

UNIT 1

The Gilded Age

Economic expansion and the seemingly unlimited resources available in postbellum America offered great opportunity and created new political, social, and economic challenges. Political freedom and economic opportunity provided incentives for immigration to America. But after an initial burst of freedom, African Americans were segregated from mainstream America and limited in their political and economic rights and opportunities. The need for cheap labor to run the machinery of the Industrial Revolution created an atmosphere for potential exploitation that was intensified by the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few capitalists. The labor movement took root, with some elements calling for an overthrow of the capitalist system, while others sought to establish political power within the existing system. Strains began to develop between immigrant and native-born workers as well as between workers and owners, husbands and wives, and parents and their children.

With the growth of industry, urban problems became more acute. Improvements in water and sewage, street cleaning, housing, mass transit, and fire and crime prevention developed slowly because incredible population growth strained municipal services. Urban governments had limited powers, which often fell under the control of political bosses. Historians disagree as to whether or not attempts to remedy these problems through a brokered political system were successful. Meanwhile, the last frontier had been reached with the end of the Indian wars. Were the Western communities more violent than the large industrial cities of the 1890s? Or have radio, television, and the movies portrayed a mythical West?

- Did Reconstruction Fail as a Result of Racism?
- Was the Wild West More Violent Than the Rest of the United States?
- Were the Nineteenth-Century Big Businessmen “Robber Barons”?
- Was the American Labor Movement Radical?
- Were Late-Nineteenth-Century Immigrants “Uprooted”?
- Were the Populists Irrational Reactionaries?

ISSUE 1



Did Reconstruction Fail as a Result of Racism?

YES: George M. Fredrickson, from *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Harper & Row, 1971)

NO: Heather Cox Richardson, from *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post–Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Harvard University Press, 2001)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: George M. Fredrickson concludes that racism, in the form of the doctrine of white supremacy, colored the thinking not only of southern whites but of most white northerners as well and produced only halfhearted efforts by the Radical Republicans in the postwar period to sustain a commitment to black equality.

NO: Heather Cox Richardson argues that the failure of Radical Reconstruction was primarily a consequence of a national commitment to a free-labor ideology that opposed an expanding central government that legislated rights to African Americans that other citizens had acquired through hard work.

Given the complex issues of the post–Civil War years, it is not surprising that the era of Reconstruction (1865–1877) is shrouded in controversy. For the better part of a century following the war, historians typically characterized Reconstruction as a total failure that had proved detrimental to all Americans—northerners and southerners, whites and blacks. According to this traditional interpretation, a vengeful Congress, dominated by radical Republicans, imposed military rule upon the southern states. Carpetbaggers from the North, along with traitorous white scalawags and their black accomplices in the South, established coalition governments that rewrote state constitutions, raised taxes, looted state treasuries, and disenfranchised former Confederates while extending the ballot to the freedmen. This era finally ended in 1877 when courageous southern white Democrats successfully “redeemed” their region from “Negro rule” by toppling the Republican state governments.

This portrait of Reconstruction dominated the historical profession until the 1960s. One reason for this is that white historians (both northerners

and southerners) who wrote about this period operated from two basic assumptions: (1) The South was capable of solving its own problems without federal government interference; and (2) the former slaves were intellectually inferior to whites and incapable of running a government (much less one in which some whites would be their subordinates). African American historians, such as W. E. B. DuBois, wrote several essays and books that challenged this negative portrayal of Reconstruction, but their works seldom were taken seriously in the academic world and rarely were read by the general public. Still, these black historians foreshadowed the acceptance of revisionist interpretations of Reconstruction, which coincided with the successes of the civil rights movement (or "Second Reconstruction") in the 1960s.

Without ignoring obvious problems and limitations connected with this period, revisionist historians identified a number of accomplishments of the Republican state governments in the South and their supporters in Washington, D.C. For example, revisionists argued that the state constitutions that were written during Reconstruction were the most democratic documents that the South had seen up to that time. Also, although taxes increased in the southern states, the revenues generated by these levies financed the rebuilding and expansion of the South's railroad network, the creation of a number of social service institutions, and the establishment of a public school system that benefited African Americans as well as whites. At the federal level, Reconstruction achieved the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which extended significant privileges of citizenship (including the right to vote) to African Americans, both North and South. Revisionists also placed the charges of corruption leveled by traditionalists against the Republican regimes in the South in a more appropriate context by insisting that political corruption was a *national* malady. Although the leaders of the Republican state governments in the South engaged in a number of corrupt activities, they were no more guilty than several federal officeholders in the Grant administration, or the members of New York City's notorious Tweed Ring (a Democratic urban political machine), or even the southern white Democrats (the Redeemers) who replaced the radical Republicans in positions of power in the former Confederate states. Finally, revisionist historians sharply attacked the notion that African Americans dominated the reconstructed governments of the South.

In the essays that follow, George M. Fredrickson and Heather Cox Richardson present thought-provoking analyses of the influence racism played in the failure of Reconstruction. In the first selection, Fredrickson contends that the doctrine of white supremacy that galvanized southern opposition to the political, economic, and social empowerment of African Americans after the war also dominated the thinking of white northerners, including many Radical Republicans. As a consequence, racism prevented the success of efforts to incorporate African Americans fully into American society on an equitable basis.

Heather Cox Richardson offers a postrevisionist interpretation of the failure of Reconstruction and contends that the key barrier to postwar assistance for African Americans was the nation's commitment to a free-labor ideology. Believing that social equality derived from economic success, most Americans opposed legislation, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which appeared to provide special interest legislation solely for the benefit of the former slaves.

The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914

Race and Reconstruction

Once freed, the black population of the South constituted a new element that had to be incorporated somehow into the American social and political structure. Some Radical Republicans and veterans of the antislavery crusade regarded justice and equality for the freedmen as a fulfillment of national ideals and a desirable end in itself. For a larger number of loyal Northerners the question of Negro rights was, from first to last, clearly subordinate to the more fundamental aim of ensuring national hegemony for Northern political, social, and economic institutions. But even those who lacked an ideological commitment to black equality could not avoid the necessity of shaping a new status for the Southern blacks; for there they were in large numbers, capable of being either a help or a hindrance to the North's effort to restore the Union and secure the fruits of victory.

Before 1863 and 1864, Northern leaders had been able to discuss with full seriousness the possibility of abolishing slavery while at the same time avoiding the perplexing and politically dangerous task of incorporating the freed blacks into the life of the nation. President Lincoln and other moderate or conservative Republicans, feeling the pulse of a racist public opinion, had looked to the reduction or elimination of the black population through colonization or emigration as a way of approaching the racial homogeneity which they associated with guaranteed national unity and progress. By itself the Emancipation Proclamation had not destroyed such hopes, but events soon made the colonization schemes irrelevant and inappropriate. . . .

Whatever the motivation of Radical Reconstruction and however inadequate its programs, it was a serious effort, the first in American history, to incorporate Negroes into the body politic. As such, it inevitably called forth bitter opposition from hardcore racists, who attempted to discredit radical measures by using many of the same arguments developed as part of the proslavery argument in the prewar period.

The new cause was defined as "white supremacy"—which in practice allowed Southern whites to reduce the freedmen to an inferior caste, as they

had attempted to do by enacting the "Black Codes" of 1865. To further this cause in 1868, [John] Van Evrie simply reissued his book *Negroes and Negro "Slavery"* with a topical introduction and under the new title *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination*. [Josiah] Nott also entered the Reconstruction controversy. In an 1866 pamphlet he reasserted the "scientific" case for inherent black inferiority as part of an attack on the Freedmen's Bureau and other Northern efforts to deal with the Southern race question. "If the whites and blacks be left alone face to face," he wrote, "they will soon learn to understand each other, and come to proper terms under the law of necessity."

Edward A. Pollard, a Richmond journalist and prewar fire-eater, also attacked Northern Reconstruction proposals on racial grounds. His book *The Lost Cause Regained*, published in 1868, contended that "the permanent, natural inferiority of the Negro was the true and *only* defense of slavery" and lamented the fact that the South had wasted its intellectual energy on other arguments. Before the war, Pollard had advocated a revival of the slave trade because it would deflate the pretensions of uppity house servants and town Negroes by submerging them in a flood of humble primitives; he now endorsed Van Evrie's thesis that white democracy depended on absolute black subordination, and concluded his discussion of Negro racial characteristics by asserting that the established "fact" of inferiority dictated "the true *status* of the Negro." Other propagandists of white supremacy, North and South, joined the fray. A writer named Lindley Spring attacked Radical Reconstruction in 1868 with a lengthy discourse on the benighted and savage record of blacks in Africa; and a Dr. J. R. Hayes excoriated the proposed Fifteenth Amendment in 1869 with a rehash of all the biological "evidence" for Negro incapacity.

Inevitably, the pre-Adamite theory of Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright and Jefferson Davis was trotted out. In 1866 Governor Benjamin F. Perry of South Carolina made it the basis of a defense of white supremacy; and in 1867 a Nashville publisher named Buckner Payne, writing under the pseudonym "Ariel," revived a controversy among racists by expounding the doctrine at some length in a pamphlet entitled *The Negro: What Is His Ethnological Status?* Payne not only asserted that the Negro was "created before Adam and Eve" as "a *separate* and *distinct* species of the *genus homo*," but also argued that it was because some of the sons of Adam intermarried with this inferior species, related, as it was, to the "higher orders of the monkey," that God had sent the flood as a punishment for human wrongdoing. Like almost all the racist respondents to Reconstruction, he contended that Negro equality would lead inevitably to amalgamation, and that miscegenation, in addition to resulting in the debasement of the white race, would bring on catastrophic divine intervention: "The states and people that favor this equality and amalgamation of the white and black races, *God will exterminate*. . . . A man can not commit so great an offense against his race, against his country, against his God, . . . as to give his daughter in marriage to a negro—a *beast*. . . ."

Most of the propagandists who attacked Radical measures on extreme racist grounds had a prewar record as apologists for slavery, but Hinton Rowan Helper attracted the greatest attention because of his fame or notoriety as an antebellum critic of slavery. As we have seen, Helper had never concealed his

anti-Negro sentiments. A letter of 1861 summed up his philosophy: "A trio of unmitigated and demoralizing nuisances, constituting in the aggregate, a most foul and formidable obstacle to our high and mighty civilization in America are Negroes, Slavery, and Slaveholders. . . .

Death to Slavery!
Down with the Slaveholders!
Away with the Negroes!"

Having done justice to the first two imperatives in *The Impending Crisis*, Helper turned after the war to the third. His *Nojoque*, published in 1867, may have been the most virulent racist diatribe ever published in the United States. It contemplated with relish the time when "the negroes, and all the other swarthy races of mankind," have been "completely fossilized." To speed up the divinely ordained process of racial extermination, Helper proposed as immediate steps the denial of all rights to Negroes and their complete separation from the whites. All this of course went in the teeth of the emerging Reconstruction policies of what had been Helper's own party, and throughout the book he excoriated "the Black Republicans" for departing from the attitudes of the prewar period, a time when Republicans had billed themselves as "the white man's party." His heroes were "White Republicans" like Secretary of State Seward and those few Republicans in the House and Senate who had remained loyal to President Johnson and joined the Democrats in efforts to prevent Federal action on behalf of Negro equality.

The active politicians—mostly Democrats—who opposed Radical Reconstruction were quite willing to resort to racist demagoguery, although they generally avoided the excesses of polemicists like Payne and Helper. President Johnson, for example, played subtly but unmistakably on racial fears in his veto messages of 1866; and later, in his third annual message to Congress, he put his views squarely on the line: "... it must be acknowledged that in the progress of nations negroes have shown less capacity for self-government than any other race of people. No independent government of any form has ever been successful in their hands. On the contrary whenever they have been left to their own devices they have shown an instant tendency to relapse into barbarism. . . . The great difference between the two races in physical, mental, and moral characteristics will prevent an amalgamation or fusion of them together in one homogeneous mass. . . . Of all the dangers which our nation has yet encountered, none are equal to those which must result from the success of the effort now making to Africanize the [Southern] half of our country." Equally blatant were the Northern Democratic Congressmen who made speeches against Radical measures which appealed directly to the prejudices of white workingmen. As Representative John W. Chanler of New York put it, in attacking an 1866 proposal to give the vote to Negroes in the District of Columbia: "White democracy makes war on every class, caste, and race which assails its sovereignty or would undermine the mastery of the white working man, be he ignorant or learned, strong or weak. Black democracy does not exist. The black race have never asserted and maintained their inalienable right to be a people, anywhere, or at any time."

In addition to such crude appeals to "white democracy," Democratic spokesmen in Congress provided detailed and pretentious discourses on the "ethnological" status of the Negro, drawn from writers like Nott and Van Evrie. The most notable of such efforts was the speech Representative James Brooks of New York delivered on December 18, 1867, in opposition to the First Reconstruction Act. "You have deliberately framed a bill," he accused the Radicals, "to overthrow this white man's government of our fathers and to erect an African Government in its stead. . . . The negro is not the equal of the white man, much less his master; and this I can demonstrate anatomically, physiologically and psychologically too, if necessary. Volumes of scientific authority establish the fact. . . ." Brooks then proceeded "in the fewest words possible to set forth scientific facts." He discoursed at length on "the hair or wool of the negro," on "the skull, the brain, the neck, the foot, etc.," and on the perils of miscegenation. In considering the last topic, he conceded that "the mulatto with white blood in his veins often has the intelligence and capacity of a white man," but added that he could not consent to suffrage for mulattoes because to do so would violate the divine decree "that all are to be punished who indulge in a criminal admixture of races, so that beyond the third or fourth generation there could be no further mulatto progeny." Having covered black and brown physiology, Brooks went on in standard racist fashion to portray Negro history as a great emptiness.

In general such anti-Negro arguments were simply ignored by the proponents of Radical Reconstruction, who, by and large, tried to avoid the whole question of basic racial characteristics. But Brook's speech, perhaps the most thorough presentation of the racist creed ever offered in Congress, could not go unanswered. In a brief reply, Thaddeus Stevens dismissed Brook's views as contradicting the Biblical doctrine of the unity of mankind. Resorting to sarcasm and impugning Brook's loyalty, Stevens agreed that Negroes were indeed "barbarians," because they had "with their own right hands, in defense of liberty, stricken down thousands of the friends of the gentleman who has been enlightening us today." Disregarding Brooks's point about the "intelligence and capacity of mulattoes," Stevens proposed to match Frederick Douglass against Brooks in an oratorical contest. A more serious and extended reply to Brooks was made from the Republican side of the aisle by John D. Baldwin of Massachusetts. Baldwin's speech is significant because it clearly reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of the Radical position on race as a factor in Reconstruction.

In the first place, Baldwin contended, Brooks's argument was largely a *non sequitur*; for "the question presented in these discussions is not a question concerning the equality or the inequality of human races . . . it is a question concerning human rights. It calls on us to decide whether men shall be equal before the law and have equality in their relations to the Government of their country." Races, like individuals, might indeed differ in their capacities, but this should not affect their fundamental rights. In reply to Brooks's claim that miscegenation would result from equality, Baldwin suggested that it was much more likely to result from degradation such as had occurred under slavery, a system which provided a "fatal facility" for "the mixture of races." As for

Brooks's position on political rights, it meant in effect that all Negroes should be excluded from suffrage while "even the most ignorant and brutal white man" should be allowed to vote: "If he should propose to guard the ballot by some exclusion of ignorance or baseness, made without regard to race or class, candid men would listen to him and discuss that proposition." But Brooks was propounding, according to Baldwin, a concept of white privilege and "divine right" completely incompatible with the American egalitarian philosophy. Eventually Baldwin touched gingerly on the question of inherent racial differences and conceded the point that the races were not alike, but argued that "it is quite possible that we shall find it necessary to revise our conception of what constitutes the superiority of race." The prevailing conception, he noted, had resulted from an admiration for the ability to conquer and dominate; but were such aggressive qualities "really the highest, the most admirable development of human nature?" Pointing to the recent rise of a higher regard for the gentler, more peaceable virtues, Baldwin suggested "that each race and each distinct family of mankind has some peculiar gift of its own in which it is superior to others; and that an all-wise Creator may have designed that each race and family shall bring its own peculiar contribution to the final completeness of civilization. . . ." Although he did not discuss directly how the racial character of whites and Negroes differed, he was clearly invoking the romantic racialist conceptions that had long been popular among Radicals and abolitionists.

At first glance it would appear that Baldwin's speech constituted an adequate response to the racist critique of Radical Reconstruction, despite his avoidance of Brooks's specific physiological, anatomical, and historical arguments. It was indeed "rights" that the Radicals were attempting to legislate and not the identity of the races. But if, as Baldwin conceded, the races had differing "gifts"—with the whites holding a monopoly of the kind of qualities that led to dominance and conquest—then the competitive "test" of racial capabilities that the Radicals envisioned as resulting from their program would, to follow their own logic, lead inevitably to white domination, even without the support of discriminatory laws. Furthermore, their tendency to accept the concept of innate racial differences and their apparent repulsion to intermarriage were invitations to prejudice and discrimination on the part of those whites—presumably the overwhelming majority of Americans—who were less likely to respond to romantic appeals to racial benevolence than to draw traditional white-supremacist conclusions from any Radical admissions that blacks were "different" and, in some sense, unassimilable.



A few Radicals and abolitionists had early and serious doubts about the efficacy and underlying assumptions of the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868. They suspected that quick readmission of Southern states into the Union under constitutions providing for Negro suffrage and the disfranchisement of prominent ex-Confederates would not by itself give blacks a reasonable opportunity to develop their full capacities and establish a position of

genuine equality. Some understanding of this problem had been reflected in the land confiscation proposals of men like Thaddeus Stevens and Wendell Phillips. But it was the Radicals who worked for extended periods among the freedmen in the South who gained the fullest awareness of what needed to be done beyond what most Congressional proponents of Radical Reconstruction thought was necessary. Charles Stearns, an abolitionist who attempted to establish a co-operative plantation in Georgia as a step toward Negro land-ownership, attacked the notion that legal and political rights were all that was required to give the black man a fair, competitive position. In *The Black Man of the South, and the Rebels*, published in 1872, Stearns denounced Greeley's philosophy of "root hog or die," arguing that even a hog could not root without a snout. In his view, provisions for land and education, far beyond anything that was then available to the blacks, were absolutely essential. Arguing that "the black man possesses all the natural powers that we possess," he pointed out that the blacks had not yet recovered from the degrading effects of slavery and were unable, even under Radical Reconstruction, to compete successfully or maintain their rights in the face of a bitterly hostile Southern white population.

Albion W. Tourgée, an idealistic "carpetbagger" who settled in North Carolina and became a judge under its Radical regime, was an eloquent and persistent spokesman for the same point of view. Tourgée, who eventually made his experiences and perceptions the basis of a series of novels, sensed from the beginning that the Radical program, as it finally emerged from Congress, constituted a halfhearted commitment to Negro equality which was doomed to fail in the long run. In a letter to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in October, 1867, he announced his opposition to the "Plan of Congress" that was taking shape. "No law, no constitution, no matter how cunningly framed," he wrote, "can shield the poor man of the South from the domination of that very aristocracy from which rebellion sprang, when once states are established here. Anarchy or oligarchy is the inevitable result of reconstruction. Serfdom or bloodshed must necessarily follow. The 'Plan of Congress,' so called, if adopted, would deliver the free men of the South, bound hand and foot to their old-time, natural enemies." The Southern Republican Party, Tourgée was saying, was composed largely of impoverished blacks and lower-class whites. Even if assured of temporary political dominance by the disfranchisement of ex-Confederates, these men would soon find themselves at the mercy of the large landowners, who were in a position to apply economic pressure and undo the reforms of Reconstruction. With rare realism, Tourgée argued in effect that political power could not be maintained on the basis of suffrage alone but must be bolstered by adequate economic and social power—and this was precisely what Southern Republicans lacked.

Tourgée's predictions of course came true. As the North looked on, manifesting an increasing reluctance to interfere—a growing desire to wash its hands of the whole matter—Southern white "redeemers" toppled one Radical government after another between 1870 and 1877 and established white-supremacist regimes. Southern Radicalism, supported largely by black votes and ruling through shifting and unstable alliances of Northern "carpetbaggers," Southern

white “scalawags,” and emergent black spokesmen, had no chance of withstanding the economic, political, and paramilitary opposition of the white majority. In his 1879 Reconstruction novel, *A Fool's Errand*, Tourgée provided an acute assessment of what the Northern leadership had done and why it failed to achieve its original objectives:

After having forced a proud people to yield what they had for more than two centuries considered a right,—the right to hold the African race in bondage,—they proceeded to outrage a feeling as deep and fervent as the zeal of Islam or the exclusiveness of the Hindoo caste, by giving the ignorant, the unskilled and dependent race—a race which could not have lived a week without the support or charity of the dominant one—equality of political right. Not content with this, they went farther, and by erecting the rebellious territory into self-regulating and sovereign states, they abandoned these parties to fight out the question of predominance without the possibility of national interference, they said to the colored man in the language of one of the pseudo-philosophers of that day, ‘Root, hog, or die!’

The Negro never had a chance in this struggle, as the entire novel makes clear. His ignorance and poverty made him no match for the white conservative forces.

What Tourgée and a few others—notably Representative George W. Julian of Indiana—would have preferred as a plan of reconstruction was a comparatively long-term military occupation or territorial rule of the South, which would have guaranteed “Regeneration before Reconstruction.” This “territorial tutelage” would have lasted for an indeterminate period, perhaps as long as twenty or thirty years—long enough to give the North a chance to prepare the freedmen for citizenship through extensive programs of education and guidance, presumably including some form of economic assistance, while at the same time working for a diminution of the racial prejudice and “disloyalty” of the whites. But such an approach was rendered impossible both by pressures which impelled Republican politicians to seek readmission of loyalist-dominated Southern states to the Union in time for the election of 1868 and by the underlying social and racial attitudes that have been described. According to the dominant “self-help” ideology, no one, regardless of his antecedents, had a claim on society for economic security or special protection, or was entitled to a social status that he had not earned through independent struggle and hard work; the just penalty for laziness, inefficiency, or vice was severe social and economic deprivation, and it was becoming an open question at this time whether society’s most abysmal “failures” should even retain their full right to participate in the political process. Having been provided with Federal laws and Constitutional amendments which supposedly guaranteed his legal equality, the black man was expected to make his own way and find his “true level” with a minimum of interference and direct assistance. When the Reconstruction governments foundered, many in the North were quick to say that the blacks had had their fair chance, had demonstrated their present incapacity for self-government, and could justifiably be relegated, for the time being at least, to an inferior status.

Tourgée probably understood better than anyone how tenuous and conditional the Northern commitment to Negro equality had been. His book *An Appeal to Caesar*, published in 1884, contended that the Northern people "have always reflected the Southern idea of the negro in everything except as to his natural right to be free and to exercise the rights of the freedman. From the first [the North] seems to have been animated by the sneaking notion that after having used the negro to fight its battles, freed him as the natural result of a rebellion based on slavery, and enfranchised him to constitute a political foil to the ambition and disloyalty of his former master, it could at any time unload him upon the states where he chanced to dwell, wash its hands of all further responsibility in the matter, and leave him to live or die as chance might determine."



The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901

Civil Rights and the Growth of the National Government, 1870–1883

Northern Republican disillusionment with African-American attitudes toward social issues compounded the Northern association of Southern freedmen with labor radicals who advocated confiscation of wealth. Taking place during and immediately after the South Carolina tax crisis, the civil rights debates of the 1870s seemed to confirm that African-Americans were turning increasingly to legislation to afford them the privileges for which other Americans had worked individually. Civil rights agitation did more than simply flesh out an existing sketch of disaffected black workers, however; it suggested that advocates of African-American rights were actively working to expand the national government to cater to those who rejected the free labor ideal.



“Civil rights,” in the immediate aftermath of the war, meant something different than it gradually came to mean over the next several years. *Harper’s Weekly* distinguished between “natural rights” to life, liberty, and “the fruits of . . . honest labor,” and “civil rights,” which were critical to a freedperson’s ability to function as a free worker. Civil rights, it explained, were “such rights as to sue, to give evidence, to inherit, buy, lease, sell, convey, and hold property, and others. Few intelligent persons in this country would now deny or forbid equality of natural and civil rights,” it asserted in 1867. The 1866 Civil Rights Act, written by the man who had drafted the Thirteenth Amendment, Illinois senator Lyman Trumbull, was intended to secure to African-Americans “full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property as is enjoyed by white citizens.” It guaranteed only that the legal playing field would be level for all citizens; state legislatures could not enact legislation endangering a black person’s right to his life or his land. By 1867, hoping to woo conservative Republican voters into the Democratic camp and

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to undercut the justification for black suffrage, even moderate Democrats claimed to be willing to back civil rights for African-Americans "with every token of sincerity . . . from a free and spontaneous sense of justice."

"Social" equality was a different thing—it was a result of a person's economic success rather than a condition for it. It was something to be earned by whites and blacks alike. Directly related to economic standing, a man's social standing rose as he prospered. A good social position also required that a person possess other attributes that the community valued. A place in upwardly mobile American society required religious observance and apparently moral behavior, as well as the habits of thrift and economy dictated by a plan for economic success. This gradual social elevation became a mirror of gradual economic elevation through hard work as a traditional free laborer.

Immediately after the Civil War, as Democrats insisted that black freedom would usher in social mixing between races and intermarriage, almost all Northern Republicans emphatically denied that emancipation was intended to have any effect on social issues and reiterated that African-Americans must rise in society only through the same hard effort that had brought other Americans to prominence. In 1867, a correspondent to the radical *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* from Louisiana painted a complimentary portrait of Louisiana African-Americans, then concluded that they had neither the expectation nor the desire for "social equality, that favorite bugbear." They would ridicule any attempt to break down social distinctions by legislation, knowing that the government could give them only political equality, the writer claimed, quoting his informants as saying, "Our own brains, our own conduct, is what we must depend upon for our future elevation; each one of us striving for himself and laboring to improve his mental and moral condition." Adding credence to the correspondent's representations, the Georgia Freedmen's Convention of 1866 resolved, "We do not in any respect desire social equality beyond the transactions of the ordinary business of life, inasmuch as we deem our own race, equal to all our wants of purely social enjoyment."

As the Republicans enacted legislation promoting the interests of African-Americans, however, racist Democrats insisted they were forcing social interaction to promote African-Americans artificially, at the expense of whites. When the Civil Rights Act of 1866 took effect, Democrats charged that the Republican concept of black equality before the law meant Republicans believed that blacks and whites were entirely equal. The *New York World* predicted interracial marriages; the *Columbus (Ohio) Crisis* insisted that a black orator in Richmond had told his black audience to "vote for the man who will bring you into his parlor, who will eat dinner with you, and who, if you want her, will let you marry his daughter." In 1868, *De Bow's Review* argued that negro suffrage meant that African-Americans would "next meet us at the marriage altar and in the burial vault," where they would "order the white ancestors' bones to be disinterred and removed elsewhere, and their own transferred into these hitherto held sacred white family sepulchers."

In response to Democratic attacks, in 1868 the *New York Times* reiterated that Republicans planned only for African-Americans to share the rights and opportunities of typical free laborers. It maintained that "reconstruction did

not fly in the face of nature by attempting to impose social . . . equality," it simply established political and legal equality. These rights would eventually "obliterate" social prejudices as white men sought black votes. The next year the *Times* approvingly reported that abolitionist agitator Wendell Phillips had said that "the social equality of the black race will have to be worked out by their own exertion." Frederick Douglass put out the best idea, it continued later, namely: "Let the negro alone."



