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978-0-521-83936-5 - Cities and the Making of Modern Europe, 1750-1914

Andrew Lees and Lynn Hollen Lees

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Introduction

Historians regularly and rightly refer to the great importance, particularly during the period between the late eighteenth century and 1914, of the process of urbanization. Between 1750 and 1910, the percentage of the European population living in communities numbering 5,000 or more inhabitants more than tripled, and between 1800 and 1900 the percentage living in “big cities” (defined at the time as cities of at least 100,000 inhabitants) more than quadrupled. Owing both to the overall growth of European population and to its changing distribution, the absolute numbers of city dwellers skyrocketed, from 14.7 million in 1750 to 127.1 million in 1910.¹ As Robert Vaughan, an English observer to whom we shall return at several points, observed around the middle of the period, this was “the age of great cities.” In our volume, we seek to show where and how these rapidly growing collections of men and women arose and why the physical and demographic expansion of such places mattered.

Scholars justifiably regard the growth of cities as a major force behind democratization and industrialization, two processes they often label as “the dual revolutions” that marked these years, and as a crucially significant development in its own right. Neither the political upheavals that broke out in the late eighteenth century and recurred in 1830, 1848, and 1871 nor the industrial revolution, which began a few decades earlier and continued to accelerate even as expressions of political radicalism evolved from revolutionary to less violent manifestations, can be understood apart from the story of urban growth. Cities brought together energy, information, and human and financial capital in the critical mass needed for social transformation. New forms of transportation, communication, employment, family life, governance, and leisure within Europe, which signaled the change from the world of the mid-eighteenth century to that of the twentieth, were also closely linked to urban development. The rise of great cities, even more than the rise of the factory, transformed the

¹ For these and later remarks about the growth of urban populations, see Tables 1 and 2 below and, with regard to individual cities, Appendix A.

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appearance of much of the European landscape and also, much more than any political events, dramatically altered the conditions under which sharply increasing percentages of Europeans (and, albeit to a lesser extent, non-Europeans) experienced daily life. Cities were the places where modernity began and where it reached its zenith, and they richly deserve a central place in general as well as in local historiography. Concentrating on the urban variable thus opens a window that enables us to look at and bring into focus many of the most important aspects of European history during the period between the pre-revolutionary “old regime” and the outbreak of the First World War.

Urban centers served as the focal points where not only the dual revolutions but also many other transformations occurred. Institutions located in cities brought together, employed, housed, and educated the social groups that produced these changes, and urban growth was in turn stimulated by them. Bankers, entrepreneurs, radical politicians, students, workers, political philosophers, and economists – all of whom sought to change their societies – worked primarily in cities and through urban organizations and networks. The nature of urban industries and cultural production made cities the sites where nation-states were imagined by members of the educated middle classes, and created and strengthened in no small part as a result of their efforts. Via newspapers, print shops, coffee-houses, theaters, schools, and other institutions, cities served as centers for communication and cultural innovation more broadly as well. They transmitted information, functioning both as laboratories and as command centers, whose examples and powers influenced not only rural areas within their own nations but also growing cities in European empires overseas.

Concentrating on the urban sector braids into one narrative rope many related threads, not in a narrowly determinist fashion but as a story of interconnections. Although urban growth seemed to be and in many respects really was disruptive, investments in the cities’ physical and human capital made the towns exemplars of a changing order and also engines for the creation of that order. High levels of consumption by members of urban elites contributed to and reinforced sharp differences among social classes but also set standards for emulation. The cities experienced in a particularly acute fashion the contradictions of nineteenth-century society: squalid poverty and astonishing wealth, early death and growing longevity, ignorance and science, popular and high culture, and appalling chaos and impressive institutions of social control and betterment. The social and cultural history of cities mirrored and shaped the evolution of nineteenth-century society, both negatively and positively.

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Four mutually reinforcing themes will recur throughout this book: the cities as milieux characterized by both freedom and discipline; cities as places of social and political diversity in an era of growing national unity; cities as concentrations not only of people but also of governmental functions; and cities as nodes in networks of exchange in Europe and in global economic and imperial systems. As we explore each of these aspects of urban history, we shall seek to provide answers to many questions of interest to historians of modern Europe. How were industrial and urban development linked? How did urban populations experience the impact of technological change and intensified city growth? How did urban governments respond to the challenges of populations divided by race, class, and gender? What roles did cities play in stimulating political democracy and the rise of nationalism? How did imperial networks shape cities in Europe and in its colonies?

Our volume focuses on the three countries whose cities, we argue, merit the closest scrutiny of historians who seek to link urban development and the making of modern Europe. European-wide trends and processes occurred here most visibly, dramatically, and influentially. The claims on our readers' attention of Britain, the clear leader in the area of urban development during the early and middle parts of the period we consider, and of Germany, where urban growth took place with particular rapidity toward the end of it, require no further justification with regard to the importance of what occurred there. Urban developments were less marked in France, but for a variety of reasons – perhaps foremost among them the role of its capital as a laboratory in which some of the most pronounced extremes of urban life asserted themselves with particular force and clarity – it, too, must be included. Inasmuch as what we offer is an interpretive synthesis, which depends heavily on work by others as well as our own research for earlier projects, there are other reasons in addition, of a practical sort, for focusing on Britain, Germany, and France. Our own research and teaching have centered on these three countries, and the scholarly literature on their cities is particularly rich, both in monographs and in broad treatments of urban change. Many bricks, some of which have already been cemented together by others, thus lay ready to hand for use in constructing the work we had in mind.

