The Fin-De-Siècle World

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The city and urban life

Publication details


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Published online on: 26 Nov 2014

How to cite:
Peter Fritzsche. 26 Nov 2014, The city and urban life from: The Fin-De-Siècle World Routledge
Accessed on: 04 Oct 2020

CHAPTER TWO

THE CITY AND URBAN LIFE

Peter Fritzsche

“...they were nearing Chicago.” Among the travellers on the train in August 1889 was Caroline Meeber, who had left Columbia City, Wisconsin, to find a better life in the city. Out the window she could already see the fringes of the city: “lines of telegraph poles stalking across the fields,” followed by “big smoke stacks towering high in the air,” and, closer to the railway terminal, “dingy houses, smoky mills, tall elevators” alongside “vast net-works of tracks.” “Bells clanged, the rails clacked, whistles sounded afar off,” until the brakeman slammed open the door and called out: “Chicago!–Chicago!” The sights and sounds of this first arrival continued to resonate. Carrie was irresistibly drawn to the movement on the streets outside her sister’s modest house on the West Side and to the crowds outside the restaurants, theaters, and department stores along Chicago’s boulevards downtown. As Theodore Dreiser described it in his 1900 novel, Sister Carrie, the young woman would have to find and keep a job, and pay the rent, but she also hoped that the lights of the city that had been so obviously “set for dining” would turn out to have been set “for me” (Dreiser 1981: 9–11).

Dreiser and his character, Carrie, followed thousands of men and women to Chicago. From places like Columbia City, Wisconsin, or Terre Haute, Indiana, Dreiser’s own hometown, immigrants streamed into cities around the world, making urban life a fundamentally new and increasingly commonly shared experience at the turn of the twentieth century. “Between 1789, when Gen. George Washington set out from Mount Vernon for New York City to be sworn in as the nation’s first president, and 1889, when Jane Addams set out from Rockford, Illinois, to open a settlement house in a Chicago slum, America’s urban population had increased more than one hundred times, while the total population had multiplied only sixteen times,” writes Donald Miller (Miller 1996: 181). New York City was the largest city in the United States in 1900, with over 4 million inhabitants, but Chicago’s population had grown at a truly incendiary rate. It had exploded from 30,000 in 1850 to half a million in 1880 only to more than triple in size in the next twenty years.

What occurred in the United States was a global process. In 1900, one in seven people in Wales and England lived in London, the world’s largest metropolis with
over 6 million inhabitants. Between 1848 and 1905, the population of Berlin leaped from 400,000 to 2 million; suburbs ringing the city added another 1.5 million. Like Berlin, St. Petersburg was a modestly sized imperial capital in 1800 but a hundred years later emerged as a teeming industrial settlement, the eighth-largest city in the world with 1.5 million inhabitants. Shanghai was also unremarkable for much of the nineteenth century, but the establishment of the international concession in the 1840s provided the foundation for a city of 1.3 million by 1910. Older cities such as Tokyo tripled in size in the fifty years after the Meiji Restoration; 1.6 million people lived there in 1908. Much smaller cities such as Cracow, Beirut, and Pittsburgh grew rapidly as well. But the growth of population was only one register of urbanization. Industrialization, commercialization, and colonization (or Westernization) fundamentally altered how places from maritime Beirut in the Ottoman Empire to conservative Chengdu in late Qing China operated. Both established residents and unsophisticated newcomers encountered new forms of life and calibrated themselves to rhythms that no longer collapsed in cycles of rise and fall but seemed to move insistently forward. Cities incorporated the future tense: as Carrie’s travelling companion remarked, “Chicago is getting to be a great town” (Dreiser 1981: 10). There were new streets to life in a figurative as well as a literal sense. In the nineteenth century, two global trends combined: more and more people lived in cities and cities became more and more the crossroads of unprecedented cultural, economic, and political change that was at once perilous, opportune, and spectacular. No matter how it was experienced, city life demanded considerable adjustment on the part of city people old and new. Across the world, the door was slammed open to a call that was very much like what Carrie heard in 1889: “Chicago!–Chicago!”

With her “cheap imitation alligator skin satchel” and “yellow leather snap purse,” items which attested to the ways in which Chicago commodities had reached places like Columbia City, Carrie appeared outfitted for the city, but not when compared to the man she met on the train, a travelling “drummer” for an up-and-coming manufacturing house and a “masher” when it came to appreciating young women. His brown wool business suit, cut in a “striped and crossed pattern” that was “very popular at that time,” the high white collar, the gold watch chain, the broad-soled tan shoes, and, of course, the grey “fedora” all indicated that he stood at the center of a “dim world of fortune” about which Carrie could only dream (Dreiser 1981: 3, 5–6). She might have been “the best and dearest girl in half the world,” but, as the novelist Henry Blake Fuller described one of his heroines who had also just arrived by train in Chicago, “all her experiences have lain between Sandusky and Omaha” (Fuller 1894: 5). The urbane “drummer” did not just have clothes, he also had an “air” about him which suggested his ability to make his way in the train stations, broadways, and entrepôts of the city—“Chas. H. Drouet” read his business card. “It felt different for individuals to live in this new urban zone,” writes Robert Alter: to “walk the city streets, to enter into the urban crowds, to be exposed to the exponential increase of noise and bustle” (Alter 2005: xi). To arrive in the city was to enter an astonishing construction site—“Bareheaded, Shoveling, Wrecking, Planning, Building, breaking, rebuilding,” is how Carl Sandburg described Chicago and its settlers (Starkey and Guzman 1999: 123–24). (Sandburg was born in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1878, and resided in the streetcar suburbs of America’s “second city” after detours in Denver and Omaha.) City people experienced
enormous new freedoms, and reorganized their sense of self, but they also took enormous risks. Cities made it imperative for individuals to find their way, which was often confounding, and cities made it possible for them to make their own way, which was not always easy.