Republican insistence that social equality would work itself out as freedpeople worked their way up to prosperity could not provide an answer for the overwhelming discrimination African-Americans faced. While many black and white Southerners accepted the established patterns of segregation, those practices meant that African-Americans' public life was inferior to that of their white counterparts. Black people could not sit on juries in most of the South, they could not be certain of transportation on railroads or accommodation at inns, their schools were poor copies of white schools. In addition to creating a climate of constant harassment for African-Americans, discrimination, especially discrimination in schooling, seemed to hamper their ability to rise economically. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments had made all Americans equal before the law, but they could not guarantee equal access to transportation, accommodations, or schools, and while many ex-slaves accepted conditions as an improvement on the past and dismissed civil rights bills as impractical, those African-Americans who had worked hard to become members of the "better classes" deeply resented their exclusion from public facilities. "Education amounts to nothing, good behavior counts for nothing, even money cannot buy for a colored man or woman decent treatment and the comforts that white people claim and can obtain," complained Mississippi Sheriff John M. Brown. Prominent African-Americans called for legislation to counter the constant discrimination they faced.

African-American proponents of a new civil rights law to enforce non-discrimination in public services had a champion in the former abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. An exceedingly prominent man, the tall, aloof Sumner was the nation's leading champion of African-American rights after the war and had advocated a civil rights measure supplementary to the Civil Rights Act of 1866 since May 1870, when he introduced to the Senate a bill (S. 916) making the federal government responsible for the enforcement of equal rights in public transportation, hotels, theaters, schools, churches, public cemeteries, and juries.

But Sumner's sponsorship of a civil rights bill immediately made more moderate congressmen wary of it; his enthusiasm for black rights frequently made him advocate measures that seemed to remove African-Americans from the free labor system and make them favored wards of a government that was expanding to serve them. Only two months after the ratification of the fifteenth Amendment had reassured moderate Republicans and Democrats

alike that they had done everything possible to make all men equal in America, Sumner told the Senate that black men were not actually equal enough, but that his new bill would do the trick. When it passes, he said, "I [will] know nothing further to be done in the way of legislation for the security of equal rights in this Republic." . . .



By 1874, most Republicans were ready to cut the freedpeople's ties to the government in order to force African-Americans to fall back on their own resources and to protect the government from the machinations of demagogues pushing special-interest legislation. When Mississippi Republicans asked President Grant in January 1874 to use the administration to shore up their state organization, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* enthusiastically reported his refusal. Grant "remove[d] his segar from his mouth and enunciate[d] a great truth with startling emphasis," according to a writer for the newspaper. The president said it was "time for the Republican party to unload." The party could not continue to carry the "dead weight" of intrastate quarrels. Grant was sick and tired of it, he told listeners. "This nursing of monstrosities has nearly exhausted the life of the party. I am done with them, and they will have to take care of themselves." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* agreed that the federal government had to cease to support the Southern Republican organizations of freedpeople and their demagogic leaders. The *New York Daily Tribune* approved Grant's similar hands-off policy in Texas, thrilled that "there [was] no longer any cause to apprehend that another State Government will be overturned by Federal bayonets."

Benjamin Butler's role as the House manager of the civil rights bill only hurt its chances, for he embodied the connection between freedpeople and a government in thrall to special interests. The symbol of the "corruption" of American government, Butler was popularly credited with strong-arming the House into recognizing the Louisiana representatives backed by the Kellogg government, which was generally believed to be an illegal creation of Louisiana's largely black Republican party, supported not by the people of the state but by federal officers. Honest men wanted to destroy "the principle which Mr. Butler and his followers represent," wrote the *New York Daily Tribune* and others. "The force in our politics of which he is the recognized exponent, and of which thousands of our politicians of less prominence are the creatures." "Butlerism" meant gaining power by promising an uneducated public patronage or legislation in their favor, and all but the stalwart Republicans and Democratic machine politicians hoped for the downfall of both Butler and what he represented.

Despite the fact that it was prosperous African-Americans who advocated the bill, it appeared to opponents that the civil rights bill was an extraordinary piece of unconstitutional legislation by which demagogues hoped to hold on to power in the South, and thus in the nation, by catering to the whims of disaffected African-Americans who were unwilling to work. The proposed

law seemed to offer nothing to the nation but a trampled constitution, lazy freedpeople, and a growing government corrupted into a vehicle for catering to the undeserving.

The civil rights bill would probably never have passed the Senate had it not been for the sudden death of Charles Sumner on March 11, 1874. Before he died, Sumner charged fellow Massachusetts senator George F. Hoar to "take care of the civil-rights bill,—my bill, the civil-rights bill, don't let it fail." Even Republican enemies of the bill eulogized the "great man"; the *Chicago Tribune* reflected that "there is no man, friend or enemy, who does not pause to pay respect to the memory of Charles Sumner." African-Americans across the country mourned Sumner's death and called for the passage of his "last and grandest work," and on April 14, 1874, from the Committee on the Judiciary, Senator Frederick T. Frelinghuysen reported Sumner's civil rights bill protecting African-Americans from discrimination in public facilities, schools, and juries. The committee's amendments placed firmly in the national legal apparatus responsibility for overseeing violations of the proposed law. In caucus on May 8, some Republican senators objected to "certain features" of the bill but expressed a desire to act "harmoniously" on the measure. In the next caucus, the Republicans decided to support the bill without amendments.

After an all-night session of the Senate, a handful of African-American men in the galleries applauded as the Senate passed the bill on May 23, 1874, by a vote of twenty-nine to sixteen. Rumors circulated that the president had "some doubts about signing it" if it should pass the House, and many Republicans indicated they would not mind the loss of the bill. "Respect for the dead is incumbent on us all," snarled the *New York Times*, "—but legislation should be based on a careful and wise regard for the welfare of the living, not upon 'mandates,' real or fictitious, of the dead." Referring to the apparent African-American control of Southern governments, the *Times* asked whether the freedman "stands in need of protection from the white man, or the white man stands in need of protection from him." The House Judiciary Committee could not agree on its own civil rights measure and decided to replace its bill with the Senate's. The House then tabled the bill for the rest of the session, despite the continued urging of "leading colored men" that Benjamin Butler get it taken up and passed. . . .

The civil rights bill was rescued from oblivion only by Democratic wins in the 1874 elections. Republican congressmen's desire to consolidate Reconstruction before the Democrats arrived barely outweighed party members' fears that the measure was an attempt of corrupt politicians to harness the black vote by offering African-Americans extraordinary benefits that would undermine their willingness to work. When the lame-duck Congress reconvened in December 1874, House Republican leader Benjamin Butler tried to pass a bill protecting freedmen at the polls and an army appropriations bill to shore up stalwart Republicans in the South. Democrats filibustered. Butler was unable to get a suspension of the rules to maneuver around them as fifteen Republicans joined the opposition, worried that Butler's attempt to suspend the rules was simply a means "to get through a lot of jobbing measures under cover of Civil Rights and protection of the South." With his reputation as a

special-interest broker, Butler had a terrible time getting the civil rights bill off the Speaker's table. Finally Republicans agreed to let Butler take it to the floor in late January.

The galleries were full as the House discussed the bill in early February. After omitting provisions for integrated schools, churches, and cemeteries, the House passed the bill on February 5 by a vote of 162 to 100. While African-Americans in favor of a civil rights bill were horrified at the sacrifice of the school clause, all but the most radical Republicans approved the omission. "The bill . . . is worthy [of] the support of every congressman who wishes to deal equitably with the citizens of the United States, white and black," wrote even the *Boston Evening Transcript*. "This measure simply provides for the education of the blacks, and does not force their children into association with white scholars," at the same time demanding that the schools be equal. "The Republicans can stand upon such a platform as that," the *Transcript* chided unwilling party members. "The great desire and solicitude of the people are to support 'civil rights' and so execute in good faith the constitutional pledges of the nation." After initial reluctance, the Senate passed the school amendment by a vote of 38 to 62, and despite Democratic plans to talk the bill to death, the Senate repassed the civil rights bill without further amendment on February 27, 1875, with Democrats in the opposition. Grant signed the civil rights bill into law on March 1, 1875.

While some radical papers like the *Boston Evening Transcript* defended the bill—wondering "[i]f the blacks and whites cannot shave and drink together . . . how can they remain tolerably peaceful in the same community?"—its passage drew fire from conservative and moderate Northern Republicans who still read into the measure a larger political story of the corruption of a growing government by those determined to advance through government support rather than through productive labor. The *New York Times* noted that Northern African-Americans were "quiet, inoffensive people who live for and to themselves, and have no desire to intrude where they are not welcome." In the South, however, it continued, "there are many colored men and women who delight in 'scenes' and cheap notoriety." It was these people, the "negro politician, . . . the ignorant field hand, who, by his very brutality has forced his way into, and disgraces, public positions of honor and trust—men . . . who have no feeling and no sensibility," who would "take every opportunity of inflicting petty annoyances upon their former masters." The author concluded that the law would not be enforceable, and that "it is a great mistake to seek to impose new social customs on a people by act of Congress." Noticing the immediate efforts of Southerners to circumvent the law by giving up public licenses and legislating against public disturbances, the *San Francisco Daily Alta California* agreed that the act was likely to produce more trouble than equality, and reiterated that social equality must be earned rather than enforced by law.

The true way for African-Americans to achieve equality, Republicans argued, was to work. The *New York Times* approvingly quoted an African-American minister in the South who reiterated the idea that laborers must rise socially only as they acquired wealth and standing. The *Times* recorded his warning that "character, education, and wealth will determine their position,

and all the laws in the world cannot give them a high position if they are not worthy of it." Even a correspondent for the staunchly Republican *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* reflected that "Sambo . . . can go to the hotels, ride in first-class cars, and enjoy a box in the theater. To what good is all this? . . . He needs now, to be let alone, and let work out his own destiny, aided only as his wants make him an object of charity. . . .



In 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court considered five civil rights cases, one each from Tennessee, New York, Kansas, Missouri, and California. On October 15, 1883, the court decided that the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was unconstitutional because federal authority could overrule only state institutional discrimination, not private actions; Justice John Marshall Harlan of Kentucky cast the only dissenting vote. With the decision, Northern Republicans stated that they had never liked the law, because it removed African-Americans from the tenets of a free labor society, using the government to give them benefits for which others had to work. The *New York Times* declared that African-Americans "should be treated on their merits as individuals precisely as other citizens are treated in like circumstances" and admitted that there was, indeed, "a good deal of unjust prejudice against" them. But the *Times* remained skeptical that legislation could resolve the problem. Even newspapers like the *Hartford Courant*, which supported the law, said it did so only because it proved that Americans were sincere in their quest for equal rights. Three days later that newspaper mused that the law had been necessary only for "the reorganization of a disordered society," and that freedpeople no longer needed its protection. The *Philadelphia Daily Evening Bulletin* agreed that public sentiment had changed so dramatically that the law was now unnecessary. Even the radical African-American *Cleveland Gazette*, which mourned the court's decision, agreed that the law was a dead letter anyway. The *New York Times* welcomed the decision, going so far as to charge the law with keeping "alive a prejudice against the negroes . . . which without it would have gradually died out."

Instead of supporting the Civil Rights Act, Republicans reiterated the idea that right-thinking African-Americans wanted to succeed on their own. The *New York Times* applauded the public address of the Louisville, Kentucky National Convention of Colored Men that concentrated largely on the needs of Southern agricultural labor and referred not at all to civil rights. That the convention had pointedly rejected chairman Frederick Douglass's draft address, which had included support for civil rights legislation, made the *Times* conclude that most attendees were "opposed to the extreme views uttered by Mr. Douglass," and that the great African-American leader should retire, since his "role as a leader of his race is about played out."

Despite the *Times's* conclusion, African-Americans across the country protested the decision both as individuals and in mass meetings, reflecting, "It is a mercy that Charles Sumner is not alive to mourn for his cherished Civil Rights

bill." At a mass meeting in Washington, D.C., Frederick Douglass admonished that the decision "had inflicted a heavy calamity on the 7,000,000 of colored people of this country, and had left them naked and defenceless against the action of a malignant, vulgar and pitiless prejudice." When the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church Conference of Western States, in session in Denver, discussed the decision, delegates made "incendiary" speeches and "[a] Bishop declared that if the negroes' rights were thus trampled upon a revolution would be the result." . . .

Republicans and Democrats agreed that the only way for African-Americans to garner more rights was to work to deserve them, as all others did in America's free labor system. The *Philadelphia Daily Evening Bulletin* repeated this view:

[F]urther advancement depends chiefly upon themselves, on their earnest pursuit of education, on their progress in morality and religion, on their thoughtful exercise of their duties as citizens, on their persistent practice of industry, on their self-reliance, and on their determination to exalt themselves, not as proscribed or despised Africans, but as American men clothed with the privileges of citizenship in the one great republic of the earth. They have it in their power to secure for themselves, by their own conduct, more really important "rights" than can be given to them by any formal legislation of Congress.

The Democratic *Hartford Weekly Times* agreed, and asserted that true black leaders, "not men like Fred. Douglass, who are 'professional' colored men, and who have been agitating something and been paid for it all of their lives," approved of the decision. "They say there is no such thing as social equality among white men, and that the colored man cannot get it by law, but by the way he conducts himself."

Republican and Democratic newspapers highlighted those African-Americans who cheerfully told their neighbors "to acquire knowledge and wealth as the surest way of obtaining our rights." From Baltimore came the news that "Mr. John F. Cook, a colored man of character, who deservedly enjoys the respect of this entire community, who has held and administered with marked ability for years the responsible office of Collector of Taxes for the District of Columbia," told a reporter that he had no fears of white reprisals after the decision, expecting whites to accord to African-Americans "what legislation could never accomplish." "These are golden words, and if all men of his race were like Mr. Cook there would never be any trouble on this subject," concluded the Republican *Philadelphia Daily Evening Bulletin*.

Even many Northern Democrats painted their own picture of an egalitarian free labor society that had no need of a civil rights law. First they restated the idea that Republican efforts for African-Americans had simply been a ploy to control the government by marshalling the black vote. Trying to make new ties to African-American voters, the Democratic *San Francisco Examiner* emphasized that Republicans had only wanted to use the black vote to create a Republican empire and that the reversal showed that Republicanism no longer offered advantages to black citizens. A reporter noted that members of the black community had said

that "it was about time to shake off the Republican yoke and act in politics as American citizens, not as chattels of a party who cared but for their votes."

While the rhetoric of the *San Francisco Examiner* repeated long-standing Democratic arguments, it also reinforced the idea that some hardworking African-Americans had indeed prospered in America, and that these upwardly mobile blacks were fully accepted even in Democratic circles. In San Francisco, the paper noted, "there are . . . many intelligent and educated men and women of African descent." Using the Republican pattern of according prosperous African-Americans names, descriptions, and their own words, it interviewed the Reverend Alexander Walters, whom it described respectfully as an educated and well-traveled young man, and happily printed both his assertion that in cities across the nation and "in the West . . . race prejudice has died out," and his prediction that the court's decision would drive black voters from the Republican party. Similarly, it quoted P. A. Bell, "the veteran editor of the *Elevator*, the organ of the colored people," as saying that in California—a Democratic state—"we people are treated just as well as if there were fifty Civil Rights bills."

With the overturning of the 1875 Civil Rights Act, mainstream Republicans and Democrats, black and white, agreed that there must be no extraordinary legislation on behalf of African-Americans, who had to work their way up in society like everyone else. Stalwart Republicans who advocated additional protection for black citizens were seen as either political demagogues who wanted the black vote to maintain their power or misguided reformers duped by stories of white atrocities against freedpeople. Northern black citizens who advocated civil rights legislation, like Frederick Douglass, were either scheming politicians who, like their white counterparts, needed the votes of uneducated African-Americans, or they were disaffected workers who believed in class struggle and wanted to control the government in order to destroy capital.

Southern blacks seemed to be the worst of all these types. They appeared to want to increase the government's power solely in order to be given what others had earned, and to do so, they were corrupting government by keeping scheming Republican politicians in office.



POSTSCRIPT



Did Reconstruction Fail as a Result of Racism?

There can be little doubt that racism played some role in the failure of the Radical Republicans to realize their most ambitious goals for integrating African Americans into the mainstream of American society in the years following the Civil War. After all, white supremacy was a powerful doctrine. At the same time, we should not so cavalierly dismiss some of the more positive conclusions reached by that first generation of revisionist historians who built upon W. E. B. DuBois's characterization of Reconstruction as a "splendid failure." For example, Kenneth Stampp's *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1965) ends with the following statement: "The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which could have been adopted only under the conditions of radical reconstruction, make the blunders of that era, tragic though they were, dwindle into insignificance. For if it was worth a few years of civil war to save the Union, it was worth a few years of radical reconstruction to give the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights." Eric Foner, too, recognizes something of a silver lining in the nation's post-Civil War reconstruction process. In *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (Harper & Row, 1988), Foner claims that Reconstruction, though perhaps not all that radical, offered African Americans at least a temporary vision of a free society. Similarly, in *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Louisiana State University Press, 1984), Foner advances his interpretation by comparing the treatment of ex-slaves in the United States with that of newly emancipated slaves in Haiti and the British West Indies. Only in the United States, he contends, were the freedmen given voting and economic rights. Although these rights had been stripped away from the majority of black southerners by 1900, Reconstruction had, nevertheless, created a legacy of freedom that inspired succeeding generations of African Americans.

On the other hand, C. Vann Woodward, in "Reconstruction: A Counterfactual Playback," an essay in his thought-provoking *The Future of the Past* (Oxford University Press, 1988), shares Fredrickson's pessimism about the outcome of Reconstruction. For all the successes listed by the revisionists, he argues that the experiment failed. He challenges Foner's conclusions by insisting that former slaves were as poorly treated in the United States as they were in other countries. He also maintains that the confiscation of former plantations and the redistribution of land to the former slaves would have failed in the same way that the Homestead Act of 1862 failed to generate equal distribution of government lands to poor white settlers.

Thomas Holt's *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (University of Illinois Press, 1977) is representative of state

and local studies that employ modern social science methodology to yield new perspectives. Although critical of white Republican leaders, Holt (who is African American) also blames the failure of Reconstruction in South Carolina on free-born mulatto politicians, whose background distanced them economically, socially, and culturally from the masses of freedmen. Consequently, these political leaders failed to develop a clear and unifying ideology to challenge white South Carolinians who wanted to restore white supremacy.

The study of the Reconstruction period benefits from an extensive bibliography. Traditional accounts of Reconstruction include William Archibald Dunning's *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (Harper & Brothers, 1907); Claude Bowers's *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (Riverside Press, 1929); and E. Merton Coulter's, *The South During Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (Louisiana State University Press, 1947), the last major work written from the Dunning (or traditional) point of view. Some of the earliest revisionist views appeared in the scholarly works of African American historians such as W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (Harcourt, Brace, 1935), a Marxist analysis; John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (University of Chicago Press, 1961); and Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1965). Briefer overviews are available in Forrest G. Wood, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1863–1877* (Harlan Davidson, 1975); and Michael Perman, *Emancipation and Reconstruction, 1862–1879* (Harlan Davidson, 1987). One of the best-written studies of a specific episode during the Reconstruction years is Willie Lee Rose's *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), which describes the failed effort at land reform in the sea islands of South Carolina. Richard Nelson Current's *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation* (Oxford University Press, 1988) is a superb challenge to the traditional view of these much-maligned Reconstruction participants. Finally, for collections of interpretive essays on various aspects of the Reconstruction experience, see Staughton Lynd, ed., *Reconstruction* (Harper & Row, 1967); Seth M. Scheiner, ed., *Reconstruction: A Tragic Era?* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968); and Edwin C. Rozwenc, ed., *Reconstruction in the South*, 2d ed. (Heath, 1972).



ISSUE 2



Was the Wild West More Violent Than the Rest of the United States?

YES: David T. Courtright, from "Frontiers," in Ronald Gottesman and Richard Maxwell Brown, eds., *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999)

NO: Robert R. Dykstra, from "To Live and Die in Dodge City: Body Counts, Law and Order and the Case of *Kansas v. Gill*," in Michael A. Bellesiles, ed., *Lethal Imagination, Violence and Brutality in American History* (New York University Press, 1999)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of history David T. Courtright argues that the cattle, mining, and lumbering Western frontiers were extremely violent because these regions were populated by young, single, and transient males who frequented saloons and prostitutes, and engaged in fights.

NO: Professor Robert R. Dykstra argues that Dodge City had a low crime rate in the decade 1876–1885, and in the murder case of *Kansas v. Gill*, it conducted a jury trial "according to conventions nurtured through a thousand years of Anglo-American judicial traditions."

In 1893, the young historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932) delivered an address before the American Historical Association entitled *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Turner's essay not only sent him from Wisconsin to Harvard University, but also became one of the most important essays ever written in American history. According to Turner's thesis, American civilization was different from European civilization because the continent contained an abundance of land that was settled in four waves of migration from 1607 through 1890. During this process, the European heritage was shed, and the American characteristics of individualism, mobility, nationalism, and democracy developed.

This frontier theory of American history did not go unchallenged. Some historians argued that Turner's definition of the frontier was too vague and

imprecise; he underestimated the cultural forces that came to the West from Europe and the eastern states; he neglected the forces of urbanization and industrialization in opening the West; he placed an undue emphasis on sectional development and neglected class struggles for power; finally, his provincial view of American history prolonged the isolationist views of a nation that became involved in world affairs in the twentieth century.

Younger historians have begun to question the traditional interpretation of Western expansion. For example, older historians believed that growth was good and automatically brought forth progress. New historians such as William Cronin, Patricia Limerick, and others, however, have questioned this assumption in examining the disastrous ecological effects of American expansionism, such as the elimination of the American buffalo and the depletion of forests.

Turner's romantic view of the frontier became popularized in the literature of the West from the 1860s through modern times. As America went through its Industrial Revolution with factories manned by immigrants pouring in from Europe and Asia and second- and third-generation farmers diminishing in numbers, a mythic view of the frontier developed. The publishing house of Beadle and Adams had five million of its dime novels in circulation. Its most prolific hero was William F. Cody, a real person glamorized as "Buffalo Bill, the King of the Border Men." Buffalo Bill or his ghostwriters produced 121 novels—all with the same formula. Cody's Wild West shows toured the United States and Europe and featured reenactments of such famous episodes as Custer's Last Stand "at the battle of Little Bighorn in 1876." Buffalo Bill even hired the aged Sitting Bull one season to ride around the arena once per show. The rest of the time, Sitting Bull sat in his tent signing autographs in the fashion of today's retired athletes.

The prototype Western for the twentieth century and beyond is found in Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian*. Written in 1902, it went through six printings its first year and remains in print today. The hero, a southerner gone to Wyoming, is forced at the end to kill his former best friend and his rustling partner. *The Virginian* legitimized the use of violence on the frontier. The good guys would use force only when necessary against the bad. Since Wister, novelists such as Louis L'Amour (whose 80-plus novels have sold over 100 million copies), motion pictures, radio, and television have perpetuated the mythical West.

"The United States," says Richard Hofstadter, "has a history but not a tradition of domestic violence" for two reasons. First, it lacks an ideological and geographical center; second, "we have a remarkable lack of memory where violence is concerned and left most of our excesses a part of our buried history. . . . What is most exceptional about the Americans is not the voluminous record of their violence, but their extraordinary ability, in the face of that record, to persuade themselves that they are among the best-behaved and best-regulated of peoples."

Since Professor Hofstadter wrote those words in 1971, a number of studies have attempted to systematically study the American history of violence. One major question is whether or not the late-nineteenth-century West was more violent than other parts of the country.

Frontiers

The Two Types of Frontiers

Type I

farming, farm building
families, usually nuclear
balanced gender distribution
a few over forty-five years old
many children
high birthrate
women less highly valued
relatively permanent
limited vice
peaceful
colonizing

Type II

mining, ranching, other extraction
individuals
80 to 90 percent (or more) male
almost none over forty-five years old
few children
low birthrate
women more highly valued
transient
widespread commercialized vice
violent
imperialist, exploitative

Source: An elaboration of Walter Nugent, "Frontiers and Empires in the Late Nineteenth Century." *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 (1989): 401.

A Stabbing in Idaho

Don Maguire was a Rocky Mountain trader who made his money selling guns, knives, dice, cards, and various other items at a 1,000 percent profit. He kept a journal, which has been edited by the historian Gary Topping. This entry, composed in a hurried, stream-of-consciousness style, was written in the course of an 1877 trip to the mining town of Atlanta, Idaho:

The two noted characters of the town Coyote Smith and Poker Smith. My attention was first drawn to Coyote Smith. While he was engaged in a quarrel with two carpenters who were working lumber in front of a saloon, he being drunk made much disturbance and at the same time vowing to whip the two carpenters whereupon one of them gave him a kick in the hip. This set him wild. He snarled for a revolver swearing to kill the two. A revolver he could not procure. Midway up the street entered into a second altercation with Poker Smith and seizing a carving knife from the counter of a restaurant he made a stroke [passage obliterated] to sever the jugular vein for Poker Smith but missing

From *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia*, Volume. 1 by Ronald Gottesman, ed., (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999), pp. 594–601. Copyright © 1999 by Charles Scribner's Sons, a part of Cengage Learning, Inc. Reprinted by permission. www.cengage.com/permissions

his aim the knife struck the collar bone broke and his hand running down the blade he received a horrible wound cutting his hand from the hollow between the thumb and forefinger nearly to the wrist blood flowed freely from both parties but neither was fatally injured. There were no arrests made.

"No arrests made" was the outcome of many a similar confrontation. This sort of affray kept the local surgeon busy, not necessarily the sheriff or vigilance committee. One of the busiest surgeons was George Kenny of Salmon City, Idaho. Before he was through, he managed to fill half a coffee mug with bullets dug from miners.

Source: "A Trader in the Rocky Mountains: Don Maguire's 1877 Diary." Idaho Yesterdays 27 (summer 1983): 2-4, 7 (quotation). Where indicated by Maguire's capitalization, periods have been inserted; the spelling of one word, "seizing" for "siezing," has been corrected.

In the last decades of the twentieth century the concept of the frontier had become for many U.S. historians the equivalent of an insult in a crowded saloon: an invitation to fight. Many a blow had been leveled at Frederick Jackson Turner's famous account of European-descended whites "advancing" into "free lands" along an "empty" frontier, a notion of national progress that was condemned as oblivious to the existence of the native peoples. Some indignant historians refrained from using the word *frontier* altogether, an extreme reaction that jettisoned a useful analytical concept. Properly understood in a neutral, ecological sense as a shifting, generally westward-moving zone of interaction between indigenous and nonindigenous populations, the idea of the frontier is useful in making sense of the historical pattern of violence in the United States. In fact, it is indispensable.

Peaceful and Not-So-Peaceful Frontiers

The frontier violence of fact and legend was mostly a product of developing regions with an excess of young single males. The historian Walter Nugent calls these type II frontiers and contrasts them with type I farming frontiers, which were generally peaceful, not to say dull. The people of the farming frontiers were the "colorless many, . . . too busy trying to raise families and eke out a living to become legendary." The denizens of the cattle towns and mining camps were the "colorful few," whose lives were more often cut short by accidents, drunken violence, or hygienic neglect.

Type II frontiers were most common in ranching country and in the mining and lumbering regions of the cordillera, the vast elevated region from the eastern Rocky Mountains to the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges. With the exception of Mormon-settled Utah, type I frontiers were found in rainier areas with good soil and readier access to the East. In their very earliest stages, they were pioneered by men who came ahead of their families to scout the land, build primitive shelters, and pave the way for agriculture. As soon as they judged conditions to be satisfactory, these men

brought their fiancées or wives and children to join them. Though raids by Native Americans or outlaws might bring moments of terror (and retreat to safer lands), populations consisting mostly of young farming families enjoyed relatively stable social lives.

Type II frontiers were far more volatile. In any society young men in their late teens and twenties are responsible for a disproportionate amount of violence and disorder. Statistically, populations that consist mostly of young men have shown a tendency toward violent crime. This is not only because the young men are so numerous or brimful of testosterone, but also because so many of them are unattached. In type II frontiers there simply were not enough eligible women.

In normal circumstances, marriage acts as a brake on rambunctious male behavior: the boys get hitched and settle down. The cliché is grounded in both sociology and evolutionary psychology. When men acquire wives and families, they have more to lose and so behave more cautiously. Other things being equal, a married frontiersman thought twice before wading into the thick of a barroom fray. A married frontiersman was less likely to be in a barroom in the first place.

