

States of the Union

METROPOLLYANA AND RURAL POVERTY

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WE SUFFER in this country from metropollyana, a profane and all but universal belief in the City Triumphant. The word, though not the myth, was invented by Clay Cochran, director of the Rural Housing Alliance, one of the few organizations still raging against urban

fatalism. Nearly everyone else, including farmers and their spokesmen, shares the grand illusion.

Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz, for example, recently offered this apologia: "When I said we were going to have upwards of a million fewer farmers in 1980, that didn't mean necessarily that I approved of that. I simply was reporting what was going to happen. I think it is inevitable."

Even the late Charles Abrams, an urban specialist yet no slouch of a social critic, felt compelled to concede the inevitability of world-wide urbanization, and to argue that it was all for the best—in fact, that it might foretell an era without wars. Since we are no longer competing for tillable land, Abrams reasoned, and have learned instead to live together in municipal compactness, we may soon "lay to rest the *Lebensraum* concept that has perennially arisen to threaten world peace." That is metropollyana on a global scale.

Fatalism frequently masks bad social policy. In the United States we virtually ignore the miseries of

14 million impoverished rural people, on the grounds that they are residing in the wrong place at the wrong time. President Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty estimated, in 1966, that one out of every four non-urban citizens was poor. "In the poverty areas of rural America," the Commission noted, ". . . more than 70 per cent struggle along on less than \$2,000 a year, and one family in every four exists, somehow, on less than \$1,000 a year."

To learn who gets what in America and who doesn't, we need only examine people's houses, the traditional folk-gauge of economic and social status. ("They think me unworthy," runs an Indian song, "my Midé brethren,/but look and see/the length of my wigwam.") Bad as the housing is in our cities, it is even worse in our villages.

The figures from the latest census indicate that one out of every seven rural dwelling units is substandard, compared to one out of every 25 in the cities. In round numbers, that means nearly 4 million non-metropolitan families, or about 10

million rural Americans, inhabit housing that is either substandard or overcrowded, or both. And the Commission on Rural Poverty reports:

- More than a million rural houses are unsafe for human occupancy.

- Less than one in four farm families have water piped into their homes.

- About one-third of all rural families still use privies.

- Under half of all nonurban residences have central heating.

There is nothing new here—rural conditions have been bad for a long time and a few souls, like the commission members, have always stood ready with the facts. But not many of us take an interest in the problem of rural suffering, leaving the concerned to cry in the night: "The publicity that has attended the urban housing program during the last few years has aided immeasurably in educating the country to the need for better urban housing. Not enough has been said about similar conditions on the nation's farms." That was written in 1940 by Will W. Alexander, then head of the Farm Security Administration.

He went on to make what has now become a familiar plea, beseeching doubters to go and see for themselves. "Here, then, is the picture of rural housing in America. The city dweller can prove it for himself by taking a drive into the country. Along the main highways one will find many large substantial farm homes. . . . But on the back roads . . . he will see leaky roofs, broken floors, the kerosene lamp, the privy, the smoking fireplace. . . ." Five successive Presidents, all but one born and raised on a farm or in a small town, have made public commitments to our nation's rural poor, yet little has changed since Alexander's day.

Why do we traditionally ignore our farms and villages? In the first place, the concept of the city as magnet has seeped into our collec-

tive imagination; we are its unwitting captives. In the second place, cities are centers of political influence and contain large aggregations of wealth and technical knowledge; they are able to assert *metropower*, the brother-in-law of *metropollyana*. I define *metropower* as the urban ability, for better or for worse, to control America's social, political and economic destiny.

Our belief in urban inevitability seems to have been confirmed by the migratory torrent from farm to city. It began almost as soon as the United States began. In 1790, the year of the first census, only 3 per cent of the population lived in towns of 8,000 or more; by the end of the 19th century a third of the population was classified "urban." During that century, as C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, "the population of the entire country increased twelvefold, but over the same period the urban population multiplied eighty-sevenfold."

And that was just the start. It has been estimated that since World War II about 1 million Americans a year have moved from farm to city. The shift may constitute one of the most gigantic migrations in the history of man. No wonder people tend to view urbanization as the wave of the future.

There have been forces at work, however, shaping all the colossal patterns—forces like industrialization, capitalization, suburbanization. Beware of trends whose names end in z-a-t-i-o-n: Neither as impersonal nor as inevitable as they sound, they are the consequences of human decisions, made by the same people who invented *metropower*.

THE CRITICAL moment occurred early, when Alexander Hamilton's metropolitan pragmatism, or cynicism, conquered Thomas Jefferson's pastoral idealism. From that moment on, with their growing accumulations of wealth and power, cities began to enforce their will.

Not even the Homestead Act of 1862, specifically written to prevent land monopoly by absentee (read "urban") owners, and to head off rampant land speculation, could appreciably alter the drift of affairs. In the country's first 40 years of homesteading, only 600,000 homesteads were patented, accounting for less than one-fifth of all the new acreage that was added to the total land in farms. Few prospective homesteaders possessed either the capital or the know-how to settle the land and wrest a living from it. So speculators from the city moved in and had a field day. And they've been having one ever since.

