Private Streetcars and Public Utopias:

*Urban Transportation and Chicago's City
Body in the Early Twentieth Century*

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When the electric streetcar made its debut in Chicago during the 1890s, it immediately assumed a central part in the city's physical expansion and politics. The trolley, as the electric streetcar came to be known, became the object onto which urban residents projected their hopes for and fears over the development of the city. Reformers were most preoccupied by the need to unite a city they felt to be both physically and politically fragmented, in their words, to uphold the notion of the city as body. The streetcar took on a central point within that conception: on the one hand, reformers feared it might further fragment city spaces along class lines; on the other hand, they hoped that by assuring mobility to all residents, it would help transcend new urban divisions. They envisioned the streetcar as the "artery" of the city body.

The ideal of the city body can also be applied to the city's political life, and here again the streetcar occupied center stage. In turn-of-the-century Chicago, as in most American cities, political debate revolved around how this vital public tool- then in private, corporate hands-ought to be regulated, and how private/corporate interests ought to be balanced with public ones. Political negotiations over public transportation forced a redefinition of the body politic. During the late 1890s, new social groups, particularly women and workers, entered political discussions for the first time. As a result, new understandings of shared public interests and legitimate political practices evolved. The challenge became whether to maintain a sense of cohesion of the political city body or accept its permanent divisions. In both a geographic/spatial sense and in a political sense, then, the streetcar formed the lifeline of the city body. Would it indeed become a vehicle for the public,

in terms of providing public mobility and of allowing for a formulation of the public interest? The answer by no means resided in technology alone: whether the streetcar would unite or fragment the city body depended on more than the rails it rode on, it depended on the nature of urban democracy.

This article charts the politics of urban transportation in Chicago during the first decade of the trolley's appearance, the 1890s. It analyzes the central place assumed by streetcars in defining urban reformers' hopes and fears over their city's development. Once the streetcar question entered the vortex of politics, however, a great variety of social groups voiced their views. Chicago's public sphere enlarged at precisely the moment when a redefinition of the public interest became imminent.

The same held true for the nation as a whole. By the 1890s, a new corporate economy, the possibility of violent class conflict and socialism, and a wave of new immigration all raised the specter of a deeply and permanently divided society. The progressive era, lasting from the mid-1890s to the end of World War I, derives its name from the faith of a new generation of reformers in the ability to overcome these threatening divisions. By the late 1900s, the corporation had become a permanent and dominant economic institution. The perceived power of monopolies over prices and access to markets, and the decline of family-owned businesses left a great unease among U.S. society. Anti-monopoly movements would embrace a broader cross-section of society than ever before, and provoke political efforts at accommodating and limiting new corporate power. Likewise, the specter of violent class conflict, most visible in major nation-wide strikes during the late

nineteenth century, challenged progressives to realize ways of alleviating class tensions. Finally, the nation appeared to fragment permanently along ethnic lines. So-called "new immigrants" from Eastern and Southern European countries (mainly the Baltic region, Poland, Russia, the Balkans and Southern Italy) arrived by the tens of thousands to new industrial centers like Chicago. Forming part of the progressive era's search for order, a central political question became how to integrate these new immigrants into American society.

Although progressives never formed a united response to these challenges, either in the form of a political party or clear reform program, they held certain basic approaches in common. They looked toward a strengthened government and a reform of the electoral process, they merged positivist faith in science and professionalism with Deweyian pragmatism and experimentalism, they redirected their energies from the individual to society, and they shared an optimism in the possibilities for such a societal and political renewal. In the case of the economy, for example, this meant that progressives would call for greater governmental control of corporations. For such a regulation to occur on a scientific or expert basis, however, required a reform of a political system perceived as corrupt and overly personalistic in nature. Above all, it necessitated an invigoration of the public interest.

U.S. historians have disagreed over the nature of this search for unity. The so-called social-control school, growing prominent during the late 1960s, saw the period dominated by a new professional elite, which in the name of its monopoly on superior knowledge, and operating within a strengthened state bureaucracy, created new, repressive and anti-democratic mechanisms of social control. These pro-

fessionals imposed weak regulatory powers on corporations, either fought trade unionism or tolerated merely its most conservative wing, and favored coercive reforms as a means to "Americanize" new immigrants.[1] A more recent group of historians has challenged the social-control model, countering that the progressive era witnessed true possibilities for democratization of public life and politics. These scholars do not so much disagree with the overall outcome of the period-a search for order that by World War I took on increasingly repressive and anti-democratic means-but stress the contested nature of that drama, whose leitmotif concerned the meaning and strength of a newly formulated public interest in the face of powerful group-based, especially corporate, interests. While acknowledging the power of corporations and of new professional experts over public discourse, these scholars take the social broadening and intensity of public debate seriously. Who would define the public interest and speak for it, and who would specify the political mechanisms by which to determine that

1. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920.* Greenwood Press, 1967, 1980. Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916.* New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963. James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967. Samuel P. Hays, "Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era", *Pacific Northwest Quarterly 55* (1964: 157-69).
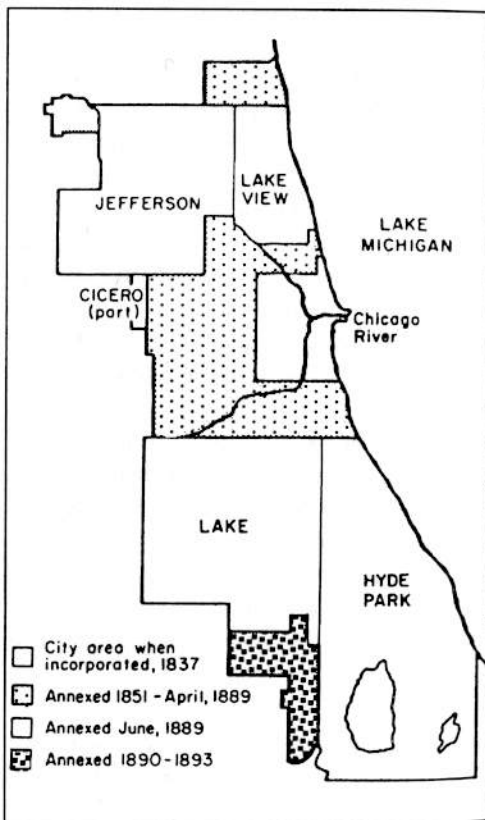
2. Richard L. McCormick, "Progressivism: A Contemporary Assessment", in *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism", *Reviews in American History* (1982:113-32); Thomas R. Pegrem, *Partisans and Progressives: Private Interest and Public Policy in Illinois, 1870-1922.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.

