

CHAPTER 19

The Vitality and Turmoil of Urban Life, 1877–1920

THEMATIC GUIDE

In Chapter 19, we examine urban growth, the third major theme (along with natural resource development and industrialization) associated with American expansion in the late nineteenth century. Urban industrial development combined with mass transportation and urban growth to destroy the old pedestrian city of the past. The physical expansion of the city attracted industry, capital, and people. By the early 1900s, the modern American city, with its urban sprawl and distinct districts, was clearly taking shape.

Cities grow in three ways: through physical expansion, by natural increase, and through migration and immigration. In the late nineteenth century, immigration from domestic and foreign sources was the most important cause of urban growth, with native whites, foreigners, and African Americans being the three major migrant groups of the period. We consider why these groups moved to the cities, how they differed from and resembled each other, and in the case of immigrants, how they differed from and resembled earlier immigrants.

Even more than today, American society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was transient. There was constant movement to and from geographic areas and constant movement within urban areas. Migration, in fact, provided one of the two paths to improved opportunity, with occupational change being the second path. Within the context of the discussion of paths to improved opportunity, we dispel certain myths concerning the availability and extent of upward mobility and look at the limiting impact of sexism and racism.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnic enclaves or immigrant districts emerged in America's urban areas as migrants and the "new" immigrants poured into the country. Within these districts there was constant cultural interaction between foreign immigrants and American society. Therefore, as is stated in the text, "[r]ather than yield completely to assimilation, migrants and immigrants interacted with the urban environment to retain their identity while altering both their outlook and the social structure of cities themselves" (see page 343). At the same time, multiethnic neighborhoods, called urban borderlands, emerged in such industrial cities as Chicago and Detroit. Some ethnic groups, most notably African Americans, Asian immigrants, and Mexicans, met with prejudicial attitudes and discrimination. Overall, however, the city of the late nineteenth century nurtured the cultural diversity that so strongly characterizes modern America.

Rapid urban growth created and intensified urban problems such as inadequate housing, overcrowding, and intolerable living conditions. These situations led to reforms that strengthened the hand of local government in regulating the construction of housing, but American attitudes toward the profit motive and toward private enterprise placed limits on the reforms enacted.

Although scientific and technological breakthroughs improved urban life, the burden of urban poverty remained. While some reformers began to look to environmental factors to explain poverty, traditional attitudes toward poverty—attitudes that blamed the victim—restricted what most Americans were

willing to do to alleviate poverty. Even private agencies insisted on extending aid only to the “worthy poor” and on teaching the moral virtues of thrift and sobriety.

Urban areas also had to contend with crime and violence. Whether crime actually increased or was merely more conspicuous can be debated, but in many cases native whites blamed crime on those they considered to be “outsiders” in American society—foreigners and blacks. The ethnic diversity of the cities, combined with urban overcrowding and uncertain economic conditions, hardened antiforeign and white-racist attitudes and increased the number of violent incidences in urban areas. Uneven, sometimes prejudicial, application of laws by law enforcement officials raised questions about the nature of justice, equality, and individual freedom in American society.

As America became a culturally pluralistic society, interest groups often competed for influence and opportunity in the political arena. This competition and the rapidity of change in the urban environment caused confusion. In the midst of this confusion, political machines and political bosses emerged to bring some order out of chaos. Eventually, however, a civic reform movement developed. Most reformers strove for efficiency and focused on structural reform in city government. Some concerned themselves with social reform and with city planning and city design. Whatever the goal, American attitudes limited and undermined these reforms. As noted in the textbook, “urban reform merged idealism with naiveté and insensitivity” (see page 350).

Despite these limiting attitudes, there were technical accomplishments in solving problems relating to sanitation, garbage disposal, the building and lighting of streets, and the construction of bridges. City engineers who applied their technical expertise to urban problems became very important to city governments while at the same time also having a tremendous impact on the home life of Americans.

In “Family Life” the focus of the chapter shifts to a discussion of the family in American society and American life. Once distinctions are made between the household and the family, we identify the factors responsible for the high percentage of nuclear families. We also note the varying ways in which households expanded and contracted to meet changing circumstances. Changes in society changed family and individual lifestyles. Reduction in family size freed adults from the responsibilities of parenthood at an earlier age. Longer life expectancy increased the number of older adults. Childhood and adolescence became more distinct stages of life. As the authors state: “People’s roles in school, in the family, on the job, and in the community came to be determined by age more than any other characteristic” (see page 352).

The leisure-time revolution brought about by labor-saving devices and by a shortened workweek changed the American way of life. As the average workweek decreased to forty-seven hours by 1920, individuals turned to croquet and bicycling as favorite leisure activities. Entertaining the public through spectator sports, the circus, show business, and motion pictures became a profitable business endeavor. Moreover, the mass production of sound and images made possible by the phonograph and the still camera dissolved the uniqueness of experience. Even news was transformed into big business and a mass commodity by the “yellow journalism” tactics of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst.

Mass entertainment and mass culture had a nationalizing effect. However, even though show business provided new opportunities for women, blacks, and immigrants, it often reinforced prejudicial stereotypes, especially concerning African Americans. Furthermore, in an America that was becoming more culturally diverse, different groups pursued their own forms of leisure. This often caused concern on the part of some reformers who tended to label individuals as un-American if their activities did not conform to the Puritan traditions of the nation’s past. These reformers wanted to use government to impose their values and lifestyles on immigrant groups. These attempts to create a homogeneous society led to questions concerning the role of government in society and in the life of the individual—questions that are as relevant today as they were in the late nineteenth century.

IDENTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

After studying Chapter 19 of *A People and a Nation*, you should be able to identify *and* explain fully the historical significance of each item listed below.

- Identify each item in the space provided. Give an explanation or description of the item. Answer the questions *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when*.
- Explain the historical significance of each item in the space provided. Establish the historical context in which the item exists. Establish the item as the result of or as the cause of other factors existing in the society under study. Answer this question: *What were the political, social, economic, and/or cultural consequences of this item?*

1. the “new” immigration