

# Urbanization During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: An Overview

**James Carroll**

Iona College  
New Rochelle, New York

## **Introduction**

The scholarly developments in the field of urbanization during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era are both exciting and daunting. 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.

## **Overview**

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 historiography and research developments in the field of urban history during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era ordinarily focus on these characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

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, New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia had populations in excess of one million (see Table 1—Appendix), yet the infrastructures of these cities were ill-equipped to support this growth. For instance, by 1890 horses in New York City deposited daily

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1. For various interpretations of urbanization, see Stuart Blumin, “City Limits: Two Decades of Urban History in JUH,” *Journal of Urban History* 21:1 (1994): 7–30; Samuel Hays, “From the History of the City to the History of the Urbanized Society,” *Journal of Urban History* 19:4 (1993): 3–25; “Cities,” in Veryan Khan (ed.), *Beacham’s Encyclopedia of Social Change—America in the 20th Century* (Nokomis, FL.: The Beacham Group, 2001); and “Urbanization” in Neil Larry Shumsky (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Urban America* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998).

500,000 pounds of manure and 45,000 gallons of urine<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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. Table 2 in the Appendix highlights major demographic changes in the United States between 1880 and 1920. 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.

## ***The Rise of the City and the Historiography of Urbanization***

The study of urbanization and urban history owes great tribute to the erudite and lifelong efforts of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., who placed the city at the center of historical debate and launched a productive historiographical discourse that continues to the present. In his 1933 book, *The Rise of the City*, he stated clearly that the United States was developing into an urban nation, and that continued economic and cultural growth required the successful resolution of the tensions between those who embraced the rural/agricultural character of our past history and those who realized that the urban/industrial paradigm was the future of the nation. The narrative touched on all regions of the country and gave equal time to the negative elements of urban life such as crime, slums, and inadequate sanitation, as well as to the positive

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2. Kevin Baker, “Ideas and Trends: Recycling in New York; The History of Ash Heaps,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2003, The Week in Review.

3. Kate Ascher, *The Works: An Anatomy of a City* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), ii.

aspects of city dwelling—technology, invention, the fine arts, education, and the like. At the same time, Schlesinger emphasized a battery of nativist and racist fears which pitted the farmer against immigrant “hordes” and those who preferred outdoor life against industrial workers in urban slums.

For all its strengths, Schlesinger’s masterpiece was not immune to criticism. Scholars noted that *The Rise of the City* did not provide a coherent model for analyzing social history and that much of the narrative discussed changing cultural norms in the closing decades of the nineteenth century with little connection to urban events. Charles A. Beard chided Schlesinger and mused that “the reader who lived through the period here surveyed will experience the sensation of living scenes over again; he will walk once more as in a dream amid the sights, sounds, and smells of Xenia, Ohio, and New York City; he will hear again the big booming confusion.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the lack of interpretive analysis, however, *The Rise of the City* clearly shaped the discussion of the history of American urbanization for decades to come.

In 1940, Schlesinger published an essay in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* that attempted to address the criticisms leveled against *The Rise of the City* and to extend Frederick Jackson Turner’s structural analysis to examining urban life. In “The City in American History,” he echoed Turner’s belief that “there seems likely to be an urban reinterpretation of our history”<sup>5</sup> and clearly argued that economic and social patterns of urban life are essential components of social history.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, he highlighted the continuous nature of urbanization in American history and how American society gradually changed and adapted to issues and events surrounding urbanization. The essay provided a positive analysis of urbanization and the growth of cities.

Sixty years after the publication of *The Rise of the City, 1878–1898*, Terrence McDonald echoed the common view that Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. was the starting point for those interested in exploring urbanization and the growth of U.S. cities. The impressive development of urban history in the post–World War II era was framed around Schlesinger’s ideas, and while many scholars in the 1950s and 1960s questioned his influence, McDonald affirmed his place as “father” of urban history. The laudatory qualities of urban life—education, literature, science, invention, fine arts, social reform, public hygiene, and leisure time—introduced by Schlesinger in 1933 are recast in this article and reevaluated using new ideas and theories.<sup>7</sup>

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4. Charles A. Beard, review of *The Rise of the City, 1878–1898*, *The American Historical Review* 38:4 (1933): 779.

5. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., “The City in American History,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27: 1 (1940): 43.

6. See Dwight W. Hoover, “The Diverging Paths of American Urban History,” *American Quarterly* 20:2 (1968): 297.

7. See Terrence J. McDonald, “Theory and Practice in the “New” History: Rereading Arthur Meier Schlesinger’s *The Rise of the City, 1878–1898*,” *Reviews in American History* 20:3 (1992): 432–45.

A balanced and objective consideration of urbanization explores the contributions made by Schlesinger while considering theories and ideas that both complement and contradict the Schlesinger thesis. There are a variety of questions that must be answered to appreciate the historical complexities of urbanization during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. How did the United States move from a rural to an urban nation? How did technology develop in tandem with industrialization and urbanization? How did European immigration both fuel and complicate urban growth in the United States? And finally, how did city governments and urban politicians respond to their constituencies?

These questions extend the themes first raised by Schlesinger and provide ample opportunity to reveal key theories and concepts associated with urbanization. Indeed, urban planning, the creation of urban enclaves, religious pluralism, ethnic heterogeneity, the presence of second-tier cities and suburbs, and the forces of race, class, and gender are all elements of urbanization during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

## **Topics Related to Urbanization**

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.<sup>8</sup>

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

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8. Jacob Riis, *How The Other Half Lives*, <http://depts.washington.edu/envir202/Readings/Reading01.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2008), 13.

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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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

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9. Schlesinger, “The City in American History,” 62, and McDonald, “Theory and Practice,” 440.

10. Carl Abbott, “Thinking About Cities: The Central Tradition in U.S. Urban History,” *Journal of Urban History* 22:6 (1996): 687–701. See also Ruth Alexander, *The 'Girl Problem': Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) and Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

assimilation. In many respects, immigrants shaped the geographic contours of urban life and, as such, are the most prolific topics of scholarly research.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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 spectroscopy 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."<sup>13</sup> 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

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11. Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). See also Eli Lederhendler, "The New Filiopietism, or Toward a New History of Jewish Immigration to America," *American Jewish History* 93:1 (2007): 1–20; Donna Gabaccia, "Inventing 'Little Italy,'" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6:1 (2007): 7–41; Nancy Foner, "Then and Now or Then to Now: Immigration to New York in Contemporary and Historical Perspective," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25:2/3 (2006): 33–47; Val Johnson, "'The Moral Aspects of Complex Problems': New York City Electoral Campaigns Against Vice and the Incorporation of Immigrants, 1890–1901," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25:2/3 (2006): 74–106; Charles Hirschman, "Immigration and the American Century," *Demography* 42:4 (2005): 595–620; James Barrett and David R. Roediger, "The Irish and the 'Americanization' of the 'New Immigrants' in the Streets and in the Churches of the Urban United States, 1900–1930," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24:4 (2005): 3–33; Charles Hirschman, "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States," *International Migration Review* 38:3 (2004): 1206–33; Steven Ruggles and Patricia Kelly Hall, "'Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity': New Evidence on the Internal Migration of Americans, 1850–2000," *Journal of American History* 91:3 (2004), 829–46; Melvin Holli, "Hull House and the Immigrants," *Illinois History Teacher* 10:1 (2003): 23–35; and Melissa Klapper, "A Long and Broad Education": Jewish Girls and the Problem of Education in America, 1860–1920," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 22:1 (2002): 3–31.
12. See Joanne Abel Goldman, *Building New York's Sewers: Developing Mechanisms of Urban Management* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1997); Clifton Hood, "Changing Perceptions of Public Space on the New York Rapid Transit System," *Journal of Urban History* 22:3 (1996): 308–31; and Werner Troesken and Rick Geddes, "Municipalizing American Waterworks, 1897–1915," *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 19:2 (2003): 373–400.
13. Robert G. Barrows, "Urbanizing America," in Charles Calhoun (ed.), *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 108.

