INTRODUCTION

The words of a fellow-traveler inspired me as I walked the banks of the urban culture that channeled the flood of life in nineteenth-century American cities. In 1839 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow urged scholar and poet to live in the dark, gray city close to the river of life "bearing along so many gallant hearts, so many wrecks of humanity."

Throughout the ages big cities have fascinated people because they concentrate many ways of life, displaying splendor and misery on a stage for the entire world. In nineteenth-century America the drama of the scene increased when intensified urbanization and rapid industrialization exposed people to modern life.

In an atmosphere of expanding personal freedom and individual opportunity, nineteenth-century cities severed the old ties of men and women with the countryside, setting them adrift in a maelstrom of people radically different from themselves. The widening gape between past and present heightened the residents' anxiety about the meaning of an existence framed by tenement and factory. In this novel environment, amid the tumultuous encounter of everybody with everyone, people sought new ways of life to strengthen their commitment to a common humanity.

People understood themselves better once the growing complexity of the new setting forced them to look around at others. After groping for a sense of direction in their encounters with failure and success, men and women found answers to mutual prob-
lems of urban life, and these accommodations created new patterns of getting along with each other. Their accomplishment was a distinctly modern and American urban culture.

I have traced the outlines of the new culture in the framework of the modern city, an intellectual construct put together with empirical evidence taken from the record of life in big cities in nineteenth-century America. The building blocks of the concept came primarily from New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco. Combined, they epitomize the features of a type of city that rose in the 1830's and faded away in the 1910's, give or take a decade or so on either side to account for the fact that this cultural process had no obvious beginning or end.

The "modern city" constitutes a rapidly expanding urban world in a uniquely American context, characterized by striking physical and human contrasts. Like all concepts it is an abstraction that has no separate historical existence. It comes to life through the accounts of people who experienced its features in the metropolitan centers of the United States. The construct makes it possible to group together related evidence from cities all over the continent and to delineate the cultural elements of a complex development sometimes obscured in the turbulence of daily life.

In the modern city the residents' cultural diversity and heterogeneous make-up enabled them to create ways of life out of new social and economic institutions and to employ the technology of communication and the corporate organizations of business to underwrite the extension of their urban culture across the continent.

City people forged the new culture from the elements that characterized their world. They used the apartment house, metropolitan press, department store, ball park, and vaudeville house to cope with the problems created by a rapidly expanding urban setting. Old urbanites, newcomers from the countryside, and immigrants from abroad relied on these novel social and economic devices in their search for privacy, identity, and happiness. They also depended on them to provide women with a place in the modern city and to establish bonds between diverse groups of people.

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In view of their role in modern city culture, the apartment house, metropolitan press, department store, ball park, and vaudeville house occupy the center of this study. Unlike church and school, they came into existence with the modern city, and their development mirrored faithfully the struggle of city people with change and chance. These new institutions also contributed more directly and extensively to the emergence of modern city culture than did the factory and political machine.

The ability of many groups of people to create new cultural forms indicates the city's potential as a durable form of social organization. Out of a variety of urban experiences emerged cultural expressions answering basic needs constantly laid bare by a changing environment. The modern city lived up to its promise of offering a better life for numbers of men and women.

In our century new urban practices have grown out of the heritage of modern city culture, perpetuating the age-old lure of the good life that the city holds out. At the same time the contrast between the magnificence of high-rise buildings and crumbling housing projects raises visions of the end of the city as a meaningful social order.

In a world doubting the value of urban life and facing the threat of ecological blight, an account of the creation of modern city culture by motley groups of people in nineteenth-century America supports the speculation that men and women will find ways to fulfill their expectations within the urban context of an automobile technology that shattered the adjustments to urban problems which city people had achieved.

In that perspective modern city culture gains lasting significance. Its success indicates that the shortcomings of urban life are less an intrinsic defect of the city and more a reflection of the fact that people's search for the better life leads as often to greed as to selflessness, which affects country as well as city existence. Reflecting on the experience of city people will uphold faith in some form of the city as the dominant way of life.
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Although she knew the scene by heart, the contrasts between the people always startled Jane Addams. The world of her Hull House, bisected by the six miles of Halsted Street that ran from the stockyards in the south to the shipyards in the north, clashed with the fashionable downtown and exclusive residential sections of Chicago. Urban diversities engulfed her daily life, accompanying “the withdrawal of the more prosperous Irish and Germans” from the area “and the slow substitution of Russian Jews, Italians, and Greeks.” The striking variations of life etched into the cityscape seemed to persist long after she had first described the street “lined with shops of butchers and grocers, with dingy and gorgeous saloons, and pretentious establishments for the sale of ready-made clothing.”

