



Michael Tavel Clarke. *These Days of Large Things: The Culture of Size in America, 1865-1930.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. 326 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-09962-7.

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A Progressive Era Portrait of America's Obsession with Bigness

In 1913 future Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, commenting on the trusts, referred to his era as “these days of large things” (p. 1).[1] Michael Tavel Clarke employs this quote as his starting point for an engaging and thought-provoking essay on America’s fascination with big things, focusing on the period (1865-1930) that encompasses a broadly conceived Progressive Era. The greatest strength of this rich work of American studies is its multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach. The author considers images, literature, scientific discourse, and popular culture artifacts. He convincingly shows that turn-of-the-century Americans constructed meanings regarding the size (especially the “stature,” or height) of their bodies and urban structures in light of their growing industrial economy. Ultimately, though, Clarke’s wide-ranging and intelligent cultural analyses—while astutely placed in historical context—do not add up to a clear, cohesive argument about the meaning of size in Progressive Era America.

The book is organized into three parts of two chapters each. It begins, logically if counter-intuitively, with small things. The first chapter focuses on “pygmies,” the African people short in stature (similar groups lived in the Philippines and New Guinea). First encountered by white explorers in the 1860s, pygmies became a touchstone for ideas about the relationship between body size and evolutionary progress. Scientists portrayed them as “living fossils” (p. 43), an attitude that carried over to popular discourses of racial hierarchy at the 1893 and 1904 World’s Fairs, events at which fairgoers reveled in

the smallness of racial “others” while they themselves were dwarfed by industrial machinery and Ferris wheels. Chapter 2 complements this analysis, showing how scientists sought to document the evolution of stature via “anthropometry,” the measuring of bodies. They imagined America’s children and urban, working-class ethnics as living artifacts of evolutionary hierarchy, atavistic throwbacks to earlier stages in human history.

The middle two chapters shift focus to America’s economy and urban environment. Chapter 3, building on Alan Trachtenberg’s work,[2] personifies the middle-class as the “Little Man” (a “pygmy”) stuck between two giants, the “Incorporated Body” and the “Unionized Body” (p. 102); it shows how ambivalence toward the large, corporate economy was expressed in the fiction of Frank Norris and Ernest Poole. The fourth chapter, “The City of Dreadful Height,” is the most fascinating section of the book. Skyscrapers led to a new “aesthetics of growth,” one that Henry James commented upon in his 1907 travelogue, *The American Scene* (p. 140). James was concerned with the nation’s increasing commercialism, especially the way it seemed to be eradicating America’s sense of aesthetics, and he saw the skyscraper as an innovation that dwarfed the individual. Clarke juxtaposes this analysis against a reading of Alvin Langdon Coburn’s photography, which expressed a contemporary, visual counterpoint to James; one image used to great effect is “The Octopus,” which portrays a skyscraper shadow looming over Madison Square Park (p. 155). This chapter finishes with an analysis of the Woolworth Build-

ing, the world's tallest from 1913 to 1930, as a representation of the supposed "upward mobility of the Little Man" (p. 169).

The final chapters return to body size, specifically the gendered and racial meanings of stature. Chapter 5, "The Growing Woman and the Growing Jew," focuses on Mary Antin, a Russian Jewish immigrant whose autobiography expressed her physical growth as a metaphor for her experience in America, thus "suggest[ing] that disenfranchised groups felt obligated at the turn of the century to demonstrate a history of or capacity for growth in order to claim entitlement to full participation in American social and political life" (p. 214). Clarke couples Antin's narrative with "Gibson Girl" images that portrayed New Women as surpassing men in size. The sixth chapter examines the "shrinking" industrial man. Jurgis Rudkus, the New Immigrant protagonist of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), degenerates and atrophies as he descends into Packingtown's depths, thus demonstrating the need to abandon "autonomy and becom[e] part of something bigger" (p. 233). In an epilogue that ranges beyond the Progressive Era, Clarke offers a tantalizing reading of the 1950s movies *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman*. Americans' obsession with size clearly did not end in 1930.

What caused this American fascination to manifest itself so dramatically during and after the Progressive Era? Capitalism and "corporate culture," no doubt, loom mightily (and logically) over Clarke's analysis. This book explores cultural and historical texture rather than explaining causality, though, and some historians will be left pondering the relationship between structure, culture, and size. Was the rise of corporate capitalism responsible for tropes of bigness, or did an obsession with size drive Americans to build skyscrapers and form the corporations that squashed workers in the industrial jungle? This reader suspects that forces of culture and economy operate in tandem, but still craves a more explicit discussion of their relationship.

These Days of Large Things demonstrates an impressive breadth of knowledge of turn-of-the-century culture and intellect, especially the chapters on ethnology. However, the greatest strength of Clarke's detailed and fascinating book—the many fruitful avenues of analysis, as well as a willingness to ask broad questions—mirrors its most significant weakness. The author examines a great variety of sources and subjects, but the reasons for their selection are not always clear. For example, the shift in focus, from ethnology, to skyscrapers, to Mary Antin

and the Gibson Girl, demands a degree of forbearance and imagination on the part of the reader. At times, indeed, the combined focus on the body and the city makes this monograph seem like two books in one. The author's decision to analyze both elements was essential, as it leads to meaningful questions about American history and culture. However, a more thoroughly developed rationale for the connection would have made the book more satisfying. For example, although Clarke does well to cite Richard Sennett's *Flesh and Stone* (1994), a brief discussion of the turn-of-the-century sociologists who described society in physiological terms may have made the juxtaposition of body and city even more historically convincing.^[3]

Finally, Clarke's stated focus on "stature" seems somewhat narrow, as it is only one thread running through the rich source material. This book, therefore, is likely to leave readers expecting a straightforward discussion of bigness in the Progressive Era yearning for more. For instance, what was the meaning of other categories of size (girth, mass, breadth, etc.) during the period? Such a broader focus arises periodically, especially in chapter 3, but gets buried under assertions about height. When stepping back from the otherwise fascinating details, one wonders whether observers like Brandeis were commenting on stature, or if they were contemplating a much more complex relationship between size and modern American society.

These critiques notwithstanding, historians and cultural critics interested in the body and the city in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture must read *These Days of Large Things*. As sociologist Robert Lynd noted in 1939 (also invoking Brandeis), "We Americans are proud of big things ... and yet our traditions also warn us against bigness."^[4] Michael Tavel Clarke offers a thoughtful and illuminating examination of this ambivalence and its cultural manifestations in the Progressive Era. His analysis will surely stimulate additional scholars to consider the historic meanings of size and the problematic nature of bigness in American life.

Notes

[1]. Brandeis was questioning banks' "financial recklessness" and the sanity of large degrees of corporate indebtedness; see Louis D. Brandeis, *Other People's Money: And How the Bankers Use It* (1913; New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914), 191-195.

[2]. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and

Wang, 1982).

[3]. An example of Progressive Era sociologists' discussion of society in physiological terms is Albion W. Small and George E. Vincent, *An Introduction to the Study*

of Society (New York: American Book Co., 1894).

[4]. Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 210.

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