The city was overwhelming to newcomers; the doors slammed open. To ascend the 3,46 steps of the Doric column called the Monument, which commemorated the Great Fire of 1666, earned tourists the privilege of seeing the unfurled panorama of the great city of London. “At the foot of the Monument . . . were the warehouses, offices, and banks of the City or Square Mile . . . immediately to the south, the docks and wharves lining the Thames . . . to the east were ‘miles of mean streets . . . smokey, dirty, unbeautiful.’ This was the East End of London . . . To the west, in the immediate foreground, was the massive dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral and beyond that the spires of Westminster, while above and past the Houses of Parliament London’s West End contained the ‘familiar succession of terraces, parks and gardens, upon which are concentrated the most lavish display of wealth and ostentation at present manifest in the world.’ To the north were the grimy streets of working-class Holborn, Clerkenwell, Kings Cross, Finsbury, and Islington, above them the greener leafier reaches of Hampstead [and] Highgate” (Schneer 1999: 4). Actually London was particular for offering a panorama; in many cities it was difficult to get a point of orientation, a bewilderment that was a constituent part of modern urban life. Indeed, the “shifting, insubstantial mists” of London’s famous fogs “baffled [the] eye” as much as the Monument might have enlightened it. The fog was an appropriate setting for Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and for the “changing identities and secret lives” of the city itself. “For a moment, the fog would be quite broken up and a haggard shaft of daylight” would reveal “a dingy street, a gin palace, a low French eating house,” but “the next moment the fog settled down again” and cut the observer off “from his blackguardly surroundings” (Stevenson 2003: 13, 23).

If traditional cities were constructed like houses to offer shelter, and were surrounded by high walls, the nineteenth-century city extended along streets that broke up the encasement. “In the space of a generation,” writes Peter Carroll about fin-de-siècle Suzhou, “city walls were transformed in the popular imagination from useful protective structures into encumbrances that clogged traffic and impeded commercial development” (Carroll 2006: 90). The movement of things and people on the streets, the commonplace encounter with strangers, and the insistent juxtaposition of new and old and rich and poor—all this registered the immensity of the city as much as its expansiveness. Indeed, the panorama from the Monument was quite misleading because it suggested that the city had a definitive order about it—East, West, South, North—when most city people could hardly avoid feelings of disorientation and sensations of shock and surprise. The streets, with the whirl of constant circulation, suggested that everything in the city was in transition—“the family, history, politics, and above all, consciousness itself.” To become part of the fin-de-siècle city was to take the measure of circulation and movement, of wreckage and reconstruction, “of doors opening and shutting” (Alter 2005: 95).

An average of 164 people migrated to Chicago every day in the twenty years before the turn of the twentieth century. Like Sister Carrie, most of them arrived by train. The city’s railway terminals handled more than 1,000 trains a day in this
period, an extraordinary volume of traffic especially in light of the fact that railway lines started and ended in Chicago so that cross-country travellers often had to stay overnight, which added to the curbside bustle around hotels and restaurants. Three million travellers got on and off trains at Tokyo’s Shimbashi Station in 1907 (Seidensticker 1983: 229). Around the world, train stations were the physical point at which the urban machinery was set in motion. The very term “Grand Central Station,” which opened for business in Chicago in 1890 and New York City in 1913, suggested the station’s functional role in circulating goods and people. The stations were also grand because they were opulent: Bombay’s Victoria Terminus offered visitors “a fantasy of domes, turrets and spires, pointed arches and rose windows littering with stained glass” (Smith 2012: 22). Indeed, the famous Oyster Bar in Grand Central Station in New York has been open continuously since 1913.

