

Prospects for Conservatives

Part IV

Prospects for the Proletariat

By Russell Kirk

From time to time, I am asked what I believe to be the greatest difficulty the American Republic confronts nowadays. I reply that our most puzzling and distressing social misfortune is the growth of a proletariat.

Let us define our terms. The words *proletariat* and *proletarian* come down to us from Roman times. In the Roman signification of the term, a proletarian is a man who gives nothing to the commonwealth but his progeny. Such a being pays no taxes, subsists at public expense, fulfills no civic duties, performs no work worth mentioning, and knows not the meaning of piety. As a mass, the collective proletarians, the proletariat, are formidable; they demand entitlements — principally, in antique times, bread and circuses; in our day, much larger entitlements, which are granted to them lest they turn collectively violent. To the state, I repeat, the proletarian contributes only his offspring — who in their turn, ordinarily, become proletarians. Idle, ignorant, and often criminal, the proletariat can ruin a great city — and a nation. What Arnold Toynbee calls “the internal proletariat” so dragged down the Roman civilization; the barbarian invaders, the “external proletariat,” burst through the fragile shell of a culture already bled to death.

Karl Marx, that hard hater of the patrimony of modern civilization, called upon the modern proletariat to arise and shed blood on a grand scale. Triumphant in the Russian empire after the World War I, and in Eastern Europe and many other regions of the world not long after World War II, Marx’s ideological disciples installed brutal proletarians in power, at least on the local level, where they were as merciless as they were stupid. The proletarian cannot build; but he is able to destroy.

The United States of America, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the early decades of the twentieth, was not afflicted by a proletariat on any large national scale — though Jefferson feared the coming of such a class when cities should grow. And Macaulay in 1857 foretold a “downward progress” in America at the end of which he said, “Either some Caesar or Napoleon will seize the reins of government with a strong hand, or your republic will be as fearfully plundered and laid waste by barbarians in the twentieth century as the Roman Empire in the fifth.”

Voting Proletariat. As Macaulay pointed out with some force, in the United States the proletariat would be possessed not merely of the power of intimidation through violence, but of the yet more effective power of the ballot box. “Your Huns and Vandals,” he went on, “will have been engendered within your own country by your own institutions.”

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Now in America today, whom do we specify when we talk of a proletariat, a rootless and discontented class that is a burden upon the commonwealth? It is necessary first to specify groups that we do *not* have in mind.

The proletariat is not identical with "the poor." Although most proletarians are poor, a man may be rich and yet a proletarian if he is nothing better than a vexation to the commonwealth and has the mind of a proletarian. Also, there are many people of very modest income who nevertheless are people of commendable character and good citizens. Incidentally, I am given to quoting an aside by Robert Frost when he was conversing with liberal friends: "Don't talk about the poor all the time!" The poor we have always with us, as Jesus of Nazareth instructs us.

The proletarian is not identical with "the workingman" — indeed, it is characteristic of the proletarian that he does *not* work voluntarily. I was reared almost literally in the Pere Marquette railway yards outside Detroit, my father a locomotive engineman and fireman; we were not proletarians, nor were my schoolmates and their parents.

The proletarian is not identical with the "welfare recipient," even though the vast majority of proletarians are on the welfare rolls. For of course among the recipients of local, state, and federal relief and entitlements are many elderly, infirm, or otherwise distressed people who are not so unfortunate as to share the proletarian mentality and morality.

The proletarian population is not an urban population only. Increasingly, the proletarian condition of life spreads even into remote rural districts. In my backwoods or backwater Michigan village, a dismal rookery of decaying trailers, immobilized "mobile homes," hems in my tall archaic house; the sale of narcotics proceeds in our village's public park; and the rate of crimes, especially offenses against women, rises annually. The village's only church has been converted into an antique shop.

The proletariat, in short, is a mass of people who have lost — if ever they possessed — community, hope of betterment, moral convictions, habits of work, sense of personal responsibility, intellectual curiosity, membership in a healthy family, property, active participation in public concerns, religious associations, and awareness of ends or objectives in human existence. Most proletarians live, as dogs do, from day to day, unreflective. The *lazzaroni* of Naples, I suppose, for centuries have existed in such a proletarian condition; but the *lazzaroni* of American cities and countryside, proliferating in recent years, are more aggressive than their Neapolitan counterparts.