Several ethnic neighborhoods surrounded Hull House, sections of a rapidly growing city that had swallowed the suburb in which the residence once stood. Old World conflicts continued to divide their inheritors in the New World, and Jane Addams recalled her surprise at the arrest of a Greek boy who had threatened to hang a young Turk, having been “stirred by some vague notion of carrying on a traditional warfare, and adding another page to the heroic annals of Greek history.”

Jane Addams referred to that divided world as “the modern city,” a phrase members of her generation began using in the 1890’s to denote a large city straining under the impact of inten-
sified urbanization and industrialization. In the context of the history of urbanization, the rise of the modern city was a phenomenon of the nineteenth century; but by the time people actually recognized the new urban phenomenon they had been so busily living, the twentieth century was already shaping the world. Within a few decades the automobile destroyed the distinct downtown focus of modern-city life and gave suburbia a separate identity. However, despite this spatial fragmentation, people continued to label their new forms of urban life “the modern city,” equating “modern” generally with the present.

Divisions of a different order than twentieth-century spatial fragmentation characterized the modern city as a stage of American urban development and marked its decades of hectic growth after the 1840’s. Most noticeably, the rifts resulted from the cultural diversity of the inhabitants. A novel degree of personal freedom heightened the ferment. Then, too, the age-old interplay of social rivalry, economic conflict, and political differences also separated urban people.

In the span of a few decades, waves of migrants from the countryside and abroad had inundated the remnants of the distinct American community, which, some observers assumed, had once formed the city’s core. In its place emerged a “queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements,” as Jacob Riis called the “mixed crowd” in tracing the patterns of mutual rejection in the succession of various ethnic groups streaming into the modern city. “The once unwelcome Irishman has been followed in turn by the Italian, the Russian Jew, and the Chinaman,” he said, “and has himself taken a hand at opposition, quite as bitter and quite as ineffectual, against these later hordes. Wherever these have gone, they have crowded him out, possessing the block, the street, the ward with their denser swarms.”

Even a casual glance at a neighborhood’s types of housing revealed some of the contrasts. Homes provided clues for a quick guess as to the social status and ethnic origin of the people who lived in them. The morning after Theodore Dreiser arrived from Chicago in “the great city of St. Louis,” in 1892, life began “manifesting itself through this city,” he recalled in his autobiography. The very first time he saw the gardens and the mansions of the very rich, the grandeur of their “newly manufactured exclusiveness” staggered him. Dumbfounded, he stared at the “great gray or white or brownstone affairs” with “immense carriage houses, parked and flowered lawns.” The city’s variety of styles and layouts taxed his senses until he discovered the monotony of “long streets of middle-class families, all alike, all with white doorsteps or windowsills and tiny front yards.”

Gradually the existence of the poor sections, hidden behind “long throbbing wholesale streets, crowded with successful companies,” penetrated the young reporter’s mind. Along the waterfront he found a mill area, “backed up by wretched tenements, as poor and grimy and dingy” as he had ever seen. During his wanderings all sorts of streets opened themselves up to him. His search revealed many kinds of people, “Jewish, Negro, and run-down American,” and the mass of humanity making up the “plain slum.”

These kaleidoscopic scenes reinforced impressions of the relationship between houses and people gathered in Chicago where Dreiser had found his way into newspaper work. There the daily walk to his job had taken him from Halsted Street east to the river, through streets “lined with vile dens and tumbledown yellow and gray frame houses.” Behind their rickety or grimy windows, he imagined “slovenly, treacherous, unsolved and possibly insolvable misery and degeneracy,” adding up to “whole streets of degraded, deserted, miserable souls.” John Sloan expanded Dreiser’s verbal sketches with his etchings of streets and people that captured the contrasts of the modern city as they appeared in New York. Inspired by Hogarth and Daumier, the artist discovered in 1904 that he “saw the life of the city really for the first time” when he walked through its streets.

