

william dean howells and the antiurban tradition a reconsideration

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The debate about William Dean Howells' attitudes toward the late nineteenth-century American city involve the much broader question of the place of antiurbanism in American thought. Responding to the charges of H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis and other post-World War I critics who had condemned the author as a complacent symbol of the nineteenth-century literary establishment, scholars in the fifties and early sixties portrayed him as a Middle Western rural democrat who spent much of his adult life criticizing urban-industrial America.¹ Unfortunately, in attempting to revive Howells' reputation, these critics exaggerated his occasional nostalgia for the Ohio village of his youth, leaving the impression that he was an alienated critic of the city, if not genuinely antiurban. Although recent scholars have partly revised this view, critics have generally continued to accept the argument that the author's well-known affinity for socialism, together with his nostalgia for a vanishing countryside, left him an unswerving critic of the city.²

During the years in which scholars were discovering these antiurban sentiments, urban historians and sociologists began challenging the depth and cohesiveness of what had long been accepted as a monolithic, anti-urban tradition, dating back to Jefferson and Crèvecoeur, and persisting through the transcendentalists, the pragmatists and literary naturalists, and the Chicago school of urban sociology, to the present. R. Richard Wohl in "Urbanism, Urbanity, and the Historian" (1955) and later Robert H. Walker in "The Poet and the Rise of the City" (1962) discounted the alleged tradition as a product of late nineteenth-century agrarian propaganda whose lingering manifestations were distorting modern approaches to urban studies.³ In "Boosters, Intellectuals and the

American City" (1963) Frank Freidel also found that America lacked a deep or sustained antiurban tradition, noting the pervasive city boosterism of Benjamin Franklin and scores of lesser figures who predated and carried well beyond Jefferson.⁴ Charles Glaab developed essentially the same case in "The Historian and the American Urban Tradition" (1963).⁵ Both Freidel and Glaab observed that among attitudes mistakenly interpreted as antiurban have been criticisms directed against specific, often European, cities: fear of the mob, particularly immigrants; aesthetic objections; and opposition to materialism or capitalism.

In 1962, Morton and Lucia White undertook in *The Intellectual Versus the City* the kind of sweeping reexamination of our supposed antiurban heritage encouraged by these scholars. Unfortunately, in their zeal to dispel the concept of a monolithic tradition, the Whites failed to observe the cautions of Freidel and Glaab, frequently reading antiurban sentiment into criticism only indirectly related to the city. While they demonstrated that objections to the city after the Civil War came from a variety of sources and reflected no single theme, they nevertheless labeled as antiurban many of the nation's leading intellectuals whose claim to such recognition was tenuous at best. Their chapter on William Dean Howells is a case in point. Entitled "The Ambivalent Urbanite," it acknowledged that since Howells chose to spend his life in the city despite his published criticism, his attitudes must have been fraught with ambivalences.⁶ Yet they devoted the bulk of their chapter to establishing the antiurbanism which they saw dominating his thought after 1890. If he was a "practical city dweller," they argued, he was nevertheless a "theoretical anti-urbanist."

Like contemporary literary critics, however, the Whites failed to distinguish between the author's socialism and his more personal criticism of certain aspects of cities. Two of the three novels upon which the Whites relied most heavily, *The World of Chance* (1893) and *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894), represent the most extreme expression of the author's socialist fervor, a view which emerged in the late 1880s and early 1890s and faded rapidly thereafter. The third, *Through the Eye of a Needle* (1907), was essentially a light-hearted sequel to the earlier Altrurian novel, and should be carefully distinguished from it.⁷ Throughout their analysis the Whites, like their contemporaries, left the misleading impression that Howells believed the capitalist trappings of American cities, their squalid slums and chaotic growth, to be irredeemable and damning features.

In short, despite some excellent Howells scholarship in recent years, there has been no treatment of the author's vision of the city in light of the suggestions of urban historians. This article attempts such an analysis with the purpose of demonstrating that while he was dismayed by some aspects of American cities, Howells believed they could be remedied, and always felt that the advantages of city life far outweighed its drawbacks.

