**Urbanization during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era**

The growth of cities influenced virtually every social, cultural, and economic movement in the United States between the Civil War and World War I. Moreover, urbanization is a dynamic topic attracting many scholars from a wide array of historical specializations, ranging from gender to political history. This broad sweep does not easily lend itself to synthesis and must be considered in connection with industrialization and immigration. In total, however, urbanization marks a vital turning point in the history of the United States and continues to influence the character of the nation. This essay makes a modest effort to review this issue by examining the trends and ideas pursued by historians of urbanization and to propose new ways of exploring this topic.

The most significant historic development of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era was the sweeping urbanization of the U.S. population. This demographic transition was fueled by the swelling numbers of European immigrants, growing rural populations displaced by increasing agricultural efficiency, and the emerging industrial focus of the American economy. All of these forces coalesced in a 30-year period and thoroughly transformed the face of the American nation. There were many challenges, however, that accompanied rapid urbanization, and many political, social, and technological innovations were needed to successfully navigate these changes. American urban centers were remarkably resilient and met the various challenges with vigor and ingenuity. The accomplishments are still visible in many American cities.

The term “urbanization” requires clarification since it is frequently used to describe any event or development associated with cities. In fact, few note that urbanization is a process and not a place. The mass movement of people from rural areas to more densely populated environs is the process of urbanization, and the growth of cities is the response to this evolutionary change. For historians, however, the term “urban” is clearly aligned with specific places that meet a prescribed set of criteria. The presence of densely populated districts, vertical housing (tenements), an industrial core area, and ethnic enclaves are all common elements of urban settings.

The Gilded Age and Progressive Era spans from 1876 to 1920 and conveniently captures the period of urbanization in the United States. This chronological designation requires some additional consideration to account for the historical complexities that emerged in tandem with the rise of large cities. In the first half of this period—the Gilded Age—the United States experienced a dramatic rise in European immigration, rapid industrialization, and significant movement away from rural/agricultural areas. Each of these developments was responsible, in part, for the speedy urbanization of American society. The Progressive Era, another period of sustained urban growth, produced a humanitarian response to the problems and excesses that were created during the Gilded Age. The Progressives focused on a wide array of issues, but many of their enduring changes were those associated with urban reform.

The sudden rise of cities in the United States left little time for rational urban planning, development of building codes, creation of police or fire departments, resolution of waste disposal challenges, and many other attendant issues. By 1900, 500,000 pounds of manure and 45,000 gallons of urine on congested streets with no sanctioned method of disposing of the dung. As with most challenges facing urban areas, this was only addressed after safety or health concerns surfaced. It was first tackled by Colonel George Waring and his “White Wings,” a highly professional and systematic corps of street cleaners in New York City, starting in 1895. Overall, the magnitude and scope of urban infrastructure required close relations between city government and those with the skills and ideas to improve urban living. By World War I, most large cities in the United States benefited from strong associations between city politicians and urban planners. The degree to which city life became “livable” was heralded by Kate Ascher in The Works: An Anatomy of a City: “rarely does a resident of any of the world’s great metropolitan areas pause to consider the complexity of urban life or the myriad systems that operate round the clock to support it.”

The rise of cities and process of urbanization tended to be concentrated on the two coasts and interior areas well served by waterways and rail transportation hubs. However, few regions of the country were spared from significant demographic shifts since many rural areas were depopulated in the process of urbanization. The prominent place held by New York City in the urbanization of the United States was secured during the Civil War when the population eclipsed one million people. By 1920, a majority of all Americans were urban dwellers.

In 1890 Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant and social reformer, described Manhattan, his adopted home, in a compelling manner:

A map of the city, colored to designate nationalities, would show more stripes

than on a skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow. The city on such

a map would fall into two great halves, green for the Irish on the West Side

tenement districts, and blue for the Germans on the East Side. But intermingled

with these ground colors would be an odd variety of tints that would

give the whole the appearance of an extraordinary crazy-quilt.

The year that these words were penned, New York City’s population approached two million, 42 percent of whom were foreign born. The more important observation is Riis’s reference to the “odd variety of tints,” since this is easily extended to other urban areas and accurately represents the ethnic and cultural diversification that occurred during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The period is full of revolutionary changes—improvements in technology, challenges associated with industrialization, changes brought by the second wave of immigration, innovations in urban planning and infrastructure development, and the machinations of urban politics—which have occupied the energies and efforts of scholars during the last quarter century. In virtually every major city in the United States, a core industrial zone dictated the form and manner of urban expansion and development. In fact, most urban areas emerged as a result of the increased demands of industrialists for a cheap and steady supply of laborers and ready access to transportation links. The demands of city living and industrial development constituted the principal stimulus for the technological improvements of the late nineteenth century. The symbiotic connection between urbanization and industrialization created what Schlesinger called “a new sectionalism,” where tensions emerged at the boundaries of retreating rural/agricultural areas and advancing urban/industrial settings, thus generating two cultures—“one static, individualistic, agricultural, the other dynamic, collectivistic,urban.” The vibrant junction between these two developments was addressed by Carl Abbott, who posited that “revolutions in transportation and production seemed to make urbanization inevitable” and that cities were epicenters of creativity and progress. This theme has garnered considerable attention from those concerned with industrial development, labor unions, tenements, slums, and social life in densely populated areas of the country.