David Graham Phillips recognized the divided quality of the cityscape in the early 1890’s when he leaned against the fence of New York’s Herald Square as a young reporter, “watching a great
city under full swing.” He had been in the city several months and had noticed the gross differences between Hester Street teeming with peddlers and customers and Wall Street crowded with clerks and messengers. He also knew the tide of shoppers sweeping along both sidewalks of Fourteenth Street and the rush of commuters leaving ferry slots and railroad stations. At the crossing of Sixth Avenue and Broadway, he recognized for the first time the subtle contribution of chorus girls, two-bit actresses, and general “about town people” to the image of a street. Their seedy appearance gave Sixth Avenue a certain dinginess in his eyes that the street could not shake off even at its intersection with the metropolitan Broadway.⁹

The crowded downtown streets brought into focus the contrasts diffused over residential districts associated variously with haughty exclusiveness, stern respectability, shabby gentility, outright misery, and brazen indolence. The streets presented a constantly surging mass of humanity. Struck by the elementary vitality of New York’s major thoroughfares in 1856, George Templeton Strong, a great diarist of nineteenth-century urban America, recorded an “orgasm of locomotion.”⁸ In 1871 an Austrian aristocrat saw Broadway as “the principle of mobility, . . . a royal road leading to everything,” with “a floating population large enough to give the impression of that agitation and preoccupation and that provisional state of things which is the characteristic of all the great American cities.”⁷ This steady movement of people obscured the truly floating and shiftless city population, which a probing camera or graphic pen at times found collected in stale-beer dives.⁸

The enormous energies of the bustling crowds lent motion to the cityscape itself. On the facades of businesses colorful advertising banners, swinging in the breeze, mimicked the movement of people in the street. The more deliberate motion of huge streamers strung from one side of the street to the other orchestrated the rhythm of the daily race. The webs of telegraph and telephone wires, suspended in a forest of poles, measured the speed of sailing clouds.

From time to time, the turmoil froze in congestion. Only the hideous mixture of smells and the varying level of noises continued to assault nose and ear. Traffic snarls offered a momentary rest for the eye, swiftly to surrender once more to the cries for impetuous movement. With renewed intensity, pedestrians hustled along to overtake carriages, horses again pursued trolleys, while the clanking elevated lines renewed their efforts to extend motion and speed into a new dimension.

These “passengers in masses,” to quote Edgar Allan Poe’s phrase from “The Man of the Crowd,” when closely watched presented “innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage and expression of countenance.”⁶ The sounds of English and foreign speech in the din of the streets packed with people multiplied the contrasts already apparent in the material and the style of people’s clothing and in their bearing. The clamor defied the idea of the universality of English as “America’s Mightiest Inheritance” extolled by Walt Whitman in 1856. The “mystical rhapsody” of his poetry sought to absorb the fantastic contradictions of the street scenes, which he registered on his walks through the city, but the visual conflicts usually silenced most observers.¹⁰

Varying styles of behavior also revealed differences—from a casual remark indicating the extent of someone’s education to the ways of walking that distinguished various trades from each other. On a Sunday or Sabbath, or any religious holiday, the demeanor of passersby distinguished the faithful from the indifferent. His own contact with crowds led a famous orator and Universalist clergyman, discoursing on humanity in the city in 1854, to identify “the diversities of human conditions” as “the first lesson of the street.”¹¹

Thus the “moving panorama of human life” on the main streets of big American cities adsorbed country folk despite their outlandish appearance.¹² Though their behavior demonstrated their ignorance of city ways, this only temporarily kept them outside the rather flexible bonds of urbanity that quickly assured adsorption but left absorption to the future. Acceptance came as a matter of
course because the city generally ignored most distinctions, indiscriminately embracing the sage and the fool, the good and the wicked, the rich and the poor. Under these circumstances, a columnist for the San Francisco Overland Monthly averred in 1883, hayseeds and greenhorns coming into the city felt as if they were part of the crowd, just watching "the building of Babel."  

Before city ways had a chance to bridge the gap between country and urban folk, the differences produced tension that tore some people apart. Couples experienced the conflict in particular, when man and woman met again after a period of separation during which one of them had come to the United States. In the 1890's, Abraham Cahan's vignette of two people searching for each other in an immigration station exposed the depth of the dilemma.