Vice, another prominent characteristic of type II frontier towns, was linked to violence in several ways. Unattached laborers—cowboys, miners, lumberjacks, fur trappers, navvies, teamsters—were the natural prey of gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, and whiskey peddlers, all of whom followed the frontier. Many vice figures were armed and hardened criminals who used violence or its threat to settle disputes over poker stakes and dance-hall girls. Vice institutions were flash points for trouble.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the Chinatowns of western cities and towns. Chinatowns were, among other things, recreational vice districts for the overwhelmingly male Cantonese laborers who poured into California and other western states and territories after the discovery of gold. They featured gambling parlors, brothels, and opium dens that were controlled by organized gangs called tongs. Tong enforcers (called highbinders or hatchet men) used muscle to collect gambling debts and prevent indentured prostitutes ("slave girls") from running away with customers. They waged pitched battles with other tongs to maintain control of the vice operations, much as rival gangs of bootleggers would later do during Prohibition. The homicide arrest rate for the Chinese in Portland, Oregon, in the 1870s was roughly four times that of the general population, a reflection of the abnormally high ratio of Chinese men to women and the consequent flourishing of vice and organized crime. The Chinese were also preyed upon by white robbers, extortionists, and bullies who found them easy and politically popular targets. The *English-Chinese Phrase Book* (1875, revised 1877) distributed by Wells, Fargo and Company included grimly useful sentences such as "He came to his death by homicide," "He was choked to death with a lasso, by a robber," "He was killed by an assassin," and "He was smothered in his room."

Outside Chinatown the saloon was the central establishment of vice. Spree drinking was common, particularly among workers who had just been paid. When they drank too much, they became careless and clumsy, likelier to give

or take offense in dangerous circumstances. Clare McKanna, who studied nearly one thousand homicide cases in three western counties from 1880 to 1920, found that seven in ten of the perpetrators had been drinking, as had about six in ten of the victims. More than one-third of the male victims died in saloons or in the streets in front of them. Thirty-two of them had been shot by bartenders (mostly with pistols, not, according to legend, with a shotgun from behind the counter), while sixteen of the dead were themselves bartenders. Most of the killings took place in the evening or on the weekend, that is, the times when tipsy men were apt to be congregating in saloons and other places of bibulous recreation.

Drunken brawls were not necessarily homicidal. What made them so lethal was the frontier habit of carrying knives or especially guns. Handguns were responsible for 63 percent of the homicides in McKanna's sample; handguns, rifles, and shotguns were responsible for 75 percent. Ready access to deadly (and often concealed) weapons greatly increased the odds that a simple assault would escalate to homicide. Most frontier killings and maimings were sordid, unpremeditated affairs that arose from jostling or insults among touchy men who had had too much to drink.

Gun toting also carried the risk of accidental death. The *Caldwell Post*, a cattle-town newspaper, estimated that five cowboys were killed by accidental gun discharges for every one who was shot intentionally. An unjacketed .44- or .45-caliber bullet did tremendous damage. Many of those who survived gun mishaps had to live with terrible injuries: blasted groins, shot-away knees, missing faces, and the like.

Measuring the Violence

The most frequently studied measure of frontier violence is the homicide rate. Killings usually made it into newspapers and official documents and thus into the historical record, while lesser crimes such as assaults were often unremarked or unprosecuted. As Robert Dykstra has argued, even in legendary places like Dodge City the number of murders was actually small, owing to the smallness of their populations. Men did not duel in the streets every noon, nor was killing, criminal or otherwise, a common event.

In proportional terms, however, frontier killings were much more frequent than in the East. When homicide is expressed as a ratio (conventionally the number of cases per 100,000 people per year), type II frontier communities had rates that were at least an order of magnitude greater than those prevailing in eastern cities or midwestern agricultural regions. The homicide rate of Fort Griffin, a central Texas frontier town frequented by cowboys, buffalo hunters, and soldiers, was 229 per 100,000 in the 1870s. That of Boston, a long-settled eastern city whose population included proportionately more women, children, and old people, was only about 6.

Some of the most clear-cut evidence comes from California. Roger McGrath has calculated that the homicide rate for the mining town of Bodie (90 percent male) was 116 per 100,000 from 1878 to 1882, years when eastern homicide rates rarely exceeded single digits. (By contrast, the robbery rates in Bodie and nearby Aurora, Nevada, were comparable to, and burglary rates

lower than, those of eastern cities—a reflection, perhaps, of the fear of armed retaliation by potential victims.) Kevin Mullen has estimated that the San Francisco homicide rate ranged from 28 to 80 per 100,000, with an average of about 49, during the city's tumultuous early years (1849–1856). The rate thereafter subsided to a range of 4 to 13 per 100,000 during the 1860s. The main reason for the shift was that the disproportionately youthful and male population characteristic of the early gold rush gradually gave way to a more balanced population that included more women, children, and old people.

This was in fact a universal pattern. Type II settlements did not retain their unbalanced populations forever. Within a decade or two the surplus men moved on to new frontiers, died prematurely, or married and settled down. Women, who were initially scarce, married and began bearing children at an early age, often in their teens. These children were roughly divided between boys and girls. Eventually the children married and further normalized the population. With the increasing numbers of women and children came institutions—schools, churches, and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union—that militated against vice and violence and improved the moral climate of the once-raucous frontier towns.

Frontier violence is thus best understood as a passing migratory anomaly. The nature of the labor demand drew youthful male workers to ranching, mining, and other type II frontier regions. These young men found themselves thrown together in competitive masculine company, isolated from familial influences, tempted by predaceous vice and payday sprees, and at least temporarily unable to find women to marry. When these circumstances changed—when the type II frontiers came to resemble more nearly the type I frontiers—the propensity toward public violence abated or at least stabilized at a lower level.

Cultural Influences

There is more to the story of frontier violence than population structure. Cultural factors also help to explain why men were so quick to fight other men and why there was so much conflict with Native Americans.

Men who come from cultures that stress personal honor are more likely to become involved in fights than those who do not. Such cultures emphasize the importance of responding to any perceived insult or slight, however trivial, lest a man lose face in the eyes of others who determine his social worth. The approved response is to display physical courage, to fight the offender, or, in certain upper-class contexts, to challenge him to a duel. The addition of deadly weapons to the honor imperative, epitomized by a Colorado grave marker, "He called Bill Smith a liar," explains why hotheaded killings were common on the frontier.

Those portions of the frontier settled or traversed by southerners were especially prone to hotheaded killings. The religiously motivated European immigrants who first journeyed to New England and the littoral regions of the middle colonies—Puritans, Quakers, German Pietists, and the like—were not particularly concerned about honor. However, the Cavaliers who settled in the

Chesapeake colonies were. (Maryland's homicide rate from 1657 to 1680 was more than twice that of Massachusetts, though this probably reflects excess males as well as cultural differences.) The Scots, Scots-Irish, border English, and Finns who settled along the backwoods frontier were also highly honor-conscious. They were accustomed to weapons and warfare, because they or their ancestors had come from remote and often violent rural areas on the hardscrabble periphery of northern and western Europe.

As the frontier moved westward, most new settlers situated themselves in places climatically similar to those whence they came. New Englanders moved to Ohio, southerners to the Gulf Plain, and so on. Until the twentieth century, migration tended to follow lines of latitude, as did cultural attitudes toward honor. Frontier regions settled by northerners were less violent than those settled by migrants from the South or Midlands. "All old-timers who know the West will tell you that they did not have so many killings and shooting scrapes after they got up North as they did in Texas," recalled E. C. "Teddy Blue" Abbott in his cowboy memoir, *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher* (1939; p. 231). The figures back him up. The statewide homicide rate in Texas was 32 per 100,000 in 1878, far higher than in northern climes.

Conflict with Native Americans

Many frontiersmen, northern as well as southern, had definite ideas about Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and the self-evident correctness of manifest destiny. At best, Native Americans were objects of suspicion; at worst, they were savages, disgusting, incorrigible, and even diabolical obstacles to the advance of civilization. Such extreme ethnocentrism naturally made it easier to justify killing them and appropriating their lands. The classic case was California, where miners enslaved, raped, or simply shot down Native Americans for no better reason, wrote one French missionary, than "to try their pistols." Miners, ranchers, and militiamen—the latter much more lethal to Native Americans than the better-disciplined regular soldiers—together accounted for more than forty-five hundred killings of Native Americans in California between 1848 and 1880.

Of course, the Native Americans in California and elsewhere fought back, often matching and surpassing whites in the ferocity of their attacks. Apaches were known to kindle slow fires under the heads of suspended captives. Tales of such atrocities confirmed the whites' conviction that the elimination of hostile Native Americans was in principle no different from hunting predatory animals. Even when Native Americans were accorded the formalities of a trial, bias against them practically guaranteed convictions. For example, every Apache accused of killing a white in Gila County, Arizona, in the late 1880s was convicted. The only Apaches who were acquitted or had their cases dismissed were those accused of killing other Apaches. For those found guilty, a long sentence was often tantamount to the death penalty. Well over one-third of all Native Americans sent off to prison in Arizona and California were dead within five years.

Native Americans were at a marked demographic disadvantage in their conflict with whites. Their numbers progressively dwindled because of their

vulnerability to imported Old World diseases such as smallpox. Too many women and dependents were another military handicap. Braves were in short supply, a legacy of intertribal warfare and, more speculatively, of the greater susceptibility of males to infectious disease. Native American women and dependents were less mobile than the braves and therefore easier to attack. The tactic of destroying villages rather than going after elusive bands of warriors, which emerged in Massachusetts and Virginia as early as the 1620s and 1630s, was used repeatedly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and led to such notorious and lopsided Native American defeats as Sand Creek (1864), Washita (1868), and Wounded Knee (1890).

Ecological violence by Europeans brought further hardship to Native Americans. Hunting was a popular pastime among frontiersmen, particularly during the nineteenth century. Competitive in masculine company and keen on proving their prowess, Europeans often killed more than was necessary to feed their families or sell to others. The rotting carcasses of thousands of Plains buffalo were a stark reminder of the excess slaughter and a signal source of Native American distress. Give the hunters bronze medals with a dead buffalo on one side and a discouraged Native American on the other, General Philip Sheridan admonished the Texas legislature. "Let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo are exterminated," he declared. "Then your prairies can be covered with speckled cattle, and the festive cowboy, who follows the hunter as a second forerunner of an advanced civilization."

Native Americans themselves were drawn into overhunting so they could barter meat and skins for European trade goods, thus heightening conflict with other tribes. One of those trade goods, alcohol, had horrific consequences. European memoirs are full of accounts of drunken Native Americans selling their squaws into prostitution, going on wild binges, stumbling into fires, cutting one another to pieces. One theory to account for this extreme behavior is that Native Americans had no knowledge of distilled alcohol before contact with Europeans and thus no store of social knowledge about drinking. Native Americans learned to drink hard liquor from the worst possible tutors: fur trappers, traders, mule skinnners, and other denizens of the type II frontier. When they saw white men swill whiskey and become dangerously, obstreperously drunk, they did likewise and suffered the same consequences.

Government's Failure to Control Frontier Violence

Selling liquor to Native Americans was illegal in most places from colonial times on. Neither the British nor the American government was able to suppress the trade, however. The U.S. government, nominally responsible for policing the western territories, was seldom able adequately to enforce any policy to protect Native Americans. The frontier was vast, the settlers numerous and greedy, and the resources of the federal government limited. The army was spread too thin to control the movements of frontiersmen or to prevent them from trespassing on treaty lands. Local courts and juries were invariably sympathetic toward white defendants and hostile toward Native Americans.

In the early stages of frontier expansion, legal institutions were either lacking or inadequate. One response to this situation, patterned after the Regulator movement in South Carolina in 1767–1769 (in which backcountry settlers organized to restore law and order and establish institutions of local government), was vigilantism, or organized extralegal movements against robbers, rustlers, counterfeiters, and other outlaws. The historian Richard Maxwell Brown counted 326 such movements in the country between 1767 and 1904, the majority of which were in southern and southwestern territories and states, the single most important of which was Texas.

When vigilante actions were limited in scope and controlled by local elites, they often served socially constructive purposes. Selected malefactors were whipped, branded, banished, or sometimes hanged in public dramas that affirmed the values of property and order. But vigilantism could also miscarry. In California, racial minorities, particularly Hispanics, made up a disproportionate percentage of those subjected to lynch courts, which were especially swift and merciless if the victims were white. Vigilantism also ran the risk of triggering private warfare, when friends and relatives of the lynch victims sought revenge against the vigilante faction, or of miscarriages of justice, when personal enemies were killed under the guise of the popular will. Vigilantism, in short, was a poor substitute for professional police and regular courts and had been widely superseded by the close of the nineteenth century.

Frontier Violence After 1900

Frontier violence is not entirely a thing of the past. The night, for example, is a present-day frontier where colonization has been made possible by cars and electric lights. Charles Lindbergh wrote in his autobiography that the most spectacular change he had seen in the earth's surface in all his decades of flying was the sprinkling of myriad lights across the United States on a clear night. These lights were signs of "conquest," of human movement into the frontier of darkness. But that movement is highly selective. Midnight finds mostly young men on the streets—and higher rates of drunkenness, accidents, assault, rape, and murder than in the daylight hours. Nighttime, in brief, resembles a type II frontier.

In some respects, inner cities also resemble a type II frontier. Urban women are hardly outnumbered by men, as they were on the nineteenth-century frontier. Nevertheless, many young innercity males, for economic, subcultural, and demographic reasons, delay marriage or avoid the institution altogether. An increasing number of them have grown up in single-parent households and so have experienced little parental guidance and supervision. Those who have joined gangs, acquired weapons, and become involved with drug traffic and other forms of organized vice are statistically among the most violence-prone members of society, just like their type II frontier counterparts. Indeed, urban ghettos can be thought of as artificial and unusually violent frontier societies: vice-ridden combat zones in which groups of armed, unsupervised touchy bachelors, high on alcohol and other drugs, menace one another and the local citizenry.

Some historians have also seen analogies between twentieth-century U.S. involvement in Pacific wars—particularly against Filipino rebels, Japanese soldiers, and Vietnamese communists—and the earlier frontier campaigns against Native Americans. In all these cases, young American men, remote from what they called civilization, were pitted against enemies they deemed treacherous and racially inferior. The conflicts quickly assumed a ferocious quality reminiscent of the worst episodes of the wars against Native Americans. Indeed, the parallel was made explicit in the language of the Vietnam War, when young GIs spoke of forays into “Indian country” and code-named their operations Texas Star and Cochise Green (a reference to the chief of the Chiricahua Apache who waged relentless war against the U.S. Army).

These GIs have grown up in the golden age of the Western, a hugely successful genre in the publishing, film, radio, and television industries (also advertising: a square-jawed cowboy beat out a crusty taxi driver as the emblem of Philip Morris’s legendary Marlboro cigarette campaign). That whole generation had been saturated with images of stylized violence and morally simplistic frontier stories of cowboys, Indians, desperadoes, and six-shooters. Did the public’s fascination with these stories of frontier violence contribute to the high rates of violence in the United States relative to other industrial democracies? Did it matter that America’s mythic hero was a man with a gun, an attitude, and a Stetson hat?

The answer is a qualified yes. We become who we are by emulating other figures in our environment, including the electronic environment with its celebrities and “action figures.” Communications researchers have discovered that, for many people, these figures become role models: people act like them, dress like them, talk like them, even talk *to* them. Insofar as larger-than-life frontier figures, played by the likes of John Wayne and James Arness, entered and shaped mass consciousness, they reinforced the belief that gun violence was an appropriate means for resolving conflicts. It is doubtful, however, that their influence was greater than more fundamental social and economic factors—racism, ghetto isolation, subcultures of poverty, deindustrialization, secularization, family decline, homicidal sensitivity about honor, lax gun control laws, drug abuse, and drug trafficking—that have contributed to the ongoing reputation of the United States as a violent land.

Colonel House Nearly Gets Himself Killed

Edward Mandell House (1858–1938) is best known as Woodrow Wilson’s adviser and confidant, a man so close to the president that Wilson once called him “my second personality . . . my independent self.” But House, who came of age in Texas’s most violent era and who counted it nothing to carry a gun, almost did not make it to Washington. In 1879 he was visiting a mining camp near Como, Colorado:

It was like all other camps of that sort—rough men and rougher women, gambling, drinking, and killing. I was in a saloon, talking to a man whom I had known in Texas, when . . . a big, brawny individual

came into the room and began to abuse me in violent terms. I had never seen the man before and could not imagine why he was doing this. I retreated, and he followed. I had my overcoat on at the time and had my hand on my six-shooter in my pocket and cocked it. The owner of the saloon jumped over the bar between us. In five seconds more, I would have killed him. An explanation followed which cleared up the mystery. He had taken me for some one else against whom he had a grudge, and whom he had seen but once. I learned later that he was a popular ex-sheriff of Summit county and that if I had killed him I should have been lynched within the hour.

It always amuses me when I see the bad men in plays depicted as big, rough fellows with their trousers in their boots and six-shooters buckled around their waists. As a matter of fact, the bad men I have been used to in southern Texas were as unlike this as daylight from dark. They were usually gentle, mild-mannered, mild-spoken, and often delicate-looking men. They were invariably polite, and one not knowing the species would be apt to misjudge them to such an extent that a rough word or an insult would sometimes be offered. This mistake of judgment was one that could never be remedied, for a second opportunity was never given.

Source: Charles Seymour, ed., *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*.
New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1926, pp. 24–25.



To Live and Die in Dodge City: Body Counts, Law and Order, and the Case of *Kansas v. Gill*

Never mind that during its celebrated decade as a tough cattle town only fifteen persons died violently in Dodge City, 1876–1885, for an average of just 1.5 killings per cowboy season. Today, three decades after the first release of the homicide data, frontier Dodge City remains a universal metaphor for slaughter and civic anarchy.

Professional historians of the American West are, of course, presumed to know better. And yet there have been recent hints of scholarly skepticism about Dodge City's modest body count. In 1994, for instance, a very prominent essay on frontier violence discussed Dodge and the other Kansas cattle towns without so much as noting in passing their low absolute numbers of killings.

This odd disregard is puzzling. One explanation might be that the homicide data are deemed irrelevant to the question of frontier violence. This is simply hard to credit. A second might be that the data do not conform to the New Western History paradigm, which tends to insist that things were always worse than we thought. That notion can be argued either way. A third possibility is that the data are somehow suspect, and thus better left unmentioned until the question can somehow be settled once and for all. This last possibility, more than the persistence of the Dodge City metaphor among those who learned their Western history in darkened theaters, suggests the value of a revisit to the real, if legendary, town in question.

All the Homicide News Fit to Print

Dodge City was indeed a legend in its own time. It was where livestock herded up from Texas to the railroad tracks in Kansas would be sold, shipped east to market, or walked onward to the ranges of the northern Great Plains. The summertime influx of transients—well-heeled drovers and cattle brokers, festive cowboys, predatory gamblers, and sporting women—more than equaled the

town's resident population. But a police force of multiple officers, their salaries totaling nearly half of Dodge City's entire municipal budget, closely supervised the behavior of these itinerants by enforcing strict gun-control laws.

The richest man in town, merchant Robert M. Wright, had been present in the bad old days when, in its unorganized first year of existence, Dodge had been the scene of several violent deaths. Wright and his entrepreneurial colleagues had not feared for their lives; they feared for their pocketbooks—that is, their local property values—as the newspapers of eastern Kansas delighted in such energetic headlines as “HOMICIDE AT DODGE CITY. A Notorious Desperado Killed” or “SHOT DEAD. Another Tragedy at Dodge City,” or in such sly one-liners as “Only two men killed at Dodge City last week.”

But with an expectation of the Texas cattle trade's coming to Dodge, local businessmen foresaw that the influx of new transients would only magnify all problems related to law and order. They therefore established a municipal government late in 1875, levied taxes to pay for it, and criminalized gun toting by private citizens. A photograph taken a few years later shows the town's busiest corner, downtown Front Street at its intersection with Bridge Street, the main thoroughfare in and out of Dodge. In the left background stand R. M. Wright's brick store and the facade of the celebrated Long Branch Saloon. In the middle foreground the superstructure of a town well displays a prominent sign: “The Carrying of Fire Arms Strictly PROHIBITED.” As this proximity suggests handgun violence was considered bad for business, an emphatic collective belief of Dodge City's business and professional elite that ultimately explains the low body count.

Scholars' attempts to dilute the significance of such body counts first appeared in the 1980s. “These statistics seem to indicate that the cattle towns were not particularly violent,” wrote Roger McGrath. “However, a note of caution is appropriate. Dykstra compiled his statistics exclusively from the local newspapers.” The subtext here: How can we be sure that more murders and justifiable homicides than reported did not occur?

There is no known official list of violent deaths at Dodge. Pending discovery of any such compendium, we must depend on a few reasonable assumptions about those reported by the press. The first is the absolute and primal newsworthiness of violent death. However enthusiastically they might conspire in cover-ups and damage control regarding local social conflict, Dodge City's journalists seemed no more able to resist a good homicide story than any circulation-chasing New York or Chicago city editor.

A second assumption involves the substantial array of local weekly newspapers that offer a fairly intimate summary of life in Dodge during the trail-driving era. The *Dodge City Times* began publishing in May 1876, just in time for the town's first cattle-trading season. The *Ford County Globe* joined it in January 1878. The *Dodge City Democrat* appeared in December 1883. And the *Kansas Cowboy* moved to Dodge from Ness County in June 1884. True enough, the first ten months of the *Times*, save for a single issue, are not extant. For 1876, one must extrapolate from the absence of murderous dispatches about Dodge in the press of eastern Kansas; so far, none has been discovered. But certainly from March 1877 to the close of the Texas cattle trade at Dodge City late

in 1885, all newspaper runs are virtually complete. Every nineteenth-century village should be so well documented.

A third guiding assumption seems equally reasonable. Cattle-town homicides, when they occasionally occur, are almost always reported in some detail, as the story of Henry Heck's demise will show. This attention lends weight to the notion that news concerning violent death tended to be revealed rather than suppressed.

Deadly Competition: Miami (1980) versus Dodge (1880)

A rather more comprehensive criticism of the cattle-town death statistics also appeared in the 1980s. This critique questioned the significance of the absolute numbers themselves, and argued for replacing them with homicide rates of the type annually devised by the FBI to measure urban violence. For today's metropolitan areas, each case of "murder and non-negligent manslaughter" (excluding justifiable homicides by the police) is calculated as a proportion of every 100,000 of population. The simple formula is

$$hr = (100,000/N_p)N_h,$$

where *hr* equals homicide rate, *N_p* equals population, and *N_h* equals number of homicides. Since the 1940s the FBI has used this formula in running a kind of annual negative sweepstakes in which the losing city becomes America's most violent community, the murder capital of the world. In 1980, for example, greater Miami's homicide rate soared to 32.7—the nation's highest that year.

But, as a few scholars began to note, a murder rate of 32.7 is not very high when contrasted with similarly calculated homicide rates back in time. That for late-thirteenth-century London, noted James Given, was about the same as the yearly average for Miami, 1948–1952. Barbara Hanawalt similarly discovered that the rate for London in the early fourteenth century soared even higher, to something between 36.0 and 51.3. Then, uncritically borrowing the two medievalists' methodology, Roger McGrath discovered that the average annual homicide rate at nineteenth-century Bodie, California, a mining camp, was a stratospheric 116.0.

These historians have been compromised by the statistical fallacy of small numbers. In 1980, Miami's absolute number of homicides exceeded 500, while Hanawalt's yearly average for London was only 18 and McGrath's body count for Bodie over several years was a measly 29. It was London's modest population (an estimated 35,000 to 50,000) and Bodie's small population (no more than 5,000 in any year) that caused their homicide rates to surpass modern Miami's.

As to tiny Dodge City—population 1,275 in 1880—its FBI homicide rate calculates out at an enormous 78.4 for that year, compared with Miami's 32.7 exactly a century later. Yet, the absolute numbers of murders on which these ratios are based are these: Dodge, 1; Miami, 515. In other words, if a bullet fired by John ("Concho") Gill had missed Henry C. Heck instead of striking him in

the chest, Dodge City's 1880 murder rate would have been zero instead of soaring to more than twice that of the 1980 murder capital of the world.

But one may argue that a single killing in a village like frontier Dodge may have had more traumatic psychological impact on its residents than Miami's 515 homicides must have had on its citizens in 1980. This proposition is supported by such personal testaments as Elizabeth Salamon's account of a double murder in her quiet New Jersey town in 1997 ("a killing has occurred in our midst and we will never be the same"), the emotional agony in awaiting identification of the shooter ("at night, my husband and I try to sleep, but sleep does not come easily"), and her guilty elation when she learns that the killer himself has died violently ("when murder hits this close to home, a dark heart is a regrettable residual"). And the general idea accords with what scholars have occasionally noted about the sociological equivalence of small and large places concerning such things as population fertility and rural-urban value conflicts.

But how does the argument fare in any specific contrast between 1980s Miami and 1880s Dodge? The *Miami Herald* for late December of 1980 is studied with allusions to the "record 555 homicides in Dade County this year," as reported by the local medical examiner's office—a figure that evidently includes 40 justifiable homicides by the police that would not be included in the FBI calculation. The newspaper reported that things are much worse in California, where Los Angeles County's homicides had reached a record 2,130 for the year. (Unfortunately for the *Herald*, however, greater Miami's smaller population imposed a 32.7 murder rate as against only 23.3 for Los Angeles.)

In any event, such defensive finger-pointing did not help much. The mood of urgency within Miami's political and economic leadership was palpable. Announcing itself "very concerned about the high incidence of homicides and other acts of violence occurring in certain liquor establishments," Miami's city council urged that they be put out of business, and a special police task force convened to identify these evil influences. "It will help when we get sufficient manpower aboard," complained the chief of Miami's patrol division. As if in anticipation, a federation of local homeowner associations formed a blue-ribbon Citizens Action Council "to pressure state and local legislators to bolster programs to counter Dade's rising crime rate." At the behest of the Citizens Crime Commission of Greater Miami, the Dade County Metro Council endorsed the new group, which planned to meet with judges, state legislators, and Governor Bob Graham. One of the commissioners set the agenda by demanding that Graham convene a special legislative session to appropriate a hundred million dollars for Dade's "war on crime." "For too long," he conceded, "the word 'war' has been overworked. . . . Nevertheless, our city can quite accurately be described at this moment as a battleground of war." Such was the local response to Miami's 32.7 murder rate for 1980.

In contrast, the public mood of Dodge City in late 1880 in the wake of its 78.4 homicide rate is much less alarmist. True enough, Concho Gill's killing of Henry Heck of November 17 caused a sensation, especially in view of the fact that nobody had died violently at Dodge in more than a year. Both

weekly newspapers expressed considerable indignation. N. B. Klaine, the dour and moralistic editor of the *Times* who moonlighted as Ford County's probate judge, broke the story on Saturday, November 20, complete with sinister overtones:

MURDER IN DODGE CITY.

On Tuesday night a murder was committed in this city, in that part of town south of the railroad track. . . . It has been some time since a murder has been committed in Dodge City, but the shooting Tuesday night offers no parallel to any of the crimes committed here. There was no provocation, and it is hinted that the unfortunate Heck was the victim of a conspiracy, the facts of which may be developed upon the trial of the murderer.

On November 23, in its turn, the *Globe* ran a much more forthcoming account that contained most of what we know of the killing's background. The paper was managed by D.M. Frost, a practicing attorney, and his journalistic associate Lloyd Shinn, who doubled as Dodge Township justice of the peace. From the breezy vernacular tone of the article, we may be almost certain that its author was Shinn rather than the more earnest Frost. The piece opens as follows:

HENRY C. HECK KILLED.

John Gill, Alias Concho, Establishes
Himself as a Killer

On last Wednesday morning the report that a killing had taken place in the city the night previous, was rife on the streets at an early hour. The report was soon confirmed and everybod[y] felt that Dodge had still some of the bloody instinct for which she was so famous in the lawless days of her infancy, when money was as dross and whisky four bits a drink.