Almost all of the particular places to which we shall refer belong to a group of forty-eight cities that numbered 250,000 or more inhabitants in 1910 and were located to the west of what was then the Russian Empire (see Appendix A). The cities to whose histories we shall refer most frequently were very large places that came to be known as major “world cities.” Each enjoyed, at the latest by about 1880, unquestioned pride of place among urban areas in the country in which it was located, and each

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in 1910 boasted a population of at least 2 million inhabitants. Not only because of their size but also for numerous other reasons, the British, French, and German capitals – London (far and away the largest city in the world, with more than 7 million inhabitants), Paris, and Berlin – figure prominently in what we have written. In the case of Britain, we refer also to such places as the port cities of Liverpool, Bristol, and Glasgow and the industrial cities of Manchester, Birmingham, and Leeds. In Germany, Munich (the capital of Bavaria), Frankfurt am Main (which was a major center of commerce), the northern port city of Hamburg (a city state until 1871), and the Ruhr Valley area in the west (which contains a number of industrial cities, most prominent among them Düsseldorf and Essen) have served as additional touchstones. Among French cities, Lyon, second only to Paris as a center of economic life of various sorts, the port cities of Marseille and Bordeaux, and the industrial cities of Lille and Saint-Étienne (although the last two were not large enough for inclusion in Appendix A) also deserve mention, here and later.

Only seventeen of the places on our list of forty-eight in Appendix A were located in European countries other than the United Kingdom, Germany, or France, none of which, except for Italy, contained more than two of the seventeen. Although we do not generally discuss them as exemplars of national trends, some of them require being referred to in their own right as important and interesting sites of urban life and development. Among the ones that have attracted the most attention by historians are Vienna, a fourth “world city,” whose role both as the capital of the ill-fated Habsburg Empire and as a major center of cultural life has long fascinated writers and readers; Budapest, the capital of the Empire’s Hungarian half; Brussels, the capital of heavily urbanized Belgium; Amsterdam, which, although it no longer enjoyed the standing it had possessed in the seventeenth century, remained the largest city in a country that had an extensive empire overseas; Stockholm, the leading city of Scandinavia; Barcelona, a major Spanish industrial city and a site of important initiatives in the area of city planning; and the industrial city of Milan, the largest city in northern Italy. Each of them will make at least an occasional appearance in what follows, and many more will be discussed in passing as well.

As this list indicates, we discuss various sorts of cities, and readers should bear in mind that our selection reflects, if only partially, the great heterogeneity of urban types. One must distinguish among national capitals, older centers of trade and commerce, port cities, resort cities, and newer factory towns. That said, we emphasize typicality rather than peculiarity and similarities that linked cities rather than differences that separated them. This perspective results partly from the book’s brevity. But

Table 1 *Urbanization in Europe, 1750–1910*

| Europe | Britain | France | Germany |
|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1750: 12.2 | 1750: 24.2 | 1750: 14.8 | 1750: – |
| 1800: 12.1 | 1801: 30.1 | 1801: 20.5 | 1816: 26.5 |
| 1850: 18.9 | 1851: 50.4 | 1851: 25.5 | 1849: 28.3 |
| 1880: 29.3 | 1881: 67.1 | 1891: 37.4 | 1880: 41.4 |
| 1910: 40.8 | 1911: 79.6 | 1911: 44.2 | 1910: 60.0 |

Numbers indicate urban populations at specified dates as percentages of total populations. The figures for Europe, which come from Bairoch, *Cities and Economic Development*, 216, pertain to the area west of the Russian Empire. They refer to municipalities or other administrative units that numbered 5,000 or more inhabitants. For the figures for individual countries, the threshold is generally 2,000 inhabitants. The figures for Britain in 1750 and 1801 come from Jan De Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 1984) and apply to settlements over 2,500; the figures for France in 1750 also come from De Vries and tally settlements over 3,000. Percentages for Germany for the period before 1880 pertain to Prussia, the largest German state in the area that was unified in 1871. For comments on sources for other numbers in this table and on sources for all of Table 2, see Lees, *Cities Perceived*, 4.

Table 2 *The growth of the big cities, 1800–1910*

| Europe | Britain | France | Germany |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1800: 2.9 (21) | 1801: 8.2 (1) | 1801: 2.8 (3) | 1816: 1.9 (2) |
| 1850: 4.8 (43) | 1851: 21.8 (11) | 1851: 4.6 (5) | 1849: 3.1 (4) |
| 1900: 12.3 (143) | 1881: 29.5 (24) | 1891: 12.0 (12) | 1880: 7.2 (14) |
| | 1911: 40.7 (39) | 1911: 14.6 (15) | 1910: 21.3 (48) |

For each area, the first numbers after dates indicate populations of cities that contained 100,000 or more inhabitants as percentages of an area’s total population. Numbers in parentheses indicate total numbers of such cities. Percentages for Germany before 1880 are for Prussia.

it also reflects the fact that we deal with large cities (placing particular emphasis on the *largest* cities), in which, despite variations, multiple functions were inevitably intertwined.