The husband tried to spot his wife among the newcomers who had just disembarked. For three years he had made his way alone in the American modern city, while she and their child stayed behind in the East European shtetl. "Freshly shaven and clipped," looking like a "regedy Yankee," Yekl finally recognized his wife in her "brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut" among the crowds of passengers. A "voluminous wig of pitch black hue" that Gitl wore in honor of the Sabbath and the great event "added at least five years to her looks." Smartly "dressed in his best clothes and ball shoes," Yekl looked younger than usual, but the days at sea had bronzed his wife's face, "which combined with her prominent cheek bones, inky little eyes, and, above all, the smooth black wig, to lend her resemblance to a squaw."

Yekl's heart "sunk at the sight of his wife's uncouth and un-American appearance." Gitl suppressed concern about her husband's shaved beard, worrying what it signified about his religious devotion. Their words and kisses "imparted the taste of mutual estrangement to both." Only when Yekl approached his boy, with his wife appealing in his behalf to the frightened child, did he feel for a moment the grip of the old country. "Presently, however, the illusion took wing and here he was. Jake the Yankee, with this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side."  

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Long before Jews arriving from Eastern Europe in the 1890's had to learn to cope with the variety of customs in the American modern city, newcomers from the city's hinterland had encountered clashes between modes of life. In the 1820's people just off the nearby farms marked the onset of a long procession. The experience was repeated so frequently that at the beginning of the twentieth century writers of pulp romances could speak glibly about a heroine's movement from "the quiet of her mountain village" to "the great metropolis," as if the actual circumstances of the migration did not seem to matter any longer.

Girls and women came from the small towns and isolated homesteads of rural America to get away from the doldrums of household and farm chores. Increasingly they found their way into the sales force and the office help of the big city, leaving the field of domestic work to immigrant women. At the end of the nineteenth century, they looked to the city "as a sort of Mecca for all in search of opportunity," as one observer noted. The symposium "The Girl Who Comes to the City," which Harper's Bazaar ran in its columns during 1908, suggested certain similarities that characterized women's widely different experiences.

Although most of them arrived with little training for the jobs available, they quickly turned to newspaper advertisements and employment bureaus for information about work opportunities. Many sought to add to school learning some sort of instruction that would increase their bargaining position in the job market. Their low income forced all of them to live frugally, one emphasizing that she always wore black to keep her laundry bills small, another recalling that she walked to and from work to save carfare. Hunger and loneliness dominated the hardships they suffered, but in retrospect most of them thought their initial years in the bewildering city to have been worthwhile.

Although the elegance of the urbanite appeared superficial to many critical eyes, most women assiduously sought the stirring smartness of the big city, striving to shake off the provincialism that separated country people from cosmopolitans. "The over-
The early-comers from the farms of the city's hinterland had the benefit of the English language, a common cultural heritage, and exposure to American institutions to ease their adjustment. In the opening phase of the migration, the urbanites' growing need for household help, factory workers, office clerks, salespeople, and shop assistants made the migrants welcome. Riverboats and railroads steadily brought the modern city within reach of farming folk in more distant regions. When these people also responded to the growing ease of movement that made some of them part of a new work force, they carried the dress, speech, etiquette, and outlook of the countryside with them into the city.

Out of the differences between newcomers and urbanites grew stereotypes that nourished condescension and resentment. Tom Corey, the scion of an old Boston family in William Dean Howells's *Rise of Silas Lapham*, felt that if "he hadn't passed a winter in Texas" he might have found his fellow New Englander Silas Lapham "rather too much." The genteel Coreys considered the self-made Lapham as an intruder, since he had been born in the sticks of Vermont so close to the Canadian border that he "came very near being an adoptive citizen." 19

The distinctions between migrants from the countryside and small towns and old urbanites faded when waves of immigrants from abroad inundated the modern city. In the late 1840's, torrents of Irish Catholic immigrants obscured the steady trickle of people from England and Scotland. The Irish disrupted the bond created by the English language with the divisive element of religion. The language barrier as a source of discord affected first the immigrants from German and Scandinavian countries. Even so, these groups still fitted vaguely into the loose framework of an Anglo-Saxon nation that some English-speaking people saw rising

in North America, the fusion of "the peoples of the world . . . run into an English mould." 20

