

## In the Face of a Dark New Age

Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead* (Vintage Books, 2004), 241 pages

Fr Vincent McNabb OP, *Nazareth or Social Chaos* (IHS Press, 2009), 82 pages

Reviewed by Daniel Blackman

Jane Jacobs was born in Pennsylvania, USA. Hers was a Protestant family living in a heavily Catholic neighborhood. She was a wife and the mother of three children, an anti-communist but with an alleged appreciation of Saul Alinsky, and an urban community activist and writer who championed a place-based, community-centered approach to urban planning and development, although she never held a professional qualification in town planning, nor did she claim to. In 1958, the Rockefeller Foundation invited Jacobs to be a reviewer of grant proposals, and awarded her a grant that year. Following the money usually makes for a good story. We know that from the end of World War II until the 1970s, American communities were submitted to widespread development and urban renewal programs that fragmented and destroyed whole communities, from Detroit to Philadelphia, to the south side of Chicago and the major cities of the northeast. We also know that the Rockefeller family supported such programs, along with strong support for new forms of hormonal contraception during the late 50s and 60s onwards, which enabled the sexual revolution and its attack upon marriage and family.

*Dark Age Ahead* is the last book published by Jacobs. Her thesis is that contemporary American society is on the brink of a new dark age. Why so? Because the five pillars of a society, according to Jacobs, are in serious decline. What are these five pillars? The family and household, higher education, science, the tax system, and self policing. For Jacobs, her understanding of these pillars and their slow demise are the hallmarks of a dark age.

Some parts of this book relate directly to the theme of home and neighborhood. Before we look at those, there are some preliminary points to make about *Dark Age Ahead*.

What does Jacobs mean by “dark age”? In her introduction, Jacobs claims that there have been numerous dark ages in the past, as many as there have been cultures that have disappeared, and eventually even the memory of what has been lost disappears. One gets the impression from Jacobs that simply because a culture was, therefore it ought to have been. This reads like a slight idealisation of otherness by a contemporary western weltanschauung. Unfortunately, Jacobs sees post-Roman-empire Christendom as a dark age typified by religious fundamentalisms. Her portrayals of the fall of the Roman empire, the rise of the Catholic Church, western Christendom (where she supposes that “sexuality became highly suspect”), the crusades, the campaign against Albigensianism in southern France, the conquistadors, and the resistance of Catholic Ireland against Protestant England all read like journalism lacking accuracy and facts, tinged, at worst, with anti-Catholic sentiment. Jacobs

also seems to be thinking of culture as *kultur* and *bildung* rather than *cultura*. We would do better to read serious thinkers like Ratzinger or Pera's *Without Roots*, historians like Christopher Dawson and Warren Carroll, and philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre for a clearer analysis.

With this out of the way, we focus on Jacob's first chapter "Families Rigged to Fail". Jacobs writes that the nuclear family of father, mother, and children, is the fundamental unit of society, whether rich or poor. The household is the fundamental economic unit of society, usually made up of the nuclear family plus any combination of lodgers, servants, tutors, and relatives. Jacobs also cites convents of nuns and monasteries of monks as examples of households, with their offshoot hospitals, care homes, schools, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, farms, and so on. The household, and so too the wider community and local government, takes on the tasks the family cannot do by itself.

With the industrial revolution and capitalism, there has been a mass exodus from the countryside and agrarian living, a move from the land to the large office or factory. The family and household stopped being a place of industry and creativity. The family has been disempowered. What of the farmland left behind? It is bought up by developers who use it intensely for urban sprawl housing developments or large-scale mass-market industrial farming. Jacobs calls for measured densification: using the land ever more intensely but diversely so that it is able to support itself as a fully-fledged community with small industries and firms, variation in housing styles, and community spaces. As such, suburbanism can be a transition phase towards some of the aspirations of the new urbanism and neo-agrarianism. But what of the families and whole communities who entered the cities?

In Chapter Seven, "Unwinding Vicious Spirals," Jacobs tells us about the clearance of so-called slum areas during the Great Depression and war years onwards. People were re-housed in subsidized housing projects. Again, thanks to a top-down imposition, communities were broken up, and moved into large, atomizing housing blocks. The architecture was uniform, post-modern, and did not sit well with the surroundings or skyline of the area. They were unpopular, yet they remain. The BBC broadcasted a series called "The History of Our Streets" in 2012, documenting this phenomenon in London. Jacobs wrote that too much densification, such as huge tower-block apartments, actually leads to less diversity and richness. However, one Harvard economist has criticized Jacobs on this point, attributing the dramatic rise in real estate in the mid eighties to the lack of supply for the baby boomers.

