

The City and Its Workers

1870–1890

Chapter Learning Objectives

1. What factors led to rapid urbanization during the late nineteenth century? What role did immigration and industrialization's demand for cheap labor play? How did native-born whites respond to the city's proliferation of immigrants and African Americans? In what ways did the social geography of the city change during the late nineteenth century?
2. Describe briefly America's diverse workers and the kinds of work in which they were engaged. What were the effects of mechanization on American industry? What was the family economy, and what role did women and children play in it? How did the managerial class develop and transform American labor?
3. Why did workers in the late nineteenth century organize? What were working conditions like, and how did management respond to labor's demands? What influence did the Great Strike of 1877 have on American labor? How did the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor form, and what different strategies and philosophies did they embrace? Why did the middle class fear the radicalization of American labor?
4. What was "domesticity"? What did it mean to both working-class and middle-class women? What kinds of amusements existed for city dwellers in the late nineteenth century, and why did city dwellers not enjoy the benefits of these amusements equally?
5. What kinds of governments developed to run America's cities, and how did they operate? Explain Americans' ambivalence about the city, and explain why Chicago's White City best exemplifies that ambivalence.

Annotated Chapter Outline

I. The Rise of the City

A. The Urban Explosion, a Global Migration

1. The movement from rural areas to urban industrial centers attracted millions of immigrants to American shores in the waning decades of the nineteenth century.
2. America's industrial growth in the years following the Civil War brought about a massive redistribution of population.
3. Capitalist development in the late nineteenth century shattered traditional patterns of economic activity in the rural periphery.
4. As old patterns broke down, rural areas exported, along with raw materials, new recruits for the industrial labor force.
5. Beginning in the 1870s, railroad expansion and low steamship fares gave the world's people newfound mobility that enabled industrialists to draw on the global population for cheap labor.

6. European immigration in the nineteenth century came in two distinct waves: Before 1880, the majority of immigrants came from northern and western Europe; after 1880, the majority came from southern and eastern Europe.
 7. The new wave of immigration resulted from a number of factors, including a protracted economic depression in southern Italy, the persecution of Jews in eastern Europe, a general desire to avoid conscription into the Russian army, and America's need for cheap labor.
 8. Would-be immigrants eager for information about the United States relied on letters, advertisements, and word of mouth – sources that were not always dependable or truthful.
 9. Most of the new immigrants remained in cities.
 10. Not all newcomers came to stay.
 11. Jews from eastern Europe usually came with their families and came to stay.
- B. Racism and the Cry for Immigration Restriction
1. Ethnic diversity and racism played a role in dividing skilled workers from the unskilled.
 2. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, members of the educated elite as well as workers viewed ethnic and even religious differences as racial characteristics.
 3. Racism took its most blatant form in the treatment of African Americans and Asians.
 4. In sheer numbers, the new immigration from Europe that began in the 1880s proved unprecedented.
 5. As the numbers of new immigrants swelled, so too did the scrutiny of these newcomers.
 6. Old-stock Yankees such as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts formed an unlikely alliance with organized labor to press for immigration restriction.
- C. The Social Geography of the City
1. Cities in the Gilded Age experienced demographic and technological changes that greatly altered urban social geography.
 2. The development of the electric streetcar in the 1880s led to urban congestion and suburban sprawl, forever altering the social geography of the city.
 3. The city's poor, unable to afford even a few cents for streetcar fare, crowded into the inner city or lived near the factories where they worked.
4. This social segregation was one of the major changes engendered by the rise of the industrial metropolis.
 5. Race and ethnicity also affected the way cities evolved.
 6. Jacob Riis, a young police reporter, documented in his book *How the Other Half Lives* the poverty, crowding, dirt, and disease that constituted the daily reality of New York City's immigrant poor.
 7. Riis's middle-class readers bristled at his revelations about the poor, but they also worried about the excesses of the wealthy.
 8. The excesses of the Gilded Age's newly minted millionaires became especially alarming when coupled with disdain for the general welfare of the people.
 9. The fear that America had become a plutocracy gained credibility from the fact that the wealthiest 1 percent of the population owned more than half the real and personal property in the country.
- II. At Work in the City
- A. America's Diverse Workers
1. Common laborers, who stood at the bottom of the country's economic ladder and generally came from the most recent immigrant groups, formed the backbone of the American labor force.
 2. At the opposite end of the labor hierarchy stood skilled craftsmen.
 3. Much industry and manufacturing in the nineteenth century remained seasonal; few workers could count on year-round pay.
 4. In an era before unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, or old-age pensions, even the best worker could not guarantee security for his family.
 5. As the century wore on, employers attempted to limit workers' autonomy by replacing people with machinery, breaking down skilled work into every smaller tasks, and replacing skilled workers with unskilled factory operatives, often immigrant laborers or young women working for low wages.
 6. Discriminated against in the marketplace, where they earned less than men, and largely ignored by the labor unions, women generally worked only eight to ten years, until they married.