Having acknowledged in a general way our indebtedness to other practitioners of urban history, whose many works of exemplary scholarship form the foundation on which and most of the building blocks with which this volume was constructed, we want to emphasize that it differs significantly from comparable work in the field. There are three major surveys

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in English that encompass urban developments during our period in the territory on which we concentrate: the classic jeremiad by Louis Mumford (in which modern cities are portrayed as appalling departures from earlier norms), the more recent and generally celebratory survey of over a dozen individual cities by Peter Hall, and the work by Paul Hohenberg and one of the present authors, Lynn Hollen Lees. More analytic than either Mumford's work or Hall's, it makes heavy use of concepts drawn from economics and other social sciences. What unites these volumes, despite their differences from one another, in comparison with the present work is the fact that all of them treat much longer periods and much larger territories than the ones on which we focus, so that anyone who wants to concentrate on the later eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries in the European heartland must sift through them with some care in order to find what she or he seeks. Not counting the classic work by Adna Weber, which is heavily statistical, only a single work other than the present one focuses comparatively on the period we treat: an excellent survey in French by Jean-Luc Pinol, which treats developments in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States.

Aside from its chronological and its geographic boundaries and the language in which it is written, our work also differs from the ones to which we have just referred by virtue of the way in which it has been constructed conceptually. We seek – despite all the diversity and complexity to which we shall refer along the way – to chart an overall trajectory. Although our approach is not primarily narrative, we do have a story to tell, a story that embodies an interpretation.

To state matters as simply as possible, we move from often appalling challenges to adaptive responses of varying adequacy. We take the reader in the first three chapters, which roughly treat the period 1750 to 1850, from relative stability through explosive growth and some of the concerns and conflicts that arose in connection with it. We treat not only commerce, industry, and migration but also the social geography of wealth and poverty, birth rates and death rates under the impact of overcrowding and poor sanitation, and illegitimacy and crime. We point in Chapter 3 to urban networks of revolutionary activity, which mobilized urban populations in several states. We also pay attention, in Chapter 4, to early nineteenth-century efforts to improve the urban scene, many emanating from churches and private associations, others from public authorities. Pressure for solutions centering on aesthetic improvement, philanthropy, individual moral reform, and institutional reform led, however, only to piecemeal results. A later wave of growth and popular mobilization followed in the second half of the century, prompting more aggressive action on the part of state and municipal governments. Here, too, we chart the

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challenges that convinced contemporaries of the need to deal with urban problems: challenges which emerged through growth and its environmental impacts. Big cities had turned into giant metropolises, compounding the difficulties of adequate housing, transportation, and sanitation. Newly armed with statistical information, contemporaries moved from unease over urban political movements and fears of slums and slum populations to the development of public policies with regard to urban social conditions. Their representations of the urban poor shaped the solutions they advocated. As the political forces unleashed by democratization intensified, the range of proposed solutions widened, as did the means at the disposal of growing local as well as state governments. After revisiting the subject of philanthropy, we consider a wide range of city services and other measures taken by public authorities to deal with the needs of urban populations. We also consider the varieties of urban cultures – elite, popular, and modernist – which greatly enriched big-city life. We turn in our last chapter to European influences on the cities of overseas empires and the networks which linked metropolises and colonial centers. During the last half of the century, European governments expanded their control of cities both at home and abroad.

There is, in the writing of good history, no such thing as a “happy ending,” and it is not our intention to suggest that by 1914 city dwellers in the countries on which we concentrate – let alone city dwellers in colonial areas – lived in communities that were even close to being perfect. Just as cities were diverse, so too were the experiences of their inhabitants. Yet there are reasons to regard urbanization between 1750 and 1914 as a process that contributed overall, at least toward its end, to the prosperity and the wellbeing of the Europeans who experienced it. By 1914, average city dwellers lived longer, and they had higher incomes, more civil rights, and, if male, greater rights to political participation than their parents or grandparents had enjoyed earlier. More cultural choices were also open to them, although pressures for conformity also increased along with the power of central states.

A few words follow about bibliographies and citations. The following list includes all the works discussed above; additional ones that bear in a general way on the urban history during the nineteenth century of Europe as a whole, of Britain, of France, or of Germany; and several books that deal broadly with perceptions of cities. In general, neither they nor the works listed in Appendix B have been cited in bibliographies at the ends of individual chapters, even though a number of them have proved highly useful. We have generally not cited in footnotes any of the works listed in any of the bibliographies unless we have quoted or referred to them in the text, drawing on them instead without specific attribution. In cases

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in which a work is cited, but only in an abbreviated fashion, the reason is usually that full information appears in the relevant bibliography. Full information is provided in citations for most primary sources, only a few of which are listed in the bibliographies.

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Part I

1750–1850, an era of disruption