Jacobs makes a third point: today the cost of housing is so prohibitive that more and more cannot buy and are forced to rent. The cost of rent continues to rise as families are at the mercy of private landlords. The cost of food, utility bills, and public transport goes up. Both parents need to work in order to provide for themselves and their children. This makes child-care and early entry into school a necessity. Children are separated from parents for longer periods of time. Parents have to commute to work, which can be miles away, facilitated by roads and cars.

In fact, Jacobs singles out the automobile as a bigger enemy to community than even illegal drugs and TV. Families spend more time apart from each other and from neighbors. Why? Because it means things no longer have to be within walking distance, close to the home. Work and recreation can be miles away where land and real estate are cheaper to obtain, the automobile industry benefits, and people are away from their communities, meaning local areas don't have the impetus to be self-supporting as things are only a drive away. Roads and highways are built to accommodate the increasing number of cars, roads which steam roll through neighborhoods, forcing the clearing of homes, open spaces, and local commercial zones.

Jacobs wonders what sorts of modern households will come about to meet the needs that families "rigged to fail" cannot meet. Her answer: "my intuition tells me they will probably be coercive. This is already true of the most swiftly multiplying and rapidly expanding type of American households at the turn of the millennium – prisons." We can add that the number of families with grown-up children still living at home out of necessity into their 20s and 30s is rapidly increasing. Fertility rates have been in freefall for decades and economic pressure is one reason. Young adults renting in shared housing with a mixture of friends and strangers is the norm. Cohabiting is the other new norm. We can also add that perhaps other sorts of arrangements come about for purposes that do not include supporting the nuclear family, but rather replacing it. Housing and town planning reflect and shape the demise of communities built on and around the nuclear family.

A more radical analysis and solution is offered by an Irish-born Dominican Fr Vincent McNabb OP (1868–1943). As Cicero Bruce writes in the introduction to *Nazareth or Social Chaos*: "McNabb was no apologist for the way we live now. In truth he repudiated it. He argued prophetically that, since the Industrial, French, and Scientific Revolutions, life in the West has lapsed into a stupor of economic confusion." McNabb, in several of his books, critiqued the modern city, precisely because of the terrible effects it had upon families. Costs of living, low wages, the price of rent or buying a house meant couples resorted to the mortal sin of contraception, or the heroic practice of marital continence. Jacobs cites abortion as the contemporary option.

McNabb and Jacobs also both criticize the city because of the sort of industry it gives rise to. McNabb laments and Jacobs notes the Western move away from agrarian-based societies, towards the ingenuity-based and the shadow world of finance. For McNabb, industrialism has led to secularism. Such a claim can be supported by contemporary sociological studies which show religiosity declines in the city compared to the village. As noted above, Jacobs says the agrarian era is past; suburbanism is here and may be a transition towards measured densification, so let's get on with it and make cities good places in which to live.

McNabb's solution, however, is to flee the city for the fields – not just individual families, but whole groups of families. It is a call to return to the agrarian way of living, not so as to restore agriculture, but "to restore families." Like Jacobs, McNabb calls for a measured but more intensive use of the land, with smallholdings rather than large farms, which use smaller amounts of land more diversely: "Nowhere – and certainly nowhere less than farming – is

mass-production the same as intensive production” and “the smaller the holding the more productive it is.” McNabb, and no doubt the reader, knows that upping sticks and buying a nice farm with some land is not possible for all, or even most. The final chapter of McNabb’s book is “Fifteen Things a Distributist May Do”, and is written for the person in the city who aspires to the fields. It’s a practical first step.

A middle way between Jacobs and McNabb is that of the neo-agrarian movement and new urbanism. Allotments and the grow-your-own movement are now popular in the UK as evidenced by TV shows like *River Cottage*, increase projects like [Landshare.net](http://Landshare.net), and towns such as Poundbury in England, Seaside in Florida, and Le Plessis-Robinson in France offer hope; even a busy city like London is seeing more shared-space thinking by increasing pedestrian areas and reducing road markings and traffic control systems. We can’t all live like the Amish, nor would we necessarily want to, but there is surely a better way than the several hours commute each day, sitting in front of computers, and, more importantly, the city pressures brought to bear upon families.