Head-on collisions of different life-styles ensued when immigrants from southern and eastern Europe surged into the United States in the waning decades of the nineteenth century. Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Czechs, Moravians, Poles, and Russians contrasted vividly with their new surroundings as well as with each other. The groups of Jews among them found that the city already sheltered other Jews who differed in origin, custom, and social status. The haunting photograph by Jacob Riis of one of the newcomers taking his Sabbath meal in a coal cellar in the early 1890's demonstrated to outsiders that adherence to religious practices was a possible bond among the members of the varied phases of Jewish immigration. Most older inhabitants of the modern city, unfamiliar with the ways of all the new immigrants, saw only a sea of strange faces, babbling in alien tongues and framed by freakish clothes, flooding their streets. Walking through these multitudes now was really "like a voyage round the globe," as a guide had already said it was in 1869. 21

The contrasts among the people of the modern city, accentuated by the discordant features of ethnicity and race, loomed largest in the case of newcomers of Asian and African origin. In a world in which most people were strangers, the Chinese seemed the strangest, in appearance, speech, and customs. Their age-old cultural heritage stressed loyalty to their families in distant China, so that, in order to earn money for the support of their extended families, many Chinese laborers in the United States were indentured to Chinese merchants who had provided their transportation across the Pacific. The resulting living and working conditions dispersed early exalted visions of citizens of the oldest and the newest empires meeting in harmony in the American modern city as the expression of a new humanity. Crowded into a few city blocks by American hostility and Chinese clannishness, their teeming, squalid quarters seemed to challenge American beliefs more than did other ghettos. Unable to fathom the exploitation that set Chin-
ese against Chinese under the guise of benevolence, many Americans thought that a country dedicated to ending all slavery should not allow the city to shelter men living voluntarily in bondage.

Blacks, who as slaves in the United States had been exposed to the language, customs, and religion of their masters, envisioned the northern city as an island of freedom in a sea of oppression. Their faith in the existence of that by-product of urban life indicated the depths of their sufferings in slavery. However, their hopes for a better life exaggerated the amount of freedom that the modern city could provide for black people in nineteenth-century America. In the face of racial discrimination and economic exploitation, they sought to realize their dreams of human dignity and economic opportunity by pursuing the chance for a breath of freer air. “Colored people will congregate in the large towns and cities,” Frederick Douglass predicted in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1853, “and they will endure any amount of hardship and privation.” 22 Relatively few black people were able to make the move in the nineteenth century, yet their presence further enriched the range of humanity there, adding differences to a manifestly diverse population.

Other factors exaggerated the contrasts. Throughout its history, any big city has inspired visions of the free life. The American modern city, however, actually generated a novel degree of personal freedom that allowed great numbers of people to live as individuals more fully than before. The chances for building a new life rested primarily on the possibility of responding immediately to the myriad opportunities to better one’s lot. These openings in the loose fabric of society, which differed according to an individual’s perception, ability, and luck, appeared seemingly everywhere.

In particular, they accounted for the enormous attraction of the American modern city for the European poor. Its freedom formed a striking contrast to the conditions in Europe, where law and custom still bound most people to specific stations in life. There, most men and women saw the course of their lives shaped at birth, by the occupation of their parents, the social status of their families, or the nobility of their ancestry.

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To be sure, race and ethnic hostilities and sex discrimination excluded groups of people from sharing fully the opportunities of the American modern city. But at least for most white males, the obstacles to personal advance and individual happiness were far less oppressive than the complacent workings of a hierarchic order of society that in many European states seemed to be keeping the mass of people forever in their place.

Imperial Germany, which in common with other Central European countries, considered the category human being to begin with the aristocrat, demonstrated its limited understanding of the urges of the common man in parliamentary debate in 1889. During a discussion of social legislation in the Reichstag, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck related his experience with some of his people who had left his estate in Pomerania to live in Berlin. “Housing and treatment, all that is hardly as good as at home,” he had argued with his former tenants. They readily agreed, but the Chancellor finally detected the reason for the move when the farm workers blushingly told him that “a place where they could sit outdoors, just listen to a band, and drink their beer” could be found only in Berlin. 23

The Chancellor had discovered human impulses that expressed themselves openly in the American modern city. There freedom rested on an extension of political democracy into many spheres of life. The existence of choices between political candidates, at times questioned by critics of American municipal government who regarded many officials as placemen of urban bosses, meant more than possible participation by eligible citizens in the political processes. As demonstrated by loyal followers assuring the strength of political machines, sharing any form of political life stirred hopes that the chance to act freely in one area would lead to a steady expansion of the entire realm of liberty.

