

# THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1922



Ripley, Maine, ca. 1920

## — CITY & COUNTRY —

The fact is now an icon of American pivotal moments: the 1920 census revealed that, for the first time in U.S. history, more people lived in urban than in rural areas. The percentages were close—51.2% urban to 48.8% rural, but the significance was astounding. Everyone understood that the trajectory would not change course. The nation of yeoman farmers and stalwart pioneers was passing into history; America was an urban nation. Here we view the city-country divide in the U.S. as perceived in the critical Twenties.

After completing a lecture tour of the United States, the English journalist Philip Gibbs published his impressions of America and Americans.

Philip Gibbs  
 "Things I Like in the United States"  
*Harper's*, October 1919

I am bound to say that during my visit to the United States I found much more to admire than to criticize, and, perhaps because I was on the lookout for things to like rather than to dislike, I had one of the best times of my life—in some ways the very best—and came away with respect, admiration, and gratitude for the American people. There are so many things I like in their character and way of life that I should be guilty of gushing if I put them all down, but although I have no doubt they have many faults, like most people in this world, I prefer to remember the pleasant, rather than the unpleasant, qualities they possess, especially as they left the most dominant impression on my mind.

I think every Englishman, however critical, would agree that he is struck at once on his first visit to America by the clean, bright, progressive spirit of life in the smaller towns beyond the turmoil of New York. I have already described the sensational effect produced upon one's imagination by that great city, and have given some glimpses of various aspects of the social life which I had the good fortune to see with untiring interest; but I confess that the idea of living in New York would affright me because of its wear and tear upon the nerves, and I think that the "commuters" who dwell in the suburbs have good sense and better luck. The realities of America—the average idea, the middle-class home, the domestic qualities upon which the nation is built—are to be found more deeply rooted in the suburbs and smaller towns than in the whirligig of Manhattan Island to which a million and half people, I am told, come every day, and from which, after business or pleasure, they go away. To me there was something very attractive in the construction of such places as Rye, Port Chester, Greenwich, and Stamford, an hour away from New York, and many other townships of similar size in other parts of the United States. I liked the style of their houses, those neat buildings of wood with overlapping shingles, and wide porches and verandas where people may sit out on summer days, with

shelter from the sun; . . . To English eyes accustomed to dingy brick houses in the suburbs of big cities, to the dreary squalor of some new little town which straggles around a filthy railway station, with refuse-heaps in undeveloped fields, . . . these American villages look wonderfully clean, bright, and pleasant!

I noticed that in each one of them there were five institutions in which the spirit of the community was revealed—the bank, the post office, the school, the church, and the picture palace [movie theater]. The bank is generally the handsomest building in the place, with a definite attempt to give it some dignity of architecture and richness of decoration. Inside it has marble pillars and panels, brass railings at the receipt of custom, a brightly burnished mechanism for locking up the safe, a tiled floor of spotless cleanliness. The local tradesman feels secure in putting his money in such a place of dignity, the local lady likes to come here in the morning (unless she has overdrawn her account) for a chat with the bank manager or one of his gentlemanly assistants. It is a social rendezvous dedicated to the spirit of success, and the bank manager, who knows the private business and the social adventures of his clients, is in a position of confidence and esteem. He is pleased to shake the fingertips of a lady through the brass railings, while she is pleased to ask him, “How do you like my new hat?” and laughs when, with grave eyes, he expresses sympathy with her husband. “Twenty years ago he was serving behind the counter in a dry-goods store. Now he has a million dollars to his credit.” Everybody brightens at this story of success. The fact that a man starts as a butcher-boy or a bell-boy is all in his favor in social prestige. There is no snobbishness, contemptuous of humble origin, and I found a spirit of good-natured democracy among the people I watched in the local bank.

Competing with the bank in architectural dignity is the village post office, generally of white stone, or wood, with the local Roll of Honor on the green outside, and, inside, a number of picture-posters calling to the patriotism of the American people to support the Liberty Loan—the fifth when I was there. Small boys at the counter are buying thrift stamps. Chauffeurs who have driven down from country houses are collecting the letters of the family from lockers, with private keys. College girls are exchanging confidences at the counters. I liked the social atmosphere of an American post office. I seemed to see a visible friendliness here between the state and the people. . . .