He might object to the glaring contrast between rich and poor and the haphazard sprawl of many cities; he might see in them a corrosive effect on community institutions. But the positive features of urban life—convenience, opportunities and exciting and complex activity—impressed him more. Above all, despite a succession of summer cottages and resorts, Howells preferred to spend the better part of his adult years in Boston and New York. His criticisms of the city were always from the point of view of an insider.

Critics have mistakenly viewed Howells' aversion to the economic inequalities of city dwellers and to the aesthetic blight of the cities as genuine antiurbanism. His early Boston writings often dealt with the stigma attached to social differences, while subsequent novels set in New York condemned the exploitation of the poor and the commercialization of values of the wealthy. The most eloquent was *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, written in outrage at the trial and executions of the Haymarket anarchists. It was soon followed by *The World of Chance* and *A Traveler from Altruria*, both of which brought even more violent attacks upon Gotham's economic conditions. As its title suggests, the former lamented that random and uncontrollable chance was the central feature of capitalistic competition, visible in New York's formless, haphazard sprawl, its congested streets, its tenements, its jagged skyline. The narrator cited "the irregularity of the buildings, high and low, as if they were parts of a wall wantonly hacked and notched," while the Altrurian traveler, in a thorough condemnation of the American economic system, characterized its cities as "the straggling and shapeless accretion of accident."⁸ In the tenements of New York, in its grimy factories, in the machinations of the Stock Exchange, the author saw the worst in American life.

But it was capitalism, and nothing inherent in the city, which Howells held responsible for these shortcomings. He expressed this view in *The World of Chance* when his three socialist protagonists discussed to what extent they held the city accountable for its evils. "If I had my way," declared Ansel Denton, the radical son-in-law of Brook Farmer David Hughes, "there wouldn't be a city, big or little, on the whole continent."⁹ Kane, a would-be novelist, took a more enlightened Jeffersonian position. "Cities are a vice but they are essential to us now," he advised. "We could not live without them; perhaps we are to be saved by them."¹⁰ As a spokesman for Howells' own feelings, Hughes countered that the capitalist system and nothing inherent in cities was the problem. In fact, he envisioned an urban utopia as the crowning accomplishment of a new socialist order, "the ideal city . . . built not from greed and the fraud of competition, but from the generous and unselfish spirit of emulation, wherein men join to achieve the best instead of separating to get the most."¹¹

That Howells was not really hostile to the city again appeared in his

fascination with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which he attended in late September 1893, the year *The World of Chance* was published. As the guest of its director, Daniel H. Burnham, he hoped to discover fresh material for his Altrurian essays. "The Fair City is a bit of Altruria," his utopian traveler would later record, "it is as if the capital of one of our Regions had set sail and landed somehow on the shores of the vast inland sea, where the Fair City lifts its domes and columns."¹² As Clara Kirk has noted, Howells' Altrurian "recognized in the White City the very atmosphere of his homeland, for the buildings which rose from the swamps on the shores of Lake Michigan were the hope for the industrial and cultural future of the United States."¹³ With a promise of the victory of aesthetic appeal over commercialism and cooperation over competition, the Exposition embodied in an urban setting what was best in American civilization.

Howells sought to realize his hopes for the American city by supporting practical reforms. He argued that if government could control the cities' physical growth, eliminate slums by redistributing incomes and regulate transportation, the commercial and aesthetic malaise of urban America might disappear.¹⁴ Even New York, the hub of American capitalism, was not beyond resurrection. In *Letters of an Altrurian Traveler*, the usually critical visitor was moved to comment that "certain traits of the city's essentially transitional nature sometimes suggest that it may be the first city of America to Altrurianize."¹⁵ Foremost among these traits was Central Park, which the author felt was an inspiration to future urban reform. "I find the pleasure of the people in it the great thing," he wrote his father in 1892, "they are often ragged and dirty, but they are all quite at home; and the Park is a fine object-lesson in favor of Socialism: whatever the whole own is good and kindly."¹⁶ Two years later his Altrurian wrote that "in everything of it and in it, I imagine a prophecy of the truer state which I believe America is destined yet to see established."¹⁷ When living in the city the author always sought to be within walking distance of the park. Like the gardened spaces of Washington and the park systems of Chicago, also designed by his friend Frederick Law Olmstead, it held out hope for the cities of the nation.

