Urbanism
(Diary Leaves)

By NICHOLAS ROERICH

In all the changes of names can be read the history of civilization. At one time certain people were called “burghers”, that is, those who collected around the burg, the castle. Under the protection of its walls and towers arose the growth of the concept of townspeople. The townsman, the burgess, were likewise identified with some city, some fortified place. Gradually, with the decline of the feudal structure, the concept of burgherhood also became outworn. For a long time it remained as a purely conventional designation, having lost its inner, formerly very definitive, meaning.

At the changing of outworn concepts and designations, many new ones grow up. At times they continue as it were and develop further the former concept, but sometimes the resulting extermination advances a definition just as outwardly conventional as the latest survivals. In most recent time, the word urbanism is employed in different countries around the concept of the city. There is something very vague in this derivative from the Latin word “urbs”. The city, the Latin “urbs”, generally appears an indefinite concept. An assembly of people forms such a populous locale, and you do not distinguish whether such a place is a fortress, a commercial center, a cultural center, or its usual principal form, containing all sorts of bazaars. Yet at the same time, such a peculiarly singularly definitive will be in the word “urbanism”.

Urbanism somehow characterizes those frigid city agglomerations which have made poisonously unhealthy places of these crowded myriads of people. Even in those cities where by a fortunate accident there have not risen up accumulations—right now even there people are trying to heap up structures in the name of some strange modernism.
There can be recited a whole list of cities which, without any visible need, killing all the already composed character of the place, are making haste to install some enormous edifices, precisely as if there were not far more than enough space in the country.

There have appeared some sort of artist "urbanists", architects "urbanists", technician "urbanists". In many of its applications the concept of urbanism, like the recently invented technocracy, has appeared rather intrusive. In this deliberate intrusiveness there always proves to be something premeditated, some premature senility. Not for long did technocracy flourish. Not even the monkey glands of Voronov could help it. Likewise precisely urbanism, in its intrusive self-assurance does not suspect its own short-livedness, in the aspect in which it is understood at present.

There may be some against the urban structure. Many thoughts have been devoted to solving the city problem. City-gardens would not be urbanism, which would like to place itself in exact opposition to life in the country. No society can successfully solve its vital problems on a foundation of decadent superstitions and fossilized horrors. Likewise precisely in the problem of the city, it is impossible to think only about ancient Babylonian towers. This Biblical symbol would seem to emphasize sufficiently the limits of uniform thinking. Any decadence, either material or spiritual, is identically worthless.

In place of the Babylonian towering piles, humanity is again beginning to remember about returning to nature. Even not so long ago ill-considered measures dragged farmers away from their fields and rounded up starving crowds in unemployment in the city. Right now one can understand the terror of these enormous throngs of people which are ending up in misanthropy. Again thoughts have arisen about a return to natural work which through the contemporary discoveries of science can be transformed into a fuller life, both spiritually and materially.

Everywhere are appearing individual persons and families and entire groups of people who dream about a
life in the midst of nature. Both on small and large scales they are thinking up all sorts of cooperatives which, in varied work, would enable them to lead a working life which is natural, full, and sensible. One can only rejoice if the latest contemporary discoveries and social movements can lead people to thoughts about nature, about natural improvements in the different applications of labor.

The loss of the city symbols and the arrival at the coldly conventional urbanism is as it were the entry-way to new and vital labor structures. Again the human spirit must rush back to nature in which there is so much free space and so many unused and unrealized possibilities. To the same thoughts about nature and to various improvements in the matter of health refer the tasks of making the deserts bloom. By wise indeferrable measures let these spaces neglected by the carelessness of people be made again fruitful and useful for habitation.

Many thoughts are narrated regarding the best methods of agriculture, forestry and other conditions relating to rural life. Not long ago V. N. Mehta in an Indian journal properly remarked about the rehabilitation of rural life. He says: "Many physicians are at work on the treatment of illness when it happens to the small villager. They have found that he has gone into debt and the indebtedness forces him as it were into the hospital. But such an endless detention in an infirmary cannot be recognized as a remedy in practical usage, and consequently many recipes are filling space, the more quickly to release such a patient from the hospital and to furnish him a reasonable period for convalescence".

Further on the author comes to the conclusion: "The small villager should not be fed on falsehood. Let him be given the inner impulse to set his affairs to rights. Do not urbanize him. In that case of course he suffers the fate which the French beautifully express by the word 'deracine', torn away, uprooted, a spectacle worthy of regret and requiring special considerations from each reformer. There can be observed two streams rushing out of the
same watershed which at last have to flow together in the Ganges Felix. These streams must enrich the soil over which they pass, and in their course bring regeneration to the countryside. Make no mistake about it. The peasantry must be so reorganized that it can augment three-fold its economic level and its spiritual growth."

Indeed, this Hindu writer could not but end his just considerations with one about precisely spiritual growth. In each new settlement, in each abode in the midst of nature, the question of spirituality must enter the more strongly in all of life. The entire way of life in nature cannot be limited by any technocracy. Many beautiful and vital thoughts will drift together at the closest contact with nature, in the blessed everyday labors. Calling these labors blessed is no exaggeration of their significance, because to them can be easily attached all the best self-cultivation. Radio and television and all the paths of facilitated communication, of course these are not for urbanism,—all these beneficial possibilities are required precisely in the broad expanse of nature, among the again blossoming meadows and filled granaries.

The definition, urbanism, in its boldness, was probably predestined for cutting short in time the harmfulness of the sickened and poisoned life in the city. It would be extremely deplorable if there should not be immediately opposed to these maladies the garden-dwellings in which will be combined the best individualities with rich opportunities for collaboration, co-operation. One comes to an end in order for the other to prosper, in eternal life. Throughout the broad horizon there are no obstacles, and no city monstrosities, no Babylonian towers overshadow the paths to the flowering garden of nature. During the last year, the idea of Urbanism received some terrible blows. If the urbanists would summarize the amount of destroyed houses by air-raids and shelling, they would get monstrous totals. Even from casual newspaper data one can see the ever-growing number of destructions even when war as such has not been declared. In one of my diary leaves mention was made
about the “rain of stones”. Such a Biblical warning may seem very mild in comparison with a rain of bombs, filled not only with explosives but also with poisonous gases and liquid fire. This is the kind of triumph that “civilization” offers to humanity. What shame!

Recently people even in Southern Europe were amazed by an unprecedented enormous Aurora Borealis. Thus the Northern Light flashed as far down as the South. These magnetic phenomena interfered with radio transmission—thus cosmic energies again entered into human inventions. Let us hope that some kind of “Aurora Universalis” may manifest itself, to crush all bombs, shells, poison gases and other “fratricidal implements of civilization”.

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