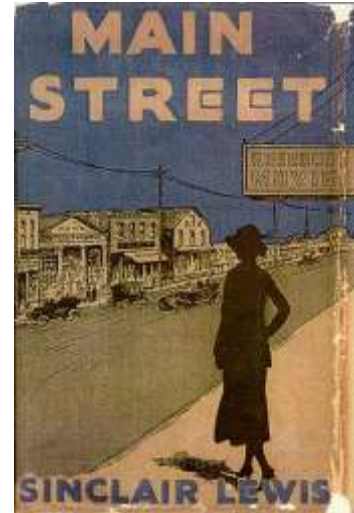
And I liked all the glimpses I had of American home life in the suburbs of New York and in other townships of the United States. I liked the white woodwork of the houses, and the bright sunlight that swept the sky above them, and the gardens that grew without hedges. I liked the good nature of the people, the healthiness of their outlook on life, their hopefulness in the future, their self-reliance and their sincerity of speech. I liked the children of America, and the college girls who strolled in groups along the lanes, and the crowds who assembled in the morning at the local station to begin a new day’s work or a new day’s shopping in the big city at their journey’s end. They had a keen and vital look, and nodded to one another in a neighborly way as they bought bulky papers from the bookstall and chewing gum from the candy stall and had their shoes shined with one eye on the ticket office. I liked the greeting of the train conductor to all those people whose faces he knew as familiar friends, and to whom he passed the time of day with a jesting word or two. I liked the social life of the American middle classes, because it is based, for the most part, on honesty, a kindly feeling toward mankind, and healthiness of mind and body. They are not out to make trouble in the world, and unless somebody asks for it very badly they are not inclined to interfere with other people’s business. The thing I liked best in the United States is the belief of its citizens in the progress of mankind toward higher ideals of common sense; and after the madness of a world at war it is good to find such faith, however difficult to believe.



*The Social Atmosphere of an American Post Office, illustration in Philip Gibbs, *People of Destiny: Americans as I Saw Them at Home and Abroad*, 1920; with reprinted essay, “Things I Like in the United States.”*

Sinclair Lewis  
*Main Street*  
Novel, 1920

Sinclair Lewis's best-selling novel became the decade's statement of the city-town divide in America. His fictional town of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, was populated with complacent and often self-righteous residents. In the scene below, Carol (Carrie), a city girl from Minneapolis, travels to Gopher Prairie with her new husband, Will Kennicott. She comments on the farmers whom she finds narrow and unaware.



“Isn’t there any way of waking them up? What would happen if they discovered scientific agriculture?” . . .

“. . . These people? Wake ’em up? What for? They’re happy.”

“But they’re so provincial. No, that isn’t what I mean. They’re—oh, so sunk in the mud.”

“Look here, Carrie. You want to get over your city idea that because a man’s pants aren’t pressed, he’s a fool. These farmers are mighty keen and up-and-coming.”

“I know! That’s what hurts. Life seems so hard for them—these lonely farms and this gritty train.”

“Oh, they don’t mind it. Besides, things are changing. The auto, the telephone, rural free delivery; they’re bringing the farmers in closer touch with the town. Takes time, you know, to change a wilderness like this was fifty years ago. But already, why, they can hop into the Ford or the Overland and get in to the movies on Saturday evening quicker than you could get down to ’em by trolley in St. Paul.”

“But if it’s these towns we’ve been passing that the farmers run to for relief from their bleakness— Can’t you understand? Just LOOK at them!”

Kennicott was amazed. Ever since childhood he had seen these towns from trains on this same line. He grumbled, “Why, what’s the matter with ’em? Good hustling burgs [towns]. It would astonish you to know how much wheat and rye and corn and potatoes they ship in a year.”



With such a small-town life a Kennicott or a Champ Perry is content, but there are also hundreds of thousands, particularly women and young men, who are not at all content. The more intelligent young people (and the fortunate widows!) flee to the cities with agility and, despite the fictional tradition, resolutely stay there, seldom returning even for holidays. The most protesting patriots of the towns leave them in old age, if they can afford it, and go to live in California or in the cities.

The reason, Carol insisted, is not a whiskered rusticity. It is nothing so amusing!

It is an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment . . . the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dullness made God. [ellipsis in original]

A savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.

Sinclair Lewis  
*Dodsworth*  
Novel, 1929

In a later novel, Lewis's protagonist Sam Dodsworth, a highly successful midwestern automobile manufacturer, decides to leave America for high-class European travel with his social-climber wife. Back in New York City, he discusses city and country living with his Iowa friend Russ Ireland, a widely travelled journalist, who resists the notion that he might prefer country life over the hustle-bustle of Manhattan life.

