

Josiah Strong, "Our Country" (1885)

During the so-called Gilded Age, many social commentators worried about the effects of unchecked urban development. Josiah Strong, a prominent Congregationalist minister from Ohio, was among the most concerned. In 1885 he published *Our Country*, a comprehensive critique of modern developments. Strong viewed the large city as a menace to morals and to the social order. He also feared that the tenor of urban culture warred against the teachings of Christianity.

The city is the nerve center of our civilization. It is also the storm center. The fact, therefore, that it is growing much more rapidly than the whole population is full of significance. In 1790, one-thirtieth of the population of the United States lived in cities of 8,000 inhabitants and over; in 1800, one twenty-fifth; in 1810, and also in 1820, one-twentieth; in 1830, one sixteenth; in 1840, one-twelfth; in 1850, one-eighth; in 1860, one-sixth; in 1870, a little over one-fifth; and in 1880, 22.5 per cent, or nearly one-fourth. From 1790 to 1880 the whole population increased a little less than four fold, the urban population thirteen fold. . . . In 1790 there were only six cities in the United States which had a population of 8,000 or more. In 1880 there were 286.

The city has become a serious menace to our civilization. . . . It has a peculiar attraction for the immigrant. Our fifty principal cities contain 39.3 per cent of our entire German population, and 45.8 per cent of the Irish. Our ten larger cities only nine per cent of the entire population, but 23 per cent of the foreign. While a little less than one-third of the population of the United States is foreign by birth or parentage, sixty-two per cent of the population of Cincinnati are foreign, eighty-three per cent of Cleveland, sixty-three per cent of Boston, eighty-eight per cent of New York, and ninety-one per cent of Chicago.

Because our cities are so largely foreign, [Romanism](#)¹ finds in them its chief strength. For the same reason the saloon, together with the intemperance and the liquor power which it represents, is multiplied in the city. East of the Mississippi there was, in 1880, one saloon to every 438 of the population; in Boston, one to every 329; in Cleveland, one to every 192; in Chicago, one to every 179; in New York, one to every 171; in Cincinnati, one to every 124. Of course the demoralizing and pauperizing power of the saloons and their debauching influence in politics increase with their numerical strength.

It is the city where wealth is massed; and here are the tangible evidences of it piled many stories high. Here the sway of [Mammon](#)² is widest, and his worship the most constant and eager. Here are luxuries gathered—everything that dazzles the eye, or tempts the appetite; here is the most extravagant expenditure. Here, also, is the *congestion* of wealth severest. [Dives and Lazarus](#)³ are brought face to face; here, in sharp contrast, are the *ennui* of surfeit and the desperation of starvation. The rich are richer, and the poor are poorer, in the city than elsewhere; and, as a rule, the greater are the riches of the rich and the poverty of the poor. Not only does the proportion of the poor increase with the growth of the city, but their condition becomes more wretched. The poor of a city with 8,000 inhabitants are well off compared with many in New York; and there

are no such depths of woe, such utter and heart-wringing wretchedness in New York as in London. . . .

Socialism not only centers in the city, but is almost confined to it; and the materials of its growth are multiplied with the growth of the city. Here is heaped the social dynamite; here roughs, gamblers, thieves, robbers, lawless and desperate men of all sorts, congregate; men who are ready on any pretext to raise riots for the purpose of destruction and plunder; here gather foreigners and wage-workers; here skepticism and irreligion abound; here inequality is the greatest and most obvious, and the contrast between opulence and penury the most striking; here is suffering the sorest. As the greatest wickedness in the world is to be found not among the cannibals of some far off coast, but in Christian lands where the light of truth is diffused and rejected, so the utmost depth of wretchedness exists not among savages, who have few wants, but in great cities, where, in the presence of plenty and of every luxury men starve. . . .

"During the past three years, 220,976 persons in New York have asked for outside aid in one form or another." Said a New York Supreme judge, not long since: "There is a large class—I was about to say a majority—of the population of New York area Brooklyn, who just live, and to whom the rearing of two or more children means inevitably a boy for the penitentiary, and a girl for the brothel." Under such conditions smolder the volcanic fires of a deep discontent.

As a rule, our largest cities are the worst governed. It is natural, therefore, to infer that, as our cities grow larger and more dangerous, the government will become more corrupt, and control will pass more completely into the hands of those who themselves most need to be controlled. If we would appreciate the significance of these facts and tendencies, we must bear in mind that the disproportionate growth of the city is undoubtedly to continue, and the number of great cities to be largely increased. . . .

But the supreme peril, which will certainly come, eventually, and must probably be faced by multitudes now living, will arise, when, the conditions having been fully prepared, some great industrial or other crisis precipitates an open struggle between the destructive and the conservative elements of society. As civilization advances, and society becomes more highly organized, commercial transactions will be more complex and immense. As a result, all business relations and industries will be more sensitive. Commercial distress in any great business center will the more surely create widespread disaster. Under such conditions, industrial paralysis is likely to occur from time to time, more general and more prostrating than any heretofore known. When such a commercial crisis has closed factories by the ten thousand, and wageworkers have been thrown out of employment by the million; when the public lands, which hitherto at such times have afforded relief, are all exhausted; when our urban population has been multiplied several fold; and our Cincinnati have become Chicagos, our Chicagos and our New Yorks, Londons; when class antipathies are deepened; when socialistic organizations, armed and drilled, are in every city, and the ignorant and vicious power of crowded populations has fully found itself; when the corruption of city governments is grown apace; when crops fail, or some gigantic "corner" doubles the price of bread; with starvation in home; with idle workingmen gathered, sullen and desperate, in the saloons with unprotected wealth at hand; with the tremendous forces of chemistry within easy reach; then with *the opportunity, the means, the fit agents; the motive, the temptation to destroy, all brought into evil conjunction*, THEN will come the real test of our institutions, then will appear whether we are capable of self-government.

1. Roman Catholicism. (Return to [text](#))
2. The false god of riches in the New Testament. (Return to [text](#))
3. Dives was the rich man in the biblical parable of Lazarus, the diseased beggar. (Return to [text](#))

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[From Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: The American Home Missionary Society, 1885), pp. 128-43.]