Demise of Cities. The cores of many American cities now are dominated by the proletariat; or if not the core in some cities, then a grim and dangerous urban ring encircling the core. Some thirty years ago, dining with the economist Colin Clark at an Oxford inn, I remarked that I did not know what would become of America's cities. Professor Clark replied, "I know: they will cease to exist." He went on to suggest that suburbs beyond a city's political boundaries would survive, surrounding a devastated and demolished and depopulated accumulation of ruins; the former urban area looking much as if it had been showered with gel bombs, after the fashion employed against Dresden at the end of World War II. With dismaying speed just that has been coming to pass.

Permit me to turn to striking instances. I have known the city of Detroit ever since I was a small boy — that is, for more than half a century, during which the "arsenal of democracy" has been quite thoroughly proletarianized. When I was a college student and wandered the streets of Detroit every weekend, the city had a population of two million; now it has one million. The art institute, the public library, the Detroit historical museum, and Wayne

State University survive, for the present, along with some tall stone churches, in the midst of an overwhelming decadence. On the campus of the University, telephone kiosks have been erected at short intervals. In these structures, the telephone is installed at ground level, so that persons wounded or violated conceivably may crawl to the kiosk and pull the phone off its hook; even if no words are spoken, a police patrol is supposed to investigate. Such is the intellectual life of Detroit in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and ninety.

Detroit's Decay. Tempting although it might be to offer to you vignettes of existence in proletarian Detroit, I have not world enough and time. Some persons present already may have read the very recent book by Ze'ev Chafets, *Devil's Night and Other True Tales of Detroit*; or have seen my own article on Detroit's Devil's Night, published in *Newsday* two years ago; or have seen the television program some weeks past that infuriated the foul-mouthed demagogue who is mayor of Detroit; or have been somewhat startled by a piece in *The New Yorker* revealing the miserable and depraved proletarian condition in which that mayor deliberately keeps the rising generation virtual prisoners in a ghetto. In any event, I do not suppose that any person present today is quite uninformed concerning the degradation of what once was a booming and hopeful city with some culture of its own.

What worked the ruin of Detroit, proletarianizing the place? The complex causes of this decay have been at work in most other American cities, too; but they were especially acute in Detroit. I venture to list some of the principal afflictions.

First, the automobile, though it brought a great deal of money into the city and much increased its population, nevertheless did mischief to what had been a rather pleasant and peaceful big town on a principal inland waterway. Ford and the other automobile manufacturers recruited labor wherever they could find it, especially from Central and Eastern Europe and from the Southern states; the masses of semi-skilled or unskilled men who came to the automobile factories were uprooted, cut off often from some traditional rural culture. With American thought, politics, and manners most of them never obtained much acquaintance. They became deculturalized, rather than acculturated, and demagogues found them easy prey. So as late as 1932, by the way, the most conservative "minority" or ethnic group in the city were the blacks of the Paradise Valley ward, stout Republicans who stood by Herbert Hoover. They were also very nearly the poorest bloc in Detroit.

Abandoning the City. Second, the triumphant automobile made it possible for the more affluent Detroiters to build houses in the suburbs, particularly in the Grosse Pointes, abandoning their mansions near the heart of the city. With the coming of the New Deal, this outflow of ability and wealth from the old city was much accelerated by the Home Owners Loan Corporation and later programs of low-interest loans, federally backed, available to people who were good credit risks; thus increasingly the old city was drained of merchants, manufacturers, professional people, bankers, and skilled craftsmen — leaving a vacuum to be filled successively by ethnic and economic groups of decreasing means and talent for leadership. The shifting of Henry Ford from a little house on Bagley Avenue, near the city's heart, to a great rustic estate near Dearborn, is sufficient illustration of this. The same flitting occurred in most other American cities, of course — New York and San Francisco being the chief, if partial, exceptions.

Third, military production in "the arsenal of democracy" during the Second World War attracted to Detroit great numbers of industrial workers, chiefly Appalachian whites ("hillbillies" to natives of Michigan) and Southern blacks. To the number of the latter were soon added more Southern blacks left technologically unemployed by the perfection of the mechanical cotton picker and other alterations of the economic patterns of Dixie. People

whose ancestors had been settled for several generations in place and in customs south of the Mason-Dixon Line found themselves in Detroit, bewildered, often resentful, and shaken in their beliefs and habits.