3. Zane L. Miller, "Boss Cox's Cincinnati" Bruce M. Stave and Sondra A. Stave, ed., *Urban Bosses, Machines, and Progressive Reformers*, rev. ed., Malabar, 1984. Allan F. Davis, "The Settlement Worker Versus the Ward Boss", in *Idem.* For the theoretical basis for the functionalist approach, see Robert K. Merton, "The Latent Functions of the Machine", in *Idem.*

interest were contests too complex and fluid to predict.[2]

Although the federal government increased in size and function during the period, the main political battles were still fought on the state and municipal level. Yet for a long time, U.S. historiography of the city has neglected the issue of power and has viewed the state in functional and non-ideological terms as a provider of services. To this school of urban historians the main question became what kind of urban governments proved best in providing services (of water, sewage, lighting, street paving, planning, transportation, etc.) to the residents of the booming metropoles. In this regard, some historians favored the boss/machine governments operating on a system of clientelism and patronage (most developed in the city of New York and rising to prominence in Chicago during the late 1910s and 1920s). Especially in the poor neighborhoods of recently arrived immigrants, ward bosses, like Chicago's Bathhouse Coughlin, set up neighborhood-based, feudal-like organizations that secured residents' votes in exchange for the provision of certain material and psychological needs. This way, newly arrived immigrants were quickly integrated into the political system, mainly as consumers of services provided by the boss and the urban government.[3] Other urban historians argued that reformer-led governments proved more effective in equipping cities with good public services. These historians refer to the wave of urban reform energy that permeated progressive-era cities. Reformers publicly attacked the boss/machine system as an inefficient, personalistic and corrupt system and advocated instead city governments run by professional experts and elected not on the basis of party affiliation but of an issue-led agenda (non-partisanism). These reform movements stemmed largely

from a new urban middle class of professionals, businessmen, and new civic organizations.[4]

Both of these approaches, however, adhere to a functionalist view of politics, where government is seen as a provider of services to citizen-consumers.[5] In more recent years, urban history has returned to more fundamental questions about the nature of urban politics. A central focus, one this study shares, concerns the process by which the agenda of government is being formed and the social battles involved therein. That is, instead of asking how well government provided services and fulfilled people's needs, recent urban historians ask who (and under what social and institutional circumstances) got to define what role government would play in the regulation of society. The central issue running through the politics of the period relates to the negotiation of private versus public interests and how municipal government would represent that public interest. This study operates from this school's perspective and hopes to shed light on these questions by focusing on one central political debate in one highly important U.S. city.[6]

Map 1. **Indicates rapid territorial expansion of Chicago from its founding in 1837 until 1893.**

4. The classic contemporary denunciation of the political boss is Lincoln Steffens, "The Shame of the Cities", in Stave and Stave. For a favorable view of the urban reformer, see Melvin G. Holli, *Reform in Detroit: Hazen S. Pingree and Urban Politics.* New York, 1969.

5. For a critique of functionalism in urban history, see Terrence J. McDonald, "The Burdens of Urban History: The Theory of the State in Recent American Social History". In *Studies in American Political Development. An Annual* vol.3. New Haven, (1989:3-30).

6. Maureen A. Flanagan, "Charter Reform in Chicago: Political Culture and Urban Progressive Reform" *Journal of Urban History* 12, 1986; Idem., *Charter Reform in Chicago.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987. Julia Wrigley, *Class, Politics and Public Schools: Chicago, 1900-1950.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982. David C.Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1982. Kenneth H. Finegold, *Experts and Politicians: Reform Challenges to Machine Politics in New*

Urban Growth, Utopias and Disillusions

Chicago experienced an astonishing growth during the late nineteenth century. Located at the center of the country's booming railroad network, it shuffled grains, cattle and wood from the midwestern "heartland" to the east, only to return people and manufactured goods back to the west. The country's first department stores, specializing in

nation-wide retail, reached (l-iterally) for the skies in Chicago's downtown by the 1890s. Many of the products sold by Marshall Fields, Montgomery Ward and Pririe Scott now were Chicago-made products, including processed agricultural and forest goods (meat and lumber) and agricultural tools and machines (especially the McCormick Harvester). By the time of the 1893 Colombian World's Fair, Chicago was known as the "Second City", second as a center of manufacture and commerce only to its eternal rival New York.[7]

In terms of increases in population, however, it came first, as no other American city's population grew as rapidly during the second half of the nineteenth century. Shortly after its incorporation in 1837, the still swampy outpost housed a little over four thousand people. Twenty years later, they had been joined by over a hundred thousand more inhabitants. By 1880, that number had increased fivefold, and by the turn of the century sixteen-fold, so that in 1900, 1.7 million people resided in Chicago. Within the next decade that number swelled to well over 2 million. Most of that growth reflected immigration. While natural population increases hovered between 20% to 30% between 1860 and 1900, the increase due to foreign immigrants were 49% in the 1880s, 23% in the 1890s, and 41% in the first decade of the twentieth century.[8] Seeing the vast human and technological powers meddling along Lake Michigan, Chicago poet Carl Sandburg described the city as follows:[9]

> Chicago
>
> Hog Butcher for the World
>
> Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat
>
> Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler
>
> Stormy, husky, brawling
>
> City of the Big Shoulders

If Sandburg wished to invoke a sense of strength and unity among Chicago's population, many contemporaries were inclined to view the city as suffering from failure, fragmentation, disorder and immorality. The Great Depression of 1893 had shattered the utopia of the Colombian World Fair's White City. A city displaying an assemblage of neo-classical buildings of civic grandeur, unity, progress and optimism became the site of widespread unemployment, poverty and, violent class conflict. One of the nation's largest and most violent industrial dispute, the Pullman Strike of 1894 confirmed Chicago's reputation as a city of potentially explosive class relations.[10]

More than these social problems themselves, it was an acute public awareness of the same that raised the sense of social fragmentation. A group of journalists and publishers, called "muckrakers" for their talent in digging up dirt, castigated the city for its immoral qualities and vice and its political corruption. In *If Christ Came to Chicago*, William T. Stead 1894 described the city as "the cloaca maxima of the world", and the Italian playwright Giuseppe Giacosce "did not see anything in Chica-

York, Cleveland, and Chicago. Princeton, NJ, 1985. Shelton Stromquist, "The Crucible of Class: Cleveland Politics and the Origins of Municipal Reform in the Progressive Era". In *Journal of Urban History* 23, Jan. (1997:192-220).

7. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West.* New York: Norton, 1991.

8. Homer Hoyt, *One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, (1933:280-84).

9. Carl Sandburg, *Chicago Poems.* New York: Dover Publications, 1994, 1916.

10. For example, Chicago housed the founding convention of the Industrial Workers of the World (iww), a militant, syndicalist workers organization, known in Mexican history for its influence upon the Magun brothers.

go but darkness: smoke, clouds, dirt and an extraordinary number of sad and grieved persons".[11] In the eyes of German sociologist Max Weber, Chicago was a "monstrous city", a site of unbridled capitalist competition, where "a restless flurry of a jumble of races of all parts of the world (engage in) a breathless hunt for bounty". Weber's Chicago was a cacophony of disorder: thousands of screaming steer awaiting slaughter in the stockyards, fuming chimneys, endless dirt, news of a murdered street vendor, prostitutes displayed in store windows, and, a turned-over streetcar with dozens of women injured. Chicago, the recently arrived German noted, was like "a human being whose skin has been torn off and whose innards are seen at work".[12]

Yet the city epitomizing the social failures of industrial capitalism also became the site of a new faith in the potentials of urban reform. Weber himself noted:

But... one is astounded not only by this great wildness, but, also by gentle traces of loving force, goodness, justice, (and) a firm will to achieve the beautiful and profound ... Above all, one senses this in the work of a courageous and faithful woman, who erected in the desolate streets of a working-class neighborhood her famous settlement.