The urbanization of the United States was accelerated by industrialization, technology, and the migration of peoples. The first two components are critical dimensions and have received some attention, yet the human factor of urban growth constitutes the most important segment of this phenomena. While internal migration from rural areas to cities accounted for some of the increase in urban population, the most important factor was the 23.5 million people who arrived in the United States between 1890 and 1920. The role of ethnic enclaves and gender definitions in the lives of these immigrants are astutely considered by Hasia Diner in Lower East Side Memories and Erin’s Daughters in America. She argues that many urban dwellers proudly identified with their urban “slums,” which served as vital points of cultural transition for the new arrivals. She also maintains that women made critical contributions to the development of U.S. cities, a topic previously overlooked by historians. The combined efforts of immigration historians and scholars of urbanization have produced a rich and important body of literature touching upon topics as disparate as prostitution and religion and as synergistic as ethnicity and assimilation. In many respects, immigrants shaped the geographic contours of urban life and, as such, are the most prolific topics of scholarly research. Most historiographical treatments tend to focus on a single dimension of urbanization—construction of transportation networks, creation of public utilities, sanitary crusades, residential and industrial architecture, and waterworks, among others—without critically evaluating the convergence of these forces. Robert Barrows’s 1996 essay “Urbanizing America” is exceptional because it summarizes and evaluates the major factors associated with urbanization across a broad geographic spectrum. His analysis includes major metropolises and small cities, ethnic enclaves and streetcar suburbs, and the northeast corridor and the south. Moreover, this essay succinctly summarizes urban growth, technological advances, architectural milestones, city politics, and social decay in many urban centers. Barrows aptly concludes with a remark by a prominent economist who described the late nineteenth-century city as “the spectroscope of society; it analyzes and sifts the population, separating and classifying the diverse elements. The entire process of civilization is a process of differentiation, and the city is the greatest differentiator. The cities, as the foci of progress, inevitably contain both good and bad.” This prescient observation is still pertinent to many urban areas today. The effects of technological advances were quickly felt in larger cities, particularly New York, but were promptly carried to urban environs in all parts of the nation. The customary litany of urban worries included waste disposal, sanitation, paved streets, bridges, garbage disposal, waterworks, rail lines, fire safety, and the like, which captured the imagination of city officials and entrepreneurs seeking solutions and profits. The application of electricity to power urban transportation accelerated urban sprawl, facilitated the growth of concentric rings of settlement (“urban suburbs”), and amplified socioeconomic divisions among urban dwellers. While the trolley and streetcar augmented the horizontal growth of urban places, advances and improvements in load-bearing steel and curtail-wall construction allowed for vertical growth and the emergence of skyscrapers in most urban settings.

The high population density of the early twentieth century put pressure on fragile infrastructures and demanded ingenuity and insight from urban planners and politicians. Both of these topics have drawn critical attention from historians who desire a rational description of city development and those who want to dispute the simplistic dismissal of political machines as “corrupt to the core.” Progressive reformers exerted significant influence on politicians and charted impressive legislation that improved urban living. Building codes were passed that required minimum living space, access to fresh air, bathroom facilities, steady water supply, adequate stairwells and egress, and other modifications that improved housing. In the wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911, state and local governments responded by implementing fire codes to improve building safety. A carefully choreographed array of city services—police, fire, sanitation, building and health departments, public schools, and others—were standard features throughout the nation by 1920. Clearly between 1880 and 1920, urban areas became cleaner and healthier as a result of a consistent and coherent codification of regulations and laws that were enacted by city planners and politicians. Urban politicians and machine politics were negatively caricatured by many critics, especially Thomas Nast who vilified the unsavory activities of Tammany Hall’s William Marcy “Boss” Tweed in New York. However, some recent observers have argued that party bosses frequently encouraged social reforms, assisted the masses in adjusting to life in the United States, and promoted legislation to ensure orderly urban expansion. Despite common references to political corruption and honest graft, urban politicians, on balance, appear to have made many positive contributions to urban life.