



CHAPTER XX

THE HOPE OF DEMOCRACY

THE Twentieth Century opens with two distinguishing features—the dominant city and militant democracy. These phenomena are not confined to America. They characterize England, Germany, France, Belgium, and Italy. These features are permanent. This is assured by the nature of things. The life, the industry, the culture of the future will be urbanized, even though some revolution in the means of transit should lead to a decentralization of population. The city may change in many ways—undoubtedly it will. In the city of ten or possibly twenty million people there will be a redistribution of centres, possibly a redivision of political functions. But, in a historical sense, the city has resumed the commanding position which it enjoyed in the days of Athens, Rome, and the mediæval towns.

In external form and appearance, and methods of administration, the modern city does not differ greatly from its early prototype. The features common to both are a close association of mankind with many coöperative activities. Nor does the analogy stop here, for in every age the great cities

of the world have enjoyed a certain degree of freedom; of local control over the conduct of their affairs. In Athens, Rome, and the Italian cities there were democratic forms and a popular flavor to the government, while the free cities of the Middle Ages were private corporations of the merchants, hand-workers, and tradesmen, whose guild organizations elected the magistrates, the mayor, and the aldermen, and through this representation of special interests limited the power of the nobles and the feudal system.

The great difference between the twentieth-century city and those of the past lies in our legalized freedom; in universal education; in an organized machinery backed by years of tradition; but especially in the social instincts and industrial background of the present. Democracy, rather than class or business interest, is becoming intelligently organized. In this respect the Twentieth Century marks the dawning of an epoch in Western civilization. Our politics are reflecting this change. Never before has society been able to better its own condition so easily through the agency of government. The ready responsiveness of democracy, under the close association which the city involves, forecasts a movement for the improvement of human society more hopeful than anything the world has known.

In the past, too, the political unit has been the

state, and the theories of philosophers, of the socialist, and the individualist have had in mind a centralized organization, working downwards from the top to the individual.

But a shifting of emphasis has taken place. The tendencies of the present day are towards decentralization, in which the city will command an increasing share of attention. This is apparent in England, where the new democracy at work within the city is rapidly socializing industry with the conscious aim of improving the conditions of life. The same is true of all these reform movements in America that have involved the coöperation of the people.

Everywhere matters affecting the individual in his domestic relations are commanding increased attention. Present-day politics are concerning themselves with the elevation of the standard of living, with equality of opportunity, with the uplifting of life, and the betterment of those conditions which most intimately affect mankind. And these are almost all municipal matters. They bear only a distant relationship to the state at large. They are domestic in character and are being solved by an appeal to manhood suffrage and democratic organization. History offers no parallel to this phenomenon. For the cities of the past have been aristocratic centres, capital cities, industrial guilds, or feudal strongholds. Nowhere

and at no time has society been organized through manhood suffrage and the ballot, and free to carry out its philosophy or desires by a direct appeal to its members. This is a new force in the world—a force of unmeasured possibilities. And when the scope of the city is borne in mind, the possibilities of this new power of conscious, organized democracy are apparent. Saving as to matters of taxation, of international dealings, of transportation from place to place, of the administration of justice, the city is complete within itself. All other affairs of life, even industry itself, fall within the city's control. And with the unit reduced to the city, and with its functions determined by popular control, as is done in the New England town meeting, the dangers from bureaucratic or distant control are reduced to a minimum. For the city will then expand its activities only in response to the developing demands of the community; it will assume new burdens only as it justifies its abilities to perform them. Every city will be an experiment station, offering new experiences to the world. Just as one by one the services now performed by society have passed from private hands under the control of the city, and have brought increased liberty through the change, so the activities of the future will come in through a demand for a higher standard of life, and a larger equality of opportunity.

This very process is going on in every city. The steps that are being taken are so reasonable that they commend themselves to all. The English official resents the suggestion that his city is socialistic, even though it involves the management of many of those activities which, in America, are now left to private enterprise. The American feels no fear of socialism when his city assumes the disposal of garbage, the supply of water or electricity, the opening up of schools, kindergartens, lodging houses, parks, playgrounds, and bath houses. Yet his father would have rubbed his eyes in amazement at the suggestion of such undertakings being proper fields of public activity. Even the city of Cincinnati, which has built a railroad, is far from a socialistic commonwealth. And yet, no city in the Old or New World, with the possible exception of Manchester, which has aided in the construction of a ship canal, has gone to this extent in its functions. Yet Cincinnati has made a success of this venture. Threatened, as the city believed, by railway discrimination, it secured powers from the state to construct a railroad to the south. The enterprise was carried to a successful completion, and for years has proven not only self-sustaining, but a source of revenue to the city.