Howells' deepest reservation about the nineteenth-century American city was the inability of its social institutions to keep pace with its rapid physical and economic transformation. As America's urban population swelled with the influx of immigrants and dissatisfied country-dwellers, and as industrialization brought glaring extremes of wealth and poverty, communal bonds inevitably eroded. The traditions which had provided the cement for these institutions seemed to be disappearing, rendering them incapable of enforcing social and moral values.¹⁸ In his three most important Boston novels—*A Modern Instance*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and *The Minister's Charge*—neither church, polite society, nor neighborhood was able to provide a sense of community for urban dwellers. New-

comers like the Hubbards, the Laphams and Lemuel Barker, leaving village institutions behind, were cast adrift in the moral dislocation of the metropolis. The sons and daughters of established residents—the Tom Coreys and Ben and Olive Hallecks—were likewise compelled to seek alternatives to the crumbling social order of their parents.

The author's most perceptive criticism of the breakdown of community, however, was in his New York novels. His personal sense of loss in the city was evidenced as early as 1860 in a conversation with Edmund Stedman. "In Broadway no one would know who you were, or care to the measure of his smallest blasphemy," he remarked, then added, "I cannot think that the sense of neighborhood is such a bad thing for the artist in any sort. It involves the sense of responsibility, which cannot be too constant or too keen."¹⁹ Forty years later, when his Altrurian asked a vacationing New York socialite about the sense of neighborhood where she lived, she was taken aback. "My next door neighbor!" she cried. "But I don't *know* the people next door! We live in a large apartment house, some forty families, and I assure you I do not know a soul among them."²⁰ Families, like neighborhoods, were affected by the habits of city dwellers. Married couples separated for the summer, the wife and children residing in a resort hotel, the husband remaining at his club in the city.

Howells effectively described this loss of community in several novels which introduced country-dwellers to New York City. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *The Kentons*, village Ohioans felt cast adrift in the anonymity and complexity of the metropolis. Both Jacob Dryfoos and Simon Kenton were community leaders, their positions of authority based upon precepts shared by their village peers. New York freed them from social responsibility at the cost of the familiarity and respect of their neighbors. For Dryfoos it was "a desolation in which he tasted the last bitter of homesickness, the utter misery of idleness and listlessness. When he broke down and cried for the hardworking, wholesome life he had lost, he was near the end of what was best in himself. He devolved upon a meaner ideal than that of conservative good citizenship, which had been his chief moral experience."²¹ Unlike Dryfoos, Kenton was only visiting Gotham, but experienced a similar sense of loss:

He had given up smoking, and he did not care to sit alone in the office of the hotel where other old fellows passed the time over their papers and cigars, in the heart of the glowing grates. They looked too much like himself, with their air of unrecognized consequence, and of personal loss in an alien environment. He knew from their dress and bearing that they were country people, and it wounded him in a tender place to realize they had each left behind him in his own town an authority and a respect which they could not enjoy in New York. Nobody called them judge, or general, or doctor, or squire; nobody cared who they were, or what they thought; Kenton did not care himself; but when he missed one of them he envied him, for then he knew that he had gone back to

the soft, warm keeping of his own neighborhood, and resumed the intelligent regard of community he had grown up with.²²

A Hazard of New Fortunes was the author's finest, most penetrating attempt to convey the extent of the social and moral fragmentation of New York. Called together to launch a new literary journal, its central characters found their lives caught up in the throes of a massive strike by the streetcar workmen. Arriving from Boston to become editor of the journal, Basil March underwent an initiation similar to Howells' own into the disruptive, often violent forces sweeping the city. Passing its teeming tenements, observing the corrosive effects of wealth upon the capitalist, he slowly came to appreciate the conditions which set rich against poor, father against son, and was finally shocked into moral sensibility upon witnessing the death of one friend and the maiming of another during a strike confrontation.