Everyone knows about the railroads, the banks, the mills—all urban institutions calculated to win a smile from Hamilton's gloomy ghost. These aggregations of *metropower* first kept people *down* on the farm, and then, ultimately, sucked them into the city.

But we need not belabor the past. The present is replete with examples of *metropower* policies that throw people off the land and drive them into our teetering cities. Take welfare. Rural families comprise about one-third of the total population, yet HEW allocates only 25 per cent of its health welfare funds to these families. Similarly, the low-income elderly in rural areas make up 46 per cent of the national total, but receive only 38 per cent of Social Security and Old Age Assistance benefits. Should we characterize these discrepancies as inevitable, the legacy of forces too large to oppose? Or should we call them what they really are: the offspring of bad social policy?

Agribusiness is another branch of *metropower*. At present only 800,000 farms produce 90 per cent of all our food and fiber. This is one of those "historic trends" that experts like Butz view as natural, though in fact the big farms have been pampered and promoted by national policy. Our Secretary of Agriculture has never conceded that

present laws encourage creeping "agribus" by offering fat tax shelters and generous depreciation benefits to corporations engaged in farming. Nor has he intimated that his own department wastes millions of dollars each year in research, through stipends to land grant colleges, aimed at mechanizing and automating the nation's farms.

As Jim Hightower observes in *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*, "Land grant college research is agribusiness research. Projects are designed with agribusiness interests in mind, frequently with agribusiness participation. Whether the need is an irrigation system, a new shaped tomato . . . a chemical solution for processing vegetables, a new food product or an electronic checkout system for supermarkets, land grant researchers stand ready and able to assist, irrespective of other interests in rural America."

The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)—hailed only a few years back as the poor man's salvation—provides us with another melancholy example of metropower. A decade ago, it will be recalled, liberal political scientists were noting the existence of two national parties cutting across traditional Republican and Democratic boundaries. The "Congressional party" was said to be conservative, unimaginative and unsympathetic to the poor; the "Presidential party," on the other hand, was considered liberal and humane.

A different picture emerges, though, if these groupings are considered along rural-urban lines. The "conservative" Congressional party, with its heavier farm and small-town representation, retains a sympathy for the rural poor, while the "liberal" Presidential party, dependent on electoral largesse from large industrial states, is urban or suburban in its thinking. The result has been much prorural legislation followed by little prorural administration. A case in point is the alleged "war on poverty."

IN THE original Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Congress called for equitable distribution of OEO funds between rural and urban areas, instructing the OEO director to establish guidelines to insure that the intent of Congress was carried out. To date, OEO has established no guidelines. In 1965 Congress reaffirmed its concern for equitable allocation of antipoverty funds and even wrote in some specific measures aimed at helping to get the job done. None of this had any effect on the bureaucrats at OEO.

In 1966 the Senate Committee



on Labor and Public Works reported: "After careful consideration of the nature and scope of program activity in rural areas, the committee has determined that the Congressional intent respecting rural poverty has not been adequately implemented." Although rural areas accounted for 43 per cent of the nation's poverty, continued the committee, they received only 15.5 per cent of all OEO community action funds.

In 1967 Nick Kotz, then a reporter for the *Minneapolis Tribune*, charged that OEO Assistant Director Robert A. Levine "has actively opposed programs to establish housing, job training and economic de-

velopment to help the hard-core rural poor stay where they are. He believes these programs are doomed to failure and that migration to the city is inevitable."

The same year, a House committee inserted strong language in its report on amendments to the anti-poverty law, calling for an expansion in OEO's rural programs: "The committee wishes to discourage any policy which relies on or might tend to reinforce the migratory flow from rural to urban areas. . . ." Consequently, Congress rewrote the objectives of the community action program to include the following: "It shall not be the purpose . . . of OEO to encourage the rural poor to migrate to urban areas, since it is not in the best interests of the poor. . . ."

Despite this series of clear expressions from the Congress, successive OEO administrators have made only limited progress toward equalizing assistance to the rural poor. Three years ago OEO officials admitted to Congress that rural programs would account for less than one-fourth of all community action funds spent from 1969 through 1971. And just last month President Nixon casually declared an 18-month moratorium on nearly all of the rural housing funds that Congress had appropriated to OEO and the Farmers Home Administration.

These patterns of metropower—typified by inequities in OEO and welfare grants, and by Federal subsidies to agribusiness—have engulfed millions of rural Americans, keeping them locked in poverty. And they have been perpetrated not out of a desire for humane social policy, but—as Federal officials keep saying—in the name of inevitability. Meanwhile, to borrow from Franklin P. Adams:

*The rich man has his motor car,
His country and his town
estate.*

*He smokes a fifty-cent cigar
And jeers at Fate.*