But to the locals, as to any reasonably sensitive historian, the death of Henry Heck was much more than just a blemish on Dodge City's 1880 crime-control statistics. A human life had been taken, an industrious citizen was gone, the community diminished.

The Unredeemed Lover

Where does the story begin?

In southwestern Kansas. In the year 1876 or 1877.

Henry C. Heck arrived in Dodge. We know that he was single, the Ohio-born son of German immigrants, twenty-four or twenty-five years old. In fairly short order he became the trusted employee of H. B. ("Ham") Bell, the owner of a popular livery stable, a man not much older than himself. The two evidently became close friends. Heck, according to Lloyd Shinn's account, was often "left in charge of the extensive livery and other business, whenever Mr. Bell was absent from the city." Bell's "other business" increased

considerably in June 1878, when he had a local contractor build him a dance hall, the Varieties Theatre, on Locust Street in the “notorious” south side of town. The establishment was a success from the start, and a month after its opening the *Globe* reported that “the Texas boys and visitors generally still continue to throng the Varieties nightly.”

Ham Bell placed Heck in charge of this enterprise. In a legal deposition of early 1879, in which he adroitly distanced himself from entrepreneurial proximity, Bell described the place as “kept by Henry Heck.” It is, he wrote, “a long frame building with a hall and bar in front and sleeping rooms in the rear.” A contemporary photograph shows a low room with dark, wood-paneled ceiling and large side windows. In the foreground a bar extends along the right wall, three gaming tables stand beyond the bar, and a dance floor lies beyond the tables. Presumably the bedrooms are behind the wall in the back.

Management of the Varieties naturally brought Henry into close—not to say intimate—association with several young women (one as young as fourteen) identified by Ham Bell as “prostitutes, who belonged to the house and for the benefit of it solicited the male visitors to dance.” And, Bell added, “The rooms in the rear [are] occupied, both during the dancing hours and after, both day and night[,] by the women for the purpose of prostitution.”

In short, Heck’s was not a particularly savory occupation, although it entailed much responsibility. Overseeing the bar and kitchen; tallying receipts; dispensing payments to liquor and grocery wholesalers, to the cook and bartenders and musicians, and (of course) to the young women. And keeping order, a task that brought him several close acquaintanceships among the police—successive marshals Ed Masterson and Charlie Bassett, the various assistant marshals (Wyatt Earp, for one), and the rank-and-file officers—who kept a watchful eye on the Varieties and its two competitors, the Lady Gay and the Comique, especially during the wee hours when spirits were high and inhibitions low.

There soon arose a complication. One of the young women, a violet-eyed blonde named Caroline (“Callie”) Moore, had captured Henry’s affections. “Nearly ever since Mr. Heck has resided in this county,” wrote Shinn, “. . . this woman has been his faithful companion, according to the approved method of this class of Dodge City lotus eaters.” Read: Henry and Callie lived together. And in time they planned a joint future beyond the confines of Dodge south of the tracks. Ham Bell had acquired a ranch twelve miles below town where the Camp Supply trail toward Texas intersected Mulberry Creek. Later, when trying to sell it, Bell laconically described Mulberry Ranch as “good range, good water running by the place, a well of good water at the door, good corral 100 feet square, good house 22 × 35.” But better still was its situation: “a No. 1 location for keeping passersby, and cattle or sheep.” Heck agreed to lease Mulberry Ranch. In the latter part of 1879 Heck and Callie Moore quit Ham Bell’s employ and settled at the ranch. Here, as Lloyd Shinn puts it in words that suggest strong community approval, Heck “was raising a little stock which was being steadily accumulated by his industry and prudence.” And “for nearly a year,” wrote Shinn, Moore “performed the duties which usually fall to the lot of a rural housewife.” Her life seemed a model of common-law domesticity.

But, we may guess, bright prairie flowers and frisky colts and wonderful sunsets and a convivial parade of teamsters stopping for dinner cannot forever compensate for the relative isolation of agricultural pioneering, which had defeated many a woman of stronger psychological construction than Callie Moore. Ranch life may have begun to pall. In any event, in September 1880, while on a shopping trip to town that no doubt included a visit to old friends and old haunts, she met Concho Gill, an unemployed cowboy whom the newspapers refer to as a gambler—a common cattle-town usage for any man who frequents saloons to play cards for money.

Gill, aged twenty-three, was the Texas-born son of an Irish immigrant father and a mother from Mississippi. The father must have died, for the mother was married to James D. Young, a Mississippi-born preacher. Gill's nickname probably referred to an adolescence in frontier Concho County of west-central Texas. Gill stood a half inch short of six feet, had a fair complexion, hazel eyes, and black hair. He could read and write, and "was a quiet man," said Shinn, "and not considered quarrelsome or dangerous." When visited in June 1880 by the Dodge City census taker, Gill was sharing a Front Street building with four other unattached males, each in his own apartment: two sheep raisers, another unemployed cowboy, and the manager of the local stockyard.

On that same day Gill also said he was sick, suffering from scurvy. This is not as unlikely an illness for a cowboy as it might seem today, when the disease is occasionally encountered among infants and the very elderly. But scurvy had been diagnosed as recently as the 1850s among frontier settlers lacking sustained access to foods rich in vitamin C—citrus fruits, tomatoes, vegetables. Adult symptoms include swollen, bleeding gums and loose teeth, bleeding under the skin and into the joints, mental depression, fatigue, and increased susceptibility to infection. Unless treated, the disease is fatal. Yet, as physicians of the time well knew, scurvy is easily cured; since the early sixteenth century lime juice was the infallible remedy, and fresh vegetables—especially potatoes and wild salad greens—were by the 1860s prescribed as effective preventives.

So why was Concho Gill sick in June and again in November? In a community blessed with doctors and druggists and grocery stores? Perhaps he suffered from some more serious malady than just a vitamin C deficiency. It is possible that he had a misdiagnosed case of gonorrhea or secondary-stage syphilis (not uncommon among cowboys), some of whose symptoms—joint pain, skin blotches, depression, lassitude—resemble those of scurvy.

Concho's illness, whatever it was, did not diminish his attractiveness to Callie Moore; in fact, a touch of chronic illness possibly added a certain Byronic allure, prompting some maternal impulse, perhaps. In any event, according to Shinn, Moore was immediately smitten. "His dark brown eyes, classic features, and complexion bronzed by a southern sun, together with [a prospect of] the indolent life of a gambler's paramour, were too dazzling to be resisted, when compared with kitchen drudgery, and the society of her more homely lover." Soon the young woman bid a permanent farewell to Mulberry Ranch, moving back to Dodge and in with Gill.

Moore's betrayal devastated Heck. He turned to drink, but it did no good. He at last resorted to an ultimatum. On Saturday, November 13, Heck told

Moore that she had three days to return to him or leave Dodge City forever. Or else.

Late in the evening of November 16 Henry Heck came to Dodge City to separate Callie Moore from Concho Gill. But some things, as John Demos reminds us, we have to imagine. We know nothing of how Heck managed his wait. But wait he did, as an unseasonably early winter gripped the village. Perhaps he had proposed their old workplace, the Varieties Theatre, as a rendezvous, where he now lingered, occasionally greeting friends, but moody, on edge, drinking too much. At last she arrived, accompanied by a companion, Sallie Frazier, a middle-aged woman of color who, we can imagine, hovered protectively as a tearful Moore faced her former lover. The young woman reaffirmed that she would neither get out of Dodge nor leave Gill. She and Frazier turned to go. Heck says that if she does not return to him by midnight he will, as both women later remember his words, kill Concho Gill "before morning."

At midnight, Heck gathered himself into his coat and stepped out into the night, somewhat unsteadily perhaps, his mood as bitter as the weather. He trudged through fallen snow, crossing the railroad track toward Front Street and the intermittent glow of its all-night saloons. He made his way to Gill's apartment and, without announcing himself, began kicking in the front door.

Inside, Gill had been sick for the past ten days. Moore was building a fire in the stove. A friend, one Charlie Milde, was also present in the room. Aroused from bed, Gill grabbed a pistol and went to the door. It flew open and he fired twice.

One bullet struck Henry Heck in the right breast just below the nipple, perforating the lung.

Heck retreated back into the darkness. We do not know how he spent the next half hour—perhaps dazed, bewildered by shock. Probably there was no pain: his neural synapses have shut down. Perhaps he rested, leaning upright in an alleyway, out of the wind, uncontrollably trembling. Perhaps he collapsed unconscious until the snow against his cheek finally brought him around. He roused himself and stumbled toward a lamp-lit saloon. He entered, and after calling for a drink told the night bartender that Gill had shot him. He left the saloon for a moment, returned, dropped to the floor, and expired "without a groan." It had taken him forty-five minutes to die.

This love story from early Dodge City is over. But the consequences were not, and they provide us with an important cultural reading of frontier justice in Dodge City.

The Judgment of Concho Gill

As the dying Henry Heck silently stumbled along Front Street, Assistant Marshal Neil Brown, alerted by the gunshots, arrived at Gill's apartment. He confiscated the fatal pistol, ordered Gill to dress, and escorted him to jail.

Later that morning of November 17, a coroner's inquest convened, as required for any death happening by violence or under suspicious circumstances. The coroner's jury was heavy with law-enforcement types characteristically impatient with troublemakers. The county coroner himself, Col.

John W. Straughn, doubled as a deputy sheriff. The six jurors included Ham Bell, now the deputy U.S. marshal in Dodge; blacksmith Pat Sugh-rue, a former Dodge Township constable and future Ford County sheriff; and merchant A. B. Webster, soon to run for mayor on a law-and-order platform. W. J. Miller, a local cattle raiser; James Mufty, an unemployed carpenter; and Fred Berg, a baker, rounded out the jury. They presumably viewed the body and then took testimony from bartender A. J. Tuttle, Officer Brown, Charlie Milde, and Callie Moore.

Although the victim literally broke into Gill's domicile, he may not have been armed. Tuttle testified that Heck was not carrying a weapon when he took his last drink. The jurors returned a verdict of felonious homicide, thereby asserting that the killing had been done without justification or excuse and signaling that Gill was in very serious trouble indeed. The following day editor N. B. Klaine, in his role as probate judge, appointed Under-Sheriff Fred Singer as administrator of the deceased's estate. As for Callie Moore, she "is still true to her imprisoned lover," noted Lloyd Shinn, "and supplies him daily with tempting viands."

The excitement subsided, life resumed its normal rhythms. Cattle continued loading down at the freight yard, and wagons bearing livestock feed, hay, and millet, arrived daily from outlying farms. U.S. Senator P. B. Plumb was in town several hours on his way home from Colorado. Saloon-owner Chaulk Beeson's sojourning parents departed for Iowa "well pleased with their visit." The respectable "dancing people" of the town announced plans to organize a social club. "Professor" W. H. LyBrand, hotel proprietor and former bandmaster, was recruiting an orchestra "to supply music for the holidays." On Thanksgiving Day churchgoers held interdenominational services and the Methodists hosted an oyster supper. The following afternoon children presented "literary exercises" at the grammar school. A baby was born to businessman A. J. Anthony and his wife. "Mother and son are doing well," it was reported. All of which suggests that frontier Dodge had more in common with fictional Grover's Corners, New Hampshire ("nice town, y'know what I mean?"), than with modern Miami.

And in contrast to Miami's plea for more cash for cops late in 1980, Dodge City's municipal council late in 1880 continued pressing the mayor to cut police expenditures. The reason was liquor prohibition, adopted as a constitutional amendment in November's general election, ending the legal sale of intoxicants in Kansas. With saloon license fees far and away the most important source of municipal income, citizens did not view the loss of revenue with equanimity. By mid-December 1880 the village found itself more than \$2,200 in debt, with unpaid bills shortly hiking the total to \$3,239. More than a hundred taxpayers panicked, petitioning the council for a referendum on dissolving the municipal corporation entirely. The council scheduled a vote for New Year's Eve. The *Ford County Globe* approved this drastic proposition, warning that saloon closings would leave Dodge City "without resources except such as might be derived from direct taxation. . . . This would swell the total tax upon the property owners of the city to about eight cents on the dollar." But cooler heads prevailed, and on December 31 a low voter turnout doomed this solution to the crisis.

Meanwhile, Concho Gill's fate was being decided. On December 1, Gill appeared at a preliminary examination before Lloyd Shinn, in his role as justice of the peace, to determine if sufficient evidence existed to warrant his trial by a higher court. Col. Thomas S. Jones appeared for the accused, County Attorney Mike Sutton, Dodge City's most prominent attorney, for the people. Owing to the absence of one witness, the defense requested a continuance, which Shinn granted. The hearing resumed on the fourth. We lack details; both newspapers evidently considered the testimony old news. On December 7, Shinn ruled that the evidence merited binding Gill over for trial at the January 1881 term of district court. Shinn set bail at \$3,000. The charge was first-degree manslaughter, meaning that Gill allegedly killed Heck, in the words of the law, "without a design to effect death," at a moment when Heck was "engaged in the perpetration or [the] attempt to perpetrate [a] crime or misdemeanor, not amounting to a felony."

Justice Shinn's reasoning is discernible. Heck's death clearly had not been murder: provoking circumstances closely preceding the shooting—the unlawful attack by Heck on the defendant's door—had caused Gill to react on impulse, in the heat of the moment. Yet it also seemed to Shinn not to be a case of justifiable homicide, although Kansas law gave as one definition a killing "committed by any person . . . in resisting any attempt to murder such person, or to commit any felony upon him or her, or in any dwelling house in which such person shall be."

Gill probably assumed that Heck had a gun. But—and this was a major qualifier—whether Heck was or was not armed, Gill had had an obligation to "retreat to the wall," to avail himself of any reasonable avenue of escape, even if that was only a few feet of floor space, before employing deadly force. That Concho may have failed to understand this virtually universal responsibility was simply his bad luck. As it happened, Texas was unlike most other states. Where Gill came from, the law said a man did not have to retreat from an attacker any farther than "the air at his back." Unfortunately for Gill, Kansas was not Texas.

State of Kansas v. John Gill alias Concho opened at the courthouse in Dodge on January 17, 1881—two months to the day after the shooting. Again we lack details, although Judge Samuel R. Peters's summary for the record preserves the essential procedural facts. Again Mike Sutton prosecuted, Colonel Jones defended. As late as December 21 the charge was still first-degree manslaughter, punishable by "confinement and hard labor for a term not less than five years nor more than twenty-one years." But since then Mike Sutton, for some reason, had upped the charge to first-degree murder, punishable by death. The accusation Sutton filed with the court asserted that Gill "feloniously, willfully and of his deliberate and premeditated malice did kill and murder one Henry Heck contrary to law." Gill pleaded not guilty, he and Jones still probably confident that his act could be seen as self-defense.

A jury was empaneled, consisting of twelve men from outside the corporate boundaries of Dodge, the most prominent of them being the prosperous sheep rancher R. W. Tarbox. After hearing the evidence and arguments of counsel and being instructed in writing by the court, the jury retired to deliberate.

The next day it rendered its verdict: Gill was guilty not of first-degree murder but of murder in the second degree—a killing “committed purposely and maliciously, but without deliberation and premeditation,” and punishable by “confinement and hard labor for not less than ten years.”

The jurors evidently concluded that Gill had killed Heck with no set design to take life but that, nevertheless, there was a purpose to kill (or at least a purpose to inflict injury without caring whether it caused death or not) formed instantaneously in Gill’s mind. And they must have been unimpressed by testimony suggesting that Gill had been so provoked by Heck’s behavior as to reduce the crime to manslaughter.

Colonel Jones immediately moved for a new trial on the ground that the verdict was “contrary to evidence”—that is, the jurors had mistakenly interpreted the weight of the testimony in the case. Judge Peters pondered that for three days, then brought attorneys and defendant together again on January 21. He denied the motion to retry, and sentenced Gill to fifteen years’ hard labor in the Kansas State Penitentiary. Concho was taken into custody, and the next day Sheriff George Hinkle and Under-Sheriff Singer took him off to Lansing.

The Rest of the Story

In March 1884, somebody—presumably Mike Sutton, the man who had successfully prosecuted Concho Gill three years earlier—addressed a petition to Governor George W. Glick. “We the undersigned Citizens of Ford County Kansas respectfully ask your excellency to commute the sentence of John Gill now confined in the penitentiary of the State of Kansas, under a sentence for fifteen years,” Sutton wrote. “Since his incarceration his health has failed, and there is strong probability that . . . he will not live until the expiration of his term.” But, the petition added, “The crime for which said John Gill was convicted was committed by him under a misapprehension . . . that the man he killed was hunting him [in order] to kill him.”

This document resulted from a visit to Dodge City by Gill’s stepfather, the Reverend Young. Probably after conferring with Callie Moore (now Mrs. C. F. Lane) and Sallie Frazier, he brought them to Sutton. The former county attorney took depositions from the two women, and then had these sworn to before E. D. Swan, a notary public. Incredibly enough, it seems, the knowledge that Heck had specifically threatened Gill’s life, and that Gill knew it, had not been presented at the trial; apparently this was the first Sutton learned of it. Thus he drafted the petition, which the Rev. Mr. Young then circulated.

Soon thirty-six names graced the document. The signatories included Dodge City’s mayor and its city clerk; *Times* editor and now postmaster N. B. Klaine; W. F. Petillon, Ford County’s registrar of deeds; Sheriff Pat Sughrue, who had been a member of the coroner’s jury that had initiated the case against Gill; Assistant City Marshal David (“Mysterious Dave”) Mather; merchants R. M. Wright, H. M. Beverley, and a scattering of other commercial men; lawyers Sutton, Swan, and T. S. Jones, who had defended Gill; baker Fred Berg, who also had sat on the coroner’s jury; plus a butcher, a druggist, two

hoteliers, a bookkeeper, and two of the town's more respectable saloon owners. Although admitting that "I was not here at the time," Police Judge R. E. Burns added a note that "from Statements of Responsible citizens I believe this petition should be granted." In addition, Jones and Petillon each wrote supporting letters to Governor Glick.

"Everyone here seems to sympathize with him," said Petillon of the Reverend Young, and journalist Klaine agreed. "Time seems to efface unpleasant memories," he philosophized, "as well as to soften prejudices and produce sympathy." The tendency of cattle-town people to find excuses for leniency in cases of shooting homicides was belatedly asserting itself.

In his letter, Colonel Jones added an interesting interpretation of the trial. Gill "would have been promptly acquitted," he told the governor, "had a it not been for the evidence of a personal enemy." The identity of this enemy is unknown. One may guess that it was Heck's friend Ham Bell, who may have been responsible for the severe stance taken by the coroner's jury, who then had less influence over the more lenient Shinn decision but who later yet may have convinced Mike Sutton to escalate the charge against Gill to first-degree murder. What testimony Bell may have offered is also unknown; perhaps it maintained that Heck's killing was the result of a conspiracy, as suggested in the first news report of the death. In any event, Mike Sutton's implicit repudiation of his role in Gill's conviction included the suggestion that he, as county attorney, had been duped by somebody into wholly discounting Gill's claim of self-defense. For him, the two women's affidavits now proved definitive.

Gill's stepfather evidently hand carried the petition, the two affidavits, and the two supporting letters to Topeka, delivering them to Governor Glick. The governor said that prior to any formal application to commute, Young must give public notice in plenty of time for those with objections to make them known. On April 3 and 10, therefore, the *Dodge City Times* printed the required notice, editor Klaine certified its publication, and lawyer Swan sent copies of both to the governor. Formal application to commute his stepson's sentence would be made by Young on April 16, 1884.

But in the end the governor refused the request for unknown reasons. Concho did not die in prison, but he did stay for another seven years. On August 19, 1891, his sentence at last commuted, he emerged from the Kansas penitentiary after having served ten and one-half years for the murder of Henry Heck.

Body Counts or Murder Rates?

The point of the story of *Kansas v. Gill* is that the people of Dodge City took Heck's death seriously, and instituted deliberate legal action against his slayer according to conventions nurtured through a thousand years of Anglo-American judicial tradition. The judgment of Concho Gill was, as it was meant to be, a series of civic rituals assuring villagers that although situated on the geographic extremity of civilization, theirs was a fully domesticated society, culturally located well within the larger American community.

As for public fear, neither in Miami in December 1980 nor in Dodge in December 1880 did any important number of citizens cower behind locked doors. But Miami's business community clearly had been terrified by how its spiraling homicides would affect property values and tourism; Dodge City's businessmen, although attuned to the need to attract new residents and capital investment, were not. The important cause of these different responses was hardly the contrast between homicide rates of 32.7 and 78.4 but between body counts of 515 (or 555) and 1.

Let anthropologist Lawrence Keeley have the penultimate word on murder rates versus body counts. Keeley's recent book criticizing the "peaceful-savage" myth displays a wealth of evidence on the lethal nature of tribal life. Its relevance to the present discussion is that its author employs death rates somewhat similar to those calculated for the FBI crime reports, leading him to relish a number of absurd comparisons. For example, he judges a chance Black-foot massacre of a 52-man Assiniboiné raiding party more lethal (100.0 percent killed) than the loss of 21,392 British soldiers on the horrifying first day of the Battle of the Somme (only 13.5 percent killed). Obviously, the statistical fallacy of small numbers is in full flower here.

But Keeley has a ready reply. The unsophisticated, he says, are always "more impressed by absolute numbers than ratios." And he asks if, consistent with such views, any reader would rather undergo a critical medical operation at a "small, rural, Third-World clinic"—where the number of inadvertent deaths from surgery is numerically small but the death rate high—than at a large American "university or urban hospital" where such deaths are more frequent but the rate low. According to the same reasoning, would anyone prefer to fly regularly on small planes rather than airliners? And would one prefer to live on an Indian reservation than in a large city, "since the annual absolute number of deaths from homicide, drug abuse, alcoholism, cancer, heart disease, and automobile accidents will always be far fewer on the reservations than in major cities and their suburbs"?

There are, for the sake of argument, answers. Most health insurance would not pay for elective surgery in a jungle hospital, so that point is moot. But yes, those wealthy enough to own airplanes regularly and routinely defy the odds. And yes again, many persons would rather live in Navaho country than in parts of Manhattan.

But more to the point of this essay, a great majority of fully informed time-travelers surely would feel safer cruising the all-night saloons of Dodge City in 1880 than barhopping in Little Havana, Coconut Grove, or downtown Miami a hundred years later. And that is a ratio beyond dispute.

POSTSCRIPT



Was the Wild West More Violent Than the Rest of the United States?

David T. Courtwright believes that the frontier was a very violent place. He qualifies his answer by accepting the distinction of Professor Walter Nugent, who distinguishes between the two types of frontiers: type one, which centered on farming, and type two, which focused on mining, ranching, and other extractive industries. The author argues that type one had minimal violence because of its concentration of large nuclear families engaged in farming. On the other hand, the more volatile type-two frontiers of mining and cattle raising were manned by young, single males who often brawled in bar fights that were caused by excessive drinking, gambling, and womanizing.

Courtwright also takes a quick look at the violence that occurred on the multicultural West stressed in the writings of the new Western historians. He argues that Native Americans and whites engaged in some serious atrocities committed by both sides. He also discusses high crime rates among the Chinese in San Francisco because of tong (gang) battles.

Justice was limited in type-two frontier communities. The army was spread too thin, and local governments concentrated on property claims. Consequently, vigilante movements or quasi-legal groups emerged to enforce the law. Professor Richard Maxwell Brown, who has spent a lifetime writing books and articles about these movements, has calculated that 326 such movements emerged in the country between 1767 and 1904. Most of these movements occurred in the southern and southwestern territories and states, with Texas being the most violent.

Richard Maxwell Brown divides Western violence into roughly three periods. Period one, which is what this issue is concerned with, extends from 1850 to 1910. It parallels the tumult brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Brown employs the concept Western Civil War of Incorporation (WCWI) to interpret the feuds between Yankees and ex-Confederates, cattlemen and land barons, and Republicans and Democrats who use violence to gain power in the last American frontier. See Brown's summative article on "Violence" in Clyde A. Milner, II, et al., eds., *The Oxford History of the American West* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

Ironically, in recent years, historians have tried to lay to rest the myths about gunfighters. Writers such as Joseph Rosa have argued the term "gunfight" did not come into popular usage until the 1890s. The number of killings by Wild Bill Hickok was really seven or eight, not between 30 and 85. Even psychopathic killers like John Wesley Hardin and Billy the Kid had the

numbers of killings inflated over the years by pop writers and the movie industry. The bar-room brawl, not "the stereotypical walkdown of motion picture fame," was responsible for most of the violence. And when gunfights took place, the most famous killers were often outnumbered and ambushed. See Joseph G. Rosa, *The Gunfighter: Man or Myth* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), and Gary L. Roberts, "The West's Gunmen," *American West* (January 1972, 10–15, 64; March 1972, 18–23, 61–62), and "Gunfighters and Outlaws, Western," in Ronald Gottesman and Richard Maxwell Brown, eds., *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999).

Robert R. Dykstra was one of the first historians to challenge the image of the West as a section more violent than the rest of the country. His study of *The Cattle Towns* (Knopf, 1968, 1983) rejected the view that the five towns of Abilene, Caldwell, Dodge City, Ellsworth, and Wichita were hellholes. In fact, from 1870 to 1885 only a total of 45 killings took place. The homicides varied widely from accidental deaths to those that involved law officers, cowboys, and gamblers, among others. Of the shootings that took place, "less than a third of them returned the fire."

Dykstra has been criticized on numerous grounds. First of all, he did not count the 17-plus murders committed in three of the five towns in the years prior to his study, a point the author concedes. Secondly, he has been challenged by studies of other communities whose authors compare the high crime rates of some of these Western counties and communities with the lower crime rates of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities. Finally, Dykstra has been taken to task for relying on contemporary newspaper accounts for his main sources.

The author has responded vigorously to these charges. He challenges writers who use the FBI statistical rate of crimes per 100,000 by claiming the samples of a town or county are too small and, therefore, one less murder can radically skew the homicide ratio downward. In addition, the comparisons may be between apples and oranges. As Harold J. Weiss, Jr., points out in his valuable article, "Overdosing and Underestimating: A Look at a Violent and Not-So-Violent American West," *Quarterly of the National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History* (April–June 2003), "Have western historical writers used the same database? Information about criminal homicides can be collected in several ways; those committed; those reported to the police; those cleared by police arrests; those that resulted in an indictment by a Grand Jury; those that came to trial; those that ended in a court conviction; and those that involve prison time."

Dykstra also believes that contemporary newspapers reported every homicide in as much detail as possible. Would a nineteenth-century newspaper miss a major crime any more than the nightly local news broadcasts, which comb the police blotter for every gruesome homicide?

Dykstra's most recent assessments of the newest literature on Western violence are (1) "Overdosing on Dodge City," *Western Historical Quarterly* (Winter 1996); (2) "Violence, Gender and Methodology in the 'New' Western History," *Reviews in American History* (March 1999); and (3) "Body Counts and Murder Rates: The Contested Statistics of Western Violence," *Reviews in American History* (December 2003).

The most recent assessment, "Guns, Murder, and Probability: How Can We Decide Which Figures to Trust," *Reviews in American History* (June 2007) by Randolph Roth, challenges Dykstra's theory of the statistical fallacy of small numbers. A recent study by Clare V. McKanna, Jr., *Race and Homicide in Nineteenth Century California* (University of Nevada Press, 2002), examines seven counties in California and the one by David Peterson Del Mar, *Beaten Down: A History of Interpersonal Violence in the West* (University of Washington Press, 2002), studies all of Oregon. These figures, says Roth, constitute representative samples similar to contemporary pollsters who use small numbers to predict elections. Both books argue that very high crime rates existed in the nineteenth-century West.

Students interested in pursuing the subject further should consult the following bibliographical articles and books: Indispensable and balanced are Harold J. Weiss, Jr., "Overdosing and Underestimating: A Look at a Violent and Not-So-Violent American West," *Quarterly of the National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History, Inc.* (April-June 2003) and Michael A. Bellesiles, "Western Violence," in William Deverell, ed., *A Companion to the American West* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), which plays down Western violence, while Robert McGrath is ambivalent in *Gunfighters, Highwaymen and Vigilantes: Violence in the Frontier* (University of California Press, 1984). Giles Vandal's *Rethinking Southern Violence: Homicides in Post-Civil War Louisiana, 1866-1884* (Ohio State University Press, 2000) offers a comprehensive look at the 4,986 recorded homicides in a southern state mostly against African Americans committed collectively by whites who refused to accept the new political order of the Reconstruction era.