“But I don’t like the country! Being a hick by origin, I like cities. I had enough cornfields and manure piles before I ran away, at fourteen. And from what I heard at lunch, all the other towns in America are becoming about as bad as New York—traffic jams and big movie theaters and radios yapping everywhere and everybody has to have electric dishwashers and vacuum cleaners and each family has to have not one car, by golly, but two or three—and all on the installment plan! But I guess any of those burgs would be better than this New York monkey jungle.

Herbert Blumer  
*Movies and Conduct*  
1933

In the late 1920s sociologist Herbert Blumer conducted a national study of movies' influence on the life attitudes, aspirations, and behavior of high school and college-age youth. Each person in the study completed a "motion picture autobiography."

*Female, 16, white, college sophomore.*—Life in a small town such as mine was not so thrilling after I passed the age of twelve, and oftentimes I went to the Friday night show and sat in a daze, picturing myself in the places I saw on the screen. My world was very small, for up to this time I did not know what existed outside the small circle I had been traveling in. When I would see the great open spaces of the desert and the cities with great buildings, my heart would yearn to break away from the surroundings I had always lived in and to get out into the world and see what it was all about.

Louis Raymond Reid  
"The Small Town," in Harold E. Stearns, ed., *Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans*, 1922

Before the appearance of the automobile and the movie upon the national horizon, the small town was chiefly characterized by a

distinctly rural and often melancholy peacefulness. A gentle air of depression hung over it, destructive of the ambitious spirit of youth and yet, by very reason of its existence, influencing this spirit to seek adventure and livelihood in wider fields. Amusements were few and far between. It was the day of the quilting party, of the Sunday promenade in the cemetery, of buggy-riding, of the ice cream festival and the spelling bee. The bucolic note was ever present.

Such an environment, while joyous to the small boy, became hopelessly dull and lifeless to the youth of vitality and imagination. Restlessness with it tormented him day and night until it grew into an obsession. Especially did he dislike Sunday, its funereal quiet with stores closed and other possible avenues of excitement and adventure forbidden. He began to cherish dreams of a life strange and teeming in distant cities.

As he grew older and a measure of independence came to him he fled, provided there was no business established by a patient and hard-working ancestry which might lure him into remaining home. And even that did not always attract him. He was compelled to go by his very nature—a nature that desired a change from the pall of confining and circumscribed realism, the masks of respectability everywhere about him, the ridiculous display of caste, that saw a rainbow of fulfilled ideals over the hills, that demanded, in a word, romance.

He, who did not feel this urge, departed because of lack of business opportunities. Occasionally he returned disillusioned and exhausted by the city and eager to re-establish himself in a line of work which promised spiritual contentment. But more often he stayed away, struggling with the crowd in the city, returning home only for short vacation periods for rest and reminiscence, to see his people and renew boyhood friendships. At such times he was likely to be impressed by the seeming prosperity of those boys he left behind, of the apparent enjoyment they found in the narrow environment. The thought may have occurred to him that the life of the small town had undergone a marked change, that it had adopted awkward, self-conscious urban airs.

Suddenly he realizes that the automobile and the movie and to some extent the topical magazine are mainly responsible for the contrast. The motor-car has given the small town man an ever-increasing contact with the city, with life at formerly inaccessible resorts, with the country at large. And the movie

and the magazine have brought him news and pictures of the outside world. He has patronized them and grown wiser.



Al Posen, "You Were My Queen in Calico," comic strip series, *Them Days Is Gone Forever*, *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 1, 1922



Robert S. Lynd & Helen Merrell Lynd  
*Middletown: A Study in American Culture*  
 1929

Selected in 1924 as a typical town of “middle America,” Muncie, Indiana, was the focus of two sociologists’ research into the changes wrought in modernizing America since the late 1890s.

Confronted by the difficulty of choosing among subtle group loyalties, the Middletown citizen, particular of the business class in this world of credit, tends to do with his ideas what he does with his breakfast food or his collars or his politics—he increasingly accepts a blanket pattern solution. He does not try to scratch the “good fellow” ticket, but votes it straight.<sup>1</sup> To be “civic” and to “serve” is to “put over” “Magic Middletown,” the church, the [political] party, a get-together dinner, a financial campaign, one’s friends; it is to be “a booster, not a knocker”; to accept without question the symbols. Hence one tends to find certain groups of loyalties linked together. A successful lawyer is likely to belong to the Bar Association, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, the Republican party, one of two or three leading churches, a high order in the Masons, the Country Club, and be a director of the Y.M.C.A., while his wife joins the more fashionable women’s clubs, the group directing the local charities, and so on. . . .