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. In *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace chronicle the technological transformation of New York City and point out how these changes guided developments in other urban areas.<sup>14</sup> By the close of the nineteenth century, urban technology was replicated, adapted, and improved by city planners and urban boosters from coast to coast. The exponential improvements in technology defined the spatial geography and architectural design of most cities and ensured that by the close of the Progressive Era, cities were healthier and safer places for urban dwellers.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

14. Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Martin Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005); Craig Colten, “Cities and Water Pollution: An Historical and Geographic Perspective,” *Urban Geography* 26:5 (2005): 435–58; John F. Wasik, *The Merchant of Power: Sam Insull, Thomas Edison, and the Creation of the Modern Metropolis* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Daniel Eli Burnstein, *Next to Godliness: Confronting Dirt and Despair in Progressive Era New York City* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006); and Joanne Abel Goldman, *Building New York's Sewers: Developing Mechanisms of Urban Management* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1997).

15. Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004 [1978]); Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Robert Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and James Borchert, “Residential City Suburbs: The Emergence of the New Suburban Type, 1880–1930,” *Journal of Urban History* 22:3 (1996): 283–307.

16. See Philip Ethington, “Recasting Urban Political History: Gender, the Public, the Household, and Political Participation in Boston and San Francisco during the Progressive Era,” *Social Science History* 16:2 (1992): 301–33.

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.<sup>17</sup>

## Summation and Related Themes

An overview of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era inevitably narrows to three major movements—industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. The interconnectedness among these competing forces makes causal analysis a complex task. The chronological developments are fairly well established, yet they still engender debate and discussion among historians. The ideas circulated in the last 20 years on urbanization integrate immigration and industrialization into the discussion; rely on paradigms related to race, class, and gender; empower ethnicity as a defining component of city life; and detail the importance of urban neighborhoods in the process of assimilation.

Since the late 1990s, the field of urban history, and most other facets of American history, have been revitalized by transnational theories and interpretations. In fact, most recent journal-length treatments of urbanization include important elements of this new school of historical thought. For instance, the processes of urbanization in Australia and Argentina share important similarities with the United States and were also influenced by the twin forces of immigration and industrialization. This comparative dimension provides a global interpretation of urbanization and extends the trajectories of inquiry.<sup>18</sup>

Suburbanization, second-tier cities, religion, and the "Great Migration" of African Americans still require additional exploration by scholars focused on urbanization during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Several of these developments could be pursued using interdisciplinary and transnational approaches, which would greatly expand scholarly discourse. The continued vitality of this topic is obvious given the

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17. See Leo Hershkowitz, *Tweed's New York: Another Look* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1977) and Thomas Pegram, "Who's The Boss?: Revisiting the History of American Urban Rule," *Journal of Urban History* 28:6 (2002): 821–35.

18. See R. Else-Mitchell, "American Influences on Australian Nationhood," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 62:1 (1976): 1-19; John McQuilton, "Comparing Frontiers: Australia and the United States," *The Australasian Journal of American Studies* 12:1 (1993): 26-46; and Walter Nugent, *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870–1914*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

wide array of books published in the field and the multitude of articles that appear regularly in scholarly journals, especially *The Journal of Urban History*, which is devoted to this specific topic.<sup>19</sup>

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19. Information about the journal may be accessed [Online]: <http://juh.sagepub.com/current.dtl> (accessed March 2008).

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The years after the Civil War were characterized by industrialization, urbanization, and a new wave of immigration. During the early 1900s, the Progressive Movement arose to address the negative impact of America's rapid changes. LINK TO QUIZLET: [https://quizlet.com/\\_3sojdl](https://quizlet.com/_3sojdl). Selection. File type icon. File name. Description. Size.