

# Chapter 19: The Rise and Reform of Industrial Cities, 1880-1917

## I. The New Metropolis

### A. The Shape of the Industrial City

1. The commercial cities of the early nineteenth century were densely settled around harbors or riverfronts.
2. A downtown area emerged, and industrial development followed the arteries of transportation to the outskirts of the city where concentrations of industry were formed.
3. Travel in the larger American city was difficult and challenged the ingenuity of city builders.
4. In 1887, Frank J. Sprague's electric trolley car became the main mode of transportation in the cities; the trolley car had replaced the horsecar, which had in turn replaced the omnibus.
5. Congestion in the cities led to the development of elevated and underground transportation; with Manhattan's subway, mass transit became rapid transit. **Suburbs** developed in response to mass transportation developments beginning with the railroad.
6. By 1900, Alexander Graham Bell's newly invented telephone linked urban people in a network of instant communication.
7. With steel girders and passenger elevators available by the 1880s, Chicago soon pioneered skyscraper construction, though New York took the lead after the mid-1890s.
8. The first use of electricity was for better city lighting, and Thomas Edison's invention of a serviceable incandescent bulb in 1879 put electric lighting in American homes.

### B. Newcomers and Neighborhoods

1. The explosive growth of America's urban population made cities a world of newcomers, including millions of immigrants from overseas. The biggest ethnic group in Boston was the Irish; in Minneapolis, Swedes; in most other northern cities, Germans. Arriving in the metropolis, immigrants confronted many difficulties.
2. Patterns of settlement varied by ethnic group. Many Italians, recruited by *padroni*, or labor bosses, found work in northeastern and Mid-Atlantic cities. Their urban concentration was especially marked after the 1880s, as more and more immigrants – especially men – arrived from southern Italy.
3. Sharply defined ethnic neighborhoods – such as San Francisco's Chinatown, Italian North Beach, and Jewish Hayes Valley – grew up in every major city, driven both by discrimination and by immigrants' desire to stick together.
4. A great African American migration from the rural South to northern cities began at the turn of the century, but urban blacks could not escape discrimination; job opportunities were few, and they retreated into ghettos to live.
5. Race riots periodically plagued the black community, often targeting black business districts.
6. Whether they arrived from the rural South or from Europe, Mexico, or Asia, working-class city residents needed cheap housing near their jobs.
7. As urban land values climbed, speculators tore down older houses that had been vacated by middle-class families moving to the suburbs. In their place, they erected five- or six-story tenements, buildings that housed twenty or more families in cramped, airless apartments.

### C. City Cultures

1. Despite their many dangers and problems, industrial cities could also be exciting places to live – places where people could challenge older mores.
2. By the turn of the twentieth century, new mass-based entertainments had emerged among the working classes, especially youth.
3. At the same time, the great cities proved to be stimulating centers for intellectual life, from museums and opera houses to news magazines.
4. One enticing attraction for city dwellers was the **vaudeville** theater, which arose in the 1880s and 1890s. For 25 cents, these theaters invited customers to walk in any time and watch a continuous sequence of musical acts, skits, juggling, magic, and other entertainment.
5. Even more spectacular were great amusement parks that appeared around 1900, most famously at New York's Coney Island. These parks had their origins in World's Fairs, whose free educational exhibits proved less popular than their paid entertainment areas.
6. Popular music also became a booming business in the industrial city. By the 1890s, Tin Pan Alley, the

nickname for New York City's song-publishing district, produced dozens of such national hit tunes as "A Bicycle Built for Two" and "My Wild Irish Rose."