- B. The Family Economy: Women and Children
1. Although real wages rose by 15 percent between 1873 and 1893, workers did not share equally in the improvement.
 2. Moreover, protracted depressions following the panics of 1873 and 1893 undercut many workers' gains.
 3. The paid and unpaid work of women and children thus proved essential for family survival and economic advancement.
 4. As industries mechanized in the 1880s and 1890s, factories hired children who could tend to machines as efficiently as adults yet received considerably lower wages.
 5. Attempts to abolish child labor or limit the number of hours children could work proved largely unsuccessful.
 6. Child labor increased decade by decade; the percentage of children under fifteen engaged in paid labor did not drop until after World War I.
 7. In the late nineteenth century, the number of women workers also rose sharply. Their most common occupation changed slowly from domestic service to factory work and then to office work.
 8. Women's working patterns varied considerably according to race and ethnicity.
- C. Managers and White Collars
1. In the late nineteenth century, business expansion and consolidation led to a managerial revolution, creating a new class of managers.
 2. Until late in the century, when engineering schools began to supply recruits, skilled workers trained on the job were likely to move from the shop floor to positions of considerable responsibility.
- D. "Typewriters" and Sales Clerks
1. The growing managerial class increased the need for workers to support this new class.
 2. In the decades after the Civil War, as businesses became larger and more far-flung, the need for more elaborate and exact records as well as the greater volume of correspondence led to the hiring of more office workers.
 3. Called "typewriters," women workers were seen as indistinguishable from the machines they operated.
 4. Far from viewing their jobs as dehumanizing, women "typewriters" took pride in their work and relished the economic independence it afforded them.
5. As the new consumer culture came to dominate American urban life in the late nineteenth century, department stores offered another employment opportunity for women in the cities.
 6. Typically, the gender segregation that kept women's wages low in the office and the factory also prevailed in the department stores.
- III. Workers Organize
- A. The Great Railroad Strike of 1877
1. When the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad announced a 10 percent wage reduction in the summer of 1877 while at the same time it declared a 10 percent dividend to its stockholders, brakemen in West Virginia, whose wages had already fallen from \$70 to \$30 a month, went on strike.
 2. Their action touched off the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, a nationwide uprising that spread rapidly across the country.
 3. Violence erupted as the strike spread.
 4. Within eight days, the governors of nine states, acting at the prompting of the railroad owners and managers, defined the strike as an "insurrection" and called for federal troops.
 5. Although the Great Railroad Strike was spontaneous and unorganized, it frightened the authorities and upper classes like nothing before in U.S. labor history, making them hostile to labor organization.
 6. In three weeks, the strike was over.
 7. Workers soon recognized they held little power individually and flocked to join unions.
- B. The Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor
1. The Knights of Labor, the first mass organization of America's working class, proved the chief beneficiary of labor's newfound consciousness.
 2. In 1878, the organization launched an ambitious campaign to organize workers regardless of skill, sex, race, or nationality, becoming the dominant force in labor during the 1880s.
 3. In theory, the Knights of Labor opposed strikes, preferring instead arbitration and boycotts.
 4. The Knights of Labor did have rivals, including the American Federation of Labor, headed by Samuel Gompers.
 5. Gompers's plan was to organize skilled workers and to use strikes to gain

immediate objectives such as higher pay and better working conditions.

C. Haymarket and the Specter of Labor Radicalism

1. While the AFL and the Knights of Labor competed for members, radical socialists and anarchists offered different visions of labor's true path.
2. Both groups, sensitive to criticism that they preferred revolution in theory to improvements here and now, rallied around the popular issue of the eight-hour workday, launching major rallies in cities across the nation.
3. Supporters of the movement set May 1, 1886, as the date for a nationwide general strike in support of the eight-hour day.
4. All factions of the nascent labor movement came together in Chicago on May Day for what was billed the largest demonstration to date.
5. Management at the McCormick reaper works brought in strikebreakers and marched the scabs to work under the protection of the Chicago police and security guards supplied by the Pinkerton Detective Agency.
6. During the rally, 45,000 workers paraded peacefully down Michigan Avenue in support of the eight-hour day.
7. Trouble came two days later when strikers attacked scabs outside the McCormick works and police opened fire, killing or wounding six men.
8. Radicals organized a rally on May 4 at Haymarket Square to protest police brutality.
9. When the police ordered the crowd to disperse, someone threw a bomb into the police ranks.
10. After the melee ended, seven policemen and an unknown number of others lay dead.
11. News of the Haymarket "riot" provoked a nationwide convulsion of fear, followed by blind rage directed at anarchists, labor unions, strikers, immigrants, and the working class in general.
12. Eight men, none of them directly connected to the bomb throwing, stood trial and were found guilty.
13. The bomb blast at Haymarket had lasting repercussions, including delivering a deathblow to the eight-hour day movement and to the Knights of Labor.

