

## URBANIZATION and CITIES

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**Cities in the Agricultural Age** Small, isolated cities emerged fairly soon after the introduction of agriculture, serving as centers of trade primarily. Population rarely exceeded 2,000 in these initial cases, and buildings were often clustered together for defense. With the advent of more complex societies, cities also took on roles as government centers and locations for cultural exchange, while craft production also increased. A few cities served religious functions and little else. Throughout the Agricultural Age, cities offered high mortality rates, and depended on some continued in-migration from the countryside. Urban capacities nevertheless expanded steadily. Harappa, in the Indus valley, may have had 35,000 inhabitants by 2500 BCE. Athens in the classical period probably supported 250,000 at its height. Rome at its peak had a million residents, and several Chinese cities maintained over 400,000. City size declined in Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. For many centuries the largest cities now clustered in parts of Asia (along with Constantinople, which straddled continents); but Teotihuacan, in Central America, also had over 125,000. African cities were smaller, though Timbuktu might have had 100,000 people at its height. Cities in Russia remained much smaller. Overall, predictably, city size mirrored levels of trading activity. Virtually all the major centers located either on a river or coast, for commercial reasons. Premodern cities also developed a distinct urban culture, taking pride in a variety of entertainments and a level of activity that differentiated urban residents from the rural majority. Street entertainments were common. Most cities also mixed levels of wealth without too much distinction – with poorer people taking rooms in cellars or attics, and with only a few separate mansions.

**Industrial Urbanization** Western cities began to grow very rapidly with industrialization, in some cases converting villages into centers with half a million people in just a few decades. Factory centers grew most dramatically, but rising commerce and banking also expanded older centers like London. In 1870 there were eight German cities with over 100,000 people, and by 1900 there were 41, with several surpassing half a million. London briefly became the largest city in the world. Urban percentages moved ahead steadily. Britain became the first half-urban society in world history, in 1851. Germany reached this mark by 1890, the United States by 1920. Industrial cities were crowded, with many slums. This quickly generated a new tendency toward social segregation, with wealthier populations moving to some particular quarters or even into suburbs. But urban amenities expanded as well. Public health reforms began to promote underground sewers and piped water from the 1830s onward, improving sanitation though particularly for the better-to-do. Transportation changed, with horse drawn trams. London introduced the first subway system, in the 1860s; and gas lighting spread, changing the nature of the urban night. City streets were widened, in part for crowd control. Urban health began to improve, surpassing rural levels in the West by the end of the century; and crime rates declined in many cases as well. Asian cities grew more slowly at this point, except in Japan; the urban percentage of total population actually dropped in China. But European colonists and merchants expanded some Asian cities, like Singapore and Shanghai. Indian cities grew with trade (including the opium trade with China, sponsored by the British): Kolkata, then called Calcutta, rose from 120,000 people in 1750 to over a million by 1900. Latin American cities, though smaller, also grew with trade, with features like subways and tramways introduced into places like Rio de Janeiro (with a million residents early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and Buenos Aires. African centers remained smaller, though trade and colonial government activities spurred some growth. Johannesburg, however, founded in 1886 as part of the gold rush (the first major city ever to be established without a river or a coastline), boasting 100,000 people by 1895. Many traditional cities in many regions, under European influence, tore down some older sections, replacing them with wider streets and newer kinds of stores, and by 1900 with telephone services as well. Finally, though particularly in the West, cities began to expand their entertainment functions, with department stores, sports venues, popular theaters, and by 1900 movies outlets. Many constructed new park systems, and zoos, once the preserve of royalty, were opened to the public.

**Contemporary Urbanization** The big story remained: urban growth. Half of the world's population lived in cities by 2010, a historic first. Many cities were now fueled through a combination of economic expansion, in manufacturing, commerce and services, and the growing influx of the rural poor – who often clustered in shantytowns on the cities' fringes. Over half a billion people, at least, lived in urban slums by 2000. Urban populations soared in many parts of the Middle East and Latin America, even in places where industrialization lagged. Urban growth was slower – though massive in absolute numbers – in China and India; African cities also remained smaller (though Lagos became the continent's first megacity), but the pace was increasing by 2000.

**Megacities** Western cities no longer set the pace. Agglomerations with over 10 million people – megacities – cropped up in many parts of Asia and Latin America; only London and New York came close to this level, in the West. Tokyo, with 35 million people, topped the charts. Some megacities were poorly organized, with high rates of crime and disease; but many East Asian centers were quite orderly. Transportation was a common problem, as subway and bus lines failed to keep pace with growth; growing reliance on the automobile led to massive congestion in places like Beijing or Istanbul. Alienation and loneliness, amid a forest of high rise apartment units, were other important issues. In many regions, the gap between cities and the countryside widened, with urban populations younger as well as better educated. While the function was not new, urban service as centers of popular culture and entertainment increased as well. Most major cities supported massive sports complexes and amusement parks, as well as outlets for high culture.

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*Industrialization and Urbanization: Studies in Interdisciplinary History*. By Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg (Princeton, 2014).

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**Discussion**

1. What were the main features of early cities?
2. How was space in urban areas controlled? Who controlled what spaces, and what does this tell historians about social dynamics?
3. What impact has urbanization had on the environment both before and after the industrial revolution?
4. What were the main regional differences in cities and urbanization during the Agricultural Age?
5. What has contributed to urbanization becoming a global phenomenon? What impact has globalization had on the growth of cities?
6. Why have cities grown so rapidly even in non-industrial societies during the past century?
7. What characterizes contemporary urbanization in Europe? Does this differ from other regions?
8. What different levels of urbanization are there in the contemporary world? How do regions fit into these different levels?
9. What are the characteristics of a mega city? How new are they, compared to earlier industrial cities?