The fin de siècle around 1900 was characterized by the installation in cities of systems to move around people and transport commodities. Nothing better indicates the gospel of development and commerce than the replacement of city walls with traffic arteries as was the case in Paris (the Périphérique), Berlin (the Stadtbahn), and Vienna (the Ringstrasse). Of course, development enhanced the dual roles of the city as capital and metropolis; great administrative complexes, new palaces such as Istanbul’s Dolmabaçe Palace, and public gardens burnished the capital. But what really changed the face of the city and the quality of urban life was the reconstruction of the metropolis as a nodal point of commerce: bigger train stations, post offices, factories, and department stores, wider streets, and more extensive intra-urban transportation lines. More than anything, the street, its quotidian usefulness in the production and consumption of goods and services, as well as its recreational aspects, defined the development of the new city. Indeed, transport over, under, through, and between streets became the very symbol of the new city, whether the example is the subway in New York (Duke Ellington’s 1941 “Take the ‘A’ Train” “to go to Sugar Hill way up in Harlem”), the double-decker buses in London (“the way to see London is from the top of a bus,” said the many-serving Prime Minister Gladstone), the ferries in Istanbul (companies such as Şirket-i Hayriye competed for the loyalty of customers who, in turn, wrote poems celebrating or mocking the ferry boats), or the rickshaws in Shanghai (an iconic city type, the embodiment of the precariousness of urban existence, the “rickshaw boy” became the subject of a famous 1937 novel by Lao She). Two machines, in particular, circled the globe and put their stamp on cities around 1900: the streetcar and the bicycle. They became global commodities alongside cigarettes (and cigarette cards), movies, Singer sewing machines, postcards, and the fedora like the one “Chas. H. Drouet” wore.

Streetcars are an efficient index of urban development. They required capital and an interface with a central city administration and they indicated the metropolitan scale to activities in the city, first and foremost the separation of work and home, and the wherewithal of common people to spend streetcar fare, which Sister Carrie, for one, was reluctant to do. By 1892, Chicago had almost 1000 miles of streetcar track, all fully electrified (Miller 1996: 177). Streetcars arrived in Beirut the same year. After the turn of the century, they appeared in Cracow and Shanghai. Wherever streetcar lines were laid, they quickly became a fixture in urban life, a scary thing at first perhaps—the cars rumbled down the track “like a drunk,” remembered Cracow’s Eleonora Gajzlerowa; “I always had the impression they would leap off
The city and urban life

—but soon entirely everyday, so much so that early in the morning or late in the afternoon streetcars passed Berlin’s suburban stations every twenty seconds (Wood 2010: 130; Fritzsche, 1996: 62). And on Sundays, as many as 1.2 million Berliners—almost half the able-bodied city—stepped onto the Grosse Berliner for an outing, which indicates that most people could afford to pay the fare. That was not the case in St. Petersburg where many workers found the cheapest ticket at forty-two kopeks, twice the fare of Berlin, too dear. As a result, the intra-urban mobility of the work force lagged behind in the Russian capital. Not even the rich commuted; only one of St. Petersburg’s bankers worked more than 5 kilometers from home at a time when commutes of up to 19 kilometers were not uncommon among Pittsburgh’s (Bater 1976: 334, 402). And without streetcars or streetcar riders, no “streetcar suburbs.”

Bicycles were also a new-fangled invention of the late nineteenth century and, like streetcars, they required modern paved roads. Most bicycling was recreational; at the end of the nineteenth century, most city people still walked to work or they rode the streetcar. It was not until the 1950s that Beijing or Shanghai became a bicycling city of blue-smocked commuters. Even so, the cycling fashion spread quickly among men and then women; Chicago, the home of Arnold, Schwinn & Co., boasted 500 bicycle clubs by 1895 (Spinney 2000: 86). Bicycles were popular because they were a symbol of the independence that came with mobility. In Cracow, the freedoms female cyclists allowed themselves earned them either rebuke (“Miss, your panties are showing”) or an invitation (“give me a kiss”) (Wood 2010: 197). But the satisfaction of learning to ride a bike was real. Franz Göll was over thirty when he learned: “I couldn’t believe that I was really sitting on a bicycle and riding out into the world.” “Of course,” the Berliner added, “at first I had to pay my ‘dues,’” but he quickly turned out to be “a jaunty Sunday cyclist,” reaching a speedy tempo, negotiating turns and crossing streetcar tracks, and responding alertly to obstacles on the street (Fritzsche 2011: 103–04). Given these achievements, advice books at the turn of the century recommended bicycling as a way to discipline the body and reduce the nervous agitation that city life had heightened.

Yet there were reasons to be nervous. Portrayals of urban life repeatedly and pointedly described the dangers of city traffic. Every new technology of transportation introduced into the city initially raised fears: the railroad came with “railroad spine”; automobiles added extraordinary speed and mass to the streets and the thousands of rickshaw pullers in Shanghai or Beijing came to despise them; even bicyclists lost control of their vehicles and collided with pedestrians. Big-city newspapers were full of the reports of accidents from the occasional horse-carriage mishaps on Chengdu’s new Chang Gate horse road to the daily toll of mangled bodies along Chicago’s grade crossings—alone forty-three lines of track spread out south and west into the city’s neighborhoods from the stockyards. Indeed, it became a typical feature of turn-of-the-century journalism to stand on a street corner and count the traffic that served as an index of metropolitan progress but also a reminder of how difficult it had become to cross the road. On one day in New York in the 1880s, “over 22,000 vehicles passed the intersection of Broadway and Fulton between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m.,” one every two seconds. London was just a little less busy. In 1897, the junction of Cheapside and Newgate “was passed by an average of twenty-three vehicles a minute during working hours.” For one hour in
October 1900, a reporter for *BZ am Mittag* counted “416 streetcar wagons, 146 omnibuses, 564 carriages and automobiles, 538 other vehicles, 54 coaches, and 138 three-wheelers” crossing Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz. The “average census of traffic passing at the junction of Nanking Road and Kingsu Road” in Shanghai at the end of February 1918 was as follows: “rickshaws 14,663; pedestrians 30,148; carriages 942; motor-cars 1,863; wheel-barrows 2,582, handcarts 527; bicycles 772; pony-carts 129; tram-cars 754” (Smith 2012: 118; Ackroyd 2001: 592; Fritzsche, 1996: 190; Lee 1999: 16). Of course, congestion was at its worst during “rush hour,” a term which dates from the 1890s and insinuated itself as far as streetcar-commuting Tokyo as the novels of Natume Soseki confirmed (Soseki 1972: 12). (Observers also became the subjects of city mayhem as the term “traffic jam” eventually succeeded the more literal “traffic block” a few years later.) Accidents could only be avoided if city people were “drilled into the new system of ‘hurrying up’” (Dobson 1910: 116).

