

Immigration and Urbanization

When historians talk about the surge of immigration that entered the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries they typically divide them into two groups.

The "Old" immigrants came mostly from Western and Northern Europe. This wave peaked around the middle of the 1890s. It included the English, Scotch, Irish, Scandinavian, and Germans. A fairly large percentage of these immigrants were skilled, had some capital, and were Protestants. Those coming from the British Isles already spoke English. Because they shared significant cultural similarities with the existing American population, they assimilated relatively easily. This, of course, is a very broad generalization. For instance, most Irish and a significant portion of German immigrants were Catholic, and many Irish came from poor agricultural backgrounds, arriving in this country with little money and few skills.

The "New" immigrants were much more likely to come from Southern and Eastern Europe: places like Italy, Poland, Russia, Austria, and Greece. There was also a significant immigrant flow from Japan and Mexico during this era. These new arrivals were more religiously and ethnically diverse than the "Old" immigrants and they were much more likely to be unskilled and impoverished. Because of their diversity and lack of resources they were less likely to be greeted with open arms by the native-born population. Throughout this era there was growing agitation to limit or halt immigration because of fears that these new immigrants would culturally taint American society and create social and economic problems. This would culminate in the 1920s with immigration restrictions that specifically targeted the "New" immigrants.

Why does this era see such heavy immigration? Scholars often refer to two core principals to explain the ebb and flow of populations.

"Push factors" represent conditions which encourage people to leave a country or region. Economics is often a key factor. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a significant expansion of economic globalization. Improvements in transportation meant that isolated regions could now profitably ship agricultural products to world markets. This impact regions like Eastern Europe where many large estate holders began to abandon their old systems of feudal agriculture and replace it with more mechanized mass production to take advantage of these markets. This meant that many tenants and peasant farmers were pushed off the land. The same thing happens in Mexico as railroads pushed further and further into its interior. Villages which for hundreds of years had practiced subsistence agriculture were displaced as landlords converted to commercial production. People desperate to find work began to move. Since there was little industrialization in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe, they increasingly looked overseas to the United States for employment opportunities. This also explains the decline in immigration from Northern and Western Europe -- places like Germany and England were rapidly industrializing, meaning there were sufficient jobs for workers in their home countries.

Although economics was a key "push" factor, there were other reasons as well that people chose to leave their home countries, including lack of political liberty and religious and social discrimination. This was particularly a factor in the decision of many Jews to leave Eastern Europe. Russian Jews suffered from segregation and other legal disabilities, and in the late 19th century they increasingly became the target of violent pogroms which killed thousands. It's not surprising, given these circumstances, that Eastern European Jews constituted a large portion of the "New" immigration to the United States.

The "Pull" factors which brought immigrants to the United States are pretty obvious. The growth of factories provided a tremendous lure to people desperate for economic opportunity. Advertising by employers and transportation companies in Europe, combined with the letters written by relatives, helped spread word of these opportunities abroad. News of religious tolerance and political liberties also proved attractive to many.

The ability to immigrate was also facilitated by improvements in transportation technology. The introduction of steamships made it quick and relatively cheap to cross the Atlantic. The reverse was also true: many who came to the U.S. in this era ultimately left either because they became discouraged with harsh working conditions or they had succeeded in scrapping together enough money to buy a farm or shop in the old country. It's estimated that up to one-third of the immigrants who came to the U.S. in this period ultimately returned to their native countries.

What of the ones that stayed? Were there dreams of success in the new world come true? In many ways, the answer is yes.

Immigrants, for instance, fairly quickly did gain political rights.

The new immigration was also different from the "old" immigration in that most of them found their homes in big cities. Up until the early 20th century most Americans were rural farmers rather than urban workers. Industrialization began to change this and by 1920 more Americans lived in cities rather than the countryside.

In many ways the cities were the new frontier. It was here that Americans saw the greatest opportunities and the most ready access to jobs and the new consumer goods that industrialization was producing. The gradual decline in working hours also meant that Americans had more leisure time, and city dwellers had greater access to entertainments such as vaudeville theaters, movie palaces, and sporting events. It was in this era that we witness the rise of the first big amusement parks, like Coney Island in New York. People flocked to the cities not only because of economic opportunities, but also because of the "bright lights" and fast-paced consumer lifestyle.

At the same time, the explosive growth of cities created tremendous problems. A key issue was overcrowding. Having to accommodate larger and larger populations, housing became increasingly dense. During the late 19th century, for instance, the "dumb bell" tenement became a common feature of many cities. These structures were designed to cram the largest number of tenants in the least amount of space. Apartments, particular in the interior section, had very limited access to light and air and they often lacked basic amenities such as indoor plumbing. Water often came from outdoor wells. This was

particularly problematic since sanitation was often provided by underground "cesspits" which sometimes leaked into the groundwater supply. Garbage often piled up in the streets and interior courtyards. Given these conditions, it's not surprising that disease was a significant problem as well.

