4
Urban Growth, Urban Problems, and the Census

“It is the fate of mankind to multiply and everywhere to gather in towns.”
—Manchester Guardian, 1851

“A town, such as London,” wrote Friedrich Engels in 1844, “where a man may wander for hours together without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the inference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing.” Engels’ puzzlement and fascination with London, this “heaping together of two and a half millions of human beings at one point,” was shared by many of his contemporaries, both British and foreign. As a writer for the Quarterly Review said in 1854, London’s “close-packed millions” was “the greatest camp of men upon which the sun has ever risen.”

London was indeed unique during the nineteenth century: no city on the European continent approached it in size or wealth. And during the first half of the century, Britain’s rapidly growing industrial towns were also essentially unknown in other countries. For Victorians, one of the most striking aspects of the census was the evidence it provided of urban growth. This seemingly uncontrollable urbanization was related to some of the most fundamental political and social controversies of the day, about the role of the government in society, and the fate of the British economy as a whole. It was clear that the growth of the cities represented more than a physical migration from country to town. It represented a shift from an agricultural to a manufacturing way of life and from a localized and rural economy to a national economy that was based on industry and commerce. It also reminded people of the drastic social changes that had accompanied industrialization, particularly the creation of a new and in many ways unified working class. Observers sensed that there was no turning back from this immense change.

Urbanization brought unmatched prosperity to some, but many eyewitnesses would have agreed with Engels that “these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilisation which crowd their city.” London may have been the richest city in the world, Engels thought, but it was also a scene of alienation and greed. These negative qualities, Engels believed, increased
in direct ratio to the density of population: “The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space.”

Large cities were therefore both a source of extraordinary pride and a cause for great alarm, a symbol of the country’s prosperity and a portent of its destruction. Such a dichotomy was not new to the nineteenth century; Europeans had been having mixed feelings about cities for hundreds of years. Nor were problems of urban order or urban poverty new phenomena. But nineteenth-century cities saw population on a scale hitherto unknown, a new organization of labor, and a rate of growth that seemed unstoppable and uncontrollable. Furthermore, while during the eighteenth century London had dominated discussions of urban growth, the nineteenth-century landscape was one of multiple, rapidly growing cities that were entirely different from London. Not seats of government or centers of culture, cities such as Manchester seemed to exist solely for the purposes of work and accumulation of wealth. Meanwhile, factory life and the solidarities that it created for workers made observers aware of the working-class community in a way that eighteenth-century London did not.

The census alerted people not only to the increasing population of the cities and to the problems that population faced but also to the increasing proportion of the whole that it constituted. Urban workers were increasingly seen as the majority, and as such the group that was going to make or break British wealth, power, and social stability. In 1830, Joshua Milne told the Parliamentary Enquiry concerning the upcoming census that more information was needed about the working classes “who form the bulk of the people (and their state is a sure index of the state of the country).” Or, as Thomas Carlyle wrote, “The condition of the great body of people in a country is the condition of the country itself.”

Living in the shadow of the French Revolution, many middle-class British observers believed that the urban poor were far more dangerous than the rural poor. As Engels wrote, “The great cities have transformed the disease of the social body, which appears in chronic form in the country, into an acute one, and so made manifest its real nature and the means of curing it.” If a revolution happened in Britain, observers thought, it would begin in the cities, where the poor lived in close proximity to one another and were comparatively free from middle-class surveillance. High population density could be positive, prourbanites argued, because it meant better communication and an increased level of mental activity. But most middle-class observers also agreed that a dense population was detrimental to both public health and social stability: the city was the breeding place for epidemics and for subversive politics because people were simply crowded too closely together.

The city was also, like the social body more generally, a space that was increasingly viewed as susceptible to intervention. Mary Poovey has demonstrated