

Why Conservatives Should Care More about Cities

It's a time-honoured tradition in America, since the days of [Jefferson](#) and even before, to decry the evils of city life.

One sees a great deal of this tradition in modern conservative discourse. Small-town America is the ['real America'](#), the unpretentious, authentic, [hardworking](#) America with healthy values, and the big cities are full of [crime](#) and [violence](#), as well as [condescending snobs](#) who [look down their noses](#) at rural people, who are drawn to [big shiny projects](#) of limited practical worth, and who desire to engineer people into better living.

In the Jeffersonian telling, the city is corrupting. It's a wretched hive of scum and villainy. It's congested, polluted, noisy, distracting. It lures man into effeminacy and vice. It withers man's competencies in the productive arts at the same time as it fosters in man an exaggerated conceit of his own power. It pulls man [away from God](#). There is a venerable strain in American rhetoric juxtaposing Jericho with Jezebel, taunting the tyranny of Tyre, urging flight into the fields and forests to recover the purity of faith and the awareness of man's dependence on God.

There is something highly commendable in the agrarian tradition in America; it has borne much good fruit. Appeals to the solid good sense of the rural yeoman have accompanied the [Populist insurgency](#) of the 1880's and 1890's against the (very real) greed and arrogance of the big-city bankers and lawyers and bureaucrats back east. It has inspired the poetry of [Allen Tate](#), the journalism of [Herbert Agar](#). It has guided the work of [Wendell Berry](#). But the agrarian tradition shows us something of an incomplete picture.

The city has existed as long as human beings have lived settled lives. The very word 'civilisation' has its root in *civitas*, the Latin word from which we also derive 'city'.

In fact, the English language is replete with words whose very meaning and etymology accentuates the *ennobling* nature of the city. A man is rightly admired who is *civil*, *polite*, *urbane* – that is to say, one who has the wisdom and moderation which have been associated in classical thinking with *living in a city*, in close proximity to and in common interest with other men.

It is not an accident that the great theorists of Western civilisation took the city as their primary object of interest. In [Plato's Republic](#), when discussing the nature of justice as a virtue in the human soul, Socrates leads his students Glaucon and Adeimantus to first consider *cities*, because justice is easier to see in the city than in the individual. Justice can be seen coming into being first through a *city-in-speech*. The city is a macrocosm of the human soul; to understand justice and virtue in the person you have to understand the city which shapes and reflects her.

In classical Christianity, too, the language of the city comes up with great frequency – and not solely in reference to Babylon or the city of Herod. Early Christianity was a religion *of the great cities*: Jerusalem, Antioch, Paraliōs Kaisareia, Alexandreia, Ephesos, Thessaloniki, Korinthos, Kyrene, Athens, Syrakousai, Rome. The relationship between the earthly city and the heavenly Jerusalem to which early Christians aspired, was a matter of great concern to early leaders of the Church; particularly to Augustine who authored [The City of God](#). To Augustine as to all of the Church Fathers who followed him, it simply wasn't enough to defer all our concern about our earthly communities to an eschatological expectation of the heavenly. Our built spaces have a profound impact not only on our present happiness but on [the way faith is lived](#).

Cities must therefore be of interest particularly to those with a classical bent of mind, both because they reflect the souls of their builders and because they shape the souls of those who live in them. They show the soul of a civilisation 'in large print', to use Socrates' metaphor. If a city truly is as vicious as Jefferson or his followers make it out to be, even the souls of those who live in its rural ambit cannot be healthy. Furthermore, we have to consider whether our cities truly live up to what they promise us. Do the urban communities we inhabit encourage us to make ourselves more wise, more moderate, more just? Or do they encourage gluttony, dissipation, ignorance and crime?

Two and a half years ago the novelist and commentator William Lind, writing for *The American Conservative*, wrote [a pæan](#) to the 'new urbanism' based on precisely these concerns. The city, he argued, should be free and accessible in its built space, business-friendly and pedestrian-friendly, but most importantly: it should be *beautiful*. And much too much of modern architecture makes beauty a secondary concern (if indeed it's a concern at all).

There is much that can be done in and for the city; it's not worth writing off just yet.

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