More general are Michael A. Bellesiles, ed., *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History* (New York University Press, 1999), and the three-volume reference work in alphabetical order by Ronald Gottesman and Richard M. Brown, eds., *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999). Easier to locate are two anthologies written in the shadow of the violent 1960s: Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New American Library, 1969) and Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (Random House, 1971), which argues that America has a history, but not a tradition, of violence.



ISSUE 3



Were the Nineteenth-Century Big Businessmen “Robber Barons”?

YES: Howard Zinn, from “Robber Barons and Rebels,” in *A People’s History of the United States* (HarperCollins, 1999)

NO: John S. Gordon, from “Was There Ever Such a Business!” in *An Empire of Wealth: The Epic History of American Economic Power* (Harper Perennial, 2004)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: According to Howard Zinn, the new industrialists such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J. P. Morgan adopted business practices that encouraged monopolies and used the powers of the government to control the masses from rebellion.

NO: John S. Gordon argues that the nineteenth-century men of big business such as John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie developed through the oil and steel industries consumer products that improved the lifestyle of average Americans.

Between 1860 and 1914, the United States was transformed from a country of farms, small towns, and modest manufacturing concerns to a modern nation dominated by large cities and factories. During those years, the population tripled, and the nation experienced astounding urban growth. A new proletariat emerged to provide the necessary labor for the country’s developing factory system. Between the Civil War and World War I, the value of manufactured goods in the United States increased 12-fold, and the capital invested in industrial pursuits multiplied 22 times. In addition, the application of new machinery and scientific methods to agriculture produced abundant yields of wheat, corn, and other foodstuffs, despite the decline in the number of farmers.

Why did this industrial revolution occur in the United States during the last quarter of the nineteenth century? What factors contributed to the rapid pace of American industrialization? In answering these questions, historians often point to the first half of the 1800s and the significance of the “transportation revolution,” which produced better roads, canals, and railroads to move people and goods more efficiently and cheaply from one point to another.

Technological improvements such as the Bessemer process, refrigeration, electricity, and the telephone also made their mark in the nation's "machine age." Government cooperation with business, large-scale immigration from Europe and Asia, and the availability of foreign capital for industrial investments provided still other underpinnings for this industrial growth. Finally, American industrialization depended upon a number of individuals in the United States who were willing to organize and finance the nation's industrial base for the sake of anticipated profits. These, of course, were the entrepreneurs.

Regardless of how American entrepreneurs are perceived, there is no doubt that they constituted a powerful elite and were responsible for defining the character of society in the Gilded Age. For many Americans, these businessmen represented the logical culmination of the country's attachment to laissez-faire economics and rugged individualism. In fact, it was not unusual at all for the nation's leading industrialists to be depicted as the real-life models for the "rags-to-riches" theme epitomized in the self-help novels of Horatio Alger.

Closer examination of the lives of most of these entrepreneurs, however, reveals the mythical dimensions of this American idea. Simply put, the typical business executive of the late nineteenth century did not rise up from humble circumstances, a product of the American rural tradition or the immigrant experience, as frequently claimed. Rather, most of these big businessmen were of Anglo-Saxon origin and reared in a city by middle-class parents. According to one survey, over half of the leaders had attended college at a time when even the pursuit of a high school education was considered unusual. In other words, instead of having to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps from the bottom of the social heap, these individuals usually started their climb to success at the middle of the ladder or higher.

American public attitudes have reflected a schizophrenic quality with regard to the activities of the industrial leaders of the late nineteenth century. Were these entrepreneurs "robber barons," who employed any means necessary to enrich themselves at the expense of their competitors? Or were they "captains of industry" whose shrewd and innovative leadership brought order out of industrial chaos and generated great fortunes that enriched the public welfare through the workings of various philanthropic agencies that these leaders established? Although the "robber barons" stereotype emerged as early as the 1870s, it probably gained its widest acceptance in the 1930s when, in the midst of the Great Depression, many critics were proclaiming the apparent failure of American capitalism. Since the depression, however, some historians, including Allan Nevins, Alfred D. Chandler, and Maury Klein, have sought to revise the negative assessments offered by earlier generations of scholars. In the hands of these business historians, the late nineteenth-century businessmen have become "industrial salesmen" who skillfully oversaw the process of raising the United States to a preeminent position among the nations of the world.

The following selections reveal the divergence of scholarly opinion as it applies to the nineteenth century entrepreneurs who came to epitomize both the success and excess of corporate capitalism in the United States.

Robber Barons And Rebels

In the year 1877, the signals were given for the rest of the century: the blacks would be put back; the strikes of white workers would not be tolerated; the industrial and political elites of North and South would take hold of the country and organize the greatest march of economic growth in human history. They would do it with the aid of, and at the expense of, black labor, white labor, Chinese labor, European immigrant labor, female labor, rewarding them differently by race, sex, national origin, and social class, in such a way as to create separate levels of oppression—a skillful terracing to stabilize the pyramid of wealth.

Between the Civil War and 1900, steam and electricity replaced human muscle, iron replaced wood, and steel replaced iron (before the Bessemer process, iron was hardened into steel at the rate of 3 to 5 tons a day; now the same amount could be processed in 15 minutes). Machines could now drive steel tools. Oil could lubricate machines and light homes, streets, factories. People and goods could move by railroad, propelled by steam along steel rails; by 1900 there were 193,000 miles of railroad. The telephone, the typewriter, and the adding machine speeded up the work of business.

Machines changed farming. Before the Civil War it took 61 hours of labor to produce an acre of wheat. By 1900, it took 3 hours, 19 minutes. Manufactured ice enabled the transport of food over long distances, and the industry of meatpacking was born.

Steam drove textile mill spindles; it drove sewing machines. It came from coal. Pneumatic drills now drilled deeper into the earth for coal. In 1860, 14 million tons of coal were mined; by 1884 it was 100 million tons. More coal meant more steel, because coal furnaces converted iron into steel; by 1880 a million tons of steel were being produced; by 1910, 25 million tons. By now electricity was beginning to replace steam. Electrical wire needed copper, of which 30,000 tons were produced in 1880; 500,000 tons by 1910.

To accomplish all this required ingenious inventors of new processes and new machines, clever organizers and administrators of the new corporations, a country rich with land and minerals, and a huge supply of human beings to do the back-breaking, unhealthful, and dangerous work. Immigrants would come from Europe and China, to make the new labor force. Farmers unable to buy the new machinery or pay the new railroad rates would move to the cities.

Between 1860 and 1914, New York grew from 850,000 to 4 million, Chicago from 110,000 to 2 million, Philadelphia from 650,000 to 1½ million.

In some cases the inventor himself became the organizer of businesses—like Thomas Edison, inventor of electrical devices. In other cases, the businessman compiled other people's inventions, like Gustavus Swift, a Chicago butcher who put together the ice-cooled railway car with the ice-cooled warehouse to make the first national meatpacking company in 1885. James Duke used a new cigarette-rolling machine that could roll, paste, and cut tubes of tobacco into 100,000 cigarettes a day; in 1890 he combined the four biggest cigarette producers to form the American Tobacco Company.

While some multimillionaires started in poverty, most did not. A study of the origins of 303 textile, railroad, and steel executives of the 1870s showed that 90 percent came from middle- or upper-class families. The Horatio Alger stories of "rags to riches" were true for a few men, but mostly a myth, and a useful myth for control.

Most of the fortune building was done legally, with the collaboration of the government and the courts. Sometimes the collaboration had to be paid for. Thomas Edison promised New Jersey politicians \$1,000 each in return for favorable legislation. Daniel Drew and Jay Gould spent \$1 million to bribe the New York legislature to legalize their issue of \$8 million in "watered stock" (stock not representing real value) on the Erie Railroad.

The first transcontinental railroad was built with blood, sweat, politics and thievery, out of the meeting of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads. The Central Pacific started on the West Coast going east; it spent \$200,000 in Washington on bribes to get 9 million acres of free land and \$24 million in bonds, and paid \$79 million, an overpayment of \$36 million, to a construction company which really was its own. The construction was done by three thousand Irish and ten thousand Chinese, over a period of four years, working for one or two dollars a day.

The Union Pacific started in Nebraska going west. It had been given 12 million acres of free land and \$27 million in government bonds. It created the Credit Mobilier company and gave them \$94 million for construction when the actual cost was \$44 million. Shares were sold cheaply to Congressmen to prevent investigation. This was at the suggestion of Massachusetts Congressman Oakes Ames, a shovel manufacturer and director of Credit Mobilier, who said: "There is no difficulty in getting men to look after their own property." The Union Pacific used twenty thousand workers—war veterans and Irish immigrants, who laid 5 miles of track a day and died by the hundreds in the heat, the cold, and the battles with Indians opposing the invasion of their territory.

Both railroads used longer, twisting routes to get subsidies from towns they went through. In 1869, amid music and speeches, the two crooked lines met in Utah.

The wild fraud on the railroads led to more control of railroad finances by bankers, who wanted more stability—profit by law rather than by theft. By the 1890s, most of the country's railway mileage was concentrated in six huge systems. Four of these were completely or partially controlled by the House of Morgan, and two others by the bankers Kuhn, Loeb, and Company.

J. P. Morgan had started before the war, as the son of a banker who began selling stocks for the railroads for good commissions. During the Civil War he bought five thousand rifles for \$3.50 each from an army arsenal, and sold them to a general in the field for \$22 each. The rifles were defective and would shoot off the thumbs of the soldiers using them. A congressional committee noted this in the small print of an obscure report, but a federal judge upheld the deal as the fulfillment of a valid legal contract.

Morgan had escaped military service in the Civil War by paying \$300 to a substitute. So did John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Philip Armour, Jay Gould, and James Mellon. Mellon's father had written to him that "a man may be a patriot without risking his own life or sacrificing his health. There are plenty of lives less valuable."

It was the firm of Drexel, Morgan and Company that was given a U.S. government contract to float a bond issue of \$260 million. The government could have sold the bonds directly; it chose to pay the bankers \$5 million in commission.

On January 2, 1889, as Gustavus Myers reports:

... a circular marked "Private and Confidential" was issued by the three banking houses of Drexel, Morgan & Company, Brown Brothers & Company, and Kidder, Peabody & Company. The most painstaking care was exercised that this document should not find its way into the press or otherwise become public. . . . Why this fear? Because the circular was an invitation . . . to the great railroad magnates to assemble at Morgan's house, No. 219 Madison Avenue, there to form, in the phrase of the day, an iron-clad combination . . . a compact which would efface competition among certain railroads, and unite those interests in an agreement by which the people of the United States would be bled even more effectively than before.

There was a human cost to this exciting story of financial ingenuity. That year, 1889, records of the Interstate Commerce Commission showed that 22,000 railroad workers were killed or injured.

In 1895 the gold reserve of the United States was depleted, while twenty-six New York City banks had \$129 million in gold in their vaults. A syndicate of bankers headed by J. P. Morgan & Company, August Belmont & Company, the National City Bank, and others offered to give the government gold in exchange for bonds. President Grover Cleveland agreed. The bankers immediately resold the bonds at higher prices, making \$18 million profit.

A journalist wrote: "If a man wants to buy beef, he must go to the butcher. . . . If Mr. Cleveland wants much gold, he must go to the big banker."

While making his fortune, Morgan brought rationality and organization to the national economy. He kept the system stable. He said: "We do not want financial convulsions and have one thing one day and another thing another day." He linked railroads to one another, all of them to banks, banks to insurance companies. By 1900, he controlled 100,000 miles of railroad, half the country's mileage.

Three insurance companies dominated by the Morgan group had a billion dollars in assets. They had \$50 million a year to invest—money given by ordinary people for their insurance policies. Louis Brandeis, describing this in his book *Other People's Money* (before he became a Supreme Court justice), wrote: "They control the people through the people's own money."

John D. Rockefeller started as a bookkeeper in Cleveland, became a merchant, accumulated money, and decided that, in the new industry of oil, who controlled the oil refineries controlled the industry. He bought his first oil refinery in 1862, and by 1870 set up Standard Oil Company of Ohio, made secret agreements with railroads to ship his oil with them if they gave him rebates—discounts—on their prices, and thus drove competitors out of business.

One independent refiner said: "If we did not sell out. . . we would be crushed out. . . There was only one buyer on the market and we had to sell at their terms." Memos like this one passed among Standard Oil officials: "Wilkerson & Co. received car of oil Monday 13th. . . Please turn another screw." A rival refinery in Buffalo was rocked by a small explosion arranged by Standard Oil officials with the refinery's chief mechanic.

The Standard Oil Company, by 1899, was a holding company which controlled the stock of many other companies. The capital was \$110 million, the profit was \$45 million a year, and John D. Rockefeller's fortune was estimated at \$200 million. Before long he would move into iron, copper, coal, shipping, and banking (Chase Manhattan Bank). Profits would be \$81 million a year, and the Rockefeller fortune would total two billion dollars.

Andrew Carnegie was a telegraph clerk at seventeen, then secretary to the head of the Pennsylvania Railroad, then a broker in Wall Street selling railroad bonds for huge commissions, and was soon a millionaire. He went to London in 1872, saw the new Bessemer method of producing steel, and returned to the United States to build a million-dollar steel plant. Foreign competition was kept out by a high tariff conveniently set by Congress, and by 1880 Carnegie was producing 10,000 tons of steel a month, making \$1½ million a year in profit. By 1900 he was making \$40 million a year, and that year, at a dinner party, he agreed to sell his steel company to J. P. Morgan. He scribbled the price on a note: \$492,000,000.

Morgan then formed the U.S. Steel Corporation, combining Carnegie's corporation with others. He sold stocks and bonds for \$1,300,000,000 (about 400 million more than the combined worth of the companies) and took a fee of 150 million for arranging the consolidation. How could dividends be paid to all those stockholders and bondholders? By making sure Congress passed tariffs keeping out foreign steel; by closing off competition and maintaining the price at \$28 a ton; and by working 200,000 men twelve hours a day for wages that barely kept their families alive.

And so it went, in industry after industry—shrewd, efficient businessmen building empires, choking out competition, maintaining high prices, keeping wages low, using government subsidies. These industries were the first beneficiaries of the "welfare state." By the turn of the century, American Telephone and telegraph had a monopoly of the nation's telephone system, International Harvester made 85 percent of all farm machinery, and in every other industry

resources became concentrated, controlled. The banks had interests in so many of these monopolies as to create an interlocking network of powerful corporation directors, each of whom sat on the boards of many other corporations. According to a Senate report of the early twentieth century, Morgan at his peak sat on the board of forty-eight corporations; Rockefeller, thirty-seven corporations.

Meanwhile, the government of the United States was behaving almost exactly as Karl Marx described a capitalist state: pretending neutrality to maintain order, but serving the interests of the rich. Not that the rich agreed among themselves; they had disputes over policies. But the purpose of the state was to settle upper-class disputes peacefully, control lower-class rebellion, and adopt policies that would further the long-range stability of the system. The arrangement between Democrats and Republicans to elect Rutherford Hayes in 1877 set the tone. Whether Democrats or Republicans won, national policy would not change in any important way.

When Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, ran for President in 1884, the general impression in the country was that he opposed the power of monopolies and corporations, and that the Republican party, whose candidate was James Blaine, stood for the wealthy. But when Cleveland defeated Blaine, Jay Gould wired him: "I feel . . . that the vast business interests of the country will be entirely safe in your hands." And he was right.

One of Cleveland's chief advisers was William Whitney, a millionaire and corporation lawyer, who married into the Standard Oil fortune and was appointed Secretary of the Navy by Cleveland. He immediately set about to create a "steel navy," buying the steel at artificially high prices from Carnegie's plants. Cleveland himself assured industrialists that his election should not frighten them: "No harm shall come to any business interest as the result of administrative policy so long as I am President . . . a transfer of executive control from one party to another does not mean any serious disturbance of existing conditions."

The presidential election itself had avoided real issues; there was no clear understanding of which interests would gain and which would lose if certain policies were adopted. It took the usual form of election campaigns, concealing the basic similarity of the parties by dwelling on personalities, gossip, trivialities. Henry Adams, an astute literary commentator on that era, wrote to a friend about the election:

We are here plunged in politics funnier than words can express. Very great issues are involved. . . . But the amusing thing is that no one talks about real interests. By common consent they agree to let these alone. We are afraid to discuss them. Instead of this the press is engaged in a most amusing dispute whether Mr. Cleveland had an illegitimate child and did or did not live with more than one mistress.

In 1887, with a huge surplus in the treasury, Cleveland vetoed a bill appropriating \$100,000 to give relief to Texas farmers to help them buy seed grain during a drought. He said: "Federal aid in such cases . . . encourages the expectation of paternal care on the part of the government and weakens the sturdiness of

our national character." But that same year, Cleveland used his gold surplus to pay off wealthy bondholders at \$28 above the \$100 value of each bond—a gift of \$45 million.

The chief reform of the Cleveland administration gives away the secret of reform legislation in America. The Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 was supposed to regulate the railroads on behalf of the consumers. But Richard Olney, a lawyer for the Boston & Maine and other railroads, and soon to be Cleveland's Attorney General, told railroad officials who complained about the Interstate Commerce Commission that it would not be wise to abolish the Commission "from a railroad point of view." He explained:

The Commission . . . is or can be made, of great use to the railroads. It satisfies the popular clamor for a government supervision of railroads, at the same time that that supervision is almost entirely nominal. . . . The part of wisdom is not to destroy the Commission, but to utilize it.

Cleveland himself, in his 1887 State of the Union message, had made a similar point, adding a warning: "Opportunity for safe, careful, and deliberate reform is now offered; and none of us should be unmindful of a time when an abused and irritated people . . . may insist upon a radical and sweeping rectification of their wrongs."

Republican Benjamin Harrison, who succeeded Cleveland as President from 1889 to 1893, was described by Matthew Josephson, in his colorful study of the post-Civil War years, *The Politicos*: "Benjamin Harrison had the exclusive distinction of having served the railway corporations in the dual capacity of lawyer and soldier. He prosecuted the strikers [of 1877] in the federal courts . . . and he also organized and commanded a company of soldiers during the strike. . . ."

Harrison's term also saw a gesture toward reform. The Sherman Anti-Trust Act, passed in 1890, called itself "An Act to protect trade and commerce against unlawful restraints" and made it illegal to form a "combination or conspiracy" to restrain trade in interstate or foreign commerce. Senator John Sherman, author of the Act, explained the need to conciliate the critics of monopoly: "They had monopolies . . . of old, but never before such giants as in our day. You must heed their appeal or be ready for the socialist, the communist, the nihilist. Society is now disturbed by forces never felt before. . . ."

When Cleveland was elected President again in 1892, Andrew Carnegie, in Europe, received a letter from the manager of his steel plants, Henry Clay Frick: "I am very sorry for President Harrison, but I cannot see that our interests are going to be affected one way or the other by the change in administration." Cleveland, facing the agitation in the country caused by the panic and depression of 1893, used troops to break up "Coxey's Army," a demonstration of unemployed men who had come to Washington, and again to break up the national strike on the railroads the following year.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court, despite its look of somber, black-robed fairness, was doing its bit for the ruling elite. How could it be independent,

with its members chosen by the President and ratified by the Senate? How could it be neutral between rich and poor when its members were often former wealthy lawyers, and almost always came from the upper class? Early in the nineteenth century the Court laid the legal basis for a nationally regulated economy by establishing federal control over interstate commerce, and the legal basis for corporate capitalism by making the contract sacred.

In 1895 the Court interpreted the Sherman Act so as to make it harmless. It said a monopoly of sugar refining was a monopoly in manufacturing, not commerce, and so could not be regulated by Congress through the Sherman Act (*U.S. v. E. C. Knight Co.*). The Court also said the Sherman Act could be used against interstate strikes (the railway strike of 1894) because they were in restraint of trade. It also declared unconstitutional a small attempt by Congress to tax high incomes at a higher rate (*Pollock v. Farmers' Loan & Trust Company*). In later years it would refuse to break up the Standard Oil and American Tobacco monopolies, saying the Sherman Act barred only "unreasonable" combinations in restraint of trade.

A New York banker toasted the Supreme Court in 1895: "I give you, gentlemen, the Supreme Court of the United States—guardian of the dollar, defender of private property, enemy of spoliation, sheet anchor of the Republic."

Very soon after the Fourteenth Amendment became law, the Supreme Court began to demolish it as a protection for blacks, and to develop it as a protection for corporations. However, in 1877, a Supreme Court decision (*Munn v. Illinois*) approved state laws regulating the prices charged to farmers for the use of grain elevators. The grain elevator company argued it was a person being deprived of property, thus violating the Fourteenth Amendment's declaration "nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law." The Supreme Court disagreed, saying that grain elevators were not simply private property but were invested with "a public interest" and so could be regulated.

One year after that decision, the American Bar Association, organized by lawyers accustomed to serving the wealthy, began a national campaign of education to reverse the Court decision. Its presidents said, at different times: "If trusts are a defensive weapon of property interests against the communistic trend, they are desirable." And: "Monopoly is often a necessity and an advantage."

By 1886, they succeeded. State legislatures, under the pressure of aroused farmers, had passed laws to regulate the rates charged farmers by the railroads. The Supreme Court that year (*Wabash v. Illinois*) said states could not do this, that this was an intrusion on federal power. That year alone, the Court did away with 230 state laws that had been passed to regulate corporations.

By this time the Supreme Court had accepted the argument that corporations were "persons" and their money was property protected by the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Supposedly, the Amendment had been passed to protect Negro rights, but of the Fourteenth Amendment cases brought before the Supreme Court between 1890 and 1910, nineteen dealt with the Negro, 288 dealt with corporations.

The justices of the Supreme Court were not simply interpreters of the Constitution. They were men of certain backgrounds, of certain interests. One

of them (Justice Samuel Miller) had said in 1875: "It is vain to contend with Judges who have been at the bar the advocates for forty years of railroad companies, and all forms of associated capital. . . ." In 1893, Supreme Court Justice David J. Brewer, addressing the New York State Bar Association, said:

It is the unvarying law that the wealth of the community will be in the hands of the few. . . . The great majority of men are unwilling to endure that long self-denial and saving which makes accumulations possible . . . and hence it always has been, and until human nature is remodeled always will be true, that the wealth of a nation is in the hands of a few, while the many subsist upon the proceeds of their daily toil.

This was not just a whim of the 1880s and 1890s—it went back to the Founding Fathers, who had learned their law in the era of *Blackstone's Commentaries*, which said: "So great is the regard of the law for private property, that it will not authorize the least violation of it; no, not even for the common good of the whole community."

Control in modern times requires more than force, more than law. It requires that a population dangerously concentrated in cities and factories, whose lives are filled with cause for rebellion, be taught that all is right as it is. And so, the schools, the churches, the popular literature taught that to be rich was a sign of superiority, to be poor a sign of personal failure, and that the only way upward for a poor person was to climb into the ranks of the rich by extraordinary effort and extraordinary luck.

In those years after the Civil War, a man named Russell Conwell, a graduate of Yale Law School, a minister, and author of best-selling books, gave the same lecture, "Acres of Diamonds," more than five thousand times to audiences across the country, reaching several million people in all. His message was that anyone could get rich if he tried hard enough, that everywhere, if people looked closely enough, were "acres of diamonds." A sampling:

I say that you ought to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich. . . . The men who get rich may be the most honest men you find in the community. Let me say here clearly . . . ninety-eight out of one hundred of the rich men of America are honest. That is why they are rich. That is why they are trusted with money. That is why they carry on great enterprises and find plenty of people to work with them. It is because they are honest men. . . .

I sympathize with the poor, but the number of poor who are to be sympathized with is very small. To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins . . . is to do wrong . . . let us remember there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings. . . .

Conwell was a founder of Temple University. Rockefeller was a donor to colleges all over the country and helped found the University of Chicago. Huntington, of the Central Pacific, gave money to two Negro colleges, Hampton Institute and Tuskegee Institute. Carnegie gave money to colleges and to libraries.

Johns Hopkins was founded by a millionaire merchant, and millionaires Cornelius Vanderbilt, Ezra Cornell, James Duke, and Leland Stanford created universities in their own names.

The rich, giving part of their enormous earnings in this way, became known as philanthropists. These educational institutions did not encourage dissent; they trained the middlemen in the American system—the teachers, doctors, lawyers, administrators, engineers, technicians, politicians—those who would be paid to keep the system going, to be loyal buffers against trouble.

In the meantime, the spread of public school education enabled the learning of writing, reading, and arithmetic for a whole generation of workers, skilled and semiskilled, who would be the literate or force of the new industrial age. It was important that these people learn obedience to authority. A journalist observer of the schools in the 1890s wrote: “The unkindly spirit of the teacher is strikingly apparent; the pupils, being completely subjugated to her will, are silent and motionless, the spiritual atmosphere of the classroom is damp and chilly.”

Back in 1859, the desire of mill owners in the town of Lowell that their workers be educated was explained by the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education:

The owners of factories are more concerned than other classes and interests in the intelligence of their laborers. When the latter are well-educated and the former are disposed to deal justly, controversies and strikes can never occur, nor can the minds of the masses be prejudiced by demagogues and controlled by temporary and factious considerations.

Joel Spring, in his book *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*, says: “The development of a factory-like system in the nineteenth-century schoolroom was not accidental.”

This continued into the twentieth century, when William Bagley’s *Classroom Management* became a standard teacher training text, reprinted thirty times. Bagley said: “One who studies educational theory aright can see in the mechanical routine of the classroom the educative forces that are slowly transforming the child from a little savage into a creature of law and order, fit for the life of civilized society.”

It was in the middle and late nineteenth century that high schools developed as aids to the industrial system, that history was widely required in the curriculum to foster patriotism. Loyalty oaths, teacher certification, and the requirement of citizenship were introduced to control both the educational and the political quality of teachers. Also, in the latter part of the century, school officials—not teachers—were given control over textbooks. Laws passed by the states barred certain kinds of textbooks. Idaho and Montana, for instance, forbade textbooks propagating “political” doctrines, and the Dakota territory ruled that school libraries could not have “partisan political pamphlets or books.”

Against this gigantic organization of knowledge and education for orthodoxy and obedience, there arose a literature of dissent and protest, which had

to make its way from reader to reader against great obstacles. Henry George, a self-educated workingman from a poor Philadelphia family, who became a newspaperman and an economist, wrote a book that was published in 1879 and sold millions of copies, not only in the United States, but all over the world. His book *Progress and Poverty* argued that the basis of wealth was land, that this was becoming monopolized, and that a single tax on land, abolishing all others, would bring enough revenue to solve the problem of poverty and equalize wealth in the nation. Readers may not have been persuaded of his solutions, but they could see in their own lives the accuracy of his observations:

It is true that wealth has been greatly increased, and that the average of comfort, leisure and refinement has been raised; but these gains are not general. In them the lowest class do not share. . . . This association of poverty with progress is the great enigma of our times. . . . There is a vague but general feeling of disappointment; an increased bitterness among the working classes; a widespread feeling of unrest and brooding revolution. . . . The civilized world is trembling on the verge of a great movement. Either it must be a leap upward, which will open the way to advances yet undreamed of, or it must be a plunge downward which will carry us back toward barbarism. . . .

A different kind of challenge to the economic and social system was given by Edward Bellamy, a lawyer and writer from western Massachusetts, who wrote, in simple, intriguing language, a novel called *Looking Backward*, in which the author falls asleep and wakes up in the year 2000, to find a socialistic society in which people work and live cooperatively. *Looking Backward*, which described socialism vividly, lovingly, sold a million copies in a few years, and over a hundred groups were organized around the country to try to make the dream come true.