14. With the labor movement under attack, many skilled workers turned to the American Federation of Labor.

15. The nation's unskilled workers remained untouched by the AFL's brand of trade unionism.

IV. At Home and at Play

A. Domesticity and Domesticity

1. The separation of the workplace from the home marked the shift to industrial society and redefined the home as a haven presided over by a wife and mother who made the household her separate sphere.
2. In the decades after the Civil War, the typical middle-class dwelling became more embellished architecturally and its interiors more cluttered.
3. The gap between working-class austerity and the trappings associated with middle-class respectability continued to widen.
4. The cult of domesticity and the elaboration of the middle-class home gave rise to the live-in servant in the North, replacing the casual hired girl of the previous century.
5. Servants resented their long workday and lack of privacy.
6. Domesticity were a boon for the women of the white middle class, freeing them from household drudgery and giving them more time to spend with their children or to pursue club work or reform.

B. Cheap Amusements

1. Growing class divisions became evident in patterns of leisure as well as in work and home life.
2. The poor and working class took their leisure, when they had any, in the cities' streets and in the dance halls, music houses, ballparks, and amusement arcades that by the 1890s were familiar parts of the urban landscape.
3. The growing anonymity of urban industrial society posed a challenge to traditional rituals of courtship.
4. The need of young women to negotiate sexual encounters if they wished to participate in commercial amusements blurred the line between respectability and promiscuity and made dance halls a favorite target for reformers who feared that they would lure girls into prostitution.
5. For men, baseball became a national pastime in the 1870s.

6. The increasing commercialization of entertainment in the late nineteenth century is best seen at Coney Island, site of some of the largest and most elaborate amusement parks in the country.

V. City Growth and City Government

A. Building Cities of Stone and Steel

1. Skyscrapers and mighty bridges dominated the imagination and the urban landscape.
2. Structural steel made possible enormous advances in building.
3. Skyscrapers forever changed the cityscape.
4. Alongside the skyscrapers rose new residential apartments for the rich and middle class.
5. The flush toilets, bathtubs, and lavatories in the new apartments would not have been possible without major improvements in city sewers and water mains.
6. Across the United States, municipal governments undertook public works on a scale never before seen, paving streets, building sewers and water mains, running trolley tracks, and digging underground subway lines.
7. Cities became more beautiful with the creation of urban public parks to complement the new buildings that quickly filled city lots.
8. American cities created comprehensive free public school systems and public libraries.
9. The poor did not share equally in the advantages of city life.
10. At the turn of the twentieth century, a central paradox emerged: The enduring monuments of America's cities stood as the undeniable achievements of the same system of municipal government that reformers dismissed as boss-ridden, criminal, and corrupt.

B. City Government and the Bosses

1. The physical growth of the cities required the expansion of public services and the creation of entirely new facilities.
2. The professional politician — the colorful big-city boss — became a phenomenon of urban growth.
3. These city bosses presided over political machines — political parties organized at the grassroots level.
4. The machine existed to win elections and reward its supporters with jobs on

the city payroll and services in their neighborhoods.

5. More than 80 percent of the nation's thirty largest cities experienced some form of boss rule in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century.
6. Infighting among powerful ward bosses was more typical than domination by one big-city boss.
7. Urban reformers and proponents of good government challenged machine rule and sometimes succeeded in electing reform mayors.
8. Reformers rarely managed to stay in office long, however.
9. Because of the social services they received, the urban poor remained the bosses' staunchest allies.
10. In 1902, journalist Lincoln Steffens wrote a series of articles exposing city corruption and pointed out that the business class also benefited from bossism.
11. Compromise and accommodation characterized big-city government by the turn of the twentieth century.

C. White City or City of Sin?

1. Americans in the late nineteenth century were ambivalent about the city: They liked its culture and sophistication but feared it as a locus of sin.
2. The White City, built on Chicago's fairgrounds in 1893, graphically represents America's divided view of the city.
3. Its very name celebrated harmony, uniformity, and pristine beauty not seen in Chicago, with its stockyards, slums, and bustling terminals.
4. Most fairgoers applauded the White City and launched a City Beautiful movement in their neighborhoods.
5. In 1893, the fair closed its doors in the midst of the worst economic depression the nation had yet seen.
6. During the winter of 1894, Chicago's unemployed and homeless took over the fairgrounds, vandalized the buildings, and frightened the city's comfortable citizens out of their wits.
7. In July 1894, in a clash between federal troops and striking railway workers, incendiaries set fire and burned the fairgrounds to the ground.
8. In the end, the White City remained what it had always been, a dreamscape.