As for Howells himself, he may have found the effects of capitalism most apparent in the city, and was often deeply disturbed by its lack of community, but he preferred to be an urbanite. When he moved to a country house outside Boston in 1878, he had hoped to escape the trials of city life. He encountered the trials of country life. Even with a hired man, he wrote a friend, day-to-day living was just too taxing. He disliked the long ride to work. Illness in the family convinced him of the need for immediate access to medical facilities. He soon returned to Boston and later New York, where he could once again enjoy the conveniences of urban life. His houses in Boston were expensive if not extravagant. His New York apartments were outfitted with the most modern electrical and plumbing facilities. He delighted in traveling the paved streets in horse-drawn trolleys, and later riding the elevated through the city, taking in the sights and sounds. His family could shop in hundreds of stores and select from thousands of items, most of which were unavailable outside the city. Groceries offered a countless variety of fresh and prepared items, and the author could satisfy his own Epicurean tastes at any number of gourmet restaurants, each with its own specialty.

Howells also appreciated the opportunities available to city residents. In his many novels set in rural New England, he depicted its villages and surrounding countryside as isolated, confining and quite often oppressive.²³ Bryce Maxwell in *The Quality of Mercy* might have been speaking for the author in explaining why he could never remain in the country. " 'Arcady is a good place to emigrate from,' " he observed, " 'It's like Vermont, where I was born, too. And if I owned the whole of Arcady, I should have no use for it till I had seen what what the world had to offer. Then I might like it for a few months in the summer.' " ²⁴ Only in the city could one pursue a variety of interests and fully develop natural talents. The experience of Simon Kenton's wife upon arrival in New York was typical. She "was growing gayer and seemed to be growing younger in the inspiration of the great, good-natured town," the narrator

observed.²⁵ She began to enjoy many of the things which only a large city could offer, "matinees . . . exhibitions of pictures . . . schools of painting . . . studio teas . . . meetings and conferences of aesthetic interest . . . parlor lectures . . . intellectual clubs."²⁶

Howells elaborated upon the expansive opportunities of the metropolis in *Coast of Bohemia*, which related the experiences of Cornelia Saunders, a young girl who left Pymantoning, Ohio, to attend the Synthesis of Art Studies in New York, where she was able to develop her artistic talent in a way undreamt of back home. As the narrator observed, her experience at the studio "was all a strange happiness to her, and yet not so strange. It was like a heritage of her own that she had come into; something she was born to, a right, a natural condition."²⁷ Soon after her arrival she shed all thoughts of returning to her village circumstances as she began to realize her potential in the great city. She remained in New York to marry Mr. Ludlow, a director of the Synthesis, and happily continued her painting.

In addition to the conveniences and the opportunities of life in the city, Howells was invigorated by its stimulating and diverse activity, something he could not do without for long. Whatever else might be true of metropolitans, he felt, they could never be bored. In an essay on "The Country Printer," the author contrasted "the whirl and rush" of cities with the "ennui and boredom" of the country. While he believed that "getting the good of the city and the country out of one into the other" was the ideal solution, he remained an urbanite until he could find a way.²⁸ Howells' youthful pleasure in the boisterous social life of Columbus, Ohio, had pricked his curiosity, and every city thereafter was only more attractive. Of an early visit to Cincinnati he wrote, "Already I am grown fond of this big bustling city. The everlasting and furious rush up and down, and to and fro, pleases me, and I like nothing better than to stroll about the streets alone; and stealthily contemplate the shop windows and orange stands, and speculate on the people I meet."²⁹ He continued to express a sense of exhilaration in his visits to Midwestern cities. Twenty-five years later he passed through Indianapolis and pronounced the state capital "a magnificent city."³⁰ Returning in 1899 he again found Indianapolis "a stately and beautifully livable city; there is a great Denkmal in it that is distinctly noble, and gives the capital square a very European effect. Asphalt everywhere, and comfort down to the poorest. People gentle and easy spoken."³¹ Chicago, which he visited that same year, fascinated him. "The smokey sky of Chicago, all painted with white plumes of steam was something wonderful, and wild beyond compare," he wrote his wife. Chicago had the "*presence*" of a great city; the people possessed "a kind of inner calm in their rush which is astounding."³²

