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San Fransicko: Why Progressives Ruin Cities

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But none of these problems started with the pandemic. Between 2008 and 2019, eighteen thousand companies, including Toyota, Charles Schwab, and Hewlett-Packard, fled California due to a constellation of problems sometimes summarized as “poor business climate.”¹ California has the highest income tax, highest gasoline tax, and highest sales tax in the United States, spends significantly more than other states on homelessness, and yet has worse outcomes.² “I came out here in 1983,” said HBO’s Bill Maher to Representative Adam Schiff in the fall of 2020. “I found paradise. I love California. I do. I don’t want to leave. But I feel like I’m living in Italy in the ’70s or something. . . . I don’t know what I’m getting for my super high taxes.”³ I

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While the homeless are poor, few poor people live on the street. Nearly 90,000 people in San Francisco live in poverty but just over 8,000 are homeless. The vast majority of people, including very poor people who are priced out of San Francisco’s expensive rental markets, move out of the city or move in with friends or family. Vanishingly few decide to pitch a tent on the filthiest sidewalks in America.

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From 2005 to 2020, San Francisco experienced an astonishing 95 percent increase in unsheltered homelessness as the number of permanent supportive housing units offered by the city rose from 6,487 to 10,051.⁵⁷ Today, San Francisco has the greatest quantity of permanent supportive housing units per capita of any major city in the United States. It has 11 permanent supportive housing units per 1,000 people, which is nearly three times as much as New York City (4 per 1,000 people) and Chicago (4 per 1,000), and over six times as much as Miami-Dade County (1.7 per 1,000).⁵⁸ All of that, and yet the unsheltered homeless population of New York City, Chicago, and Miami fell 11, 10, and 50 percent, respectively, between 2005 and 2020, while San Francisco’s rose 95 percent.⁵⁹ Why was that?

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No matter how many times you’ve heard the statistics, they never lose their power to shock: the United States is home to less than 5 percent of the world’s population but has 25 percent of its prisoners.¹ Today, the United States incarcerates five times more people than it did in 1970. The total number of people incarcerated in state or

federal prison rose from 200,000 to 1.6 million between 1972 and 2014.² California’s incarceration rate quintupled, from about 100 for every 100,000 residents to nearly 500. Between 1984 and 2005, the state opened twenty-one prisons.³

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But a closer look at the data reveals that just 3.7 percent of state prisoners are there for nonviolent drug possession, and that 14.1 percent of state prisoners are locked up for any nonviolent drug offense. Forty-seven percent of inmates in federal prisons are in for nonviolent drug convictions, but there are just 172,000 people in federal prisons and 1.3 million in state prisons.⁷ Over half of all prisoners in state prisons are there for violent offenses like murder, rape, and robbery.⁸ During the 1990s and 2000s, an estimated 50 percent of the increase in state prisoners came from those convicted of violent offenses.⁹ Twenty percent of those serving time for drug charges said they had used a firearm in a previous crime, and 24 percent had a prior conviction for a violent crime, found a 1997 national survey of state prisons.¹⁰ It’s true that the share of drug offenders in prison rose from 6.5 to 22 percent between 1980 and 1990, growing from 20,000 in 1980 to nearly 250,000 by 2010.¹¹ And nonviolent drug offenses were as responsible for prison growth in the 1980s as violent offenses.¹² But only 20 percent of prisoners in all jails and prisons are there for drugs.¹³ Today, incarceration rates in the United States are at a thirty-year low. In 2019, the state and federal imprisonment rate of 419 prisoners per 100,000 US residents was the lowest it had been since 1995, and was a 17 percent decrease from 2009.¹⁴ The

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Violence, not stricter drug sentences, drove mass incarceration. New York is proof. For ten years after Governor Nelson Rockefeller and the state legislature increased penalties for drug use beginning in 1973, the number of people in prison for drugs hardly changed. Then, in 1984, the number of people incarcerated for drug crimes started to rise sharply due to violence associated with the crack epidemic. More than a decade later, in 1997, total inmates in New York prisons for drug offenses peaked and began their long decline, mostly because of a reduction in violence. It was only in 2004 and again in 2009 that the state legislature reduced penalties, and the declining rate of incarceration for drug crimes didn’t change after those two years.²² And

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The Congressional Black Caucus worked with then-senator Joe Biden, President Bill Clinton, and Senator Bernie Sanders to pass the 1994 crime bill.²⁸ “[H]ow racist can a law be which the Congressional Black Caucus vigorously supported and even considered too weak?” asked Columbia University professor John McWhorter. “If we had asked these black congresspeople in 1986 why they supported these laws, they would have said that they were aimed at breaking the horror of the crack culture, which had turned inner cities into war zones by the mid-1980s.”