The day-by-day operation of that democracy of the urban machine opened up avenues for getting ahead in life. With the boss allocating some of the spoils of the office and influence to his followers, it provided access to economic opportunities to people who at times could not vote or did not care to, but under other circum-
stances might be in the position or inclined to cast their ballots. The fusion of politics and economics affected the social sphere, too. In the modern city, "where human relationship is not taken account of by big business, by the schools, by commercial amusements, or by any of the dominant institutions," the political machine represented a benevolent institution, reformers explained in 1914, "social during the man's ordinary life, benevolent in his time of trouble." 24

The pulse of urban life beat irregularly but strongly. Limited legal restraints left little too high to be aspired to, and little too low to be done. The urge to get ahead in life fostered an attitude that considered anything permissible that assured gain and regarded all activities that the law did not actually punish as acceptable. The accompanying social fluidity made life in the modern city more desirable for most people than the world they had left behind. Even if their conditions or their status did not measurably change, they could hope that chances for betterment existed because others had improved themselves.

The freedom fostered by the American big city quickly broke down the exclusiveness of many professions and crafts. During economic booms, when labor was scarce, men and women applied for jobs on the spur of the moment, inspired by advertisements as well as rumors about openings, or just following their hunches. Work books, labor contracts, and apprenticeship papers received slight attention, as did other routines of the European labor structure that kept workers in bondage. If the need for hands was great enough it even curbed the racial, ethnic, or sex biases of prospective bosses. Lean years, when products and labor glutted the market, limited workers' choices, deprived them of work, and forced them into unaccustomed activities, adding yet another element of change to the flux of the modern city.

Compared with the working conditions in the countries they came from, many residents found and lost jobs with bewildering ease. The visible effects of momentary affluence or starvation reflected the uncertainty of employment. In weeks of full employ-
of age actualized in the constant updating of the cityscape, came to be viewed as a social concept. This device allowed men and women to feel as young as was necessary to remain in step with their whirling surroundings. “Young America,” mid-century America’s catchword for politicians challenging the complex problems of a nation dividing, also referred to the youthful exuberance of urbanites preoccupied with building their world. Since people continued to age biologically as they always had, the effect of the new social convention was to widen the gulf between young and old. The city world, out of touch with natural growth and decay, now identified old age as an existence separate from ordinary living.

Another aspect of the conflict between young and old was the confrontation between old families and nouveaux riches. The newness of the modern city and the rapid increase of the population prevented the development of a patriciate. A few families had kept their links with the city through several generations, but that kind of distinction meant little in the face of the power of the enormous wealth with which the newly rich battered their way to eminence. The tenets of American democracy had done away with the aristocratic titles that ranked people in Europe. But in this professedly egalitarian society the modern city accepted a hierarchy in which money was the badge of distinction.

“Money is the habitual measure of all things,” an English visitor to America emphasized in the 1860’s, “the only secure power, the only real distinction.” The possibility of unrestrained pursuit of riches opened up many opportunities for seeking distinction, since this did not depend on family background or princely favor, as it did in Europe. The direct links between money and status heightened the incentive to gain and demonstrate wealth and power. Furthermore, the captive audience of thousands of spectators in an urban environment created many opportunities to display one’s wealth, from charity to self-indulgence. This attraction of the modern city also brought to the scene those newly rich who had amassed their fortunes elsewhere. The struggle to be on top of the heap, or to share the summit, created splendid rivalries among the affluent and lengthened the distances that separated the rich from each other and from the poor.

The sheer numbers of scrambling people not only accelerated the rush for riches but also broke the links of paternalism and discredited the argument that the rich were merely the stewards of poor people’s so-called share in the wealth. The recognition of the humanity of the poor that had once constituted the conventional reward for their subservient behavior now appeared as pure condescension. Moreover, there was little room in the great free-for-all to exercise deference. Whoever made it to the top first intended to stay there as long as possible; anyone seeing his opportunity was expected to take it. In any case the legions of poor, who swirled hopelessly in the eddies of the mainstream of seemingly unlimited material progress, made any rich man who tried to justify his wealth by paternalistic rhetoric look like a crafty thief who had found a philosophy in the bargain.

The great inequalities between rich and poor caused unrest and riots, which Joel Tyler Headley considered an index of ongoing “changes in tone and temper” of a great city in 1873. Indeed, riots marked the modern city. In 1866, the stormy year of especially intense industrial conflict, the contrasts were expressed so violently as almost to erase the distinction between strikes and anarchy. For a leader of the Social Gospel Movement the struggle raised the plain question, “Is It Peace or War?”