Weber here was referring to Jane Addams, the "Engel von Chikago" who in 1889 had founded Hull House in the midst of one of the poorest immigrant neighborhoods.[13] Turning the theoretical insight that poverty, crime and vice were caused by people's environment into practice, Addams and other social reformers set out to improve living conditions of their neighbors, a goal that quickly involved them in urban politics.[14] Under the banner of "municipal housekeeping", the mostly female settlement residents sought to alleviate congested living conditions and demanded paved streets, garbage removal, improved sanitation and better police and fire protection for the immigrant tenement districts in which they resided.[15]

Unlike earlier urban reformers, settlement-house residents like Addams held a strong faith in crafting a new and harmonious city, juxtaposing the degenerated, fragmentary urban society with the possibility of a new urban unity. Lamenting the division of the city "into two nations [...] (and) classes", reformers expressed hope that through human intervention, especially through institutions such as "night schools, art exhibits, [...] parks, playgrounds, a cheap press, [but also through] labor organizations and the church," the city could become "a tremendous agency for human advancement".[16] Rather than symbolizing the pitfall of mankind, the city, in these reformers' eyes, became literary a living site of civilization's greatest achievements, an "organism capable of conscious and concerted action, responsive, ready, and intelli-

11. William T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago: A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer.* Chicago: Laird&Lee, 1894. Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, (1978:184-87).

12. Marianne Weber, *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild.* Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (1926:298-99 my translation).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

14. David John Hogan, *Class and Reform: School and Society in Chicago, 1880-1930.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, (1985:25). See also Allen

F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914.* New York: Oxford University Press, (1967:18-19). See also Kathryn Kish-Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

15. Flanagan, p. 22; Davis. On municipal housekeeping, see Hogan, p. 28.

16. Addams, cited in Hogan, 26; Frederick C. Howe *The City. The Hope of Democracy.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1905, 1967, pp. 22-23. Howe was a prominent reporter, social worker and lawyer, who later worked in President Woodrow Wilson's administration.
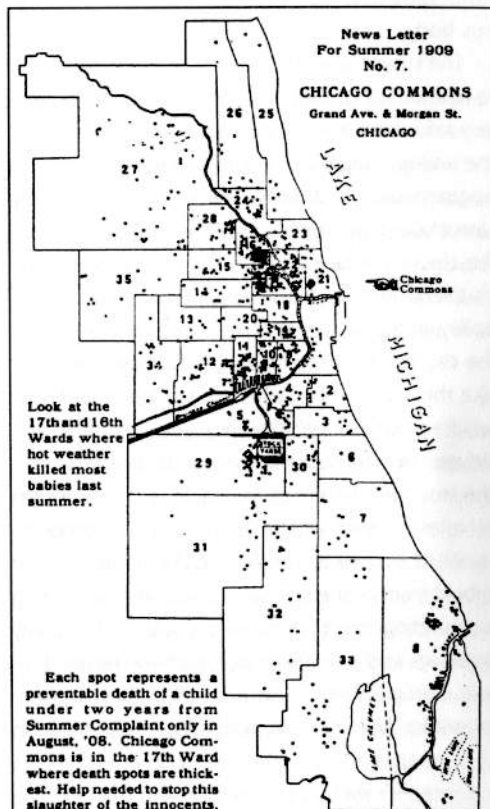
Map 2
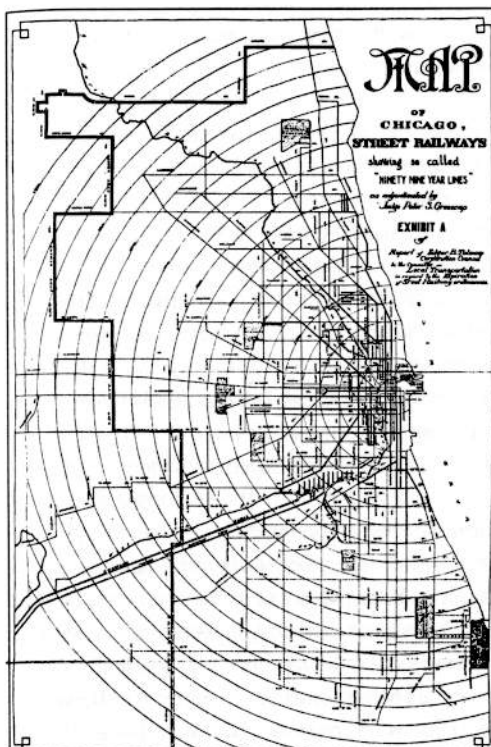
This map illustrates major street car lines of Chicago. Note the concentric arrangement of the lines that were operated by three distinctive companies, operating in the north, west and south side of the city, respectively. Any person wanting to travel from one outer region to another had to travel to the downtown first and transfer (at additional cost) to another company's lines. Souce: Report of Edgard B. Tolman to the Committee on Local Transportation, c1902.

Map 3

Each spot represents the occurrences of young childrens' death from Summer Complaint as recorded by a Chicago settlement house, Chicago Commons. Given that the disease occurred in areas with the worst living conditions, the maps serves to illustrate the poorest regions of the city. Note the heavy concentration of deaths along the branches of the Chicago river, the location of Chicago's industrial, working-class districts. Source: Chicago Commons Papers, Box 23, Manuscript Division, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Ill.

gent".[17] Once obstructive forces, such as social desolation and political corruption, were removed, the urban being could blossom freely and in perfect harmony. In response to the widespread sense

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17. Howe, pp. 22-23. In exulting the possibilities of the city, Howe and other reformers concentrated on Midwestern cities, which they considered "less aristocratic" than Eastern ones. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-53.

of the city's social fragmentation and conflict, reformers postulated a vision of the city as harmonious body.