Fourth, with the ending of war production these people were short of work and money — and often in social or moral confusion. Divorce, and desertion of wives and children, became common in Detroit and other cities; out of this arose the successive programs for Aid to Dependent Children, federally financed, and well intentioned. But out of this humanitarian scheme came the one-parent family, the welfare household on a huge scale, the street-corner gangs of bored and idle youths who looked up to the brothel keeper, the numbers racketeer and presently the drug pusher, those ingenious successful men. And presently the first generation of such dependent children fathered a second dependent generation; and then the second generation fathered a third — these true proletarians giving nothing to the commonwealth but their progeny — which progeny in turn would emulate their fathers and mothers.

Much of the old city grew shabby, and some of it dangerous, in consequence of the changes I suggested just now; yet still, in the Forties, I walked mean streets unarmed, at all hours. By the Fifties, I adopted the precaution of wearing a sheath knife when I walked those mean streets, Michigan Avenue included, nocturnally; later, I carried a pistol. By the Sixties, it was well not to walk those streets except under necessity. Incidentally, it became necessary for the most part either to drive a car or to walk, public transportation dwindling: the city never had built a subway, which might have been done readily during the Depression years; and gradually the streetcar system withered on the vine. If one was careless, old, infirm, or timid — well, one could stay home, vegetating — though corner groceries were vanishing, too.

Federal Bulldozer. The city's decay having become physically obvious, why not knock much of it down and start all over again? So argued the enthusiasts for the "urban renewal" of the administration of President Johnson. What resulted were urban deserts and urban jungles, not renewal; great profits, though, were made by eminent developers and contractors. Here was a fifth cause of Detroit's collapse: the deliberate destruction of the neighborhoods of people of modest incomes, together with many small businesses. The newcomers to Detroit had only begun to settle into tolerable community, to find a church to attend, to obtain fairly regular employment, to come to understand the city — when down the street came the federal bulldozer. Where to flee now? Why, to newish, ugly, often dangerous public housing projects — of which there were not enough to go round; or else to double up in some surviving low-rent district, which in consequence would become a slum.

Permit me to digress, so as to offer you a graphic example. Detroit's Corktown, a century ago crowded with newly-arrived Irishmen, is a district little more than a mile distant from the old handsome City Hall (itself demolished wantonly as part and parcel of that wondrous Urban Renewal). In the late Forties and early Fifties, Corktown was rather a pleasant quarter of well-built old houses, near Briggs Stadium and the boozing-dens that lined Michigan Avenue, Detroit's Skid Row. The people who lived in Corktown were a rather elderly generation of Irish — old women, chiefly; and also men employed in the printing trades at the nearby plants of the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press*, earners of high wages; and a great many Maltese, family people, Catholics, one of Detroit's many "minorities." An old Catholic church, Most Holy Trinity, was the center of Corktown's identity.

At the beginning of massive federal-financed "renewal," zealous civic planners noticed on their maps that apparently Corktown suffered from a high rate of robbery — and of disorder-

ly conduct, too. Had they scrutinized their map more closely, they might have discerned that the crime — chiefly mugging of intoxicated men — occurred almost entirely along Michigan Avenue, the alcoholic paradise of the lowly in Detroit — and distinctly not in the residential streets of Corktown itself; it merely happened that Michigan Avenue formed the boundary of part of Corktown. But the city planners drew no such fine distinctions; according to the statistics available, crimes occurred in a quarter called Corktown. What to do? Why, renew Corktown by pulling it down and later building factories there. How does one get rid of rats? Why, by burning down the barn of course. To get rid of old Corktown would be to get rid of crime. On this first grand project of urban renewal, the federal bulldozers went to work, clearing away many interesting houses, clearing out a great many families long settled there; eventually they demolished the last place of public resort in Corktown, a modest restaurant; they did spare a large second-hand bookshop lodged in an old house — but spared no other business.

Poverty War Casualties. I came to know Corktown well while this mischief was in progress. Did crime cease? Why, there had been little or no crime to abolish in Corktown's residential streets. But now crimes commenced in the rubble-strewn vacant lots, and the surviving dwellings stood always in danger of invasion. Left with no place to resort, gangs of boys began to fight among themselves and to snatch women's purses. Presently the gangs took up profitable rackets, and gang murders occurred. This was one means of obtaining relief from boredom, in a district made grittily hideous — even the trees had been cut down — by the civic improvers. I knew one of the lads indicted for murder, an amiable young man with some taste in architecture. He had been forced into a gang for survival; he hated what was being done to Corktown by the civic renewers.