Although at times a clash between the haves and the have-nots seemed imminent, the line between them was not immutable, and that flexibility balanced the rocking social boat. People resented the trappings of distinction that made the frontier between the two social camps so noticeable, yet they clung to these marks because they indicated the next goal on the way up or marked the rung already reached on the social ladder. This involvement showed that people expected movement, up or down.

An intense and ever-changing diversity of people characterized the American modern city. This feature distinguished it from other
big cities in the Western world, even though some of them also doubled in population and adsorbed many strangers. Most of these newcomers hoped to better their individual lot in life, too. However, the migrations of Eastern Europeans into Vienna or Berlin or of Italians into London never approximated the dimensions of the human mix and flux of the American modern city. The poor of the American modern city were not fashioned by a shared historical experience into uniform building blocks for the urban proletariat that some social philosophers saw emerging in European cities. Most of the American poor cared enough for the opportunities in their new surroundings to prefer the promises of a free life to any call for solidarity.

Although heterogeneity gave the modern city its distinctly American character, one group of residents considered that this cultural diversity threatened what they perceived as “American ways.” Some reformers saw diversity as endangering the political vision of an educated, homogeneous society of yeoman farmers, the backbone of American democracy. Although city-dwellers themselves, they had been raised in small towns and rural settings, and their views of democracy clung to a rather remote past in which it had been hoped that the political life of the young nation could be linked to its farmers as the embodiment of public virtues. These men and women strove diligently to create a civic morale that would perpetuate aspects of this ideal, even though it had disintegrated almost at its inception under the impact of industrialization and urbanization.

At times, urbanization and industrialization seemed to these reformers the roots of all evil. From their perspective the one destroyed the dignity of people, the other the dignity of their labor. To them the new forms of urban life that both supported, such as reading a newspaper on Sundays or spending a salary on clothes, were just one more sign of the erosion of thrift and piety, prudence and self-reliance, those attributes of rural life that they considered the basis of the nation’s social integrity, economic stability, and political wisdom. As a remedy they turned to education in po-

logical behavior to bring, belatedly, attributes of the yeoman into the city. They hoped to Americanize all residents through the political process. In his life history, an Italian tailor reduced the “big work to build the future” to these steps: “to learn the English, to become the citizen, to take part in the political life.” While these reformers strove to eradicate the divisive and clashing features of various groups (tolerating cultural diversity in the form of handicraft skills and home recipes that faced extinction in an industrial age of power looms and canned foods), they failed to substitute any elements of a new identity that people could latch on to as part of their new urban existence.

Most people accepted the heterogeneity of their world as an integral component of their lives. No single culture dominated their activities outside their living quarters. To give and take of daily chores, the mingling of people in the crowded streets, in parks and theaters, shops and factories, exposed them to a multitude of different influences. Over the years these encounters eroded old loyalties. From the chaos emerged the experience of living with the various elements of a new, diverse culture. This awareness of others produced an urban identity that stamped members of heterogeneous groups generally as city people. The process led to the development of more comprehensive social values. Slowly, something like a common frame of mind emerged out of the actions of thousands of people, as amid conflicting attitudes and diverse modes of living and working the residents of the modern city came to share certain perceptions and behaviors.

Shared feelings about their common urban life and the recognition of mutual concerns lent vitality to the emergent modern city culture. That culture constituted a response to major problems of metropolitan existence as perceived by large groups of people: the lack of identity and the need for communication; women’s urge to partake in big-city life and men’s search for leisure as part of the urban existence; and everyone’s hope to be recognized as individual in a crowd. Consequently, the expressions of the culture in the form of the metropolitan press and the department store, the ball-
park and the vaudeville house, reached beyond conventional manifestations of transplanted European culture, epitomized in painting and sculpture, literature and music, and other artifacts of seemingly absolute value. The new cultural expressions sought answers to the problems of a world being perpetually modified by the interaction of crowds of diverse people concentrated in a limited area.

The current of urban life stirred people into constant activity. It also left little opportunity for unrestrained adulation of traditional cultural expressions; these withered without the fertile soil of a common heritage. Each day stimulated variations of modern city culture to answer the need of that moment, from the expansion of news coverage in daily papers to the introduction of a faster ball speeding up the action of baseball. The new practices pushed into the background other usages that suddenly seemed irrelevant.

