Chapter 19

**[THE BIG IDEA] How did the rise of large cities shape American society and politics?**

Whether you live in an urban area, a small town, or the country, you know that big cities are different. They’re expensive to live in. They can be overwhelming and exciting. People love cities for their shopping opportunities, theaters, museums, sports arenas, and nightclubs. Those attractions help explain why so many Americans moved to big cities as the nation industrialized. Cities had *jobs*, above all--but they also created a world of vibrant neighborhoods and new consumer pleasures.

Cities, though, also concentrate and magnify human problems. Many new arrivals to New York, Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco, and other big cities had no other choice but to live in segregated ethnic neighborhoods, or slums where families crowded together in dangerous tenements. Poor children begged or found odd jobs on the streets. In factories and sweatshops, urban workers faced constant health risks and the threat of fatal accidents, such as New York City’s infamous Triangle Shirtwaist fire.

Industrialization brought both opportunity and danger, and big cities put both on display. Many visitors marveled at big cities’ array of popular newspapers, splendid parks, ethnic neighborhoods, and amusements like those of Coney Island. But others saw a grimmer picture. Reformer Jacob Riis, an immigrant from Denmark, accused wealthy Americans of shutting their eyes to how the “other half” lived.” “The half on top,” he wrote, “cared little for the struggles . . . of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat.”

To confront such problems, leading thinkers such as Jane Addams built a great movement to address the problems of industrial cities. Through their growing network of *social settlements*, these progressive men and women moved into tenement districts and tried to help poor residents protect themselves and their families from industrial hazards. The most effective social settlements helped city people—mostly recent immigrants and African Americans—develop a political voice and use it claim their rightful share of public services. As the United States sought political solutions for the human misery caused by industrialization, urban reformers led the way.