The streetcar emerged at once as a great threat to and tool of fulfillment of that vision. Contemporary reformers and later historians have attributed the trolley a large part in the functional and social fragmentation of the city. Drawing mainly on the case of Chicago, sociologist Ernest Burgess offered the classic model of public transportation's effect on the growth of the American metropolis.[18] The trolley, in Burgess' model, affirmed the position of the city center as the locus of finance and retail. Like the spokes of a wheel, the streetcar network radiated out from the center, daily shuffling employees and consumers in and out of downtown. The location of stations favored the most influential retailers, such as Marshall Field and Montgomery Ward, whose customers could exit the streetcar right in front of their entrances. The immediate ring surrounding the core housed cheap multi-family dwellings and tenements occupied by the most recent immigrants of Eastern and Southern European origin. Many of them found employment in industries located along the branches of the Chicago river. This industrial zone stretched a short distance toward the west and northwest and relatively far toward the south (reaching until the huge stockyards and packing industries). Prior to the advent of the streetcar, people of modest means had been able to build a cheap single-frame dwelling on this land, yet as new streetcar lines (and the provision of other utilities) greatly increased these lot prices, they could no longer afford to do so.[19]

The second concentric ring housed second-generation immigrants from Northern Europe, especially Germans and Irish. Finally, thanks to the streetcar, the middle-and upper-classes could reside in the most outlying ring, far removed from the unpleasant industrial or downtown environment.[20] Whereas residential settlement in the 1870s still equaled a jumble of rich and poor, immigrant and native, the "industrial metropolis [soon] came to be arranged in a systematic pattern of socio-economic segregation, where outward and upward mobility became synonymous".[21] More than just enabling expansion, streetcars helped create a city with a functional and hierarchical arrangement of urban space. Around

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18. Ernest W. Burgess, "Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project" in Robert E. Park, Burgess and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City*. University of Chicago Press, 1967, 1925. For a discussion of the ecological school of urban sociology, best represented by Burgess and Park, see Sergio Tamayo Flores-Alatorre, «Una revisión de las principales corrientes teóricas sobre el análisis urbano». *Anuario de Estudios Urbanos* No. 1, 1994.

19. Sam Bass Warner, Jr. *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, (1962:109; Hoyt, pp, 109, 164-66).

20. Burgess. See also Howard P. Chudacoff and Judith E. Smith, "Industrialization and the Transformation of Urban Space, 1850-1920", in *Idem.*, ed., *The Evolution of American Urban Society 4th ed*. Prentice Hall, NJ, 1975, 1994. Glenn Yago, *The Decline of Transit: Urban Transportation in Germany and U.S. Cities, 1900-1970*. Cambridge

University Press, 1984. See also Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. New York: Macmillan, 1958. Engels describes the same basic pattern of class-based segregation for mid-19th-century Manchester and he attributes these developments directly to the capitalist market economy.

21. Warner Hoyt, p. 144. Harry R. Stevens, "Some Aspects of the Standards of Living in Chicago, 1893-1914", in Bessie L. Pierce *Papers, Special Collections*. University of Chicago.

Segregated zones based on race also began to emerge in the early twentieth century, only to become far more pronounced by World War I when African-Americans first migrated in large numbers to Chicago. Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*. Chicago: U of Chicago P., (1967:11-28). William M. Tuttle, Jr. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*. New York: Atheneum Press, 1985.

1900, a settlement pattern existed whereby 73,400 people shared one square mile of land in Chicago's near western industrial district while half that number of people resided in eighty-eight square miles in Chicago's suburbs.[22]

The social reformers of the settlement houses and universities studied and lamented these spatial divisions. They refused, however, to blame the streetcar as such. Quite to the contrary, they hailed the potential of the streetcar in reuniting the socially and functionally disjointed city. Yet for this to happen would require equal access to transportation by all segments of the population. By enabling free travel throughout the city, the trolley would function like the artery of a body; allowing for physical and social mobility and contributing to a new found urban unity.

In its ideal form, the streetcar became the tool for outward and upward mobility for all Chicagoans. For one, the streetcar would enable the crowded masses to escape to the suburbs. Accessible mass transit would "'bring suburban residence within reach of large classes of the poorest people'" and thereby provide "'a safety valve to relieve the congested districts'".[23] Already, traction expert E. W. Bemis claimed, a new streetcar extension to the Hull House district had induced 5,000 slum residents to "'move to healthful suburbs'".[24] To labor econo-

mist John Commons, the trolley became the be-all savior of urban social problems. Cheap mass transit, he envisioned,

> would save (every family) twenty to forty dollars from street-car fares to spend for clothing, groceries, shoes, and amusements [...] Laboring people could live in the country, and own their own homes [...]Tenements would not be crowded. Sanitary conditions would be improved and the death-rate lowered. Men out of work could ride in search of employment, instead of wearily tramping the streets. Laborers would be in better health, have better food, do better work, and all city industries would be materially advanced and stimulated.[25]

The streetcar potentially formed one of the greatest tools of urban social reform. Affordable streetcar service, in effect, became "the workingman's ticket for escape from the slum".[26]

If the streetcar could help to overcome the city's spatial fragmentation, it would also serve to foster civic harmony. Reformers waxed especially enthusiastic about the resulting betterment of workers' moral and civic orientation. Once transported cheaply into a (sub)-urban environment, the workingman could enhance his "social imagination" and partake in furthering the city's civic ideal.[27] Efficient transportation would save the worker time, and would "better ... (the worker's) condition, help him

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22. The densely settled district was bounded by Twelfth, Twenty-Second streets and Halsted and Ashland avenues. The residents there consisted largely of Italians, Poles, and Russian Jews. Hoyt, 201, 210.

23. Frank Parsons, "Lessons in Municipal Ownership", *Chicago American*, December 1, 1905.

24. Holli, 36-37. Howe points to the city of Glasgow, Scotland as an example where cheap rapid transit has dispersed "a portion of the slum population" to suburban sites. Howe, 203-04. See also L. S. Rowe, «Municipal Ownership and Operation: The Value of Foreign Experience»,

American Journal of Sociology 12 (1906-1907: 241-53).

25. John R. Commons, "Municipal Monopolies", in *Social Reform and the Church*, New York: Cromwell, 1894, 1967, pp. 123-51.

26. *Ibid*. Reformers' enthusiasm about the potentials of the city betrayed a certain ambivalence, in so far as they continued to affirm the suburban ideal. Thus the traditional tendency of middle-class Americans of wanting to escape (rather than improve) their cities lived on, only that they now sought to include the (white) working class.