7. African American artists brought a syncopated beat that, by the 1890s, began to work its way into mainstream hits like "A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." Black performers soon became stars in their own right with the rise of ragtime.
8. Ragtime was apparently named for its "ragged rhythm," which combined a steady beat in the bass (played with the left hand on the piano) and syncopated, off-beat rhythms in the treble (played with the right).
9. In the city, many young people found parental oversight weaker than it had been in previous generations. Amusement parks and dance halls helped foster the new custom of "dating," which like many other cultural innovations, emerged first among the working class.
10. Gradually, it became more acceptable for a young man to escort a young woman out on the town for commercial entertainments, rather than spending the evening at home under parents' watchful eyes. For young people, dating opened a new world of pleasure, sexual adventure, and danger.
11. Dating and casual sex were hallmarks of an urban world in which large numbers of residents were young and single. Seeking jobs, greater personal freedom, or both, young unmarried women moved to urban areas in large numbers.
12. In addition to informal and casual heterosexual relationships, many industrial cities developed robust gay subcultures. A gay world flourished in New York, for example, including an array of drinking and meeting places, as well as underground gay clubs and drag balls.
13. For elites, the rise of great cities offered an opportunity to build museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions, which could flourish only in major metropolitan centers. Millionaires patronized the arts partly to advance themselves socially, but also out of a sense of civic duty and national pride.
14. The arrival of Sunday color comics, like F. G. Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* (1894), lent their name to "yellow journalism," a derogatory term used for mass-market newspapers.
15. By 1900, new magazines such as *Collier's* and *McClure's* introduced middle-class readers to the work of such reporters as Ida Tarbell, who exposed the machinations of John D. Rockefeller, and David Graham Phillips, whose "Treason of the Senate," published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1906, documented the deference of U.S. senators – especially Republicans – to wealthy corporate interests.
16. Exposé journalists usually lived and worked in big cities, where their magazines were published. President Roosevelt dismissed them as **muckrakers** who focused too much on the negative side of American life. But their influence was profound. They inspired thousands of readers to get involved in reform movements and tackle the problems caused by industrialization.

## II. Governing the Great City

### A. Urban Machines

1. In the United States, cities relied largely on private developers to build streetcar lines and provide urgently needed water, gas, and electricity. This preference for business solutions gave birth to what one urban historian calls the "private city" – a place shaped by individuals, all pursuing their own goals and bent on making money.
2. Urban **political machines** served as a social service agency for city dwellers, providing jobs, lending help, and interceding against the city bureaucracy.
3. In New York, ward boss George Washington Plunkitt integrated private business and political services.
4. For city businesses, the machine served a similar purpose, but it exacted a price in return for its favors: tenement dwellers gave a vote and businesses wrote a check.
5. In the 1860s, boss William Marcy Tweed had made Tammany a byword for corruption, until his extravagant graft in the building of a lavish city courthouse led to his arrest in 1871 and a decline thereafter in the more blatant forms of machine corruption.
6. Tammanyite George Plunkitt declared that he favored "honest graft," the easy profits that came to savvy insiders.
7. In the following decades, city governance improved impressively. Though by no means free of corruption, municipal agencies became far better organized and more expansive in the functions they undertook.
8. Chicago's achievement of infrastructure development in a short period of time was especially remarkable because American city governments labored under severe political constraints.
9. As cities continued to expand, the limits of machine government became increasingly clear. In addition to the

problem of corruption, even the hardest-working ward boss could only help individuals on a local level, in limited ways.

### B. The Limits of Machine Government

1. Even a casual observer could see that cities were finding it difficult to cope with extremely rapid growth, and that some urban politicians preferred personal gain to public welfare.
2. The problems that resulted were dramatically evident during the depression of the 1890s, when working-class unemployment reached a staggering 25 percent in some cities.
3. The crisis of the 1890s radicalized many urban voters, who proved none too loyal to the machines when better alternatives arose.
4. Reformers experimented with new ways of organizing municipal government. After a devastating hurricane killed an estimated 6,000 people in Galveston, Texas, and destroyed much of the city, rebuilders adopted a commission system that became a nationwide model for efficient government.