At that time I was courting a redheaded girl who was engaged in charitable work, unpaid, in connection with the parish of Most Holy Trinity. She lived near the church in an apartment house that had seen better days, and was then inhabited by elderly Irishwomen who dared not go out of doors for dread of having their purses snatched and themselves beaten. I offered Mary the loan of a pistol of mine, that apartment house being a chancy place; but she declined the weapon, saying that if the boys should learn she possessed anything of the sort, they would break in to snatch the gun.

But I must not prolong this digression. My immediate point is that the very process of public policy, the misguided urban-renewal fiasco, did much to turn the remaining inhabitants of Corktown into proletarians. Now that most of Corktown's old population has been expelled, has died, or has fled, some gestures toward architectural restoration and even repopulation have been made in Corktown: gentrification may come to pass. That is pleasant news, but there linger in my memory the faces of certain honest ungentle Corktowners who were reduced to poverty and indeed to a proletarian state by Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty," more accurately described as war upon the poor.

When the tremendous Detroit riot of 1967 occurred, some of the rioters, as they threw bottles of gasoline to burn down shops, cried mockingly, "Instant urban renewal!" They were not grateful for the ministrations of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Governor George Romney, in his last public address before leaving Michigan to take a cabinet post in Washington, declared that the riot — almost an insurrection — had been caused by resentment against urban renewal and federal highway building. Too true!

The Kerner Report (the author of which, you may recall, presently was sent to prison) declared that the fierce disorder had been a race riot, provoked by "white racism." In fact, blacks and whites were nearly equal in numbers among the looters and arsonists; of those

arrested on suspicion of sniping, all were white. The Great Riot was a proletarian stroke that Jack London would have relished, and not an organized black protest against "racism."

A sixth cause of the reduction of Detroit to a generally proletarian state has been the construction of gigantic freeways that destroyed established neighborhoods — as Governor Romney pointed out. It became nearly impossible to get from one old quarter of the city to another district without an automobile and various detours. Thousands of decent homes, many family-owned, were swept away in the remorseless progress of the freeway system. The new freeways sometimes became impassible barriers against access to a church or to shops. Forgetting that cities are places for people to live, the highway builders thought of Detroit as a massive inconvenience to be got into and got out of as swiftly as possible. Presently violent crimes against people whose cars happened to stall on a freeway became almost commonplace.

The seventh, and most catastrophic, cause of the reduction of Detroit to a warren for unhappy proletarians was middle class flight on a tremendous scale after the Great Proletarian Riot of 1967. The police had lost effective control of the sprawling city. Virtually all families who could find money enough to buy a house and a lot in the outer suburbs scurried out of old Detroit. And now, most former Detroiters have retreated beyond Eight Mile Road, Detroit's northern political boundary. From the Detroit River to Eight Mile Road, Detroit's principal thoroughfare, Woodward Avenue, is almost all ghastly dereliction, except for public buildings and churches. A Detroitier remarked to me recently that it is no longer possible to buy a shirt in downtown Detroit. The great elegant department stores were abandoned or demolished years ago.

Crumbling School System. Eighth among the causes of the forming of a classless society in Detroit — that is, a society consisting of a single class, the proletariat — has been the crumbling of the public school system. Compulsory integration turned out to be worse schooling for both blacks and whites, not better; the abandonment of neighborhood schools alienated both parents and pupils; the tax basis for the school system dwindled. Schools became unpleasant and dangerous places where teachers' energies were spent mostly in maintaining some semblance of physical order. Public opinion polls showed that both white and black parents strongly objected to massive busing — but their mere opinion did them no good, decisions being in the hands of omniscient judges, those infallible educators.

You will have perceived, ladies and gentlemen, that the causes of Detroit's sickness indeed are complex: it is almost as if some evil genius had plotted intricately the undoing of a great metropolis. Woe unto the city! But let me name a ninth major cause of Detroit's undoing, the latest of the terrible afflictions: the frightful curse of the narcotics traffic and of widespread narcotics addiction. Possibly the city of Washington is worse off in this malady than is Detroit — but I doubt that. (True, Washington during the past two years has deprived Detroit of its former proud distinction as "Murder Capital of the United States.") Presumably it is unnecessary for me to describe to you the fatal consequences, personal and social, of the curse of narcotics. It is the proletarian who seeks hallucinatory drugs, because he retains no objective in life; and narcotics addiction will convert people of good prospects into empty proletarians.