As pointed out above in connection with the disappearance of the Ethical Society,<sup>2</sup> the discredit attached to voting for La Follette, and so on,<sup>3</sup> strong heretics—religious, economic, political, social—in Middletown are increasingly frowned upon. An educator recently moving to Middletown was warned, “No matter what you think, you’ll have to become a regular churchman to get along in Middletown.” The Teachers’ Federation, wanting to bring Ida Tarbell to lecture,<sup>4</sup> was told by a leading Middletown lawyer, “I don’t believe you’d better do it. Why, when I was in the university I believed all the teachers told me and went out thinking I could help change things. Now I realize it was downright wrong for them to talk to us the way they did.” “It is rather comforting to know,” says a Middletown editorial in 1924, “that the great masses of businessmen, of which there are excellent examples in [Middletown], ‘sit steady in the boat.’” A man of wide experience who had grown up in Middletown and is highly respected by the city said that the two things he felt most upon coming back to Middletown from a distant country were its prejudice and superficiality. “These people are all afraid of something,” he said. “What is it?”

William Starr Myers  
 “The Ku Klux Klan of Today”  
*The North American Review*, June 1926

Myers was a political science professor at Princeton University.

It may seem a small matter, but it may be said in this connection that one of the great causes of anti-foreign prejudice among our farmers and other country people is the crowds of “owner-drivers” of automobiles that swarm out of the cities upon every road within a radius of fifty to one hundred miles upon practically every Sunday and holiday of the year, and especially during the summer months. These people, often of foreign birth and comparatively recent immigration, not only “hog the road” and drive in the most reckless manner, but commit wide and serious depredations upon the gardens, orchards, woods and private property of the rural dwellers. The strength of the Ku Klux movement in these sections is probably a direct result, and only better policing of the roads, with better manners upon the part of the visitors, will allay this prejudice that is visited without discrimination upon all those whom the farmers are pleased to designate as “foreigners.” It is the seemingly small thing that so often has a great effect upon public opinion.



Popular Science, October 1928

<sup>1</sup> “Good fellow” ticket . . . straight ticket: i.e., the voter feels the pressure to vote for all candidates of the dominant party instead of making personal selections.  
<sup>2</sup> Ethical Society. “The openly free-thinking group, represented in part in the Ethical Society of the nineties, has disappeared and in its stead is an outwardly conforming indifference among a certain minority of the business class.” [Lynd & Lynd, p. 317]  
<sup>3</sup> Support for the secular Ethical Society and the progressive Wisconsin politician Robert La Follette would indicate a liberal political stance.  
<sup>4</sup> Ida Tarbell: well-known woman journalist and Progressive Era muckraker.

“Is Democracy a Failure?”  
*The Forum*  
 February 1929

The editors of the *Forum* invited commentary on modern democracy, its strengths and challenges, from a variety of spokesmen for this article in 1929.

TOM D. MCKEOWN, Congressman from Oklahoma: “The transfer of our population from the soil [farm] to the city has put a terrific strain on America’s institution of democracy. By increasing the complexity of living, this trek to the city is making inadequate many of the old governmental methods. By submerging the individual in the crowd, it lessens his sense of civic responsibility and thus opens the way for political machines which thrive better in urban than in rural conditions. The political machine is not the root of the trouble, as Dr. [William] Durant says, but rather the fruit of the trouble.”

Pres. Warren Harding  
 State of the Union Address  
 December 6, 1921

Pres. Harding included this comment in his discussion of farmers’ economic hardships during the postwar depression.

The base of the pyramid of civilization which rests upon the soil is shrinking through the drift of population from farm to city. For a generation we have been expressing more or less concern about this tendency. Economists have warned and statesmen have deplored. We thought for a time that modern conveniences and the more intimate contact would halt the movement, but it has gone steadily on. Perhaps only grim necessity will correct it, but we ought to find a less drastic remedy.



One hundred years ago the population of the U. S. Today the city population is greatly in excess of the was two-thirds farming and one-third city population, country population.

“City and Country Population”

*Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 1921

Cartoonist: John T. McCutcheon

The 1920 census revealed that, for the first time in U.S history, more people lived in urban than in rural areas (51.2% / 48.8%).

+W. J. Bryan: William Jennings Bryan, “Cross of Gold” speech, July 1896: “You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.”

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Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, 1920