## III. Cities as Crucible of Reform

### A. Public Health

1. One of the most urgent problems of the big city was disease. In the late nineteenth century, researchers in Europe came to understand the role of germs and bacteria.
2. The public health movement became one of the era's most visible and influential reforms.
3. In cities, the impact of pollution was more obvious than in rural areas. Children played on piles of garbage, breathed toxic air, and consumed poisoned food, milk, and water. Infant mortality rates were shocking.
4. Outraged, urban reformers mobilized to demand safe water and better garbage collection. Hygiene reformers taught hand-washing and other techniques to fight the spread of tuberculosis.
5. Rising fears of unsafe food and drugs also led to government action. At the end of the Civil War, federal and state governments provided no regulation or oversight of food or medical products.
6. Journalist Upton Sinclair published his novel *The Jungle*, an exposé of labor exploitation in Chicago meatpacking plants. What caught the nation's attention were Sinclair's descriptions of rotten meat and filthy packing conditions. Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and created the Food and Drug Administration (1906) to oversee compliance with the new law.

### B. Campaigns Against Urban Prostitution

1. Distressed by the commercialization of sex in American cities, reformers also launched a nationwide campaign against prostitution. They warned, in dramatic language, of the perils of "white slavery," alleging (in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary) that young white women were being kidnapped and forced into prostitution.
2. Practical investigators found a more complex reality: women entered prostitution as a result of many factors, including low-wage jobs, economic desperation, and often sexual and domestic abuse.
3. A wave of brothel closings crested between 1909 and 1912, as police shut down red-light districts in cities nationwide. Meanwhile, Congress passed the Mann Act (1910) to prohibit the transportation of prostitutes across state lines.
4. The crusade against prostitution accomplished its main goal – closing brothels – but in the long term it worsened the conditions under which many prostitutes worked.

### C. The Movement for Social Settlements

1. The most celebrated urban reform institution of the industrial era, and one of the most effective, emerged out of Christian urban missions, educational and social welfare centers that were founded in the 1870s and 1880s.
2. Some reformers were focusing on the plight of urban working-class women, tackling such problems as low wages and lack of day care for working mothers. Some groups created cooperative exchanges through which women could support themselves by selling needlework and crafts.
3. Philanthropic projects led and staffed by women soon evolved into a far more ambitious project: the **social settlement**. The most famous of these was Hull House on Chicago's West Side, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams. The project was an idea borrowed not only from American missions but also from Toynbee Hall, a London settlement that they had visited while touring Europe.
4. Addams and her colleagues came to believe that immigrants already *knew* what they needed. What they lacked was the resources to fulfill those needs, as well as a strong political voice. Hull House was typical in offering a bathhouse, playground, kindergarten, and day care.
5. By the early twentieth century, social settlements sprang up all over the United States. They engaged in an

array of public activities and took many forms. Some attached themselves to pre-existing missions or to African-American colleges. Others were founded by energetic graduates of women's colleges.

6. Social settlements used their resources and influence in many ways. They opened libraries and gymnasiums for working men and women. They operated employment bureaus, penny savings banks, and cooperative kitchens for tired families.
7. Settlement work served as a springboard for other projects and was an early, crucial proving ground for the emerging profession of social work, which transformed the provision of public welfare.
8. Social workers rejected the older model of private Christian charity, dispensed by well-meaning middle-class people to those in need.

#### D. Cities and National Politics

1. Despite the work of reformers, the problems of the industrial city grew more rapidly than remedies for them could be found.
2. To overcome the systemic ills of industrialization – which wrought transformations at the national and even global levels – city governments needed new strategies, as well as allies in state and national politics.
3. The political aftermath of the Triangle fire, which killed 146 young women, showed how challenges posed by industrial cities pushed politics in new directions, not only by transforming urban government but also by helping to build broader movements for reform.
4. After the Civil War, Americans and new immigrants had thronged to the great cities from rural areas and from countries around the world. They helped build America into a global industrial power. In the process, they created an electorate and a society that was far more ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse than it had been before.