27. Quoted in Boyer, 227.

to a higher plane, (and) facilitate social inter-course".[28] A clean and comfortable streetcar would provide a public space suited for the formulation of a civic ideal. "The opening of a municipal tramway, settlement reformer Frederick C. Howe exclaimed, would provide "this sense of intimacy with the city that we most lack in America. It is a thing that can only come through constant physical touch with the community".[29] In these reformers' minds, the trolley became the locus of the bourgeois ideal of the public sphere, a free space allowing rational, disinterested formation of a consensus over the public interest. With mobility and an elevated pub-lic discourse assured, the city would function as an organic, harmonious whole. According to settle-ment resident George Hooker, "The future rivalry of cities is bound to depend in no slight degree upon the organizationtof their circulatory systems". Yet Hooker charged that private streetcar corpora-tions were applying "artificial obstructions to the circulatory system of the body.[30]
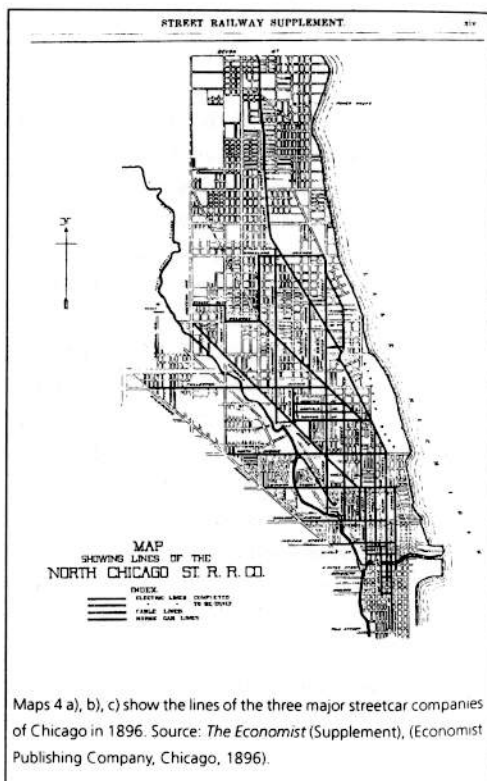
Indeed, decisions where to lay tracks reflect-ed the private interests of the companies' own-ers, real estate agents, and downtown merchants. It was the economic logic of the streetcar com-panies rather than any city-wide design that shaped decisions over where to lay tracks. Thus one of the most lamented service-related prob-

Map 4a.

STREET RAILWAY SUPPLEMENT.
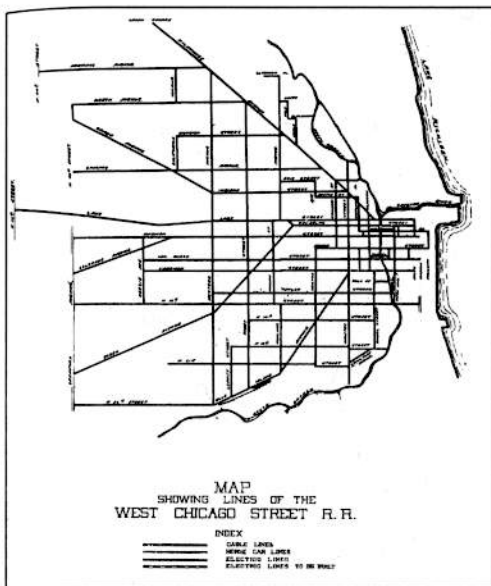
MAP
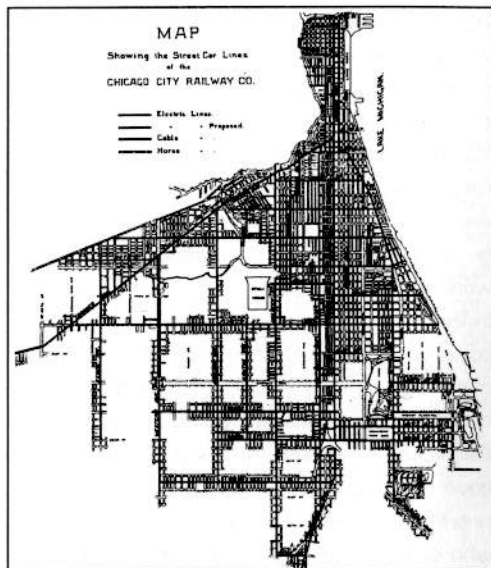SHOWING LINES OF THE
NORTH CHICAGO ST. R. R. CO.

Maps 4 a), b), c) show the lines of the three major streetcar companies of Chicago in 1896. Source: *The Economist* (Supplement), (Economist Publishing Company, Chicago, 1896).

28. Carrol D. Wright, "The Ethical Influence of Invention". *The Social Economist* 1 (September 1891:338-47, esp. 341-42). This sociologist's argument is similar to the arguments of workers seeking shorter work-days during the 1880s and 1890s. See Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

29. Howe.

30. George Hooker to Patterson, January 5, 1902, Hooker Collection, Special Collections, University of Chicago.

lems concerned the lack of a coordinated city-wide transportation system. Each of the three main streetcar companies serviced routes from downtown to its own outlying middle-class re-gion-the north, west and south sides-and paid little attention to the system as a whole. As a result, people wishing to travel from one outly-ing region to another often faced complicated and costly obstacles. A city government investi-gation of 1898 exposed this "unnatural" division

Map 4b.

MAP
SHOWING LINES OF THE
WEST CHICAGO STREET R.R.

INDEX
CABLE LINES
HORSE CAR LINES
ELECTRIC LINES
ELECTRIC LINES TO BE BUILT

Map 4c.

MAP
Showing the Street Car Lines
of the
CHICAGO CITY RAILWAY CO.

Electric Lines
" " Proposed
Cable
Horse

of the streetcar network.[31] A passenger wishing to travel for three miles north to south on Halsted Street, "one of the longest straight thoroughfares in the world",

must not only pay two fares, but must take three different cars, and in changing to one of these cars, viz., the one which crosses the Twenty-sixth Street Bridge and runs only at long intervals, he must at best walk half a block and must risk a walk of an eighth of a mile across the bridge to Archer avenue or a long wait.

"The fact that it [rapid transit in Chicago] is in the hand of nearly thirty different companies," the report continued,

each with its separate organization and management, each with more or less of a monopoly in its particular district, and

each, as regards other lines, naturally administered under an individualistic motive to enhance its own interests rather than under a broad purpose to develop the means of transportation as an [sic] unified system.[32]

The downtown-centered transit network proved particularly disadvantageous to Chicago's working people. Especially workers commuting to work places located outside downtown faced hurdles of time

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31. "Report of the Special Committee of the City Council of Chicago on the Street Railway Franchises and Operations", (Chicago, City Documents, 1898), hereafter "Harlan Report". In addition, numerous "feeder companies" operated within each region. Although these were technically independent of the main companies, and charged riders separate fares, they were often owned by the same stockholders. *Ibid.*

32. Harlan Report, 11. For example, the northern lines terminated in the most northern part of the loop, while lines moving southward originated in the center of downtown. See also Warner and Hoyt.

and money that often precluded them from using the streetcars altogether.[33] For example, Jurgis Rudkus, the hero of Upton Sinclair's exposÈ novel *The Jungle*, faced a several miles long commute to his workplace, the stockyards, and, even in deep winter, chose to walk instead. As Sinclair put it, "Jurgis, like many others, found it better to spend his fare for a drink and a free lunch, to give him strength to walk".[34] In Sinclair's novel, streetcars could kill: Jurgis' wife, Ona, caught pneumonia on her way to work, because she could not afford to ride the cars.[35] Indeed, the ten cent per day fare for a round trip could prove a heavy, if not impossible, burden on many working-class families. Even if only one member of a working-class family used the streetcar on a daily basis, the annual expense ($30) would almost equal that of annual fuel costs ($36) and amount to one-third of a family's annual rent.[36] Those workers who could afford to use the streetcars faced very uncomfortable rides, since their districts were being serviced by the oldest, least comfortable and most overcrowded cars. Such a system, settlement reformer George Hooker commented, "compels the working people, who chiefly ride at the rush hour, to pay the same price for a strap or the footboard as the well-to-do, who more largely ride at other times, [and] pay for a reasonable amount of room".[37] Many workers lacked access to the service altogether. For example, the city's most advanced transit system, the Elevated, made no stops in the factory districts. Trade unionists and reformers also complained about the lack of adequate service after hours when workers on night shifts relied on the trolleys.[38]