Howells reserved his highest praise for New York, where he spent the last thirty years of his life. Although he never liked to be thought

of as a New Yorker, he wrote as one. He might deplore the city's capitalistic trappings, but he did not conceal that he enjoyed the city "immensely."³³ In 1906, he told his sister Aurelia of "the vast deluge of New York incidents. Things take place here on such a huge scale."³⁴ From Europe two years later he wrote her that "Paris is a wonderful place. . . . Still I would rather live in New York, and homesickness is growing on me."³⁵ And from Seville he wrote to his son that "the climate here is perfect. Meantime, I am homesick for New York."³⁶

Howells' fascination with the pace of New York life was constantly evident. Walking through the city's slums, Basil March speculated in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* that not even the most destitute inhabitants would prefer the quiet of the countryside when so much activity swirled about. In "Confessions of a Summer Colonist" the author's vacationing urbanite closed with the wistful observation, "I myself sniff the asphalt afar; the roar of the streets calls to me with the magic that the voice of the sea is losing."³⁷ In a series of fictional essays selected from "The Editor's Easy Chair" and collected in *Imaginary Interviews*, Howells tried to assess Gotham's attractions. He observed in "Autumn in the Country and City" that the city had "a charm which we of the Easy Chair always feel, on first returning to it in the autumn."³⁸

If anyone were so daring, he might say it was confidence modified by anxiety; a rash expectation of luck derived from immunity for past transgression; the hopes of youth shot through with youth's despair. . . . No other city under the sun, we doubt, is so expressive of that youth: that modern youth, able, agile, eager, audacious; not the youth of the poets, but the youth of the true, the grim realists.³⁹

In "To the Home-comer's Eye" the "Easy Chair" asked another New Yorker for his first impressions upon returning to the city from abroad. "I wish I could say!" the imaginery visitor replied. "It was as un-beautiful as it could be, but it was wonderful! Has anybody else ever said there is no place like it?" When asked what quality he felt best described the uniqueness of the metropolis, he answered, "I was going to say, sublimity. What do you think of sublimity?" To which the "Easy Chair" replied, "We always defend New York against you. We accept sublimity."⁴⁰ Later the "Chair" pressed its visitor to elaborate upon his observation. "You had got quite away from the sublimity of New York," it noted, "We should like you to explain again why, if 'The Heart of New York,' with its skyscrapers, made you think of scrap-iron, the Flatiron soothed your lacerated sensibilities?" In his defense the visitor concluded, "The flatiron is an incident, an accent merely, in the mighty music of the Avenue, a happy discord that makes for harmony."⁴¹ Just as the author lauded the city's confident spirit as a blend of youth and experience, he admired its sublime appearance as the harmony produced by happy discord.

Howells thus sang the praises of urban America. What was true of Gotham applied to all American cities. That he was able, even in his most anticapitalistic novels, to envision an urban utopia founded upon socialistic principles, and to concern himself with such urban reforms as the city park movement and increased public authority over the construction industry, indicates that it was not the city itself he rejected. He wanted, rather, to do away with social and economic inequality, as well as haphazard urban growth, evils he associated with capitalism. The only apparently innate disadvantage of city life which he decried in his novels was the breakdown of community and subsequent erosion of traditional values. Above all, Howells recognized the intrinsic—and for him indispensable—advantages of urban life: the modern conveniences, the opportunities for individual development and the excitement and variety unavailable in the countryside. From the time of his youthful arrival in Columbus, exultant in his escape from the Ohio village, through his mature years in Boston and New York, Howells, one must conclude, remained a man of the city.

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footnotes

1. Edwin H. Cady, *The Road to Realism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: 1956), *The Realist at War* (Syracuse, N.Y.: 1958), "Howells and Twain: The World in Midwestern Eyes," *Ball State Teacher's College Forum*, III (Winter 1962-1963), 3-8. Also Kenneth Eble, "The Western Ideals of William Dean Howells," *Western Humanities Review*, XI (Autumn 1957), 331-338, and Benjamin Sokoloff, "William Dean Howells and the Ohio Village," *American Quarterly*, XI (Spring 1959), 58-75. More recently, in viewing the author as influenced by the late nineteenth-century "agrarian myth" described by social historians, Jan Dietrichson in *The Image of Money in the American Novel in the Gilded Age* (New York: 1969) and Michael Millgate in *American Social Fiction: James to Cozzens* (New York: 1964) have also put Howells in the antiurban camp.