In the United States, the newly platted city streets were generally wide enough to accommodate the new traffic, but the railroad lines circumscribed the direction of growth. In Chicago, for example, the business district between the Chicago River and Lake Michigan was hemmed in on three sides, which “drove up city-center real estate prices and caused businesses to build into the sky to maximize land use” (Miller 1996: 184). In time, downtown emerged as a bustling financial and service center by day, into which the “cliff-dwellers” (as Henry Blake Fuller called them in his 1893 novel) who worked in the “skyscrapers” (a term which entered Maitland’s *American Slang Dictionary* in 1891) commuted, and a lively entertainment district filled with restaurants, theaters, and hotels by night (Smith 2012: 193). Fewer and fewer people actually lived downtown. Elsewhere, the narrow alleys lined with tiny shops and stalls were paved and widened as in Shanghai or torn down altogether as in Beirut. In Chengdu and Suzhou new gates bored into the city walls facilitated the more efficient movement of goods and people. Wherever new roads were built, as was the case with the horse road in Suzhou or Nanjing Road in Shanghai, commercial...
enterprise boomed, as did the turnover of business in teahouses and restaurants. In the late Qing novel *The Nine-Tailed Turtle* (1906), as Peter Carroll describes it, “the ne’er-do-well Zhang Qiugu travels less than a day from his home in nearby Changshou County to a fantastic and unusual place, Suzhou’s first and only improved macadam street.” The traffic was sensational as well: “carts flowed like water and horses flew like dragons. It was really hopping” (Carroll 2006: 23). Electrification at the beginning of the twentieth century added to the spectacle and pulled commerce and entertainment into nighttime hours.

Of course, not everyone used the amenities of the downtown districts. But thousands of people did travel to the new centers even in the colonial “double towns” which segregated European from “native” districts. In Chengdu, the Center for Promoting Industry and Commerce opened in 1909. It was basically a shopping mall covering 150 shops attracting shoppers as well as spectators. One day, “a reporter from *Popular Daily* counted 33,756 men and 11,340 women visitors to the Center” (Di 2003: 113). In Shanghai, department stores such as Sincere and Wing On which had opened on Nanjing Road in the 1910s and 1920s attracted great crowds of Chinese residents who rode up the “escalators leading to variegated merchandise on different floors” and enjoyed the attractions of “dance halls and rooftop bars, coffeehouses [and] restaurants” (Lee 1999: 13). In Beyoğlu, the ‘foreign’ quarter of Istanbul, the most crowded place was the department store, the Bon Marché, an import from Paris. Fixed prices and annual events such as Bon Marché’s “exposition du blanc” further enhanced business. Tokyo’s department stores well understood their powers of attraction as the advertising jingle “Today the Imperial [Theater], tomorrow Mitsukoshi” indicated. However, Mitsukoshi’s growth was initially limited by the custom of checking footwear at the door and receiving special slippers, tens of thousands of which were kept ready (Seidensticker 1983: 113).

Just moving about the city became a sensual experience of sight and sound. “To see a little of the city,” Sosuke decided to board a Tokyo streetcar in Soseki’s 1909 novel *The Gate*. “Overhead, filling every available space,” were advertisements: “It’s easy if you leave the moving to us” read one, offering service of a transport company, or the “white letters on a red background,” announcing a theater adaptation of a Tolstoy novel. Along the street, Sosuke browsed the stores with their displays of gold watches, stylish cravats, and silk hats, and around the corner he saw a man in a derby hat selling giant balloons: “Buy a balloon for the kiddies” (Soseki 1972: 9–16). On 10 July in the same year, Berlin’s *Morgenpost* invited readers to enjoy the “Strassenbahn-Ausblicke” by taking a ride on streetcar line Number 74. From affluent Schöneberg over Potsdamer Platz and Alexanderplatz, to proletarian Friedrichshain, the journey exposed the variegated physiognomy of the city: sleek automobiles, dusty trucks, quiet gardens, busy intersections, pounding factories (Fritzsche 1996: 103). Of course, many of the sights that cities offered were imperial and national. It was not so long ago that a generation could still remember that no trip to Wilhelmine Berlin was complete without a stroll down Unter den Linden to catch a glimpse of the Kaiser in his castle. Itineraries in London always included Trafalgar Square and the 176-feet high column commemorating the naval hero Lord Horatio Nelson at its center. But most city people were drawn to the commercial sights, the new horse road in Suzhou, the Center for Promoting Industry and Commerce in Chengdu, Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, the Eiffel Tower in Paris,
the Union Stockyards in Chicago, and Broadway, which “in straight New York . . . runs riot.”

