18.1: Introduction

When British author Rudyard Kipling visited Chicago in 1889, he described a city captivated by technology and blinded by greed. He described a rushed and crowded city, a “huge wilderness” with “scores of miles of these terrible streets” and their “hundred thousand of these terrible people.” “The show impressed me with a great horror,” he wrote. “There was no color in the street and no beauty—only a maze of wire ropes overhead and dirty stone flagging under foot.” He took a cab “and the cabman said that these things were the proof of progress.” Kipling visited a “gilded and mirrored” hotel “crammed with people talking about money, and spitting about everywhere.” He visited extravagant churches and spoke with their congregants. “I listened to people who said that the mere fact of spiking down strips of iron to wood, and getting a steam and iron thing to run along them was progress, that the telephone was progress, and the network of wires overhead was progress. They repeated their statements again and again.” Kipling said American newspapers report “that the snarling together of telegraph-wires, the heaving up of houses, and the making of money is progress.”

Figure 18.1: Wabash Avenue, Chicago, c. 1907. Library of Congress, LC-D4-70163.

Chicago embodied the triumph of American industrialization. Its meatpacking industry typified the sweeping changes occurring in American life. The last decades of the nineteenth century, a new era for big business, saw the formation of
large corporations, run by trained bureaucrats and salaried managers, doing national and international business. Chicago, for instance, became America’s butcher. The Chicago meat processing industry, a cartel of five firms, produced four fifths of the meat bought by American consumers. Kipling described in intimate detail the Union Stock Yards, the nation’s largest meat processing zone, a square mile just southwest of the city whose pens and slaughterhouses linked the city’s vast agricultural hinterland to the nation’s dinner tables. “Once having seen them,” he concluded, “you will never forget the sight.” Like other notable Chicago industries, such as agricultural machinery and steel production, the meatpacking industry was closely tied to urbanization and immigration. In 1850, Chicago had a population of about thirty thousand. Twenty years later, it had three hundred thousand. Nothing could stop the city’s growth. The Great Chicago Fire leveled 3.5 square miles and left a third of its residents homeless in 1871, but the city quickly recovered and resumed its spectacular growth. By the turn of the twentieth century, the city was home to 1.7 million people.

Chicago’s explosive growth reflected national trends. In 1870, a quarter of the nation’s population lived in towns or cities with populations greater than 2,500. By 1920, a majority did. But if many who flocked to Chicago and other American cities came from rural America, many others emigrated from overseas. Mirroring national immigration patterns, Chicago’s newcomers had at first come mostly from Germany, the British Isles, and Scandinavia, but, by 1890, Poles, Italians, Czechs, Hungarians, Lithuanians, and others from southern and eastern Europe made up a majority of new immigrants. Chicago, like many other American industrial cities, was also an immigrant city. In 1900, nearly 80 percent of Chicago’s population was either foreign-born or the children of foreign-born immigrants.

Kipling visited Chicago just as new industrial modes of production revolutionized the United States. The rise of cities, the evolution of American immigration, the transformation of American labor, the further making of a mass culture, the creation of great concentrated wealth, the growth of vast city slums, the conquest of the West, the emergence of a middle class, the problem of poverty, the triumph of big business, widening inequalities, battles between capital and labor, the final destruction of independent farming, breakthrough technologies, environmental destruction: industrialization created a new America.