These constantly changing cultural responses to suit novel demands baffled European visitors. Rooted securely in a world ruled by a pantheon of great masters, Europeans saw culture as a timeless affair, expressed in a great painting, an imposing edifice, or a powerful symphony. But culture "lives in America from day to day," as one of them perceived during his tour through the United States in 1876.28

The traditional forms and modes of culture also lost ground because they had not been marked by the dynamic life of the modern city. Although these time-honored artifacts represented responses to the age-old search for the good and the beautiful, they also bore the trademarks of the glorious ages of the past, rather remote from the turbulent metropolis. In contradistinction, the forms of modern city culture rested on "the deepest and broadest" experience of city people, constantly updated in their encounter with the problems of the urban scene. This collective experience Hutchins Hapgood considered a source of the "most genuine culture possible" in his Types from City Streets of 1910.29

City people coined their cultural forms out of the new social and economic institutions forged in the modern city. Fortified by their
cultural diversity, they devised answers to their most pressing urban problems. In the apartment house they adapted private space to a spatially divided city. They received from the metropolis press the pieces of an urban identity and a language for communicating with each other. The department store assured women a place in city life, and they in turn made downtown the center of urban elegance. In the ball park men were exposed to the meaning of rules in the modern city and to that basic form of urban leisure, watching others do things. The vaudeville house brought a sense of common humanity to diverse people, who emerged from the experience with social skills and cultural values that helped them cope with the intricacies of metropolitan life.

In their encounters with modern city culture, the residents of other American cities and towns recognized its value to themselves in dealing with everyday urban problems. At the same time, the dynamics of modern city life contributed to the expansion of that culture beyond the confines of metropolitan centers until it permeated all cities and towns across the continent.

From the 1870's on, advances in economic organization and in communication increased the effectiveness of the activities of certain citizens in emerging urban societies throughout the country, who had been attempting to inaugurate in the new settings a style and tone of life characteristic of great cities. This metropolis, the tendency to foster behavior typical of large urban centers regardless of the vast expanse of nature separating a new town from the older cities in the East, acquired a corporate dimension in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Above all, nationwide economic organization increased the financial gains obtained from such cultural exports. A communications network of newspaper chains and wire services stimulated demand by expounding the benefits of modern city culture to the entire country. These factors added size and momentum to schemes previously undertaken on a much smaller scale.

The corporate stage of metropolism had truly continental dimensions. The department store became the retailer for a national
market. Big-league baseball provided the basis for a national spectator sport. Vaudeville circuits carried the lessons of modern city culture from ocean to ocean. These gigantic enterprises produced forms of wealth that contrasted with the type of reward reaped earlier by solitary entrepreneurs who combined the export of culture with the hunt for a private fortune. One such was George Gordon, who in 1854 almost singlehandedly laid out a San Francisco park after a residential square of his native London, and with the profits from his real estate scheme started a sugar factory that inspired a poet’s barb: “First man then sugar he refined.”21

In December 1848, Sidney George Fisher, Philadelphia gentleman and diarist, had noticed the dawn of this awesome process during a trip through upstate New York. In every little village he found well-filled stores selling urban artifacts and goods, an entire culture on the Hudson River and the Erie Canal exported from New York City. “Fifty years ago the whole country was a pathless forest,” he marveled, while pointing at analogous developments, “hundreds of miles further west, in Ohio & Illinois, in Michigan & Iowa,” which carried big-city ways across the continent.22

The appeal of modern city culture increased its rate of expansion, thus hastening the emergence of a uniform urban civilization stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The “foreign immigration and the restless spirit of the native population have reduced all our cities to a common level of chaotic sameness,” an American living abroad discovered when he saw his native land again in 1881.23 “The city,” the editor of Harper’s Bazaar emphasized in 1908, “does not mean New York alone or “the half-dozen big cities of the United States.” When his magazine called on women to contribute their experience to a symposium “The Girl Who Comes to the City,” he assumed that despite obvious differences between Boston or Chicago, St. Louis or San Francisco, the basic conditions of urban life existed “the land over,” in “any city over twenty thousand people.”24 Sameness had risen out of diversity.

Modern city culture stretching across the continent provided a distinctly American answer to the problems of urban life. City