Turn-of-the-century advertising jingles—my favorite is “No Kiss is True Without Odol,” a German mouth freshener—indicated the degree to which the spectacular city enabled city people to possess common metropolitan sentences, perceptions, and ultimately experiences. Even working-classers who snacked in the chain restaurant Aschinger, treated themselves to an evening in the cavernous hall of the Rheingold near Potsdamer Platz, and danced under the electric lights at Lunapark (a kind of global archipelago of space trips founded in Coney Island, New York, in 1903, but quickly transplanted to Berlin in 1909 and soon thereafter found all over the world from Cairo to Lima to Melbourne), participating as they did in the novel rhythms of an emerging metropolitan culture. Thousands of Berliners also took an “Ausstellungsbummel” to the annual automobile show (25,000 on a rainy Sunday, 4 November 1906), the sports’ convention (some 40,000 on Sunday, 28 April 1907), or the agricultural exhibition (exactly 118,229 on Sunday, 17 June 1906) (Fritzsche 1996: 164).

Common metropolitan experiences bred shared metropolitan loyalties. In the United States, city people from all social stations went to baseball games that were organized around city-centered teams. In Europe, it was football rather than baseball that created distinctive metropolitan ties. Cracow, for example, had three clubs, Cracovia, Wisla, and Makkabi (a Jewish squad), which played clubs sponsored by other cities across central Europe so that an urban network criss-crossed national boundaries. Since Cracovia even put the Jewish goalkeeper Jozef Lustgarten on its

Figure 2.2 Café Josty in Berlin © Tropea, Robert/Landesarchiv Berlin
roster, football could break down the otherwise sturdy divisions of ethnicity to which the existence of the Jewish Makkabi team attested (Wood 2010: 197). Local boulevard newspapers reported on the matches, fanned inter-city rivalries, and oriented readers to the everyday aspects of the city. Even in impoverished St. Petersburg, eight out of every ten citizens could and did read one of the 555 newspapers and magazines published in the capital (Lincoln 2000: 214). At the turn of the twentieth century, the mass media, like sports clubs or streetcar lines, operated on an unmistakably metropolitan rather than on a national or global scale; with a circulation of 2 million, Le Petit Parisien was the biggest newspaper in the world at this time.

With streetcars, ball parks, and the boulevard newspapers that appeared two or three times a day, there was a new step to the modern city. As Peter Ackroyd notes, London around 1900 was, “in a phrase of the period, ‘going ahead.’ Where in the late nineteenth century, wrote the author of The Streets of London, ‘it had been rich and fruity, it was becoming slick and snappy.’” Tea shops had become “corner houses” and “maisons.” There were also “picture domes and prize fights and soda fountains and cafés and revues,” and thés dansants, tangos and waltzes and the Blue Hungarian bands all set the tune to this “fast” city (Ackroyd 2001: 721). Zhang Qiugu had said as much about Suzhou half a world away.

 Emblematic of the new quality to time were the clock towers that shot up in the colonial cities, setting schedules, announcing commerce, and demanding industriousness. Completed in 1899, the 25-meter high clock tower was the tallest structure in fin-de-siècle Beirut. Chengdu’s clock tower was built on the roof of the Center for Promoting Commerce and Industry in 1909; as Wang Di describes it, the tower set “standard time,” replacing the “roosters crowing in the morning, the position of the sun during the day, and the night watchmen’s beating of drums or bamboo boards at night” (Hanssen 2005: 246; Di 2003: 128). If posters, kiosks, and show windows invited metropolitans to stop and linger, streetcar schedules, clock towers, and the forth-and-back movement of traffic along the streets urged them to move on. Pedestrians were constantly being taken up, deposited, and retrieved by the city. There were “four standard speeds” to turn-of-the-century Berlin, remembered Walter Kiaulehn: “pedestrians five, streetcars fourteen, omnibuses sixteen, and subways twenty-five kilometers per hour” (Fritzsche 1996: 162–63). In Chicago, shopkeepers put up signs: “Closed for Lunch—Back in Ten Minutes,” as “they sat on stools, bellied up” to the bar, and then “charged back to work.” It was very important for city people to learn how to negotiate traffic, make way for passers-by, and keep time. A guidebook to new non-English-speaking immigrants in Chicago included this hard but valuable lesson (Spinney 2000: 66–68):