All this but indicates the amplitude of powers resident in the city by which it may solve, not only

the needs that now confront it, but work out the larger social problems of industry as well. What the final municipal programme of the new city will be, one can only conjecture, but that it will be a programme making for a better civilization, a larger life, and increased comfort and opportunity, the gradual progression of society gives assurance. That these increased activities will come by gradual steps, approved in time by all, is evidenced by the sanction of experience, which accepts with approval the functions which have thus far been assumed.

It may be said that such a programme is inconsistent with what we see about us, with the incompetence, if not the dishonesty, of our public life. But we do not see all the evidence. The average efficiency of public work is probably as high as the average efficiency of private work. Trade statistics show that a large per cent. of industrial ventures fail each year. Private as well as public work is performed by human agencies, and is subject to human limitations. And the character of municipal politics is rapidly improving.

How great the advance of recent years has been is proven by a contemplation of the conditions of a generation ago. Then, primaries were ruled by fraud, quite as often by force; then the "plug-ugly" of the ward held the caucus in the rear of

a saloon and brutally ejected opposition. Those were the insolent Tweed days.

But we need not go back so far. Within the past decade the gain has been remarkable. Reform has become popular. In city after city it is successful. The people are learning to make use of their political tools. The boss and the machine no longer offend the public in the grosser ways so common a few years since. The press is aiding in this movement. National and local organizations are coöperating to elevate public opinion. Better men are entering politics, while the people are learning that the ballot offers a means of redress for the worst abuses. Some of the most hopeless cities have been roused to effective action, and reform has won surprising victories in New York, Pittsburg, Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and elsewhere.

When we contemplate these things as well as the former feeling of impotence on the part of the citizen, the recent purification of the ballot, and the substantial gain which has been made in our cities, are little short of revolutionary. Corruption still exists, it is true, as do fraud, bribery, and the more subtle forms of control. But even these are being driven out into the light.

In late years all this has been converted into more respectable forms, and in the process has become even more dangerous to the state. For it

is buttressed by those in high places and ramifies into classes who decry the corruption of our life without appreciating their own participation in it. When one contemplates the similarity of conditions in city after city, there seems to be an intelligent adaptation of method by some central power. But this is not true. The similarity which prevails is not the result of concerted action, it is the logical adjustment of political agencies to the use of the private interests, grouped about the great franchise corporations of the nation. And this merging of business and politics, this weaving of private interests into the warp of party organization, has created a System of government; a System that has further entrenched itself through the centralizing tendencies observable in government during the past twenty years. This tendency to centralization has been strengthened by our desire to shirk the burdens of local government and to pass them on from the city to the state, and from the state to the nation at large. The result has been that with every departure from local home rule the opportunity for corruption increases. It opens the chance of control to irresponsible persons. Strict accountability to the people is impossible at a distance. Government that is responsible to local public sentiment cannot fortify itself against that sentiment when aroused, as can a distant executive or a legisla-

ture. They cannot be brought to book as can a city council or the mayor.

These tendencies to centralization would be checked by a return to local self-government, to municipal home rule, in which the city would be responsible to itself alone. Then the city would hold its own destiny in its hands, and unless we are ready to believe that the forces of evil are more potent than those of good, that those who desire corrupt government are more numerous than those who desire reform, the outcome of this replacement of responsibility on the shoulders of the people cannot be questioned.

Still other considerations than these of the welfare of the city demand local home rule. The urban population of the United States now comprises one-third of the whole. In the Eastern States it exceeds one-half, and is frequently as much as two-thirds, of the population. If our cities are corrupt, the larger divisions will reflect this corruption. Conversely, anything which will purify the source of the evil will destroy the evil as well. And through the divorce of the city from the state, the power of the senatorial and the state machine will be broken. By this means the city will be free to isolate its politics. Then public sentiment will be elevated and the chain of interests which ramify from the capital at Washington back to city, town, and hamlet will be broken; then

a new constituency will come into existence, which, in turn, will elevate the tone of state and national affairs as well.