By the late 1890s, not only workers and social-minded reformers had reasons to complain about the streetcars, but virtually all traveling Chicagoans expressed their frustrations with infrequent, uncomfortable and outright dangerous service. The passenger, instead of engaging in public-spirited discussions, as reformers had hoped, "rides a great part of the way hanging to a strap, jammed, jostled and jolted about in a manner that is irritating to his fellow passengers and indecent to the gentler sex".[39] He or she might have to stand on filthy, week-old straw riding in an open trolley exposed to Chicago's more than brisk winters. The much heralded electrification of the lines, supposedly speeding up travel, proved of little help against con-

33. See "Organized Labor Against the Humphrey Bills", (pamphlet, April 4, 1897, Newberry Library, Chicago).

34. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*. New York, Signet Classics, 1960, 1905, p. 199.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-199. Sinclair's novel also points to the lack of night service to workers. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

36. These figures are based on average census information of a random sample of eleven families residing in Chicago's Packingtown. The families' occupations ranged from laborer to skilled machinist and meatcutter. Although we can assume that the heads of families worked near their residences (within 1 to 2 miles) in the slaughterhouses or stockyards, many of their older sons and daughters worked downtown and had to rely on streetcars. Ethelbert Stewart Census, Manuscript Division, Chicago Historical Society.

37. Hooker, p. 14.

38. Paul Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983, p. 25. Car fares were an important consideration in distinguishing the status of white-collar and blue-collar workers. In his study of telephone operators, Stephen H. Norwood points out that although female operators earned slightly more than women factory workers did, the cost of car fare rendered the difference of little significance. *Labor's Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878-1923*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, (1990:44-45).

39. Edward F. Dunne, "Municipal Ownership. How the People may get back their own". Address before the Men's Club of the Stewart Avenue Universalist Church of Englewood», January 12, 1904. [pamphlet of Municipal Ownership Central Committee] in Hooker Collection, Special Collections, University of Chicago.

stant traffic jams downtown or against horse wagons blocking the tracks during the unloading of their freight. Horse wagon drivers' habit of waiting for the push of a streetcar in order to overcome the sharp inclines at the numerous bridges proved an especially loathsome habit.[40] Worse than mere inconvenience, riding a streetcar or walking near one might well prove fatal. People often fell from overcrowded station platforms in front of an approaching train. Pedestrians frequently got run over by the newly silent, electric cars. In a typical year, more than two thousand people were injured by a streetcar.[41] Affecting nearly all Chicagoans, the question of streetcar service acquired strong political vibrancy.

The Popular Upheaval against the Streetcar Companies

By the late 1890s, Chicagoans began to search for a new definition of the public interest in urban transportation. Middle-class social reformers and muckrakers had catapulted the streetcar question onto the political scene. To them, the streetcar held the potential of fostering a new organic-like unity of the city. That vision, of course, invariably imposed middle-class notions of civic behavior onto Chicago residents. As historian Paul Boyer reminds us, a view of the city as organic entailed potential-ly repressive mechanisms of social control. "If [...] these reformers could convince their generation that America's cities were destined to become organic, cohesive social units," so Boyer, "then every city dweller's existence would derive its meaning primarily in relation to the corporate whole".[42] Yet as the political debate over streetcar regulation came to encompass a broader cross-section of Chicago residents, including newly assertive working-class organizations, the urban elite could not maintain a monopoly on the construction of civic culture. From the late 1890s on, city residents debated more intensely than ever the meaning of civic ideals, the public interest and how it should be secured. For at stake, in people's views, were no longer just questions of streetcar service (and abstract hopes for civic renewal) but rather the very survival of democratic government. Just as people looked increasingly to the municipal government for greater regulatory control over (or even a public takeover of) the streetcar companies, they saw a government deeply corrupted by the very same corporations.

Even more than the city's social problems, muckrakers denounced the Windy City's political corruption, a state of affairs that would also center on the streetcar. Any company wishing to provide a public service, such as water, sewage, or transportation had to acquire a city grant in order to use public land for its purposes. Selling public rights of way to private utility companies was a very lucrative transaction for profit-oriented aldermen. Although urban mismanagement became a problem for cities all over the country, the nature of Chicago's political system rendered it particularly vulnerable to graft. Lacking a strong executive or a stable political party machine (like New York), the city's decentralized political system harbored a "free-for-all

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40. "This practice [by the teamsters] has become so common that push-bars, or poles, are kept at the principal bridge approaches for the purpose of enabling the wagons to be pushed up the grades by the cars". Bion J. Arnold, "Report on the Engineering and Operating Features of the Chicago Transportation Problem", Chicago: City Documents, 1902, p. 49, hereafter: "Arnold Report".

41. City of Chicago, Bureau of Statistics, Quarterly 5 (1905) at Newberry Library. See also *Chicago Daily News Almanac and Year-Book* 1907. Barrett, p. 18.

42. Boyer, pp. 254-55.

entrepreneurial form of government," where a city councilman could easily turn his political power into a profitable business undertaking.[43]

The decade's most blatant and widely publicized utility scandals centered on the streetcar corporations and their main financier, the infamous Charles Tyson Yerkes, manager of Chicago's two largest transit companies. Yerkes had begun his fame and fortune as a financial manipulator when in 1886 he purchased the majority stock of the northside and westside streetcar lines. Through technological improvements, especially the electrification of streetcars, but also through consolidations and overcapitalization, Yerkes increased the corporations' stock value from eight to over fifty-eight million dollars.[44] Such financial success depended on receiving franchises from City Hall. Based on the 1875 Chicago charter, the state legislature authorized the city to grant public utility franchises for a duration of twenty years. Yerkes and his close political friends would pay off aldermen in return for franchises that failed to stipulate adequate compensation to the city.

In the mind of most Chicagoans, Yerkes became associated with political corruption and urban mismanagement. How else could one explain that streetcar owners paid less taxes than the city's dogs?

'In 1886 when Yerkes entered the railway business, the dogs paid $27,948 for the few privileges they enjoy, while the street car companies paid $30,530.85, but soon afterwards,

Illustration 1

A BIRD OF AN ALDERMAN. "HE EATS OUT OF MY HAND."
[Reproduced from the Chicago Examiner of October 18th, with the permission of the editor.]

