had become so common, such as pride, gluttony, idleness, haughty neglect of the poor, together with unnatural vices, that God's patience became exhausted and He rained upon them a storm of fire and brimstone and sunk them to their native hell, and then the Jordan flowed into the cavity and formed the Dead Sea.<sup>2</sup> Great cities have been doomed, for their wickedness, to destruction, as, for instance, Nineveh<sup>3</sup> and Babylon. Along all the track of the centuries, from the city of Enoch to Rome, numberless cities lie buried, and if legendary lore is not totally worthless, their records were about as bad as that of

---

<sup>1</sup> Reference to *Genesis*, chapter 4, verse 17: "And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch."

<sup>2</sup> Allusion to *Deuteronomy*, chapter 29. All four cities were reputedly destroyed by the enraged deity.

<sup>3</sup> *Jonah*, chapter 3, tells of the condemnation, repentance, and sparing of Nineveh — a city mentioned multiple times in the Bible.

Sodom. Nor is it to be questioned, that the great cities of the earth, as they now exist, are the abodes of depravities, crimes, and villainies entirely in keeping with the ancient dens we have named.

“Why great cities?” is a question much easier asked than answered. The influence of great cities is known to be in all regards pernicious, and their demoralizing contagion extends far beyond their boundaries. This is known to be true, and yet there is a steady flow of population from the rural districts to the village, town and city. The innocent and pure are ceaselessly abandoning happy and peaceful homes, where all things contribute to physical and moral healthfulness, to take their chances where the earth, air and water are contaminated, and where vast numbers of them are doomed to lives worse than death, more unfortunate than dumb, driven cattle imported for the slaughterhouse. Their fate is known, or if unknown the gloom that uncertainty creates is, if possible, more depressing than if the worst had been told.

Men and women are writing of conditions in great cities, but only of virtuous squalor; what lies beyond in the unexplored haunts of vice and degradation is horrid conjecture; the abodes of abominations which defy exaggeration, so foul and beastly as to create inexpressible abhorrence, and which, were they explored, the hideous pictures, if printed, would be suppressed by the authorities. In view of such facts, the question may well be asked — Why great cities? We have remarked that the question is more easily asked than answered. Nevertheless it is possible to supply certain reasons for the creation of great cities. The great majority of the inhabitants of the civilized world are workers who eat bread in the sweat of their faces, and cities afford diversified employments, because they are the converging centers of capital, and therefore are the centers of great industrial enterprises. The chief industry of the country, that is, the rural districts, is agriculture, or, farming, and here, as elsewhere, the machine is employed and the man displaced. The gang plow, the steam plow, the drills, mowers, harvesters, and threshers displace men and set them adrift to search for employment, and they direct their steps to the cities, where their necessities compel them to “sell” their labor for what they can get. Advantage is taken of their necessities, wages go down to a starvation point, and the world stands horrified in the presence of what it calls the “sweating system,” and the tenement house. The abodes of poverty, filth, wretchedness, sickness, and death, come into view, and savages, could they behold them, would stand aghast in the presence

of the multiplied horrors which they reveal. Notwithstanding all that is told of such horrors — and the half was never told — the stream of humanity from rural abodes steadily proceeds. Capital with devilish tentacles grasps its victims and drags them down to death. The cry is, “The labor market is overstocked,” and with this cry, more terrible than a midnight fire alarm, wages go down and thousands find themselves without employment, idle, starving, and desperate. What wonder that great cities become great ulcers, forever spewing purulent matter, a poison more deadly than contaminated water, and for which no antidote was ever discovered?

In the great cities of the United States, of which there is so much and such continuous boasting, there is enough of this poison generated every day of the year, Sundays not excepted, to arouse the vengeance of an infinite God, as did the “cities of the plain.” We have civilization and science; literature and religion; the church, the school and the library; we have courts forever grinding, like the mills of the gods; we have legislatures piling up laws like Alpine peaks, and prisons and the scaffold; the experience of the centuries since Cain built the first city and since the deluge made a clean sweep of all men save Noah and his family<sup>4</sup> — and yet, great cities eternally perpetuate the virus of Sodom, and victims from the country — where all things conspire, sunshine and shower, field and forest, mountain and plain, flowery meads and babbling brooks, to make men happy — ceaselessly throng the gates of cities to eke out wretched lives, die wretched deaths, to find a resting place at last in some potter’s field.

Again, why great cities? Who knows why? Of late it is assumed that the people of the rural districts are discontented because they lack companionship, and hence the demand for better roads, to overcome isolation, and it is held that bad roads is one reason why people huddle together like sheep in cities. It is further held that people must have amusements, and since there is little in the country to entertain, to divert the mind, to cheer and enliven, by virtue of which weary hours can be beguiled, men and women flock to centers of population to find fun and relaxation, games and pastimes. The apple-bees, quiltings, spelling and singing schools — all rustic enjoyments — have become effete, and the country folk sigh for the dime museum, the merry-go-round, the blood-and-thunder performances of the modern playhouse. This is doubtless in a large measure true, and to

---

<sup>4</sup> The tale of Noah and his ark and the cataclysmic flood is told in *Genesis*, chapters 6-8.

the extent that it is true tells in mournful numbers of the pestilential influence of great cities, spreading out like the malaria of swamps, producing everywhere heart, soul and mind failure, corrupting life at its fountain head until in certain sections farms by the hundred are abandoned, to be reclaimed by the wilderness and to be repopulated by beasts and reptiles. And thus we find that while great cities are fruitful of demoralization, vice, crime, squalor, wretchedness unspeakable, there is unrest in the country and a longing desire to go to the cities and take the chances, forgetful of the fact that while there are in cities good people and opportunities to work and advance, the devil's agents are more numerous than policemen and that the saloons have a patronage greater than all the churches; that for every preacher of righteousness there are a dozen or more missionaries of hell, and that the predominating influence is evil, and that continually.

In all great cities there is a ceaseless scramble for the "almighty dollar," in which the "pillars of the church" are often the most conspicuous contestants, and this struggle for cash descends to nickels, in which there is a pell-mell contest and muss, which, being interpreted, is "every one for himself," leaving the hindmost to the mercies of the devil — a tournament forever going forward, in which "the tall, the wise, the reverend clergy," the millionaire and the tatterdemalion engage, and in which the "survival of the fittest" is not considered. In these carnivals of men reduced to mere animals, multiplied thousands are crushed to death or suffer that sort of "disability" which reduces them to the ranks of vagabonds.

Who does not know that such is life in the great cities now, as it has ever been since the dawn of authentic history?

But there is fascination in it as there is in all games of chance, and as a result, villages swell to towns and towns to cities, until the world beholds a London, a Paris, a New York, and a Chicago, and contemplates with pride, or protest, the ceaseless inflow of virtue to be contaminated and transformed into vice. After all, the question arises — Why great cities?

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · June 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.  
First Edition