

# The City's Decline - and Fall

By George R. Geiger

Here, in "The Culture of Cities" by Lewis Mumford (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1938), is a book on the city which does not blink the problem of urban land values. Too many accounts of housing and slum clearance, of zoning and garden cities, of planning and beautifying, have been mere counsels of perfection. They have characteristically forgotten or refused to consider the rather obvious fact that increased land values, both legitimate and speculative, and high rents would be the only sure effect of civic improvement; that the landlord and not the tenant would be the only ultimate beneficiary.

This accusation can in no way be brought against Mr. Mumford. He writes, for example, that "to have permanent tenure in land under modern conditions and to ensure a measure of security to the individual worker or occupant, the community must be prepared to assume the active responsibilities of ownership. . . . By owning the land, the community will dispense with the economically inert (that is, privileged or piratical) role of the private landlord: it will then be able to collect in the form of rent all those values that derive from social organization."

Again, "Henry George, viewing the process of settlement in the Far West, observed how the congestion of population automatically raised land values: thus, so long as land remained in private hands, it imposed a tax upon all those who either directly or derivatively were forced to use expensive land. The more advanced the machine industry, the more complicated the transportation net, the more dense the population, the higher the private tax in the form of rent."

In fact, the pecuniary exploitation of land value, Mr. Mumford points out, has been largely responsible for the blighting of the city. The failure to socialize land rent and land usage has meant the inevitable failure of urban civilization.

"The Culture of Cities" is a monumental history of the city from the early Middle Ages to the latest developments in civic planning. But it is much more than a history of the city. It is a profound study of urban civilization itself. The psychology and sociology of city life have never perhaps been presented as clearly, and their implications traced as thoroughly, as in the present work.

We, who take cities for granted, who love or hate them, who live in them or flee from them, have too seldom understood what scope the powers of urban life have really embraced. We appreciate the obvious forces and influences of architecture, trade, politics, and education; but, unless they are presented to us in a book such as this we are likely to ignore what the city has done to personality, sex, religion, sanitation, esthetics, thinking itself.

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But here we see the city—above all, megalopolis—as the conditioner of the most profound and intimate human feelings and ideas. We also see the necessity for a change in many of our stereotyped notions, for example, our concept of the medieval city and its horrors. Mr. Mumford is far from being a sentimental worshiper of the Middle Ages, and he does give us a realistic picture of many unsavory features of the feudal town. But, as compared with the "insensate industrial town" of the early nineteenth century, the health, sanitation, beauty, and functional adaptability of the earlier city were by no means relics of the "dark ages."

Mr. Mumford's present study must be understood as a companion to his much discussed "Technics and Civilization," published four years ago, which presented a painstaking and

original interpretation of machine civilization. Of course, the machine and urban civilizations, the industrial and the megalopolitan cultures, are complementary and inseparable, and these two volumes can be looked upon as giving us a profile of recent and contemporary industrial life. The author's work must also be understood in terms of the vocabulary and contributions of Patrick Geddes, famous as a pioneer in the field of civic planning; and likewise in terms of Mr. Mumford's own significant contributions in the Regional Planning Association of America.

"The Culture of Cities" is a work in history and sociology; it is not an economic study. In fact, possibly the only serious criticism that may be made of it is that, although Mr. Mumford clearly recognizes the uselessness of civic planning without fundamental economic change—he writes, "the slum is the outward expression of physical impoverishment: slum demolition is poverty demolition, or it is nothing"—yet he fails to present any specific program for necessary economic reform.

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He does indeed emphasize the civic importance of the co-operative movement and of the trades union, and he does see great values in a "socialized" approach to economics. (His criticism of Henry George is in his attempt to dissociate business enterprise from landlordism. "In a society where pecuniary values were uppermost and where no social motives were permitted to stand in the way of financial aggrandizement, such distinctions could gain no hold upon the industrial interests. The displacement of privilege in land could only come through the initiative of the community as a whole, with an enlightened and militant working class as the spearhead.") But there does seem to be a lack of force or nerve when the book turns to fundamental economic problems. As is so often the case with proposals of much less significance, the social ends are clear, but the economic means are misty.

However, this possible incomplete-

ness must not be exaggerated. After all, no author can be fairly criticized for not writing a book which he did not write. . . . The present work is a sociological and historical survey of urban civilization, with concrete specifications for large-scale and far-reaching changes in city life; it does not purport to be a treatise on economics. In terms of what the book intends to do, it is a superb contribution. No one can read it without becoming sensitive to great segments of modern industrial city life which were hitherto wholly unappreciated. And no reader (especially if he is also a reader of *The Freeman*) can leave the book without feeling that the significance of the land question and of the taxation of land values has been placed in such a clear light that it can be ignored only by sufferers from myopia and astigmatism.