2. Kenneth Lynn in *William Dean Howells, An American Life* (New York: 1970), and Kermit Vanderbilt in *The Achievement of William Dean Howells* (Princeton, N.J.: 1968), focusing upon Howells' early career, see him as really comfortable in neither city nor country. While interpreting his continual change of residence as indicative of an "inability to feel completely at home in urban America," they do find his commitment of Boston firmer than to his Ohio background.

3. R. Richard Wohl, "Urbanism, Urbanity, and the Historian," *University of Kansas Review*, XXII (Autumn 1955), 53-61; Robert H. Walker, "The Poet and the Rise of the City," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIX (June 1962), 85-99.

4. Frank Freidel, "Boosters, Intellectuals, and the American City," *The Historian and the City*, ed. Oscar Handlin and John Burchard (Boston: 1963), 115-20.

5. Charles N. Glaab, "The Historian and the American Urban Tradition," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XLVII (Autumn 1963), 12-25.

6. Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1962), 102-22.

7. See Gregory L. Crider, "Howells' Altruria: The Ambivalent Utopia," *The Old Northwest*, I (December 1975), 405-18.

8. *Letters of an Altrurian Traveler* (Gainesville: 1961), 38.

9. *The World of Chance* (New York: 1893), 297.

10. *Ibid.*, 298.

11. *Ibid.*, 300.

12. *Letters of an Altrurian Traveler*, 21.

13. Clara M. Kirk, *W. D. Howells, Traveler from Altruria* (Gainesville: 1961), 21.

14. See "An East-side Ramble" and "New York Streets" in *Impressions and Experiences* (New York: 1896) and "The Quality of Boston and the Quantity of New York" in *Imaginary Interviews* (New York: 1969).

15. *Letters of an Altrurian Traveler*, 21.

16. To William Cooper Howells, October 22, 1892, William Dean Howells Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University (cited hereafter as Howells Papers). Unpublished materials in this study used by permission of William White Howells, who reserves all rights of further publication.
17. *Letters of an Altrurian Traveler*, 39.
18. See Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs* (Cambridge: 1962), 160.
19. *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (Bloomington 1968), 17-18.
20. *A Traveler from Altruria* (New York: 1908), 106.
21. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (New York: 1890), 226.
22. *The Kentons* (New York: 1902), 17-18.
23. Some of these novels might include *Annie Kilburn* (New York: 1889), *Dr. Breen's Practice* (Boston: 1881), *The Leatherwood God* (New York: 1916), *A Modern Instance* (Boston: 1881), *Mrs. Farrell* (New York: 1921), *The Quality of Mercy* (New York: 1892), and *The Undiscovered Country* (Boston: 1880).
24. *The Quality of Mercy* (New York: 1892), 392.
25. *The Kentons*, 13-14.
26. *Ibid.*, 16.
27. *Coast of Bohemia* (New York: 1899), 108.
28. "The Country Printer," *Impressions and Experiences*, 38-39.
29. To Joseph A. Howells, April 10, 1857, Rutherford B. Hayes Library, Fremont, Ohio.
30. To Winifred Howells, May 1, 1881, Howells Papers.
31. To Elinor M. Howells, November 19, 1899, Howells Papers.
32. To Elinor M. Howells, October 24, 1899, Howells Papers.
33. To James Parton, January 3, 1890, Howells Papers.
34. To Aurelia M. Howells, January 6, 1906, Howells Papers.
35. To Aurelia M. Howells, May 9, 1908, Howells Papers.
36. To John Howells, in *Life in Letters*, Mildred Howells, ed., Vol. 2 (New York: 1928) 306-307.
37. "Confessions of a Summer Colonist," *Literature and Life* (Port Washington, N.Y.: 1968), 62.
38. "Autumn in the Country and the City," *Imaginary Interviews*, 255-256.
39. *Ibid.*, 261.
40. "To the Home-comer's Eye," *Imaginary Interviews*, 88.
41. *Ibid.*, 94.