Denounces the corrupting influence the streetcar company owner ("traction magnate") held on the city alderman (the bird) by means of purchasing street car franchises (stuck in pocket of person). Souce: The Public (Chicago) October 28, 1905.

the dogs, having less influence in legislative halls than certain financiers, had to bear the larger burden'.[45]

Chicagoans, like settlement reformer Howe, deplored the ability of "franchise-seekers" to convert "local government into a private agency responding to their will".[46] The main target of people like Howe were less the corrupt politicians than

43. Flanagan, 21. Jerome E. Edwards, "Government of Chicago, 1893-1915", manuscript in Bessie Pierce Collection, Universirty of Chicago; Barrett; Ray Ginger, *Altgeld's America: The Lincoln Ideal Versus Changing Realities*. New York: Funk&Wagnalls; 1958.

44. Ida M. Tarbell, "How Chicago is Finding Herself", *The American Magazine* (November, December 1908): 29-41, 124-138, esp. 31-32. For a

fictional account of the life of Yerkes, alias Frank Algernon Cowperwood, while in Chicago, see Theodore Dreiser, *The Titan.* New York: John Lane Co., 1914.

45. George S. Schilling, *Ninth Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1896.* Springfield, 1897, p. 69.

46. Howe, p. 72.

corporate leaders like Yerkes. "My word is not to the Council drunk," Hooker asserted,

> but to Mr. Bribe Giver perfectly sober, self-possessed and calculating [...] My word is to [...] those whose course is parallel to that of the thief who first gets his victim drunk and then robs him; it is to those who first corrupt the manhood of our political agents and then secure from them a capitulation of our rights.

Hooker was "convinced that the aesthetic and social conditions of Chicago, not to say her morals and politics for the next two generations, are most intimately wrapped up with the question of passenger and freight transportation". The electrification of the streetcars, he continued, had led to cleaner streets (no longer full of horse refuse), but that "delightful cleanliness" had certainly not reached the halls of government.[47]

Yerkes' dealings provoked a veritable public outcry in the wake of a series of franchise scandals beginning in 1897. The main battle centered around efforts by the streetcar companies to shield themselves from political control and to increase the length of their franchises. In the spring of 1897, traction magnate Yerkes, supposedly by bribing state representatives, pushed the Humphrey Bill through the Illinois state legislature. The bill sought to remove political control over streetcar utilities from the municipality to the state level and increase the duration of franchises from twenty to ninety-nine years. Upon the governor's veto, the House passed a more moderate bill instead. This second bill, the Allen law, while yielding jurisdiction over franchise matters back to the city, also permitted the extension of franchises, albeit only up to fifty years.[48]

The possibility that Yerkes could secure a fifty-year franchise through a vote of City Hall met with unprecedented popular furor. As rumors spread that the council would vote on a franchise measure, "City Hall was surrounded by a mob-armed with nooses and guns." The "broadsides, resolutions, speeches and decorations [in opposition to the Allen bill]," muckraker Ida Tarbell noted, "surpassed anything Chicago had yet seen in wrathful invective and direful threats".[49] Yerkes' wish to have longer-lasting franchises was understandable given the large investments recently placed in electrifying the streetcars. Yet such arguments found little understanding among Chicago residents, who perceived his political dealings as a threat to their sovereignty and their civic morality: "we fear for the perpetuity of our [...] present institutions," one spokesmen declared while another pointed to the " deadly harm inflicted upon the moral sense of the community by these mutual reprisals and corruptions [...] We tremble for the future of our commonwealth!".[50] Attendants at one of several mass meetings resolved to denounce "the traction companies of Chicago [who] have dealt foully with the people of Chicago [...] The directors and stockholders of these companies," the resolution read,

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47. Hooker Colection, University of Chicago.

48. Tarbell. As Tarbell pointed out, "The Humphrey bill violated the two cardinal principles in Chicago's traction creed-home rule and twenty-year franchises". *Ibid.*, 33.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Newton A. Partridge, "Suggestions on the Chicago Street Railway Problem. Address delivered before the Civic Federation of Chicago, June 9, 1898". Hooker Collection, U of Chicago; Robert E. Berlet, "Municipal Ownership of Street Railways in Chicago", in Hooker Collection, U of Chicago, [1898?].

should be exposed to condemnation as criminals and anarchists, in that they are organizing corruption and plotting against the peace and prosperity of Chicago and inviting consequences as disastrous to this community as any outrages ever devised by the sworn enemies of society.[51]

During the aftermath of Haymarket in 1886, the charge of anarchism had justified open class-war, now it held a rather inclusive meaning. A "Grand Mass Meeting" held on December 11, 1898 in response to the Allen law was attended by a stunning diversity of social organizations: the Mugwumpish Citizens Association, the elite Union League Club, the Chicago Federation of Labor, ethnic associations, such as the 9th Ward Polish-American Organization, as well as an assortment of trade, professional, and political associations, including among others the Chicago Law School, the Milk Dealers Association, the Humboldt Park Improvement Club, and even the Colored Democratic League of Cook County.[52]

The case of Chicago's female school teachers well illustrates the way in which the streetcar question pulled an increasingly broad section of the population into the vortex of politics. Faced with

the lowest wages among all school instructors, Chicago's elementary school teachers ingenuously mixed their concerns over their pay with the public outcry against the streetcar companies. When their employer, the Chicago Board of Education, denied yet another, long promised, salary increase, the teachers, recently organized in the Chicago's Teachers Federation, decided to sue the streetcar (and other public utility) companies for failure to pay their taxes. Political corruption had allowed these companies to ignore their fiscal obligations, the teachers argued; once receiving their revenues, the city would have enough money to increase teacher salaries and to benefit public education in general. And the teachers won! From 1902 to 1904, the courts forced several utility companies to pay additional taxes. Soon thereafter, the teachers associated with Chicago's trade union federation and became strong advocates for the public ownership of the streetcars.[53]
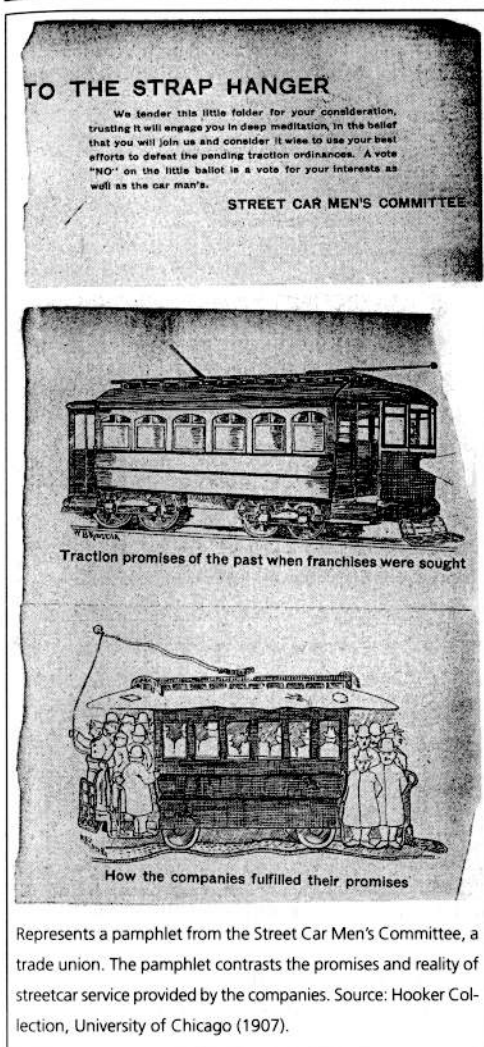
Like the teachers, other social groups and organizations fighting the streetcar companies combined their specific group interests with broadly-conceived civic arguments. Trade unionists, for example, raised service issues specific to wage earners, declaring that "This legislation threatens every inhabitant; the working children, the working women and workingmen, who, going and returning, must pay two fares every day at a rate never to be reduced, no matter how much their wages are cut." Employees of the South Side Rapid Transit Employees organization pointed out that "Said corporations have destroyed organizations of their employees, thereby denying them the right to organize for mutual protection". Yet trade unionists also argued for the need to uphold the "economical [sic], political and moral interests of this city." Insisting on Chicago's right to "home rule," the Chicago Federation of