Offering Hope. You may be asking yourselves at this point in my long tale of woe, what it is that still keeps Detroit half-alive, and functioning after a fashion. What resists proletarian despair? The Christian churches do. It is said that within the boundaries of Detroit stand some two thousand, five hundred churches, from cathedrals to scruffy store-front Bethels. Some of the black temples and tabernacles may be remarkably eccentric varieties of religious experience; but even the wildest of them offers some sort of hope and consolation

beyond the decayed City of This Earth; even the smallest of these churches or quasi-churches is a surviving anchor of community. Fervent Christian profession still breathes into wrecked Detroit some life of the spirit.

The influence of the black preacher is undiminished. In 1973, at the climax of a bitter political contest over abortion, I gave the chief address to Michigan's principal pro-life organization, meeting in a big hall on the riverfront. Behind me on the platform, as moral and physical reinforcement, sat three or four ebony monoliths, huge black Baptist preachers. A white Protestant clergyman was there, too, and one public man — William Ryan, then Speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives. (No Catholic priests ventured to take a visible stand on the platform.) The presence of those ebony ministers signified that we pro-life partisans had won the day in Detroit. For when the statewide initiative for abortion-on-demand appeared on the ballot in November, the pro-choice people were defeated nearly two to one. Every black ward in Detroit voted against abortion by large majorities; in one ward, the ratio of ballots was sixteen to one against abortion. The proletarian, Marxist model has cast off the "fetters" of religion. But clearly there remains in Detroit one strong influence that impedes total proletarianization.

I have offered you the spectacle of Detroit in the year 1990 because probably Detroit illustrates better than any other city the concurrent and converging causes of the reduction of a city's population to a miserable proletarian state. Some people tell me that Newark is worse stricken than Detroit; Washington might be worse off, were it not for the restraining power, and the resources of the federal government. Possibly I have succeeded in persuading you that while we expend our national resources in pouring hundreds of thousands of men into the Arabian desert, the cities of America have become what Jefferson called them about the end of the eighteenth century, the social equivalents of sores upon the human body.

Redemption and Reconstruction. The tendency of the American people toward a proletarian condition — often a drift more subtle than the processes I have mentioned today — ought to be the urgent concern of all genuine conservatives. The devising of any remedies or palliatives will require high power of imagination. Something is being done already — for instance, the federal programs for encouraging "minority" businesses. A number of economic innovations and reforms, to such ends, have been put forward in recent years by The Heritage Foundation. Of course we have no opportunity today to discuss such endeavors.

The main work of redemption and reconstruction, however, must come from conservatively-minded people who at present suffer under the dreary domination of demagogues and charlatans — self-styled "leaders" leading their dupes only to the proletarian condition. I have known some such restorers of responsibility and community who have brightened the corner where they were — among them, Elmo and Mattie Coney, of Indianapolis. I take it that some residents of Washington, Mayor Barry having been unseated, are taking arms against a sea of troubles. Courageous volunteers, not "welfare professionals," may yet preserve their neighbors from being converted into proletarians.

The recovery of a schooling that has wisdom and virtue for its ends, and which is moved by the moral imagination, could teach the rising generation to look for something in life beyond violent sensation; and could incline them toward a society of the common good, rather than a defiance of all authority. A voucher system for choice of schools might achieve much good within a few years. I think of an occasion on which some New York newspaper reporters visited a Catholic school in the South Bronx. Accustomed to the barbarous manners and sneering attitudes of New York's public schools, these journalists were astounded

when a little black girl, appointed their hostess, came gently up to them, introduced herself, kissed them all round, and intelligently led them from classroom to classroom. The public schools with which they had been familiar were turning out young proletarians, with few exceptions; the Catholic grade-school in the South Bronx — it was the only undamaged structure left standing for a substantial distance round about — was turning out the heirs of cultural patrimony, obstacles notwithstanding.

Conserving the Legacy. No effort at all is required to become a proletarian: one needs merely to submit to the dehumanizing and deculturizing currents of the hour, and worship the idols of the crowd. Much effort is required to conserve the legacy of order, freedom, and justice, of learning and art and imagination, that ought to be ours. Some malign spirits, in the name of equality, would have us all be proletarians together: the doctrine of equal misery. The conservative impulse, *au contraire*, is to rescue as many men and women as possible from that submerged lot in life, without object and without cheer, which is the proletarian condition.