I look at my watch.
It is half past four.
I am sure my watch is right.
Last week I took my watch to the jeweler.
It ran too slow.
It lost five minutes every day.
It made me late to work.
The time-keeper docked me for lost time.
I had less pay, because I lost time.
By the end of the nineteenth century, the city had truly become a settlement where strangers were likely to meet, which is Richard Sennett’s very fine definition of a city (Sennett 1976: 39, 47). Metropolitans bumped into tourists who increasingly crowded the cities; by the middle of the nineteenth century, Paris was attracting more visitors than any other city in the world, more than 1 million a year, although Chicago boasted the largest daily number of visitors when an astounding 751,026 people entered Jackson Park to see the Ferris Wheel, Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West” show, and the rest of the Columbian Exposition on Monday, 9 October 1893. The old record held by Paris from the days of the exposition of 1889 had been shattered (Larson 2003: 319–20). Indeed, Chicago brimmed with sights: as many as 10,000 people took in the stockyards every day, others gawked at the gigantic mail-order operation at Montgomery Ward’s (Spinney 2000: 57). “Here we are”: over a million picture postcards were posted from Berlin’s 1898 Trade and Industrial Exhibition (Steward 2008: 261). Elsewhere, tourists were drawn not to the modern and gigantic but to the old-fashioned and quaint, what Vienna assiduously cultivated as Gemütlichkeit.

For many people, the Bohemians, dandies, and metropolitan types like “Chas. H. Drouet” who promenaded the new sense of the modern and fashionable might as well have been visitors from another world. Istanbul’s Ahmed Rasim made fun of the alafranga fashions in Beyoğlu. “You can refer to this list,” he said, to make sure shoes were properly polished, shirts starched, moustaches pomaded, fezes arranged just so along with the accessories of pocket watches, canes, and the bourgeois étui (Boyar and Fleet 2010: 303–04). In Chengdu, the press also made fun of readers who worshipped the West by wearing bowler hats, leather shoes, and even eyeglasses in order to “pretend to be students.” In “The True Story of Ah Q” (1921–22), the writer Lu Xun would later popularize the Chinese term jiayangguizi or “fake foreign devil.” Japanese men too took quickly to “Western-style” haircuts. By the early 1870s, about a third of all men in Tokyo had a jangiri or “random cropping” cut. “By 1888 or 1889 only the rare eccentric still wore his hair in the old fashion.” Jangiri was modern, but somehow not un-Japanese: “If you thump a jangiri head,’ went a popular ditty of the day, ‘it sounds back “Civilization and Enlightenment,”’” the order of the day (Di 2003: 126; Seidensticker 1983: 93). Newspapers often prepared elaborate physiognomies to keep track of fashions, much as Bill Cunningham’s photo spread “On the Street” portrays New Yorkers today in the Sunday Style section of the New York Times. But anyone could sketch what Baudelaire referred to as “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent.” If you found yourself riding on the “Halsted Street Car,” Chicago’s poet Carl Sandburg urged, “Take your pencils/And draw these faces” (Starkey and Guzman 1999: 125). Like the “spices, herbs, teas and coffees, animal hides, furs, [and] feathers” unloaded on the London docks or the vehicles, carts, and rickshaws across the Nanjing Road, pedestrians on the street or commuters on the streetcar constituted an endless metropolitan inventory that could be copied, recopied, and incarnated with astonishing variety (Schneer 1999: 7).

However, it was the insistent arrival of women in the new public sphere of the spectacular city that elicited the most commentary. As Jane Addams, the founder of Chicago’s Hull House, remarked about sisters like Carrie, “Never before in civilization have such numbers of young girls been suddenly released from the protection of the home and permitted to walk unattended upon the city streets and
39

— The city and urban life —

Figure 2.3 Chicago traffic jam, circa 1910. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum

to work under alien roofs” (Larson 2003: 11). Already in the 1880s, women were strolling Chicago streets, milling about hotel corridors, and buying tickets to ride in “horse-carts, omnibuses, excursion boats, [and] railroad trains,” making city life, in the words of Henry James, “so much more down-towny.” It is hard to believe, but Marshall Field’s estimated that 99 percent of the purchases made at its State Street department store were made by women! (Miller 1996: 263–64). Although China’s tea houses remained segregated by sex—the Elephant Garden in Chengdu began to admit female patrons only in 1906—newly built public streets such as Chengdu’s Chang Gate horse road attracted male and female flaneurs alike. Indeed, in his 1909 Investigation of Chengdu, the social critic Fu Chongju estimated that “90 percent of Chengdu women liked watching local plays; 80 percent liked playing mahjong; and 70 percent liked visiting temples,” public behaviors he considered very lamentable “bad habits” (Di 2003: 176). The expansion of prostitution, a big problem in the quasi-colonial conditions of early twentieth-century China, contributed to the troubling sexualization of the street. Even in Berlin, fathers warned their daughters about Strassenbahnbekanntschaften, which resulted simply because strangers on the move were increasingly apt to meet each other (Fritzsche 1996: 156–57). Through newspapers and popular love stories discussions about free or arranged marriages, dating habits, and other aspects of social dutifulness circulated as freely as city people did themselves. Whether distributing thousands of copies of the “Don’t-Bind-Feet
Song” along Chengdu’s Jade Dragon Street in the year 1904 or demonstrating in London’s Hyde Park in June 1908 to demand suffrage or strolling on Berlin’s Opernplatz with trouser-like dresses, the so-called Hosenrock, initially adapted for bicycle riding, in February 1911, women in the city pushed against the boundaries of traditional space (Di 2003: 209; BZ am Mittag, 1911).