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In addition to his funding agreement with Soros, Ethan Nadelmann raised money from other wealthy Americans including Laurance Rockefeller; John Sperling, the creator of the for-profit University of Phoenix; and Peter Lewis, the founder of Progressive Insurance. In 2017, Soros agreed to give \$50 million over the next ten years to Drug Policy Alliance.¹²⁰

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The problems surrounding the homeless mentally ill have only grown worse since the 1980s. A psychiatrist who worked in San Francisco General's emergency psychiatric ward for twenty-five years compared parts of the city in 2018 to an "open-air insane asylum."³³ The problem is similar in Los Angeles and Seattle. There are over 11,000 people with serious mental illness living unsheltered on the streets in Los Angeles.³⁴ A Los Angeles Times reporter described LA's Skid Row as "a dumping ground for hospitals, prisons, and other cities to get rid of people with nowhere else to go."³⁵ There

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Women have never been freer, richer, or more powerful. In 1970, just 4 percent of women earned more than their husbands;³³ today, 29 percent earn more than their male spouses.³⁴ Today, girls match or outperform boys in education in the developed world.³⁵ Spousal homicides have declined since the 1960s thanks to better policing as well as more protections for victims, such as restraining orders, shelters for victims, and automatic arrests of suspects of domestic violence.³⁶

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In the early and mid-twentieth century, socialist and radical thinkers and activists began to realize that the proletariat was too disorganized and weak to achieve revolution. They sought to build a much broader political coalition. In California, the International Workers of the World, an anarchist group founded in 1905, sought to link the economic interests of the working class with those of the homeless, the people Marx and Engels had dismissed as the lumpenproletariat. They blamed the government and capitalism for their fate. They recruited hobos, who illegally hitched rides on railroad cars, and migrant farmworkers, as members.¹⁵ Antonio Gramsci, head of the Italian Communist Party in the 1930s, realized, after being imprisoned by Benito Mussolini, that fascists had defeated communists because they had taken over important cultural institutions, like the church, schools, and the military. If communists wanted to have the same influence, Gramsci reasoned, they would need to do the same.¹⁶ By the mid-twentieth century, many radicals had grown disillusioned with the Communist Party as they watched the moral failures and bureaucratic stagnation of the Soviet Union. In the United States, the trade unions, which were once a bastion of the left, had become "fiercely anti-Communist and patriotic," notes a political historian.¹⁷ In the 1950s, the Marxist American sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that students could be a more revolutionary class than workers, which inspired young Baby Boomers, who infused the radical, anti-modern, and anti-Enlightenment New Left.¹⁸ In the 1960s, some progressives came to believe that black Americans were inherently revolutionary due to their disadvantaged position in society, and that white people could join the revolution by following their lead.¹⁹

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Foucault's ideas simultaneously weakened and strengthened the progressive commitment to victimology. On the one hand, Foucault rejected reductionism and essentialism, the idea that complex individual people could or should be reduced to a single and supposedly essential trait, like race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. In his last major book, *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argued that our sexuality is "produced," or socially constructed, and doesn't exist purely biologically. "I believe that the term 'gay' has become obsolete—and

indeed, all such terms denoting a specific sexual orientation,” said Foucault in 1975. Just because someone was attracted to someone of the same sex did not make them “gay,” felt Foucault, and labeling people in such ways was oppressive.⁵⁵

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On the other, Foucault argued that any attempt to free ourselves from powerful forces would require other powerful forces that would ensnare us in new ways, no matter our intentions. We were helpless to do anything other than tear down the old institutions and categories. Foucault was thus, in an important sense, encouraging his readers to deliberately limit their political engagement to negative, critical, and destructive actions, namely, attacking social norms and civic institutions. And yet, as we have seen, progressives have insisted that it wasn't them, it was Reagan and Republicans who were responsible for closing the psychiatric hospitals without creating a viable replacement. Out

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One of my motivations in writing this book was to understand how anarchism, or what is sometimes called left-libertarianism, gained so much power in progressive West Coast cities. I believe part of the answer lies in its lack of accountability, which is itself a kind of power. Anarchists can cheerlead disruptive and even violent actions and then evade responsibility when things go wrong. It is notable that America's most influential anarchist, Noam Chomsky, selects a few points in history—a ten-month period in Spain in 1936 when large regions of the country were governed autonomously and locally, and the early kibbutzim in Palestine before the creation of the state of Israel, when Jews, Muslims, and atheists all supposedly lived together in harmony—as models of anarchist rule.⁵ Are those episodes really models for how to govern a large city, state, or nation today? Of course they aren't. But naming such episodes as the anarchist ideal allows Chomsky to reject responsibility for anarchist actions that go terribly wrong, such as in the occupied zones in Seattle and Minneapolis.

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No serious historian today would rank Harvey Milk's advocacy of requiring people to pick up after their dogs as a particularly important aspect of his legacy. Milk's legacy is normalizing gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender relationships by encouraging people to come out of the closet to their friends and families, and helping to kill a ballot initiative that would have fired gay teachers. But historians remind us that some things which appear trivial at first reveal themselves to be of greater importance over time.
