

Opinion: Progressives ruined San Francisco, but at least ‘advocacy’ is thriving

By George F. Will

Columnist

November 12, 2021 at 9:57 a.m. EST



If you're going to San Francisco

Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair ...

You're gonna meet some gentle people there

— **Sung by Scott McKenzie, 1967**

But watch your step as you hopscotch around the excrement. And some of the thousands who sleep on San Francisco's streets, the nation's filthiest, are off their meds or on meth, or both, and are not always gentle. Also, [Michael Shellenberger](#) reports that between 2015 and 2018 the city replaced more than 300 lampposts “corroded by urine after one had collapsed and crushed a car.”

Shellenberger, author of “[San Fransicko](#),” lives across the Bay in the Berkeley area and has a history of progressive preoccupations. He has written extensively about homelessness and has been anointed by Time magazine a “[Hero of the Environment](#).” But in a gem of understatement, he says “some will take offense at this book's subtitle.” It is: “Why Progressives Ruin Cities.” He does not say that only progressives ruin cities, but that they ruin them in similar ways and for similar reasons.

In 2018, there were 20,933 calls to San Francisco's government complaining about human feces. In 2019, the city spent \$100 million cleaning streets (four times more than Chicago, which has 3.5 times more people and is 4.5 times larger) because the city has more than 5,000 *unsheltered* homeless — a 95 percent increase in 15 years. In those years, in clement Miami, the unsheltered population declined 50 percent.

Last year in San Francisco, there were 6,275 registered complaints about used hypodermic needles in public places. In 2001, the city gave between \$320 and \$395 cash per month to the homeless while Oakland, across the Bay, gave \$24. Guess which city had more homeless addicts.

San Francisco has been a magnet for those who like its combination of abundant (hence cheap) drugs and lax law enforcement. In 2014, progressive California voters redefined as a misdemeanor shoplifting of items valued at less than \$950. Guess what happened.

“Advocates” for the homeless have opposed laws protecting public order — e.g., laws against aggressive panhandling near ATMs or inside buses — and have compared bans on lying on sidewalks to Jim Crow laws, of course. But “Housing First” advocates oppose providing shelters, which they think divert resources from what should be an entitlement to housing. In 1983, “activists” mobilized hundreds of the homeless to march on City Hall chanting “Don't be a louse! Give me a house!” The rule since 2009 is that when public housing is an entitlement, it is not conditional on mentally ill or addicted tenants accepting treatment.

Meanwhile, Shellenberger says, “drug overdoses are the leading cause of death for non-elderly San Franciscans, accounting for 29 percent of deaths of residents under sixty-five in 2019.” Last year, about one-third as many San Franciscans died of covid-19 as died of drug overdoses.

An “advocate” says: “We can't end overdoses until we end poverty, until we end racism.” So, in 2020, the city put up two billboards promoting the safe use of hard drugs (heroin, fentanyl): “Change it up. Injecting drugs has the highest risk of overdose, so consider snorting or smoking instead.” “Try not to use alone. Do it with friends. Use with people and take turns.” Last year, however, San Francisco did ban smoking in apartments.

What Shellenberger calls San Francisco's “pathological altruism” — e.g., spending \$61,000 per tent for homeless campers — involves the “sacralization of victims” and abandonment of equal treatment under law. Progressive victimology preaches that behaviors that are destructive of individuals and urban civilization are definitionally caused by “systemic” this or that — racism, oppression, etc. So, progressivism strips victims of agency but also, Shellenberger says, defines them as “inherently good because they have been victimized.”

“Many of the people who enjoy some of the highest levels of prosperity and freedom in human history are also the least grateful, and least loyal, to the civilization that made it possible.” He asks, “What kind of city regulates ice cream stores more strictly than drug dealers?” One with a long pedigree of progressivism.

In January 1967, just before the “Summer of Love,” between 20,000 and 30,000 gathered for a “[Be-In](#)” in Golden Gate Park to take drugs and experience nirvana. On the stage, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg asked a friend, “What if we're wrong?” *If?*

California's progressive Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, a former mayor of San Francisco, [says](#) of his state, “The future happens here first.” His boast, like Shellenberger's book, is a warning.

Opinions Newsletters

Opinions A.M.: [The best of The Post's commentary, in your inbox six days a week.](#)

Opinions P.M.: [A companion to Opinions A.M., sent weekdays afternoons.](#)

Our subscribers make our work possible.

Great journalism is essential. It's also expensive to produce and we couldn't do it without the support of people like you. Subscribe today.

Get one year for CA\$39

You can cancel anytime.