The appearance of the Hosenrock might have been shocking or scandalous, but was not basically uncomfortable or unsettling as were so many encounters with the poor. So-called “street arabs,” unwillingly enlisted in the “army of homeless boys,” frequently accosted the rich, glancing with insolent eyes, asking the question, “Give us a penny, will you, Guv’nor?”, or stealing the purse that turns the play within the play in Dreiser’s Sister Carrie (Ackroyd 2001: 654). A frisson of danger charged the whereabouts of William Dean Howells’ newcomers to New York City in A Hazard of New Fortunes (1890); after the murderous events in London in 1888, New York, Berlin, and even Cracow reported frightening “Jack the Ripper” incidents (Wood 2010: 81). But the problem on the streets was not so much the crime that threatened the rich as it was the poverty that enveloped the poor.

The railroad that brought Sister Carrie to Chicago created the “wrong side of the tracks,” both figuratively and literally. Cities teemed with the poor. Carrie herself took work for 4½ dollars a week at a shoe factory when she first arrived, which made her wages some months later as a chorus girl at 10 dollars a week look quite grand. In New York, the going entry-level wage at the turn of the twentieth century was even less substantial: 2 to 4½ dollars for young women, slightly more for men. A study of “Packingtown,” the “back” of the Chicago stockyards in 1911, found that “the average weekly wage for male heads of households was just over $9.50, while the estimated minimum weekly expenditure needed to support a family of five was $15.40” (Riis 1970: 154). The result was that wives worked and children left school early. The meat packing business boomed after the invention in 1879 of “refrigeration cars,” which opened up national and international markets to Chicago’s food giants such as Armour and Swift. But the economies of scale in the yards, the “speed up” on the assembly line, the practice of using every part of the pig “but the squeal,” and the reliance on seasonal and unskilled immigrant labor made “Packingtown” “the vilest slum” in the city (Miller 1996: 215–16, 218). Sister Carrie’s unhappy brother-in-law, Hanson, lived in “Packingtown” and woke up at half past five every day to clean refrigeration cars.

Most cities had slum districts. The Lower East Side of New York was perhaps the worst slum in the United States. “A mixture of new five- and six-story tenements” and shacks and shanties in the alleys created extraordinary overcrowding. The worst wards (10, 13, and 11) had densities of 522, 429, and 386 persons per acre (Warner 1970: xvii). Most families lived in rooms without windows or ventilation and worked long hours in jobs that barely paid the rent.

“The Tenement-House Exhibition of 1899” introduced New Yorkers to “the appearance of an actual block . . . bounded by Chrystie, Forsyth, Canal, and Bayard streets. It includes thirty-nine tenement houses, containing 605 different apartments for 2,781 persons. Of these 2,313 are over five years of age, and 466 under five years . . . There are only 264 water closets in the block. There is not one bath in the entire block. Only forty apartments are supplied with hot water. There are 441 dark rooms [with] no light or air except that derived from other rooms.
There are 635 rooms getting their sole light and air from dark, narrow airshafts” (Veiller 2002: 425).

Miserable living conditions were compounded by miserable working conditions. A fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on Washington and Greene on 25 March 1911 claimed the lives of 146 garment workers, mostly Jewish and Italian. More than half a million New Yorkers marched in the funeral procession a little more than a week later. Working life was punctuated by periods of unemployment but also by strikes, often big ones like the one that stopped railroad traffic and meat packing in Chicago in 1894 or the dockers’ strike in London in 1900 or the garment workers’ strikes in New York in 1910; usually the bosses held out and won. However, after the world socialist congress of 1891, workers around the world demonstrated their political will on the streets on May Day. Labor unrest increased in the years before the Great War.

St. Petersburg indicates just how sick the turn-of-the-century could be. “As the tell-tale smokestacks grew in number along the Schlüsselberg Road in what had once been outlying parts of the city,” writes Bruce Lincoln, “slums spread around them like mushrooms sprouting from the stumps of rotting trees . . . A black-orange-greenish-yellow pall hung over” the city. Twice as many people lived in the crowded rooms of the St. Petersburg’s slums than in Vienna or Berlin (Lincoln 2000: 150, 154). Without an adequate supply of water, which was not introduced as a municipal service until after the Russian Revolution in 1917, thousands of workers still hauled water from wells in the shabby tenement courtyards or directly from the Neva River. Inhabitants remained vulnerable to cholera, typhus, typhoid, and smallpox at fearsome rates. In 1908, infectious diseases accounted for nearly 50 percent of the deaths in the metropolis; that same year, cholera claimed 3,553 deaths (Bater 1976: 351). Elsewhere in Europe, municipal utilities introduced sewage and water systems and mortality rates dropped, but not so quickly that Gustav Mahler’s “Kindertotenlieder,” which he composed between 1901 and 1904, just four years before the death of his own daughter from scarlet fever, did not resonate with city people who knew that children remained especially vulnerable. In Berlin, at the turn of the century, children under the age of five made up 57 percent of all deaths; for London the figure was 41.2 percent, for Amsterdam it was 43.8, and for Boston it was 37.1. In Cracow, fully one out of every four homicides was an infanticide (Wood 2010: 37, 40).