It seemed that despite the strenuous efforts of government, business, the church, the schools, to control their thinking, millions of Americans were ready to consider harsh criticism of the existing system, to contemplate other possible ways of living. They were helped in this by the great movements of workers and farmers that swept the country in the 1880s and 1890s. These movements went beyond the scattered strikes and tenants' struggles of the period 1830–1877. . . . They were nationwide movements, more threatening than before to the ruling elite, more dangerously suggestive. It was a time when revolutionary organizations existed in major American cities, and revolutionary talk was in the air.

Was There Ever Such a Business!

The industrial empires that were created by the robber barons appeared more and more threatening in their economic power as they merged into ever-larger companies. In the latter half of the 1890s, this trend toward consolidation accelerated. In 1897 there were 69 corporate mergers; in 1898 there were 303; the next year 1,208. Of the seventy-three “trusts” with capitalization of more than \$10 million in 1900, two-thirds had been created in the previous three years.

In 1901 J. P. Morgan created the largest company of all, U.S. Steel, merging Andrew Carnegie’s empire with several other steel companies to form a new company capitalized at \$1.4 billion. The revenues of the federal government that year were a mere \$586 million. The sheer size of the enterprise stunned the world. Even the *Wall Street Journal* confessed to “uneasiness over the magnitude of the affair,” and wondered if the new corporation would mark “the high tide of industrial capitalism.” A joke made the rounds where a teacher asks a little boy about who made the world. “God made the world in 4004 B.C.,” he replied, “and it was reorganized in 1901 by J. P. Morgan.”

But when Theodore Roosevelt entered the White House in September 1901, the *laissez-faire* attitude of the federal government began to change. In 1904 the government announced that it would sue under the Sherman Antitrust Act—long thought a dead letter—to break up a new Morgan consolidation, the Northern Securities Corporation. Morgan hurried to Washington to get the matter straightened out.

“If we have done anything wrong,” Morgan told the president, fully encapsulating his idea of how the commercial world should work, “send your man to my man and they can fix it up.”

“That can’t be done,” Roosevelt replied.

“We don’t want to fix it up,” his attorney general, Philander Knox, explained. “We want to stop it.”

From that point on, the federal government would be an active referee in the marketplace, trying—not always successfully, to be sure—to balance the needs of efficiency and economies of scale against the threat of overweening power in organizations that owed allegiance only to their stockholders, not to society as a whole.

In 1907 the federal government took on the biggest “trust” of all, Standard Oil. The case reached the Supreme Court in 1910 and was decided the following

year, when the Court ruled unanimously that Standard Oil was a combination in restraint of trade. It ordered Standard Oil broken up into more than thirty separate companies.

The liberal wing of American politics hailed the decision, needless to say, but in one of the great ironies of American economic history, the effect of the ruling on the greatest fortune in the world was only to increase it. In the two years after the breakup of Standard Oil, the stock in the successor companies doubled in value, making John D. Rockefeller twice as rich as he had been before.

Nothing so epitomized the economy of the late nineteenth-century Western world as steel. Its production became the measure of a country's industrial power, and its uses were almost without limit. Its influence in other sectors of the economy, such as railroads and real estate, was immense. But steel was hardly an invention of the time. Indeed, it has been around for at least three thousand years. What was new was the cost of producing it.

Pig iron, the first step in iron and steel production, is converted into bar iron by remelting it and mixing it with ground limestone to remove still more impurities. Cast iron is then created by pouring this into molds, producing such items as frying pans, cookstoves, and construction members. Cast iron was widely used in urban construction in the antebellum period, but it had serious drawbacks. Extremely strong in compression, cast iron makes excellent columns. But, because it is very brittle, it is weak in tension, making it unsuitable for beams. For them, wrought iron was needed.

Wrought iron is made by melting pig iron and stirring it repeatedly until it achieves a pasty consistency and most of the impurities have been volatilized. The laborers who worked these furnaces were known as puddlers and were both highly skilled and highly paid. After the metal is removed from the puddling furnace, it is subjected to pressure and rolled and folded over and over—in effect, it is kneaded like bread dough—until it develops the fibrous quality that makes wrought iron much less brittle than cast iron and thus moderately strong in tension. Wrought iron is quite soft compared to cast iron but it is also ductile, able to be drawn out and hammered into various shapes, just as copper can be.

Wrought iron, of course, was much more expensive to produce than cast iron but could be used for making beams, bridges, ships, and, most important to the nineteenth-century economy after 1830, railroad rails. The Industrial Revolution simply could not have moved into high gear without large quantities of wrought iron.

Steel, which is iron alloyed with just the right amount of carbon under suitable conditions, has the good qualities of both cast and wrought iron. It is extremely strong and hard, like cast iron, while it is also malleable and withstands shock like wrought iron. And it is far stronger in tension than either, and thus makes a superb building material.

But until the mid-nineteenth century, the only way to make steel was in small batches from wrought iron, mixing the iron with carbon and heating it for a period of days. Thus its use was limited to very high-value items such as sword blades, razors, and tools, where its ability to withstand shock and take

and hold a sharp edge justified its high cost. At mid-century, roughly 250,000 tons of steel were being made by the old methods in Europe, and only about 10,000 tons in the United States.

Then, in 1856, an Englishman named Henry Bessemer (later Sir Henry) invented the Bessemer converter, which allowed steel to be made directly and quickly from pig iron. As so often happens in the history of technological development, the initial insight was the result of an accidental observation. Bessemer had developed a new type of artillery shell, but the cast-iron cannons of the day were not strong enough to handle it. He began experimenting in hopes of developing a stronger metal, and one day a gust of wind happened to hit some molten iron. The oxygen in the air, combining with the iron and carbon in the molten metal, raised the temperature of the metal and volatilized the impurities. Most of the carbon was driven off. What was left was steel.

Bessemer, realizing what had happened, immediately set about designing an industrial process that would duplicate what he had observed accidentally. His converter was a large vessel, about ten feet wide by twenty feet high, with trunnions so that its contents could be poured. It was made of steel and lined with firebrick. At the bottom, air could be blasted through holes in the firebrick into the "charge," as the mass of molten metal in the crucible was called, converting it to steel in a stupendous blast of flame and heat. With the Bessemer converter, ten to thirty tons of pig iron could be turned into steel every twelve to fifteen minutes in what is one of the most spectacular of all industrial processes.

The labor activist John A. Fitch wrote in 1910 that "there is a glamor about the making of steel. The very size of things—the immensity of the tools, the scale of production—grips the mind with an overwhelming sense of power. Blast furnaces, eighty, ninety, one hundred feet tall, gaunt and insatiable, are continually gaping to admit ton after ton of ore, fuel, and stone. Bessemer converters dazzle the eye with their leaping flames. Steel ingots at white heat, weighing thousands of pounds, are carried from place to place and tossed about like toys. . . . [C]ranes pick up steel rails or fifty-foot girders as jauntily as if their tons were ounces. These are the things that cast a spell over the visitor in these workshops of Vulcan."

One of the visitors to Henry Bessemer's steelworks in Sheffield, England, in 1872, was a young Scottish immigrant to America, Andrew Carnegie. He was mightily impressed—so impressed, in fact, that in the next thirty years he would ride the growing demand for steel to one of the greatest American fortunes.

Carnegie had been born in Dunfermline, a few miles northwest and across the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh, in 1835. His father was a hand weaver who owned his own loom, on which he made intricately patterned damask cloth. Dunfermline was a center of the damask trade, and skilled weavers such as William Carnegie could make a good living at it.

But the Industrial Revolution destroyed William Carnegie's livelihood. By the 1840s power looms could produce cloth such as damask much more cheaply than handlooms. While there had been 84,560 handloom weavers in Scotland in 1840, there would be only 25,000 ten years later. William Carnegie would not be one of them.

The elder Carnegie sank into despair, and his far tougher-minded wife took charge of the crisis. She had gotten a letter from her sister, who had immigrated to America, settling in Pittsburgh. "This country's far better for the working man," her sister wrote, "than the old one, & there is room enough & to spare, notwithstanding the thousands that flock to her borders." In 1847, when Andrew was twelve, the Carnegie family moved to Pittsburgh.

The Carnegies were in the first wave of one of the great movements of people in human history, known as the Atlantic migration. At first most of the immigrants came from the British Isles, especially Ireland after the onset of the Great Famine of the 1840s. Later Germany, Italy, and Eastern Europe provided immigrants in huge numbers, more than two million in 1900 alone.

In its size and significance the Atlantic migration was the equal of the barbarian movements in late classic times that helped bring the Roman Empire to an end. But while many of the barbarian tribes had been pushed by those behind them, the more than thirty million people who crossed the Atlantic to settle in America between 1820 and 1914 were largely pulled by the lure of economic opportunity.

Many, such as the land-starved Scandinavians who settled in the Upper Middle West, moved to rural areas and established farms. But most, at least at first, settled in the country's burgeoning cities, in the fast-spreading districts that came to be called slums (a word that came into use, in both Britain and America, about 1825). For the first time in American history, a substantial portion of the population was poor. But most of the new urban poor were not poor for long.

These slums, by modern standards, were terrible almost beyond imagination, with crime- and vermin-ridden, sunless apartments that often housed several people, sometimes several families, to a room and had only communal privies behind the buildings. In the 1900 census, when conditions in the slums had much improved from mid-century, one district in New York's Lower East Side had a population of more than fifty thousand but only about five hundred bathtubs.

Such housing, however, was no worse—and often better—than what the impoverished immigrants left behind in Europe, and as Mrs. Carnegie's sister—and millions like her—reported back home, the economic opportunities were far greater. The labor shortage so characteristic of the American economy since its earliest days had not abated. So the average stay for an immigrant family in the worst of the slums was less than fifteen years, before they were able to move to better housing in better neighborhoods and begin the climb into the American middle class.

The migration of people to the United States in search of economic opportunity has never ceased, although legal limits were placed on it beginning in the early 1920s. And this vast migration did far more than help provide the labor needed to power the American economy. It has given the United States the most ethnically diverse population of any country in the world. And because of that, it has provided the country with close personal connections with nearly every other country on the globe, an immense economic and political advantage.

The Carnegies moved into two rooms above a workshop that faced a muddy alleyway behind Mrs. Carnegie's sister's house in Allegheny City, a neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Mrs. Carnegie found work making shoes, and Mr. Carnegie worked in a cotton mill. Andrew got a job there as well, as a bobbin boy earning \$1.20 a week for twelve-hour days, six days a week.

Needless to say, it didn't take the bright and ambitious Andrew Carnegie fifteen years to start up the ladder. By 1849 he had a job as a telegraph messenger boy, earning \$2.50 a week. This gave him many opportunities to become familiar with Pittsburgh and its business establishment, and Carnegie made the most of them. Soon he was an operator, working the telegraph himself and able to interpret it by ear, writing down the messages directly. His salary was up to \$25 a month.

In 1853, in a classic example of Louis Pasteur's dictum that chance favors the prepared mind, Thomas A. Scott, general superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad, a frequent visitor to the telegraph office where Carnegie worked, needed a telegraph operator of his own to help with the system being installed by the railroad. He chose Carnegie, not yet eighteen years old. By the time Carnegie was thirty-three, in 1868, he had an annual income of \$50,000, thanks to the tutelage of Thomas Scott and numerous shrewd investments in railway sleeping cars, oil, telegraph lines, and iron manufacturing. But after his visit to Bessemer's works in Sheffield, he decided to concentrate on steel.



It had been pure chance that had brought the Carnegie family to Pittsburgh, but its comparative advantages would make it the center of the American steel industry.

Set where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers join to form the Ohio and provide easy transportation over a wide area, Pittsburgh had been founded, as so many cities west of the mountains were, as a trading post. Shortly after the Revolution, Pittsburgh began to exploit the abundant nearby sources of both iron ore and coal and specialize in manufacturing. While the rest of the country still relied on wood, coal became the dominant fuel in Pittsburgh, powering factories that were turning out glass, iron, and other energy-intensive products. As early as 1817, when the population was still only six thousand, there were 250 factories in operation, and the nascent city, with already typical American boosterism, was calling itself the "Birmingham of America." Because of the cheap coal, Pittsburgh exploited the steam engine long before it began to displace water power elsewhere, and most of its factories were steam-powered by 1830.

There was, however, a price to be paid for the cheap coal, which produces far more smoke than does wood. About 1820, when Pittsburgh was still a relatively small town, a visitor wrote that the smoke formed "a cloud which almost amounts to night and overspreads Pittsburgh with the appearance of gloom and melancholy." By the 1860s even Anthony Trollope, London-born and no stranger to coal smoke, was impressed with the pall. Looked down

on from the surrounding hills. Trollope reported, some of the tops of the churches could be seen, "But the city itself is buried in a dense cloud. I was never more in love with smoke and dirt than when I stood here and watched the darkness of night close in upon the floating soot which hovered over the house-tops of the city." As the Industrial Revolution gathered strength, other American cities became polluted with coal smoke and soot, but none so badly as Pittsburgh.

The most important coal beds in the Pittsburgh area were those surrounding the town of Connellsville, about thirty miles southeast of the city. What made Connellsville coal special was that it was nearly perfect for converting into coke. Indeed it is the best coking coal in the world.

Coke is to coal exactly what charcoal is to wood: heated in the absence of air to drive off the impurities, it becomes pure carbon and burns at an even and easily adjusted temperature. And either charcoal or coke is indispensable to iron and steel production. As the iron industry in Pittsburgh grew, it turned more and more to coke, the production of which was far more easily industrialized than was charcoal.

By the time Andrew Carnegie was moving into steel, Henry Clay Frick, who had been born in West Overton, Pennsylvania, not far from Connellsville, in 1849, was moving into coke. Like Carnegie, Frick was a very hardheaded businessman and willing to take big risks for big rewards. And like Carnegie, he was a millionaire by the time he was thirty. Unlike Carnegie, however, he had little concern with public opinion or the great social issues of the day. Carnegie always wanted to be loved and admired by society at large. Frick was perfectly willing to settle for its respect. Unlike Carnegie, he rarely granted newspaper interviews and never wrote articles for publication.

By the 1880s the Carnegie Steel Company and the H. C. Frick Company dominated their respective industries, and Carnegie was by far Frick's biggest customer. In late 1881, while Frick was on his honeymoon in New York, Carnegie, who loved surprises, suddenly proposed a merger of their companies at a family lunch one day. Frick, who had no inkling the proposal was coming, was stunned. So was Carnegie's ever-vigilant mother, now in her seventies. The silence that ensued was finally broken by what is perhaps the most famous instance of maternal concern in American business history.

"Ah, Andra," said Mrs. Carnegie in her broad Scots accent, "that's a very fine thing for Mr. Freek. But what do we get out of it?"

Needless to say, Carnegie had calculated closely what he would get out of it. First, the Carnegie Steel Company would get guaranteed supplies of coke at the best possible price; second, he would get the surpassing executive skills of Henry Clay Frick; and third, he would further the vertical integration of the steel industry in general and his company in particular.

Vertical integration simply means bringing under one corporation's control part or all of the stream of production from raw materials to distribution. It had been going on since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution (Francis Cabot Lowell had been the first to integrate spinning and weaving in a single building) but greatly accelerated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as industrialists sought economies of scale as well as of speed to cut costs.

Carnegie and Frick shared a simple management philosophy: (1) Innovate constantly and invest heavily in the latest equipment and techniques to drive down operating costs. (2) Always be the low-cost producer so as to remain profitable in bad economic times. (3) Retain most of the profits in good times to take advantage of opportunities in bad times as less efficient competitors fail.

One such opportunity arose in 1889, by which time Frick was chairman of the Carnegie steel companies (Carnegie himself never held an executive position in the companies he controlled, but as the holder of a comfortable majority of the stock, he was always the man in charge). That year Frick snapped up the troubled Duquesne Steel Works, paying for it with \$1 million in Carnegie company bonds due to mature in five years. By the time the bonds were paid off, the plant had paid for itself five times over.

Much of the technological advances that Carnegie was so quick to use came from Europe's older and more established steel industries, just as, nearly a century earlier, the American cloth industry had piggybacked on Britain's technological lead. As one of Carnegie's principal lieutenants, Captain W. M. Jones, explained to the British Iron and Steel Institute as early as 1881, "While your metallurgists as well as those of France and Germany, have been devoting their time and talents to the discovery of new processes, we have swallowed the information so generously tendered through the printed reports of the Institute, and we have selfishly devoted ourselves to beating you in output."

And beat them they did. In 1867 only 1,643 tons of Bessemer steel was produced in the United States. Thirty years later, in 1897, the tonnage produced was 7,156,957, more than Britain and Germany combined. By the turn of the century the Carnegie Steel Company alone would outproduce Britain. It would also be immensely profitable. In 1899 the Carnegie Steel Company, the low-cost producer in the prosperous and heavily protected American market, made \$21 million in profit. The following year profits doubled. No wonder Andrew Carnegie exclaimed at one point, "Was there ever such a business!"

And steel was also transforming the American urban landscape. When stone was the principal construction material of large buildings, they could not rise much above six stories, even after the elevator was perfected in the 1850s, because of the necessary thickness of the walls. It was church steeples that rose above their neighbors and punctuated the urban skyline. But as the price of steel declined steadily as the industry's efficiency rose—by the 1880s the far longer-lasting steel railroad rails cost less than the old wrought-iron rails—more and more buildings were built with steel skeletons and could soar to the sky. Between the 1880s and 1913 the record height for buildings was broken as often as every year as "skyscrapers" came to dominate American urban skylines in an awesome display of the power of steel. . . .

While the late-nineteenth-century American economy was increasingly built by and with steel, it was increasingly fueled by oil. In 1859, the year Edwin Drake drilled the first well, American production amounted to only 2,000 barrels. Ten years later it was 4.25 million and by 1900, American production would be nearly 60 million barrels. But while production rose steadily, the price of oil was chaotic, sinking as low as 10 cents a barrel—far below the

cost of the barrel itself—and soaring as high as \$13.75 during the 1860s. One reason for this was the vast number of refineries then in existence. Cleveland alone had more than thirty, many of them nickel-and-dime, ramshackle operations.

Many people, while happy to exploit the new oil business, were unwilling to make large financial commitments to it for fear that the oil would suddenly dry up. The field in northwestern Pennsylvania was very nearly the only one in the world until the 1870s, when the Baku field in what was then southern Russia opened up. There would be no major new field in the United States until the fabulous Spindletop field in Texas was first tapped in 1902.

But a firm named Rockefeller, Flagler, and Andrews, formed to exploit the burgeoning market for petroleum products, especially kerosene, took the gamble of building top-quality refineries. Like Carnegie, it intended to exploit being the low-cost producer, with all the advantages of that position. The firm also began buying up other refineries as the opportunity presented itself.

The firm realized that there was no controlling the price of crude oil but that it could control, at least partly, another important input into the price of petroleum products: transportation. It began negotiating aggressively with the railroads to give the firm rebates in return for guaranteeing high levels of traffic. It was this arrangement that often allowed the firm to undersell its competitors and still make handsome profits, further strengthening the firm's already formidable competitive position.

In 1870 one of the partners, Henry Flagler, convinced the others to change the firm from a partnership to a corporation, which would make it easier for the partners to continue to raise capital to finance their relentless expansion while retaining control. The new corporation, named Standard Oil, was capitalized at \$1 million and owned at that time about 10 percent of the country's oil refining capacity. By 1880 it would control 80 percent of a much larger industry.

The expansion of Standard Oil became one of the iconic stories of late-nineteenth-century America, as its stockholders became rich beyond imagination and its influence in the American economy spread ever wider. Indeed, the media reaction to Standard Oil and John D. Rockefeller in the Gilded Age is strikingly similar to the reaction to the triumph of Microsoft and Bill Gates a hundred years later. It is perhaps a coincidence that Rockefeller and Gates were just about the same age, their early forties, when they became household names and the living symbols of a new and, to some, threatening economic structure.

The image of Standard Oil that remains even today in the American folk memory was the product of a number of writers and editorial cartoonists who often had a political agenda to advance first and foremost. The most brilliant of these was Ida Tarbell, whose *History of the Standard Oil Company*, first published in *McClure's* magazine in 1902, vividly depicted a company ruthlessly expanding over the corporate bodies of its competitors, whose assets it gobbled up as it went.

That is by no means a wholly false picture, but it is a somewhat misleading one. For one thing, as the grip of Standard Oil relentlessly tightened on the

oil industry, prices for petroleum products *declined* steadily, dropping by two-thirds over the course of the last three decades of the nineteenth century. It is simply a myth that monopolies will raise prices once they have the power to do so. Monopolies, like everyone else, want to maximize their profits, not their prices. Lower prices, which increase demand, and increased efficiency, which cuts costs, is usually the best way to achieve the highest possible profits. What makes monopolies (and most of them today are government agencies, from motor vehicle bureaus to public schools) so economically evil is the fact that, without competitive pressure, they become highly risk-averse—and therefore shy away from innovation—and notably indifferent to their customers' convenience.

Further, Standard Oil used its position as the country's largest refiner not only to extract the largest rebates from the railroads but also to induce them to deny rebates to refiners that Standard Oil wanted to acquire. It even sometimes forced railroads to give it secret rebates not only on its own oil, but on that shipped by its competitors as well, essentially a tax on competing with Standard Oil. (This is about as close as the "robber barons" ever came to behaving like, well, robber barons.) It thus effectively presented these refiners with Hobson's choice: they could agree to be acquired, at a price set by Standard Oil, or they could be driven into bankruptcy by high transportation costs.

The acquisition price set, however, was a fair one, arrived at by a formula developed by Henry Flagler, and consistently applied. Sometimes, especially if the owners of the refinery being acquired had executive talents that Standard wished to make use of, the price was a generous one. Further, the seller had the choice of receiving cash or Standard Oil stock. Those who chose the latter—and there were hundreds—became millionaires as they rode the stock of the Standard Oil Company to capitalist glory. Those who took the cash often ended up whining to Ida Tarbell.

None of this, of course, was illegal, and that was the real problem. In the late nineteenth century people such as Rockefeller, Flagler, Carnegie, and J. P. Morgan were creating at a breathtaking pace the modern corporate economy, and thus a wholly new economic universe. They were moving far faster than society could fashion, through the usually slow-moving political process, the rules needed to govern that new universe wisely and fairly. But that must always be the case in democratic capitalism, as individuals can always act far faster than can society as a whole. Until the rules were written—largely in the first decades of the twentieth century—it was a matter of (in the words of Sir Walter Scott)

*The good old rule, the simple plan
That they should take who have the power
And they should keep who can.*

Part of the problem is that there is a large, inherent inertia in any political system, and democracy is no exception. Politicians, after all, are in the reelection business, and it is often easier to do nothing than to offend one group or another. So while the American economy had changed profoundly since the

mid-nineteenth century, the state incorporation laws, for instance, had not. As an Ohio corporation, Standard Oil was not allowed to own property in other states or to hold the stock of other corporations. As it quickly expanded throughout the Northeast, the country, and then across the globe, however, Standard Oil necessarily acquired property in other states and purchased other corporations.

The incorporation laws, largely written in an era before the railroads and telegraph had made a national economy possible, were no longer adequate to meet the needs of the new economy. To get around the outdated law, Henry Flagler, as secretary of Standard Oil, had himself appointed as trustee to hold the property or stock that Standard Oil itself could not legally own. By the end of the 1870s, however, Standard owned dozens of properties and companies in other states, each, in theory, held by a trustee who was in some cases Flagler and in other cases other people. It was a hopelessly unwieldy corporate structure.

In all probability, it was Flagler—a superb executive—who found the solution. Instead of each subsidiary company having a single trustee, with these trustees scattered throughout the Standard Oil empire, the same three men, all at the Cleveland headquarters, were appointed trustees for all the subsidiary companies. In theory, they controlled all of Standard Oil's assets outside Ohio. In fact, of course, they did exactly what they were told.

Thus was born the business trust, a form that was quickly imitated by other companies that were becoming national in scope. The “trusts” would be one of the great bogeymen of American politics for the next hundred years, but, ironically, the actual trust form of organization devised by Henry Flagler lasted only until 1889. That year New Jersey—seeking a source of new tax revenue—became the first state to modernize its incorporation laws and bring them into conformity with the new economic realities. New Jersey now permitted holding companies and interstate activities, and companies flocked to incorporate there, as, later, they would flock to Delaware, to enjoy the benefits of a corporation-friendly legal climate. Standard Oil of New Jersey quickly became the center of the Rockefeller interests, and the Standard Oil Trust, in the legal sense, disappeared.



With the growth of American industry, the nature of American foreign trade changed drastically. The United States remained, as it remains today, a formidable exporter of agricultural and mineral products. Two new ones were even added in the post-Civil War era: petroleum and copper. But it also became a major exporter of manufactured goods that it had previously imported. In 1865 they had constituted only 22.78 percent of American exports. By the turn of the twentieth century they were 31.65 percent of a vastly larger trade. The percentage of world trade, meanwhile, that was American in origin doubled in these years to about 12 percent of total trade.

Nowhere was this more noticeable than in iron and steel products, the cutting edge of late-nineteenth-century technology. Before the Civil War the United States exported only \$6 million worth of iron and steel manufactures

a year. In 1900 it exported \$121,914,000 worth of locomotives, engines, rails, electrical machinery, wire, pipes, metalworking machinery, boilers, and other goods. Even sewing machines and typewriters were being exported in quantity. . . .

This country has never developed an aristocracy, because the concept of primogeniture, with the eldest son inheriting the bulk of the fortune, never took hold. Thus great fortunes have always been quickly dispersed among heirs in only a few generations. The American super rich are therefore always nouveau riche and often act accordingly, giving new meaning in each generation to the phrase *conspicuous consumption*. In the Gilded Age, they married European titles, built vast summer cottages and winter retreats that cost millions but were occupied only a few weeks a year. . . .



POSTSCRIPT



Were the Nineteenth-Century Big Businessmen “Robber Barons”?

The field of business history can be divided into three major interpretations: (1) the robber baron or anti-big business viewpoint; (2) the entrepreneurial statesman or pro-big business account; (3) the organizational or bureaucratic functional framework that deems irrelevant the robber baron and entrepreneurial arguments.

The robber baron interpretation emerged from the muckrakers of the Progressive Era (1897–1917) who were critical of the immoral methods used by businessmen such as J. J. Hill, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie to gain control over the railroads, the oil, and steel processing industries. The book that did the most to fix the stereotype of the late nineteenth-century businessman as a predator was Matthew Josephson’s *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861–1901* (Harcourt Brace and World, 1934, 1962). He admitted that “large-scale production replaced the scattered, decentralized mode of production; industrial enterprises became more concentrated, more ‘efficient’ technically and essentially ‘cooperative’ where they had been purely individualistic and lamentably wasteful.” While this may have been a good thing, Josephson argues that the negatives far outweighed the positives. Ultimately, he concluded, the “extremes of management and stupidity would make themselves felt. . . . The alternations of prosperity and poverty would be more violent and mercurial, speculation and breakdown each more excessive; while the inherent contradictions within society pressed with increasing intolerable force against the bonds of the old order.”

Josephson’s view was challenged by the new group of business historians who emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, but they were isolated from mainstream historians so that some form of the “robber baron” interpretation continued into the high school and college texts through the 1960s. New left historians such as Gabriel Kolko’s *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History* (Macmillan, 1963) kept it alive as he blamed big business for the militarism, poverty, and racism that still existed in the 1960s.

In 1981, Howard Zinn, a socialist, Marxist, and an activist historian wrote *A People’s History of the United States* (HarperCollins, 1980, 1999). The book became an instant success and sold over a million copies. In one of the ironies of history, it made Zinn, the anti-business Marxist, a millionaire. Upon his death in February 2010, at the age of 87, *A People’s History of the United States* climbed to number four on *The New York Times’* paperback nonfiction bestseller list.

Zinn’s chapter, reprinted as the first reading, is self-explanatory. He details all the arguments used earlier by Josephson and Kolko. He believes

that big businessmen led by Rockefeller and Carnegie worked hand in hand with the financier J. P. Morgan who functioned as a quasi-Federal Reserve System before it was created in 1913. Morgan's banking house financed numerous mergers and controlled most of the boards of these corporations through the "interlocking directorates" of Morgan's officials who staffed the pools and trusts that held the stock.