Violence and crime were also features often associated with the rise of large cities. Prior to the 20th century urban police departments were often small and their officers ill-trained. They struggled to contain the problems arising from poverty and cultural tensions. Cities became places where many different ethnicities, races, and religions clustered together and it was almost inevitable that they would compete for resources such as housing and jobs.

Large cities also suffered from political systems which did a poor job providing the services urban dwellers needed. In small town America the tasks required of municipal government were simple; but big cities needed to create and maintain complex systems to provide sanitation, education, transportation, police and fire protection, electricity, gas, and water. Big city governments, however, were often still based on old-fashioned models that created plentiful opportunities for corruption and abuses of power. Urban "political machines" were usually grassroots organizations based upon wards or council districts. Within these districts powerful professional politicians manipulated the electoral process to keep themselves and their parties in power. These "urban bosses" did provide services, but in a chaotic and informal manner.

Poorer urban dwellers, particularly immigrants, did receive some personal services from these "bosses". In exchange for their votes and party loyalty the "machines" helped them find public or private sector jobs and provided informal social welfare benefits. If a loyal constituent ran afoul of the law, for instance, his ward representative might intervene with the police department to get him off the hook. If he lost his job or fell ill, the "boss" might provide him a little cash or food to tide his family over. Urban politicians often emphasized this benevolent side of their rule, boasting of the many services they provided for their constituents.

Yet, there were clear limitations to this informal "social welfare state". Only those who were politically loyal to the politician or party in power received favors; others were ignored. Often these machines were closely linked to particular ethnic or racial groups and excluded other groups. There were also often "strings" attached to these favors. If an urban politician found a job for one of his constituents, he might well expect a little "kickback" from his pay, or favors such as acting as a campaign worker. It should also be kept in mind that these urban bosses didn't necessarily have to provide services to a lot of people. What they needed was a cadre of campaign supporters who would help them get out the vote at election time, and often they didn't need much help because of their ability to blatantly corrupt the entire political process. Political machines could steal elections by packing ballot boxes or rigging the nomination process.

The other group that received favors from "urban bosses" were businesses. Public utilities like streetcar companies or water companies needed franchises to operate in the city and virtually all businesses had to acquire licenses and permits. The quickest way to secure these was to bribe politicians. These bribes

were not always in the form of cash – corporations could also provide jobs that the “bosses” could use to reward their followers or order their employees to campaign for the favored candidate.

The problems associated with this system were evident. Some businesses -- usually the largest and wealthiest ones – received special favors based on their political relationships with the “machines”. Other businesses were shut out. This made it extremely difficult for smaller firms to compete and meant that companies providing public services, such as gas and water, were often quite sloppy and inefficient. They didn’t have to worry too much about their customers being unhappy since they could use their political connections to lock out potential competitors.

Services provided directly by the city were also often compromised by these methods. City employees such as policemen, fire fighters, or sanitation workers were typically chosen because of their political connections, not because of their ability to do a particular job. All too often as long as they were loyal to their party and good campaign workers, they had no fears of losing their jobs. It’s not surprising, then, that so many basic city services simply failed to keep up with the demands of the modern city, leaving the frustrated residents to live in dirty and dangerous conditions.

How did Americans seek to deal with the problems of the city?

Some simply choose to make their homes elsewhere. This era witnessed a revolution in transportation technology which aided the gradual dispersal of population from the urban core to the suburbs. This accelerated in the 1890s with the widespread adoption of electric streetcars which provided mass transportation for the cities. By 1902 there were over 22,000 miles of electrified track laid in American urban centers. As mass production of automobiles became more common in the early 20th century, this mode of transportation also contributed to the suburbanization trend.

As a result, the basic physical shape of cities began to change. Prior to the transportation innovations of the late 19th century most urban centers were “walking cities” which were relatively small and compact. Because most people used their legs for transportation they typically lived close to where they worked and shopped. This also meant that different social groups in the city lived relatively closely together: rich and poor, middle-class and working-class. This fundamentally changed with the introduction of residential suburbs. Now the wealthy and middle-class population could live outside of the urban core, and yet still commute to jobs or stores in the city. Poorer working-class people were not so lucky. They remained locked in the urban core, suffering from all the problems of life in the big city.

The other reaction was a rising reform movement which sought institute basic reforms to make big cities cleaner, safer, and more efficient. As we’ll learn in the following lessons, the Progressive reform movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was largely inspired by the need for government to become more efficient and powerful so it could cope with the many problems arising from industrialization: problems which were often most apparent in big cities.