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51. "Pamphlet in opposition to Humphrey Bills, resolution of 'Mass Meeting of the Citizens, Property Owners and Business Men of the 17th Senatorial District', May 7, 1897"; Articles and By-laws of The Seventeenth Ward Municipal Club, [undated, 1900(?)]; both in Graham Taylor Papers, Newberry Library.

52. "Listen to the Voice of the People, 'Lest We Forget'" published by the Independent Anti-Boodle League [1898], Hooker Collection, University of Chicago.

53. Robert L. Reid, ed. *Battleground: The Autobiography of Margaret A. Haley.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982; see also Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Administration, 1900-1980.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Illustration 2

Represents a pamphlet from the Street Car Men's Committee, a trade union. The pamphlet contrasts the promises and reality of streetcar service provided by the companies. Source: Hooker Collection, University of Chicago (1907).

Labor opposed "any legislation that takes away from Chicago [...] its right to manage its own affairs, that extends the franchises of street railroads without the consent of the people [...] and perpetuates the monopoly of the present companies". Although the Union League Club, an association of Chicago's business elite, certainly held different immediate concerns from trade unionists, it diplomatically abstained from passing judgment on the "justice or injustice of the public feeling", and merely insisted that such public feeling "should in the interest of the peace, prosperity, and especially the good name of this city, be allayed as quick as possible". The "one hundred thousand Swedes of Chicago" stressed their interests as consumers, expressing their refusal to "by their nickels help to swell the coffers of an arrogant monopoly." Worker-, consumer-, and business- interests could find a common language and, in certain moments, a common meeting ground to voice their protests.[54]

To point to the similarity of argumentation among these diverse social actors, is not to argue for political consensus over the streetcar question. Chicagoans agreed on the necessity of public regulation over the companies and they virtually all hated Yerkes. Indeed, Yerkes' legislative schemes failed completely; the man who had converted most of Chicago's railways to electric power, had substantially enlarged the size of the net, and had constructed the elevated downtown "Loop" (in use until this day), found himself forced to escape town.[55] Yet despite such unanimous feelings toward Yerkes, Chicagoans would become deeply divided over how to regulate the companies.

By the dawn of the new century two distinctive responses to the streetcar question emerged. The first proposals for regulation of the streetcar companies emanated from the city's elite, best repre-

54. Pamphlet of Anti-Boodle League.
55. Tarbell, pp. 30-31.

sented by the Chicago Civic Federation and the Municipal Voters League. Uniting leading merchants and industrialists as well as professional transportation engineers, these organizations saw the answer to a more rational and well-operating streetcar system in the election of "honest" city councilmen and in yielding regulatory powers to expert-led governmental transportation boards. In their view the popular revolt of the 1890s had proved useful in dethroning Yerkes, but transit matters were best handled if moved outside the arena of politics and into the hands of experts.[56]

By 1903, however, Chicago trade unions, backed by sympathetic middle-class allies, formulated a radical alternative to the Civic Federation's regulatory proposals on streetcars and called for the municipal ownership of the streetcars. Most important, the municipal-ownership movement constituted a push for popular democracy in the city. Trade unionists and their allies not only sought greater government powers over the companies-in that point they moved in the same direction, if farther, than the Civic Federation-but they also envisioned a highly participative and inclusive public exerting direct control over political decisions. It was with regard to this latter point that they posed a radical challenge to elitist solutions to transportation reform.[57]

Yet despite these political divisions, which would ultimately lead to a failure of effective public regulation of the streetcars, it is important to recognize the existence of a new political universe in the Chicago of the progressive era. The need to redefine

the public interest over such vitally important services such as the streetcars led to a significant broadening of the public sphere. Chicagoans from a great variety of backgrounds, blue-collar workers, women teachers, consumers shared middle-class reformers' concern over urban fragmentation and joined in the search for a new civic cohesiveness, the new city body.

New members of the public arena, including those of a working-class background, did not simply defend their own interests but assumed the responsibility of addressing broader public concerns. Progressive-era politics should not be confused, therefore, with the emergence of pluralist politics, that is, the rise of political competition among interest groups. The progressive vision of the organic society did not view individuality and society, or group and public interest, as standing in tension to each other. Rather, the individual, or the interest group, found its highest self-realization through incorporation into the will of the community.[58] To recognize this as an ultimately utopian ideal and to point to severe limitations and abuses of that ideal in the course of the newly dawned century should not lead one to dismiss it altogether. What is impressive about the U.S. progressive era, and what has been lost in most historical accounts, is a sense of the broad nature of a societal upheaval in favor of a redefined and strengthened public interest.

The search for order during the progressive era was more than a search for social control by a new

56. Edwin Burritt Smith, "Council Reform in Chicago: Work of the Municipal Voters' League", *Municipal Affairs* 4 (June, 1900): 347-62; Michael McCarthy, "Businessmen and Professionals in Municipal Reform: The Chicago Experience, 1887-1920" (PhD. diss, Northwestern U, 1971). On the reform of philosophy of the National Civic Federation, see Weinstein.

57. Georg Leidenberger, "'The Public is the Labor Union': Working-Class Progressivism in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago", *Labor History* 36 (Spring 1995:187-210).

58. Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991:162-71). For a pluralist interpretation of the progressive era, see Pegrem.

urban elite. Rather it entailed new possibilities for a more participative democracy. The civic ideal postulated against the streetcar companies did not emanate from middle-class reformers alone, but stemmed from the voices of working-class spokesmen and -women as well. At stake then would not only be how to provide the city with its best transportation system, but also the nature of public participation in a democracy. The great variety of social actors speaking out on the streetcar question in the late 1890s suggests at once a common search for the public good and intensive conflict over the definition of the same. Perhaps it was the intensity of that conflict that precluded, in the century to come, the growth of a more publicly-oriented city. Today's "private" and overly functional U.S. city landscapes, in Chicago and elsewhere, testify to that development.