Professor Zinn also believes that both political parties, the Congress and Presidents Cleveland and Harrison, fought over such non-important issues, such as the tariff and Cleveland's mistresses and illegitimate child, and ignored important issues such as the low wages, poor housing, and horrible safety issues for the working class. In Zinn's view, the state militia, the courts, the churches, and even the education system, both colleges and high schools, were designed to produce executives for the corporations and workers for the factories. In short, Zinn's view of American history, especially this period, is very depressing. Critics have faulted Zinn's interpretation as too one-sided and lacks the diversity of viewpoints, especially divisions between small and large businessmen and small and large farmers, the pressures put upon Congress, the Justice Department who staffed the Antitrust Division in charge of enforcing the Sherman Act, and the members of the Interstate Commerce Commission who were supposed to regulate the railroads.

The Josephson-Zinn interpretation did not go unchallenged. The Harvard Business School in the 1930s and writers such as the famous journalist and popular historian Allan Nevins, whose two-volume biography of John D. Rockefeller in 1940 and rewritten in 1953, stressed his positive attributes. Rockefeller was not a robber baron, maintained Nevins, but an entrepreneurial statesman who imposed upon American industry "a more rational and efficient pattern." He and others like him were motivated not by wealth but by competition, achievement, and the "imposition of their will over a given environment." Had it not been for men like Rockefeller, the industries that developed in steel, oil, textiles, chemicals and electricity gave us such a competitive advantage that we were able to win both world wars in the twentieth century.

The two interpretations came to a head in 1954 when the *Saturday Review* published the enlightened article "Should American History Be Rewritten? A Debate Between Allan Nevins and Matthew Josephson," vol. 37 (February 6, 1954), pp. 7-10, 44-49. See also Hal Bridges, "The Robber Baron Concept in American History," *Business History Review*, vol. 32 (Spring 1958), pp. 1-13, and Maury Klein's critique of Josephson, "A Robber Historian," *Forbes* (October 26, 1987). John S. Gordon's chapter in Carnegie and Rockefeller's *An Empire of Wealth* is the antithesis of Zinn. An independent scholar who has written numerous books and articles, especially for *American Heritage*, Gordon extols a highly positive view of the men of big business. He stresses the innovations in production and organization as well as the new technologies that Carnegie used, for example, when he brought to America from Scotland the Bessemer steel process used to refine steel into iron ore. Gordon definitely takes the pro-business stance. He argues that monopolies in the private sector, want to maximize profits, not their prices, "It is simply a myth that they will raise prices once they have the power to do so." For example, as Standard Oil became the

sole monopoly in the oil industry, "prices for petroleum products declined steadily, dropping by two-thirds over the course of the last three decades of the nineteenth century."

Critics of Gordon and the entrepreneurial statesmen point of view challenged Gordon's rosy picture of development and question whether workers could have been paid a living wage, and provided a clean and safe working environment and at the same time have produced a creative and dynamic economy.

The third school of business history was the organizational school. Led by Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., this view avoided the morality tale between robber barons and entrepreneurs and stressed how large-scale corporations vertically organized themselves with departments that stretched from production, accounting, marketing, sales and distribution. Key to Chandler's view was the importance of the new national urban markets that had developed by 1900. The best place to start with Chandler is "The Beginning of 'Big Business' in American Industry," *Business History Review*, vol. 33 (Spring 1959), pp. 1–31.

Chandler almost single-handedly reshaped the way in which historians write about corporations when he employed organizational theories of decision making borrowed from the sociologists and applied them to case studies of corporate America. For example, see *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of American Industrial Enterprise* (MIT Press, 1962); *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Harvard University Press, 1977); and *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Harvard University Press, 1990). Chandler's most important essays are collected in Thomas K. McCraw, ed., *The Essential Alfred Chandler: Essays Toward a Historical Theory of Big Business* (Harvard Business School Press, 1988). For an assessment of Chandler's approach and contributions, see Louis Galambos, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History," *Business History Review* (Autumn 1970) and Thomas K. McCraw, "The Challenge of Alfred D. Chandler, Jr.: Retrospect and Prospect," *Reviews in American History* (March 1987).

Chandler's critics have complained that he ignored the role of the individual entrepreneur in developing particular industries. In "Entrepreneurial Persistence through the Bureaucratic Age," *Business History Review*, vol. 51 (Winter 1977), pp. 415–43, Professor Harold C. Livesay tries to reconcile an organizational and entrepreneurial approach via case studies of Andrew Carnegie, Michigan National Bank President Howard Stoddard, and Henry Ford II and his post-World War II revival of the Ford Motor Company. Two important articles examine the main currents in business history today. Mary Klein, "Coming Full Circle: The Study of Big Business since 1950," *Enterprise and Society*, vol. 2 (September 2001), pp. 425–460, contrasts the broader external approach pushed by Professors Thomas C. Cochran and William Miller, *The Age of Enterprise: A Social History of Industrial America*, revised ed. (Harper & Row, 1961) with the internal bureaucratic approach of Alfred Chandler. In a very detailed and sophisticated article useful for history majors with a business emphasis, see Naomi R. Lamoreaux, Daniel M. G. Raff, and Peter Temin, "Beyond Markets and Hierarchies: Toward a New Synthesis of Business History," *American Historical Review* (April 2003), pp. 404–433. The authors argue

that some of Chandler's vertically integrated corporations lost control of their markets in the 1980s and, therefore, more flexible frameworks needed to be developed to explain current and past behaviors of corporations.

Biographies of the titans of industry remain popular with the general public. The authors are sympathetic to their subject. See Joseph Frazier Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (Oxford University Press, 1970); Harold C. Livesay, *Andrew Carnegie and the Rise of Big Business* (Little, Brown, 1975, 1990); James T. Baker, *Andrew Carnegie: Robber Baron as American Hero* (Wadsworth, Thompson Learning, 2003); Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (Random House, 1998); Jean Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier* (Random House, 1999); Robert Sobel and David B. Sicilia, *The Entrepreneurs: An American Adventure* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1986); and Harold C. Livesay, *American Made: Men Who Shaped the American Economy* (Little, Brown, 1986).

Finally, labor historian Steve Fraser offers a critical review of T. J. Stiles, *The First Tycoon* (Knopf, 2009) in "The Misunderstood Robber Baron," *The Nation* (November 30, 2009). If Cornelius Vanderbilt, builder of the Erie Railroad, was lionized as a great entrepreneur, how much concern did he show for the thousands of workers who were killed building the railroad because they worked excessively long hours for paltry wages? See also the exchange between Stiles and Fraser in letters to the editor, *The Nation* (December 14, 2009).



ISSUE 4



Was the American Labor Movement Radical?

YES: Leon Fink, from *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (University of Illinois Press, 1983)

NO: Carl N. Degler, from *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America*, 3rd ed. (Harper & Row, 1984)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Although stopping short of a frontal attack on capitalism, Professor Leon Fink argues that the Knights of Labor envisioned a kind of workingman's democracy that would ensure minimal standards of health and safety at the industrial workplace.

NO: Historian Carl N. Degler maintains that the American labor movement accepted capitalism and reacted conservatively to the radical organizational changes brought about in the economic system by big business.

The two major labor unions that developed in the late nineteenth century were the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Because of hostility toward labor unions, the Knights of Labor functioned for 12 years as a secret organization. Between 1879 and 1886 the Knights of Labor grew from 10,000 to 700,000 members. Idealistic in many of its aims, the union supported social reforms such as equal pay for men and women, the prohibition of alcohol and the abolition of conflict and child labor. Economic reforms included the development of workers' cooperatives, public ownership of utilities, and a more moderate, eight-hour workday. The Knights declined after 1886 for several reasons. Although it was opposed to strikes, the union received a black eye as did the whole labor movement when it was blamed for the bombs that were thrown at the police during the 1886 Haymarket Square riot in Chicago. According to most historians, other reasons that are usually associated with the decline of the Knights include the failure of some cooperative businesses, conflict between skilled and unskilled workers, and, most important, competition from the AFL. By 1890 the Knight's membership had dropped to 100,000. It died in 1917.

A number of skilled unions got together in 1896 and formed the AFL. Samuel Gompers was elected its first president, and his philosophy permeated the AFL during his 37 years in office. He pushed for practical reforms—better hours, wages, and working conditions. Unlike the Knights, the AFL avoided associations with political parties, workers' cooperatives, unskilled workers, immigrants, and women. Decision-making power was in the hands of locals rather than the central board. Gompers was heavily criticized by his contemporaries, and later by historians, for his narrow craft unionism. But despite the depression of the 1890s, membership increased from 190,000 to 500,000 by 1900, to 1,500,000 by 1904, and to 2,000,000 by the eve of World War I.

Gompers's cautiousness is best understood in the context of his times. The national and local governments were in the hands of men who were sympathetic to the rise of big business and hostile to the attempts of labor to organize. Whether it was the railroad strike of 1877, the Homestead steel strike of 1892, or the Pullman car strike of 1894, the pattern of repression was always the same. Companies would cut wages, workers would go out on strike, scab workers would be brought in, fights would break out, companies would receive court injunctions, and the police and state and federal militia would beat up the unionized workers. After a strike was broken, workers would lose their jobs or would accept pay cuts and longer workdays.

On the national level, Theodore Roosevelt became the first President to show any sympathy for the workers. As a police commissioner in New York City and later as governor of New York, Roosevelt observed firsthand the deplorable occupational and living conditions of the workers. Although he avoided recognition of the collective bargaining rights of labor unions, Roosevelt forced the anthracite coal owners in Pennsylvania to mediate before an arbitration board for an equitable settlement of a strike with the mine workers.

In 1905, a coalition of socialists and industrial unionists formed America's most radical labor union: the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). There were frequent splits within this union and much talk of violence. But in practice, the IWW was more interested in organizing unskilled workers into industrial unions than in fighting, as were the earlier Knights of Labor and the later Congress of Industrial Organizations. Strikes were encouraged to improve the daily conditions of the workers through long-range goals, which included reducing the power of the capitalists by increasing the power of the workers.

In the first selection, Professor Leon Fink argues that the Knights of Labor envisioned a kind of workingmen's democracy which would bring about minimal standards of health and safety in the industrial workplace. Although the Knights didn't espouse socialism, the union did search for alternatives to the hourly wage system, which had become a standard feature in the new assembly line factories. In the second reading, Stanford University Emeritus Professor Carl N. Degler believes that American workers accepted capitalism and, like business unionist Samuel Gompers, were interested in obtaining better hours, wages, and working conditions. Socialism was rejected, he argues, because workers believed they were achieving economic and social mobility under capitalism.

Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics

Two well-traveled routes into the Gilded Age are likely to leave the present-day visitor with the same puzzled and unsatisfied feeling. One itinerary pursuing the political history of the era begins in 1876 with the official end of Reconstruction and winds through the election of William McKinley in 1896. The other route, this one taking a social prospectus, departs with the great railroad strikes of 1877 and picks its way through the drama and debris of an industrializing society. The problem is that the two paths never seem to meet. Compartmentalization of subject matter in most textbooks into "politics," "economic change," "social movements," and so on only papers over the obvious unanswered question—what impact did an industrial revolution of unprecedented magnitude have on the world's most democratic nation?

The question, of course, permits no simple answer. By most accounts the political era inaugurated in 1876 appears, except for the Populist outburst of the mid-1890s, as a conservative, comparatively uneventful time sandwiched between the end of Radical Reconstruction and the new complexities of the twentieth century. With the Civil War's financial and social settlement out of the way, a society desperately wanting to believe that it had removed its last barriers to social harmony by and large lapsed into a period of ideological torpor and narrow-minded partisanship. Political contests, while still the national pastime (national elections regularly drew 80 percent, state and local elections 60–80 percent of eligible voters, 1876–96), seem to have dwelt less on major social issues than on simple party fealty. Fierce rivalries engendered by the sectional, ethnocultural, and economic interest group divisions among the American people increasingly were presided over and manipulated by party professionals. To be sure, genuine policy differences—e.g., over how best to encourage both industry and trade, the degree of danger posed by the saloon, honesty in government—fueled a venomous political rhetoric. As echoed by both national parties from the late 1870s through the early 1890s, however, a complacent political consensus had emerged, stressing individual opportunity,

From *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* by Leon Fink (University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. xi–xiv, 3–4, 5–9, 11, 12–13, 14, 228–230 (excerpts). Copyright © 1983 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Reprinted by permission of University of Illinois Press.

rights in property, and economic freedom from constraints. The welfare of the American Dream, in the minds of both Democrats and Republicans, required no significant governmental tinkering or popular mobilization. Acknowledging the parties' avoidance of changing social and economic realities, a most compelling recent commentary on the late nineteenth-century polity suggests that the "distinct, social need" of the time was in part filled by heightened partisanship and the act of political participation itself.

In contrast to the ritualistic quality of politics, the contemporary social world seems positively explosive. Consolidation of America's industrial revolution touched off an era of unexampled change and turmoil. As work shifted decisively away from agriculture between 1870 and 1890, the manufacturing sector, with a spectacular increase in the amount of capital invested, the monetary value of product, and the number employed, sparked a great economic leap forward. By 1880 Carroll D. Wright, U.S. Commissioner of Labor Statistics, found that the application of steam and water power to production had so expanded that "at least four-fifths" of the "nearly 3 millions of people employed in the mechanical industries of this country" were working under the factory system. It was not just the places of production but the people working within them that represented a dramatic departure from preindustrial America. While only 13 percent of the total population was classified as foreign-born in 1880, 42 percent of those engaged in manufacturing and extractive industries were immigrants. If one adds to this figure workers of foreign parentage and of Afro-American descent, the resulting nonnative/nonwhite population clearly encompassed the great majority of America's industrial work force. Not only, therefore, had the industrial revolution turned a small minority in America's towns and cities into the direct employers of their fellow citizens, but the owners of industry also differed from their employees in national and cultural background. This sudden transformation of American communities, accompanied as it was by a period of intense price competition and unregulated swings in the business cycle, provided plentiful ingredients for social unrest, first manifest on a national scale in the railroad strike of 1877.

The quintessential expression of the labor movement in the Gilded Age was the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, the first mass organization of the American working class. Launched as one of several secret societies among Philadelphia artisans in the late 1860s, the Knights grew in spurts by the accretion of miners (1874–79) and skilled urban tradesmen (1879–85). While the movement formally concentrated on moral and political education, cooperative enterprise, and land settlement, members found it a convenient vehicle for trade union action, particularly in the auspicious economic climate following the depression of the 1870s. Beginning in 1883, local skirmishes escalated into highly publicized confrontations with railroad financier Jay Gould, a national symbol of new corporate power. Strikes by Knights of Labor telegraphers and railroad shopmen touched off an unprecedented wave of strikes and boycotts that carried on into the renewed depression in 1884–85 and spread to thousands of previously unorganized semiskilled and unskilled laborers, both urban and rural. The Southwest Strike on Gould's Missouri and Texas-Pacific railroad lines together with massive urban eight-hour

campaigns in 1886 swelled a tide of unrest that has become known as the "Great Upheaval." The turbulence aided the efforts of organized labor, and the Knights exploded in size, reaching more than three-quarters of a million members. Although membership dropped off drastically in the late 1880s, the Knights remained a powerful force in many areas through the mid-1890s. Not until the Congress of Industrial Organizations revival of the 1930s would the organized labor movement again lay claim to such influence within the working population.

At its zenith the movement around the Knights helped to sustain a national debate over the social implications of industrial capitalism. Newspaper editors, lecturers, and clergymen everywhere addressed the Social Question. John Swinton, the leading labor journalist of the day, counted Karl Marx, Hawaii's King Kalakaua, and the Republican party's chief orator, Robert G. Ingersoll, among the enlightened commentators on the subject. Even the U.S. Senate in 1883 formally investigated "Relations between Labor and Capital." Nor was the debate conducted only from on high. In laboring communities across the nation the local press as well as private correspondence bore witness to no shortage of eloquence from the so-called inarticulate. One of the busiest terminals of communications was the Philadelphia office of Terence Vincent Powderly, General Master Workman of the Knights of Labor. Unsolicited personal letters expressing the private hopes and desperations of ordinary American citizens daily poured in upon the labor leader: an indigent southern mother prayed that her four young girls would grow up to find an honorable living, an unemployed New York cakemaker applied for a charter as an organizer, a Cheyenne chief sought protection for his people's land, an inventor offered to share a new idea for the cotton gin on condition that it be used cooperatively.

Amidst spreading agitation, massed strength, and growing public awareness, the labor issues ultimately took tangible political form. Wherever the Knights of Labor had organized by the mid-1880s, it seemed, contests over power and rights at the workplace evolved into a community-wide fissure over control of public policy as well. Indeed, in some 200 towns and cities from 1885 to 1888 the labor movement actively fielded its own political slates. Adopting "Workingmen's," "United Labor," "Union Labor," "People's Party," and "Independent" labels for their tickets, or alternatively taking over one of the standing two-party organizations in town, those local political efforts revealed deep divisions within the contemporary political culture and evoked sharp reactions from traditional centers of power. Even as manufacturers' associations met labor's challenge at the industrial level, business response at the political level was felt in the dissolution of party structures, creation of antilabor citizens' coalitions, new restrictive legislation, and extralegal law and order leagues. In their ensemble, therefore, the political confrontations of the 1880s offer a most dramatic point of convergence between the world leading out of 1876 and that stretching from 1877. As a phenomenon simultaneously entwined in the political and industrial history of the Gilded Age the subject offers an opportunity to redefine the main issues of the period. . . .

Working-Class Radicalism in the Gilded Age: *Defining a Political Culture*

The labor movement of the Gilded Age, not unlike its nineteenth-century British counterpart, spoke a “language of class” that was “as much political as economic.” In important ways an eighteenth-century republican political inheritance still provided the basic vocabulary. The emphasis within the movement on equal rights, on the identity of work and self-worth, and on secure, family-centered households had informed American political radicalism for decades. A republican outlook lay at the heart of the protests of journeymen-mechanics and women millworkers during the Jacksonian period; it likewise inspired abolitionist and the women’s suffrage and temperance movements and even contributed to the common school crusade. Within the nineteenth-century political mainstream this tradition reached its height of influence in the free labor assault of the Radical Republicans against slavery. The fracture of the Radical Republican bloc, as David Montgomery has demonstrated, signaled a break in the tradition itself. The more conspicuous and politically dominant side of the schism reflected the growing ideological conservatism of America’s industrialists and their steady merger into older socioeconomic elites. A less complacent message, however, also percolated through the age of Hayes, Harrison, and Hanna. Taking place largely outside the party system, this renewed radicalism found a home within an invigorated labor movement.

Working-class radicalism in the Gilded Age derived its principles—as grouped around economic, national-political, and cultural themes—from the period of the early revolutionary-democratic bourgeoisie. Implicitly, labor radicals embraced a unifying conception of work and culture that Norman Birnbaum has labeled the *Homo faber* ideal: “an artisanal conception of activity, a visible, limited, and directed relationship to nature.” The *Homo faber* ethic found its political embodiment in Enlightenment liberalism. “From that source,” notes Trygve R. Tholfsen in a recent commentary on mid-Victorian English labor radicalism, “came a trenchant rationalism, a vision of human emancipation, the expectation of progress based on reason, and an inclination to take the action necessary to bring society into conformity with rationally demonstrable principles.” In the late nineteenth century Enlightenment liberalism was harnessed to a historical understanding of American nationalism, confirmed by both the American Revolution and the Civil War. Together these political, economic, and moral conceptions coalesced around a twin commitment to the citizen-as-producer and the producer-as-citizen. For nearly a century Americans had been proud that their country, more than anywhere else in the world, made republican principles real. In this respect the bloody war over slavery served only to confirm the ultimate power of the ideal.

Certain tendencies of the Gilded Age, however, heralded for some an alarming social regression. The permanency of wage labor, the physical and mental exhaustion inflicted by the factory system, and the arrogant exercise of power by the owners of capital threatened the rational and progressive march of history. “Republican institutions,” the preamble to the constitution of the Knights of Labor declared simply, “are not safe under such conditions.” “We have openly

arrayed against us," a Chicago radical despaired in 1883, "the powers of the world, most of the intelligence, all the wealth, and even law itself." . . .

In response the labor movement in the Gilded Age turned the plowshares of a consensual political past into a sword of class conflict. "We declare," went the Knights' manifesto, "an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labor and republican system of government." To some extent older demons seemed simply to have reappeared in new garb, and, as such, older struggles beckoned with renewed urgency. A Greenback editor in Rochester, New Hampshire, thus proclaimed that "patriots" who overturn the "lords of labor" would be remembered next to "the immortal heroes of the revolution and emancipation." . . .

To many other outside observers in the 1880s, the American working class—in terms of organization, militancy, and collective self-consciousness—appeared more advanced than its European counterparts. A leader of the French Union des Chambres syndicales Ouvrières compared the self-regarding, individualist instincts of the French workers to those of the Americans enrolled in the Knights of Labor (Ordre des Chevaliers du Travail):

Unfortunately, the French worker, erratic as he is enthusiastic, of an almost discouraging indolence when it is a question of his own interests, does not much lend himself to organization into a great order like yours. He understands nevertheless their usefulness, even cites them as an example each time that he has the occasion to prove the possibility of the solidarity of workers; but when it comes to passing from the domain of theory to that of practice, he retreats or disappears. Thirsty for freedom he is always afraid of alienating any one party while contracting commitments toward a collectivity; mistrustful, he is afraid of affiliating with a group whose positions might not correspond exactly to those inscribed on his own flag; undisciplined, he conforms with difficulty to rules which he has given to himself. . . . He wants to play it safe and especially will not consent to any sacrifice without having first calculated the advantages it will bring to him.

Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling returned from an 1886 American tour with a glowing assessment of the workers' mood. Friedrich Engels, too, in the aftermath of the eight-hour strikes and the Henry George campaign, attached a special preface to the 1887 American edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*:

In European countries, it took the working class years and years before they fully realized the fact that they formed a distinct and, under the existing social conditions, a permanent class of modern society; and it took years again until this class-consciousness led them to form themselves into a distinct political party, independent of, and opposed to, all the old political parties, formed by the various sections of the ruling classes. On the more favored soil of America, where no medieval ruins bar the way, where history begins with the elements of the modern bourgeois society as evolved in the seventeenth century, the working class passed through these two stages of its development within ten months.

Nor was it only in the eyes of eager well-wishers that the developments of the 1880s seemed to take on a larger significance. Surveying the map of labor upheaval, the conservative Richmond *Whig* wrote in 1886 of "socialistic and agrarian elements" threatening "the genius of our free institutions." The Chicago *Times* went so far in its fear of impending revolution as to counsel the use of hand grenades against strikers.

Revolutionary anticipations, pro or con, proved premature. That was true at least partly because both the movement's distant boosters as well as its domestic detractors sometimes misrepresented its intentions. Gilded Age labor radicals did not self-consciously place themselves in opposition to a prevailing economic system but displayed a sincere ideological ambivalence toward the capitalist marketplace. On the one hand, they frequently invoked a call for the "abolition of the wage system." On the other hand, like the classical economists, they sometimes spoke of the operation of "natural law" in the marketplace, acknowledged the need for a "fair return" on invested capital, and did not oppose profit per se. Employing a distinctly pre-Marxist economic critique that lacked a theory of capital accumulation or of surplus value, labor leaders from Ira Steward to Terence Powderly tried nevertheless to update and sharpen the force of received wisdom. The Knights thus modified an earlier radical interpretation of the labor-cost theory of value, wherein labor, being the source of all wealth, should individually be vested with the value of its product, and demanded for workers only an intentionally vague "proper share of the wealth they create." In so doing they were able to shift the weight of the analysis (not unlike Marx) to the general, collective plight of the laboring classes. In their eyes aggregation of capital together with cutthroat price competition had destroyed any semblance of marketplace balance between employer and employee. Under the prevailing economic calculus labor had been demoted into just another factor of production whose remuneration was determined not by custom or human character but by market price. In such a situation they concluded, as Samuel Walker has noted, that "the contract was not and could not be entered into freely. . . . The process of wage determination was a moral affront because it degraded the personal dignity of the workingman." This subservient position to the iron law of the market constituted "wage slavery," and like other forms of involuntary servitude it had to be "abolished."

Labor's emancipation did not, ipso facto, imply the overthrow of capitalism, a system of productive relations that the Knights in any case never defined. To escape wage slavery workers needed the strength to redefine the social balance of power with employers and their allies—and the will and intelligence to use that strength. One after another the Knights harnessed the various means at their disposal—education, organization, cooperation, economic sanction, and political influence—to this broad end: "To secure to the workers the full enjoyment [note, not the full return] of the wealth they create, sufficient leisure in which to develop their intellectual, moral and social faculties, all of the benefits of recreation, and pleasures of association; in a word to enable them to share in the gains and honors of advancing civilization."

A wide range of strategic options was represented within the counsels of the labor movement. One tendency sought to check the rampant concentration of

wealth and power with specific correctives on the operation of the free market. Radical Greenbackism (with roots in Kelloggism and related monetary theories), Henry George's single tax, and land nationalization, each of which commanded considerable influence among the Knights of Labor, fit this category. Another important tendency, cooperation, offered a more self-reliant strategy of alternative institution-building, or, as one advocate put it, "the organization of production without the intervention of the capitalist." Socialism, generally understood at the time as a system of state as opposed to private ownership of production, offered a third alternative to wage slavery. Except for a few influential worker-intellectuals and strong pockets of support among German-Americans, however, Socialism (for reasons which will become clearer in the next chapter) carried comparatively little influence in the 1880s. The argument of veteran abolitionist and labor reformer Joseph Labadie—"To say that state socialism is the rival of co-operation is to say that Jesus Christ was opposed to Christianity"—met a generally skeptical reception. Particularly in the far West, self-identified anarchists also agitated from within the ranks of the Order.

If Gilded Age labor representatives tended to stop short of a frontal rejection of the political-economic order, there was nevertheless no mistaking their philosophic radicalism. Notwithstanding differences in emphasis, the labor movement's political sentiments encompassed both a sharp critique of social inequality and a broad-based prescription for a more humane future. Indeed, the labor representative who shrugged off larger philosophical and political commitments in favor of a narrow incrementalism was likely to meet with incredulity. One of the first, and most classic, enunciations of business unionism, for example, received just this response from the Senate Committee on Labor and Capital in 1883. After taking testimony from workers and labor reformers across the country for six months, the committee, chaired by New Hampshire Senator Henry Blair, interviewed Adolph Strasser, president of the cigar-makers' union. Following a disquisition on the stimulating impact of shorter working hours on workers' consumption patterns, Strasser was asked if he did not contemplate a future beyond the contemporary exigencies of panic and overproduction, "some time [when] every man is to be an intelligent man and an enlightened man?" When Strasser did not reply, Senator Blair interceded to elaborate the question. Still, Strasser rebuffed the queries, "Well, our organization does not consist of idealists . . . we do [not] control the production of the world. That is controlled by employers, and that is a matter for them." Senator Blair was taken aback.

Blair. I was only asking you in regard to your ultimate ends.

Witness. We have no ultimate ends. We are going on from day to day. We are fighting only for immediate objects—objects that can be realized in a few years. . . .

Blair. I see that you are a little sensitive lest it should be thought that you are a mere theorizer. I do not look upon you in that light at all.

Witness. Well, we say in our constitution that we are opposed to theorists, and I have to represent the organization here. We are all practical men.

Blair. Have you not a theory upon which you have organized?

Witness. Yes, sir: our theory is the experience of the past in the United States and in Great Britain. That is our theory, based upon actual facts. . . .

Blair. In other words you have arrived at the theory which you are trying to apply?

Witness. We have arrived at a practical result.

Blair. But a practical result is the application of a theory is it not?