The encounter with the “eyes of the poor” often invoked a sense of dread and disorientation. “Who are these strange people ... who have so unexpectedly revealed themselves?” asked one St. Petersburg writer: “They’re not even savages . . . Savages are visionaries, dreamers, with shamans, fetishes, and incantations, while here . . . all we have is some sort of hole of nonexistence” (Lincoln, 2000: 208). The reference to “savages” indicates how the global movements of colonists and imperialists structured apprehensions of the global city. “As there is darkest Africa, is there not also a darkest England?” asked Charles Booth in the 1890s about London’s East End, “May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone’s throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest?” (Ackroyd 2001: 582). To be on the wrong side of the tracks in the city was similar to being on the wrong side of the color line in the colonies. Indeed in St. Petersburg, signs prohibited
dogs, soldiers, and peasants from many public gardens; “No Chinese or Dogs Allowed” was posted at the entrance to the gardens of the international settlement in Shanghai (Bater 1976: 382; Lee 1999: 29).

But Booth was also emblematic of reform efforts. The seventeen volumes of his Life and Labour of the People in London, published in 1903, not only spurred reformers but introduced East Enders in a sympathetic fashion. Streets like Brick Lane, which had housed German Huguenots in the eighteenth century, Eastern European Jews at the end of the nineteenth, and Bengali immigrants a hundred years later, were brought to life in Arthur Morrison’s Tales of Mean Streets (1894) just as they would be in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane (2003). By the time George Bernard Shaw wrote Pygmalion in 1912, Professor Henry Higgins could both phonetically and affectionately pin the “Cockney” flower girl Eliza Doolittle down to Lisson Grove (Porter 1995: 303). In New York, Jacob Riis presented the public with his report on How the Other Half Lives (1890), his pen sharpened by work at the New York Tribune, which since 1881 had sponsored the “fresh air fund” to offer poor city children summer vacations in the countryside, an effort which continues to this day at the New York Times. American realist novels of the time frequently featured “do-gooders” such as Gerty Farish in Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905) or Margaret Vance in William Dean Howells’ A Hazard of New Fortunes. Cities provided rich soil for social reform and social reformists from Fu Chongju in Chengdu to Jane Addams in Chicago to Jacob Riis in New York. But such characters were set against the hard-luck stories of Dreiser’s Hurstwood, Carrie’s lover, who ended up in a poorhouse in New York City or Wharton’s Lily Bart who tumbled down the entire social register to work for a living stitching gloves or Lao She’s “Rickshaw Boy” whose vehicle was stolen and his savings squandered. For most people, city life was an unending “struggle for existence,” a struggle against “hard facts” (Fisher 1985).

An editor at the Paris financial weekly magazine Le Fin de Siècle suggested that the most emblematic fin-de-siècle character was simply the “struggle for life” (Hanssen 2005: 14).

Writers found no single authoritative metaphor to contain the city at the turn of the century, not even the “struggle for life.” For some the metropolis was a brilliant sexual and economic emporium or a “brawling marketplace,” for others it was an “exotic human and architectural wonderland,” and others yet regarded it as a “battlefield” or simply an “inferno” (Alter 2005: 5). For the most part, however, observers agreed when they reported on the new settlements as something startlingly new and radically protean—hence all the probing fiction and madcap diction. Everything was for sale, as Wharton brilliantly pictured the city in The House of Mirth; real estate development showed no deference to age, refinement, or history. Whether in Suzhou, Beirut, or Berlin even cemeteries and the memories of the dead associated with them gave way to urban development. (On the other hand, municipal libraries with “life-giving contents” advanced into city neighborhoods [Fritzsche 2011: 16].) Urban inventories seemed to be the play of “accident and then exigency”—the “features of the frantic panorama” of Howells’ New York City (Howells 1965: 160). Around the world, the scale to this “building, breaking, rebuilding” inevitably transformed the street of my youth into the “street without memory” (Eloesser 1919; Kracauer 1964: 19–24). What Karl Scheffler summed up about Berlin, which was fated “always to become, but never to be”, applies to the fin-de-siècle city in...
The city and urban life —

general (Scheffler 1910: 267). In Tokyo, ceaseless urban transformations made poignant the part played by the hinomi, the “firewatcher,” who took great pleasure in his connoisseurship of fires and fire-fighting methods as he watched for a “good fire” which quickly burned the frail wooden houses and even threatened to spread across the city as was the case in the Ginza fire of 1872 or the Yoshiwara fire of 1911. Since Tokyo had three fire companies, hinomi were sometimes spectators as well to the fistfights that broke out among firefighters. Watching the old houses and neighborhoods burn—“bridges were rebuilt, there were evictions after fires, narrow streets were widened”—the novelist Tayam Katai lamented how “day by day Edo was destroyed” (Seidensticker 1983: 65, 67, 84). Daily the city rebuilt itself, continued to evict its residents, and widened its step on their lives. Daily, immigrants like Sister Carrie arrived. Daily, the conductor shouted out “Chicago!–Chicago!”

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