Just as this political hegemony can be shattered by the release of the city from state control, so municipal politics will be purified by the elimination of the cause of its corruption. The city is not menaced by the people. Popular government has justified many of its promises in so far as it has remained popular. Democracy has been drugged by privileged wealth, and the means of relief are through the resumption of those privileges by the people.

Within the past few years the steam-railway systems of America have been consolidated into a half-dozen master hands. During the same period the street railways and gas companies have been syndicated by a group of New York and Philadelphia capitalists. The same is true of the telephone, as well as of electric light and power. These interests are united by business, social, and political ties that enable them to work as one man in the organization of national, state, and city affairs. Through this unity of power the great natural monopolies of America have become identified with a few men, and these men, through the ramifications of their interests, have been able to develop a System of government which is buttressed on the one hand by the United States Sen-

ate and on the other hand by the control of the party in state, county, and city. It is these interests that are responsible for most of the corruption of our cities. For in city after city the conditions are the same. And even were the positive proof lacking, the necessity of it all supplies the explanation. For the franchise corporation is a natural monopoly, exclusive in its service. The value of its securities lies in a grant from the city, rather than in the investment made. The volume of securities which may be issued depends upon the maintenance of this monopoly,—the prevention of regulation or competition, and the keeping down of taxes.

There can be no other cause which explains the corruption. The corporation enjoys perpetual succession. Its life exceeds in duration that of the individual. It alone, yesterday, to-day, to-morrow, is interested in maintaining the *status quo*. Other corrupting influences are transient and occasional. And none save the privileged interests can afford the outlay necessary to secure political control. For the gains enjoyed are measured in millions.

When, in the criminal law, the evidence accumulates to a certainty; when in addition to the evidence the motive appears and cannot be questioned; when the means to be employed are at hand and the goods are found in the possession

of the accused; when all these things conjoin; when, in addition, one influence after another can be excluded as inadequate, then the conviction passes beyond a reasonable doubt.

Such is the nature of the proof that it is franchises, grants, and privileges that have subverted our cities and substituted for democracy a System of business government. It is this that has alienated much of the talent and intelligence of the community and made reform a class struggle, and democracy a thing many despair of.

Many there are who question the ability of democracy to solve the problems of city life along the lines indicated. To some this is not so much reasoned conviction as indolent disinclination to assume the burdens involved. It is so much easier to rely on the boss, the party, and the System which has been inaugurated. Yet, the testimony of all experience shows that society has constantly moved onward through forces from below. The great advances in government have been achieved through the common people slowly breaking down privilege after privilege in the onward movement of human liberty. The lesson of our present industrial achievement is the same. The captain of industry has come up from the sod and the mill. He has exemplified the law of nature, which is as active in government as it is in his own career.

The great problem now before the American

people is, how can opportunity be kept open; how can industry be saved from privilege; how can our politics be left to the unimpeded action of talent and ability? This is the problem which the city has to solve, even more than the state or the nation. For in the city the life of the future is to be found. Already the burden of mere existence taxes to the uttermost the energy of an increasing mass of the population. This burden arises in large measure through the increased cost of living, which, in turn, is traceable to rent, to transit, to light, heat, and water, the great natural monopolies, whose values the city creates.

With these services, along with the ground rents of our cities, socialized, the standard of living would be elevated, while through coöperative agencies the city would become in effect an enlarged home, offering to its members many of the comforts and conveniences that are now denied to any save a few. With these opportunities enlarged, the love and affection of the citizen for the city would increase, which, in turn, would bring about a purification of our politics that cannot be obtained so long as the influence of the rich and privileged classes is united against the community.

With such a programme achieved, democracy would cease to be a class struggle. There would be created a union of all the people, seeking in conscious ways the betterment of human condi-

tions. Then the merit system, the party, the ballot, the charter, would be reformed by common demand; for then there would be no class, no powerful influence, whose control of the government was dependent upon the persistence of the *status quo*. With home rule secured, with popular control attained, with the city free to determine what activities it will undertake, and what shall be its sources of revenue, then the city will be consciously allied to definite ideals, and the new civilization, which is the hope as well as the problem of democracy, will be open to realization.