On a cultural level, labor's critique of American society bore the same relation to Victorian respectability that its political radicalism bore to contemporary liberalism. In both cases the middle-class and working-class radical variants derived from a set of common assumptions but drew from them quite different, even opposing, implications. No contemporary, for example, took more seriously than the Knights of Labor the cultural imperatives toward productive work, civic responsibility, education, a wholesome family life, temperance, and self-improvement. The intellectual and moral development of the individual, they would have agreed with almost every early nineteenth-century lyceum lecturer, was a precondition for the advancement of democratic civilization. In the day of Benjamin Franklin such values may well have knit together master craftsmen, journeymen, and apprentices. In the age of the factory system, however, the gulf between employer and employee had so widened that the lived meanings of the words were no longer the same. . . .

For the Knights the concept of the producing classes indicated an ultimate social division that they perceived in the world around them. Only those associated with idleness (bankers, speculators), corruption (lawyers, liquor dealers, gamblers), or social parasitism (all of the above) were categorically excluded from membership in the Order. Other social strata such as local merchants and manufacturers were judged by their individual acts, not by any inherent structural antagonism to the workers' movement. Those who showed respect for the dignity of labor (i.e., who sold union-made goods or employed union workers at union conditions) were welcomed into the Order. Those who denigrated the laborer or his product laid themselves open to the righteous wrath of the boycott or strike. Powderly characteristically chastised one ruthless West Virginia coal owner, "Don't die, even if you do smell bad. We'll need you in a few years as a sample to show how *mean* men used to be."

This rather elastic notion of class boundaries on the part of the labor movement was reciprocated in the not inconsequential number of shopkeepers and small manufacturers who expressed sympathy and support for the labor movement. . . .

Idealization of hearth and home, a mainstay of familial sentimentality in the Gilded Age, also enjoyed special status within the labor movement. For here, as clearly as anywhere in the radicals' world view, conventional assumptions had a critical, albeit ambivalent, edge in the context of changing social circumstances. Defense of an idealized family life as both moral and material mainstay of society served as one basis of criticism of capitalist industry. Machinist John Morrison argued before the Senate investigating committee

that the insecurities of the unskilled labor market were so threatening family life as to make the house "more like a dull prison instead of a home." A self-educated Scottish-born leader of the type-founders, Edward King, associated trade union morality with the domestic "sentiments of sympathy and humanity" against the "business principles" of the age. Almost unanimously, the vision of the good life for labor radicals included the home. . . .

The importance of the domestic moral order to the late nineteenth-century radical vision also translated into an unparalleled opening of the labor movement to women. As Susan Levine has recently documented, the Knights of Labor beckoned both to wage-earning women and workingmen's wives to join in construction of a "cooperative commonwealth," which, without disavowing the Victorian ideal of a separate female sphere of morality and domestic virtue, sought to make that sphere the center of an active community life.

Both their self-improving and domestic commitments converged in the working-class radicals' antipathy to excessive drinking. The Knights' oath of temperance, which became known as "the Powderly pledge," appealed in turn to intellectual development and protection of the family as well as to the collective interests of the labor movement. Like monopoly, the bottle lay waiting to fasten a new form of slavery upon the free worker. In another sense, as David Brundage has suggested, the growing capitalization of saloons together with expansion of saloon-linked variety theatre directly threatened a family-based producers' community. While most radicals stopped short of prohibition, exhortations in behalf of temperance were commonplace. In part it was a matter of practical necessity. Tension between the mores of traditional plebeian culture and the need for self-discipline by a movement striving for organization and power were apparent. . . .

In general, then, the labor movement of the late nineteenth century provided a distinct arena of articulation and practice for values that crossed class lines. Two aspects of this use of inherited values for radical ends merit reemphasis. First, to the extent that labor radicalism shared in the nineteenth century's cult of individualism, it established a social and moral framework for individual achievement. The culture of the labor movement stressed the development of individual capacity, but not competition with other individuals; while striving to elevate humanity, it ignored what S. G. Boritt has identified as the essence of the Lincoln-sanctified American Dream—the individual's "right to rise." The necessary reliance by the labor movement upon collective strength and community sanction militated against the possessive individualism that anchored the world of the workers' better-off neighbors. By its very nature, the labor movement set limits to the individual accumulation of wealth extracted from others' efforts and represented, in Edward King's words, "the graduated elimination of the personal selfishness of man."

Second, in an age of evolutionary, sometimes even revolutionary, faith in progress and the future (a faith generally shared by labor radicals), the movement made striking use of the past. Without renouncing the potential of industrialism for both human liberty and material progress, radicals dipped selectively into a popular storehouse of memory and myth to capture

alternative images of human possibility. The choice of the name "Knights of Labor" itself presented images of chivalry and nobility fighting the unfeeling capitalist marketplace. Appeals to the "nobility of toil" and to the worker's "independence" conjured up the proud village smithy—not the degradation of labor in the factory system. Finally, celebrations of historic moments of human liberation and political advancement challenged a political-economic orthodoxy beholden to notions of unchanging, universal laws of development. Indeed, so conspicuously sentimental were the celebrations of Independence Day and Memorial Day that Powderly had to defend the Order from taunts of "spread-eagleism" and "Yankee doodleism."

This sketch of working-class radicalism in the Gilded Age raises one final question. Whose movement—and culture—was it? In a country as diverse as the United States, with a labor force and labor movement drawn from a heterogeneous mass of trades, races, and nationalities, any group portrait runs the risk of oversimplification. The varying contours of the late nineteenth-century working class do require specific inquiry, to which the next several chapters of this work contribute. Nevertheless, the Knights of Labor did provide a vast umbrella under which practically every variety of American worker sought protection. As such, the dynamic of the Order itself offers important clues to the general social context in which working-class radicalism as defined here flourished. . . .

This dominant stream within the labor movement included people who had enjoyed considerable control over their jobs, if not also economic autonomy, men who often retained claim to the tools as well as the knowledge of their trade. They had taken seriously the ideal of a republic of producers in which hard work would contribute not only to the individual's improved economic standing but also to the welfare of the community. So long as they could rely on their own strength as well as their neighbors' support, this skilled stratum organized in an array of craft unions showed economic and political resilience. But the spreading confrontations with national corporate power, beginning in the 1870s, indicated just how much erosion had occurred in the position of those who relied on custom, skill, and moral censure as ultimate weapons. Industrial dilution of craft skills and a direct economic and political attack on union practices provided decisive proof to these culturally conservative workingmen of both the illegitimacy and ruthlessness of the growing power of capital. It was they, according to every recent study of late nineteenth-century laboring communities, who formed the backbone of local labor movements. The Knights were, therefore, first of all a coalition of reactivating, or already organized, trade unions. . . .

For reasons of their own masses of workers who had not lost full and equal citizenship—for they had never possessed it—joined the skilled workers within the Knights. Wherever the Order achieved political successes, it did so by linking semiskilled and unskilled industrial workers to its base of skilled workers and leaders. The special strength of the Knights, noted the Boston *Labor Leader* astutely, lay "in the fact that the whole life of the community is drawn into it, that people of all kinds are together. . . , and that they all get directly the sense of each others' needs." . . .

... The Knights of Labor envisioned a kind of workingmen's democracy. The organized power of labor was capable of revitalizing democratic citizenship and safeguarding the public good within a regulated marketplace economy. Through vigilant shop committees and demands such as the eight-hour day, organized workers—both men and women—would ensure minimal standards of safety and health at the industrial workplace, even as they surrounded the dominant corporate organizational model of business with cooperative models of their own. A pride in honest and useful work, rational education, and personal virtue would be nurtured through a rich associational life spread out from the workplace to meeting hall to the hearth and home. Finally, the integrity of public institutions would be vouchsafed by the workingmen in politics. Purifying government of party parasitism and corruption, cutting off the access to power that allowed antilabor employers to bring the state apparatus to their side in industrial disputes, improving and widening the scope of vital public services, and even contemplating the takeover of economic enterprises that had passed irreversibly into monopoly hands—by these means worker-citizens would lay active claim to a republican heritage.

The dream was not to be. At the workplace management seized the initiative toward the future design and control of work. A managerial revolution overcoming the tenacious defenses of the craft unions transferred autonomy over such matters as productivity and skill from custom and negotiation to the realm of corporate planning. Except for the garment trades and the mines, the national trade unions had generally retreated from the country's industrial heartland by 1920. In the local community as well, the differences, even antagonisms, among workers often stood out more than did the similarities. Segmentation of labor markets, urban ethnic and socioeconomic residential segregation, cultural as well as a protectionist economic disdain for the new immigrants, and the depoliticization of leisure time (i.e., the decline of associational life sponsored by labor organizations) all contributed toward a process of social fragmentation. In such circumstances working-class political cooperation proved impossible. The Socialist party and the Progressive slates could make little more than a dent in the hold of the two increasingly conservative national parties over the electorate. Only with the repolarization of political life beginning in 1928 and culminating in the New Deal was the relation of labor and the party system again transformed. By the late 1930s and 1940s a revived labor movement was beginning, with mixed success, to play the role of a leading interest group and reform conscience within the Democratic party.

This impressionistic overview permits one further observation of a quite general nature. One of the favorite tasks of American historians has been to explain why the United States, alone among the nations of the Western world, passed through the industrial revolution without the establishment of a class consciousness and an independent working-class political movement. Cheap land, the cult of individualism, a heterogeneous labor force, social mobility, and the federal separation of powers comprise several of the numerous explanations that have been offered. While not directly denying the importance of any of the factors listed above, this study implicitly suggests a different approach to the problem of American exceptionalism.

The answer appears to lie less in a permanent structural determinism—whether the analytic brace be political, economic, or ideological—than in a dynamic and indeed somewhat fortuitous convergence of events. To understand the vicissitudes of urban politics, we have had to keep in mind the action on at least three levels: the level of working-class social organization (i.e., the nature and strength of the labor movement), the level of business response, and the level of governmental response. During the Gilded Age each of these areas took an incendiary turn, but only briefly and irregularly and most rarely at the same moment. The 1880s, as R. Laurence Moore has recently reiterated, were the international seedtime for the strong European working-class parties of the twentieth century. In America, too, the momentum in the 1880s was great. Indeed, examined both at the level of working-class organization and industrial militancy, a European visitor might understandably have expected the most to happen here first. At the political level, as well, American workers were in certain respects relatively advanced. In the 1870s and in the 1880s they established independently organized local labor regimes well before the famous French Roubaix or English West Ham labor-Socialist town councils of the 1890s. Then, a combination of forces in the United States shifted radically away from the possibilities outlined in the 1880s. The labor movement fragmented, business reorganized, and the political parties helped to pick up the pieces. The initiatives from without directed at the American working class from the mid-1890s through the mid-1920s—part repression, part reform, part assimilation, and part recruitment of a new labor force—at an internationally critical period in the gestation of working-class movements may mark the most telling exceptionalism about American developments.

It would in any case be years before the necessary conditions again converged and labor rose from the discredited icons of pre-Depression America with a new and powerful political message. Workplace, community, and ballot box would all once again be harnessed to a great social movement. But no two actors are ever in quite the same space at the same time. The choices open to the CIO, it is fair to say, were undoubtedly influenced both by the achievement and failure of their counterparts a half-century earlier. . . .



Out of Our Past

The Workers' Response

To say that the labor movement was affected by the industrialization of the postwar years is an understatement; the fact is, industrial capitalism created the labor movement. Not deliberately, to be sure, but in the same way that a blister is the consequence of a rubbing shoe. Unions were labor's protection against the forces of industrialization as the blister is the body's against the irritation of the shoe. The factory and all it implied confronted the workingman with a challenge to his existence as a man, and the worker's response was the labor union.

There were labor unions in America before 1865, but, as industry was only emerging in those years, so the organizations of workers were correspondingly weak. In the course of years after Appomattox, however, when industry began to hit a new and giant stride, the tempo of unionization also stepped up. It was in these decades, after many years of false starts and utopian ambitions, that the American labor movement assumed its modern shape.

Perhaps the outstanding and enduring characteristic of organized labor in the United States has been its elemental conservatism, the fantasies of some employers to the contrary notwithstanding. Indeed, it might be said that all labor unions, at bottom, are conservative by virtue of their being essentially reactions against a developing capitalism. Though an established capitalist society views itself as anything but subversive, in the days of its becoming and seen against the perspective of the previous age, capitalism as an ideology is radically subversive, undermining and destroying many of the cherished institutions of the functioning society. This dissolving process of capitalism is seen more clearly in Europe than in America because there the time span is greater. But, as will appear later, organized labor in the United States was as much a conservative response to the challenge of capitalism as was the European trade union movement.

Viewed very broadly, the history of modern capitalism might be summarized as the freeing of the three factors of production—land, labor, and capital—from the web of tradition in which medieval society held them. If capitalism was to function, it was necessary that this liberating process take place. Only when these basic factors are free to be bought and sold according to the dictates of the profit motive can the immense production which capitalism promises be realized. An employer, for example, had to be free to dismiss labor when the balance sheet required it, without being compelled to retain

workers because society or custom demanded it. Serfdom, with its requirement that the peasant could not be taken from the land, was an anachronistic institution if capitalism was to become the economic ideology of society. Conversely, an employer needed to be unrestricted in his freedom to hire labor or else production could not expand in accordance with the market. Guild restrictions which limited apprenticeships were therefore obstacles to the achievement of a free capitalism.

The alienability of the three factors of production was achieved slowly and unevenly after the close of the Middle Ages. By the nineteenth century in most nations of the West, land had become absolutely alienable—it could be bought and sold at will. With the growth of banking, the development of trustworthy monetary standards, and finally the gold standard in the nineteenth century, money or capital also became freely exchangeable. Gradually, over the span of some two centuries, the innovating demands of capitalism stripped from labor the social controls in which medieval and mercantilistic government had clothed it. Serfdom as an obstacle to the free movement of labor was gradually done away with; statutes of laborers and apprenticeships which fixed wages, hours, and terms of employment also fell into disuse or suffered outright repeal. To avoid government interference in the setting of wage rates, the English Poor Law of 1834 made it clear that the dole to the unemployed was always to be lower than the going rate for unskilled labor. Thus supply and demand would be the determinant of wage levels. Both the common law and the Combination Acts in the early nineteenth century in England sought to ensure the operation of a free market in labor by declaring trade unions to be restraints on trade.

Like land and capital, then, labor was being reduced to a commodity, freely accessible, freely alienable, free to flow where demand was high. The classical economists of the nineteenth century analyzed this long historical process, neatly put it together, and called it the natural laws of economics.

To a large extent, this historical development constituted an improvement in the worker's status, since medieval and mercantilist controls over labor had been more onerous than protective. Nevertheless, something was lost by the dissolution of the ancient social ties which fitted the worker into a larger social matrix. Under the old relationship, the worker belonged in society; he enjoyed a definite if not a high status; he had a place. Now he was an individual, alone; his status was up to him to establish; his urge for community with society at large had no definite avenue of expression. Society and labor alike had been atomized in pursuit of an individualist economy. Herein lay the radical character of the capitalist ideology.

That the workingman sensed the radical change and objected to it is evident from what some American labor leaders said about their unions. Without rejecting the new freedom which labor enjoyed, John Mitchell, of the Mine Workers, pointed out that the union "stands for fraternity, complete and absolute." Samuel Gompers' eulogy of the social microcosm which was the trade union has the same ring. "A hundred times we have said it," he wrote, "and we say it again, that trade unionism contains within itself the potentialities of working class regeneration." The union is a training ground

for democracy and provides "daily object lessons in ideal justice; it breathes into the working classes the spirit of unity"; but above all, it affords that needed sense of community. The labor union "provides a field for noble comradeship, for deeds of loyalty, for self-sacrifice beneficial to one's fellow-workers." In the trade union, in short, the workers could obtain another variety of that sense of community, of comradeship, as Gompers put it, which the acid of individualistic capitalism had dissolved.

And there was another objection to the transformation of labor into an exchangeable commodity. The theoretical justification for the conversion of the factors of production into commodities is that the maximum amount of goods can be produced under such a regime. The increased production is deemed desirable because it would insure greater amounts of goods for human consumption and therefore a better life for all. Unfortunately for the theory, however, labor cannot be separated from the men who provide it. To make labor a commodity is to make the men who provide labor commodities also. Thus one is left with the absurdity of turning men into commodities in order to give men a better life! . . .

Seen in this light, the trade union movement stands out as a truly conservative force. Almost instinctively, the workers joined labor unions in order to preserve their humanity and social character against the excessively individualistic doctrines of industrial capitalism. Eventually, the workers' organizations succeeded in halting the drive to the atomized society which capitalism demanded, and in doing so, far from destroying the system, compelled it to be humane as well as productive.

The essential conservatism of the labor movement is to be seen in particular as well as in general. The organizations of American labor that triumphed or at least survived in the course of industrialization were conspicuous for their acceptance of the private property, profit-oriented society. They evinced little of the radical, anticapitalist ideology and rhetoric so common among European trade unions. Part of the reason for this was the simple fact that all Americans—including workers—were incipient capitalists waiting for "the break." But at bottom it would seem that the conservatism of American labor in this sense is the result of the same forces which inhibited the growth of socialism and other radical anticapitalist ideologies. . . .

"The overshadowing problem of the American labor movement," an eminent labor historian has written, "has always been the problem of staying organized. No other labor movement has ever had to contend with the fragility so characteristic of American labor organizations." So true has this been that even today the United States ranks below Italy and Austria in percentage of workers organized (about 25 percent as compared, for instance, with Sweden's 90 percent). In such an atmosphere, the history of organized labor in America has been both painful and conservative. Of the two major national organizations of workers which developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, only the cautious, restrictive, pragmatic American Federation of Labor [A.F. of L.] lived into the twentieth century. The other, the Knights of Labor, once the more powerful and promising, as well as the less accommodating in goals and aspirations, succumbed to Selig Perlman's disease of fragility.

Founded in 1869, the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor recorded its greatest successes in the 1880s, when its membership rolls carried 700,000 names. As the A.F. of L. was later to define the term for Americans, the Knights did not seem to constitute a legitimate trade union at all. Anyone who worked, except liquor dealers, bankers, lawyers, and physicians, could join, and some thousands of women workers and Negroes were members in good standing of this brotherhood of toilers. But the crucial deviation of the Knights from the more orthodox approach to labor organization was its belief in worker-owned producers' co-operatives, which were intended to make each worker his own employer. In this way, the order felt, the degrading dependence of the worker upon the employer would be eliminated. "There is no good reason," Terence V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the order, told his followers, "why labor cannot, through co-operation, own and operate mines, factories and railroads."

In this respect the order repudiated the direction in which the America of its time was moving. It expressed the small-shopkeeper mentality which dominated the thinking of many American workers, despite the obvious trend in the economy toward the big and the impersonal. As the General Assembly of 1884 put it, "our Order contemplates a radical change, while Trades' Unions . . . accept the industrial system as it is, and endeavor to adapt themselves to it. The attitude of our Order to the existing industrial system is necessarily one of war." Though the order called this attitude "radical," a more accurate term, in view of the times, would have been "conservative" or "reactionary."

In practice, however, the Knights presented no more of a threat to capitalism than any other trade union. Indeed, their avowed opposition to the strike meant that labor's most potent weapon was only reluctantly drawn from the scabbard. The Constitution of 1884 said, "Strikes at best afford only temporary relief"; members should learn to depend on education, co-operation, and political action to attain "the abolition of the wage system."

Though the order officially joined in political activity and Grand Master Workman Powderly was at one time mayor of Scranton, its forays into politics accomplished little. The experience was not lost on shrewd Samuel Gompers, whose American Federation of Labor studiously eschewed any alignments with political parties, practicing instead the more neutral course of "rewarding friends and punishing enemies."

In a farewell letter in 1893, Powderly realistically diagnosed the ills of his moribund order, but offered no cure: "Teacher of important and much-needed reforms, she has been obliged to practice differently from her teachings. Advocating arbitration and conciliation as first steps in labor disputes she has been forced to take upon her shoulders the responsibilities of the aggressor first and, when hope of arbitrating and conciliation failed, to beg of the opposing side to do what we should have applied for in the first instance. Advising against strikes we have been in the midst of them. While not a political party we have been forced into the attitude of taking political action."

For all its fumbings, ineptitude, and excessive idealism, the Knights did organize more workers on a national scale than had ever been done before. At once premature and reactionary, it nonetheless planted the seeds of industrial

unionism which, while temporarily overshadowed by the successful craft organization of the A.F. of L., ultimately bore fruit in the C.I.O. [Committee for Industrial Organization]. Moreover, its idealism, symbolized in its admission of Negroes and women, and more in tune with the mid-twentieth century than the late nineteenth, signified its commitment to the ideals of the democratic tradition. For these reasons the Knights were a transitional type of unionism somewhere between the utopianism of the 1830s and the pragmatism of the A.F. of L. It seemed to take time for labor institutions to fit the American temper.

In the course of his long leadership of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers welcomed many opportunities to define the purposes of his beloved organization. . . .

"The trade unions are the business organizations of the wage-earners," Gompers explained in 1906, "to attend to the business of the wage-earners." Later he expressed it more tersely: "The trade union is not a Sunday school. It is an organization of wage-earners, dealing with economic, social, political and moral questions." As Gompers' crossing of swords with Hillquit demonstrated, there was no need or place for theories. "I saw," the labor leader wrote years later, in looking back on his early life in the labor movement, "the danger of entangling alliances with intellectuals who did not understand that to experiment with the labor movement was to experiment with human life. . . . I saw that the betterment of workingmen must come primarily through workingmen."

In an age of big business, Samuel Gompers made trade unionism a business, and his reward was the survival of his Federation. In a country with a heterogeneous population of unskilled immigrants, reviled and feared Negroes, and native workers, he cautiously confined his fragile organization to the more skilled workers and the more acceptable elements in the population. The result was a narrow but lasting structure.

Though never ceasing to ask for "more," the A.F. of L. presented no threat to capitalism. "Labor Unions are *for* the workingman, but against no one," John Mitchell of the United Mine Workers pointed out. "They are not hostile to employers, not inimical to the interests of the general public. . . . There is no necessary hostility between labor and capital," he concluded. Remorselessly pressed by Morris Hillquit as Gompers was, he still refused to admit that the labor movement was, as Hillquit put it, "conducted against the interests of the employing people." Rather, Gompers insisted, "It is conducted for the interests of the employing people." And the rapid expansion of the American economy bore witness to the fact that the Federation was a friend and not an enemy of industrial capitalism. Its very adaptability to the American scene—its conservative ideology, if it was an ideology at all—as Selig Perlman has observed, contained the key to its success. "The unionism of the American Federation of Labor 'fitted' . . . because it recognized the virtually inalterable conservatism of the American community as regards private property and private initiative in economic life."

This narrow conception of the proper character of trade unionism—job consciousness, craft unionism, lack of interest in organizing the unskilled, the eschewing of political activity—which Gompers and his Federation worked

out for the American worker continued to dominate organized labor until the earthquake of the depression cracked the mold and the Committee for Industrial Organization issued forth.

Nobody Here But Us Capitalists

"By any simple interpretation of the Marxist formula," commented Socialist Norman Thomas in 1950, "the United States, by all odds the greatest industrial nation and that in which capitalism is most advanced, should have had long ere this is a very strong socialist movement if not a socialist revolution. Actually," he correctly observed, "in no advanced western nation is organized socialism so weak." Nor was this the first time Socialists had wondered about this. Over eighty years ago, in the high noon of European socialism, Marxist theoretician Werner Sombart impatiently put a similar question: "*Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?*"

The failure of the American working class to become seriously interested in socialism in this period or later is one of the prominent signs of the political and economic conservatism of American labor and, by extension, of the American people as a whole. This failure is especially noteworthy when one recalls that in industrialized countries the world over—Japan, Italy, Germany, Belgium, to mention only a few—a Socialist movement has been a "normal" concomitant of industrialization. Even newly opened countries like Australia and New Zealand have Labour parties. Rather than ask, as Americans are wont to do, why these countries have nurtured such frank repudiators of traditional capitalism, it is the American deviation from the general pattern which demands explanation.

In large part, the explanation lies in the relative weakness of class consciousness among Americans. Historically, socialism is the gospel of the *class-conscious* working class, of the workingmen who feel themselves bound to their status for life and their children after them. It is not accidental, therefore, that the major successes of modern socialism are in Europe, where class lines have been clearly and tightly drawn since time immemorial, and where the possibility of upward social movement has been severely restricted in practice if not in law. Americans may from time to time have exhibited class consciousness and even class hatred, but such attitudes have not persisted, nor have they been typical. As Matthew Arnold observed in 1888, "it is indubitable that rich men are regarded" in America "with less envy and hatred than rich men in Europe." A labor leader like Terence Powderly was convinced that America was without classes. "No matter how much we may say about classes and class distinction, there are no classes in the United States. . . . I have always refused to admit that we have classes in our country just as I have refused to admit that the labor of a man's hand or brain is a commodity." And there was a long line of commentators on American society, running back at least to Crèvecoeur, to illustrate the prevalence of Powderly's belief.

The weakness of American class consciousness is doubtless to be attributed, at least in part, to the fluidity of the social structure. Matthew Arnold, for example, accounted for the relative absence of class hatred on such grounds,

as did such very different foreign observers as Werner Sombart and Lord Bryce. The British union officials of the Mosely Commission, it will be recalled, were convinced of the superior opportunities for success enjoyed by American Workers. Stephan Thernstrom in his study of Newburyport gave some measure of the opportunities for economic improvement among the working class when he reported that all but 5 percent of those unskilled workers who persisted from 1850 to 1900 ended the period with either property or an improvement in occupational status.

Men who are hoping to move upward on the social scale, and for whom there is some chance that they can do so, do not identify themselves with their present class. "In worn-out, king-ridden Europe, men stay where they are born," immigrant Charles O'Connor, who became an ornament of the New York bar, contended in 1869. "But in America a man is accounted a failure, and certainly ought to be, who has not risen about his father's station in life." So long as Horatio Alger means anything to Americans, Karl Marx will be just another German philosopher.

The political history of the United States also contributed to the failure of socialism. In Europe, because the franchise came slowly and late to the worker, he often found himself first an industrial worker and only later a voter. It was perfectly natural, in such a context, for him to vote according to his economic interests and to join a political party avowedly dedicated to those class interests. The situation was quite different in America, however, for political democracy came to America prior to the Industrial Revolution. By the time the industrial transformation was getting under way after 1865, all adult males could vote and, for the most part, they had already chosen their political affiliations without reference to their economic class; they were Republicans or Democrats first and workers only second—a separation between politics and economics which has become traditional in America. "In the main," wrote Lord Bryce about the United States of the 1880s, "political questions proper have held the first place in a voter's mind and questions affecting his class second." Thus, when it came to voting, workers registered their convictions as citizens, not as workingmen. (In our own day, there have been several notable failures of labor leaders to swing their labor vote, such as John L. Lewis' attempt in 1940 and the C.I.O.'s in 1950 against Senator Taft and the inability of union leaders to be sure they could hold their members to support Hubert Humphrey in the Presidential election of 1968.) To most workers, the Socialist party appeared as merely a third party in a country where such parties are political last resorts.

Nor did socialism in America gain much support from the great influx of immigration. It is true that many Germans came to this country as convinced Socialists and thus swelled the party's numbers, but they also served to pin the stigma of "alien" upon the movement. Even more important was the fact that the very heterogeneity of the labor force, as a result of immigration, often made animosities between ethnic groups more important to the worker than class antagonism. It must have seemed to many workers that socialism, with its central concern for class and its denial of ethnic antagonism, was not dealing with the realities of economic life.

In the final reckoning, however, the failure of socialism in America is to be attributed to the success of capitalism. The expanding economy provided opportunities for all, no matter how meager they might appear or actually be at times. Though the rich certainly seemed to get richer at a prodigious rate, the poor, at least, did not get poorer—and often got richer. Studies of real wages between 1865 and 1900 bear this out. Though prices rose, wages generally rose faster, so that there was a net gain in average income for workers during the last decades of the century. The increase in real wages in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century was negligible—but, significantly, there was no decline. The high wages and relatively good standard of living of the American worker were patent as far as the twenty-three British labor leaders of the Mosely Commission were concerned. The American is a “better educated, better housed, better clothed and more energetic man than his British brother,” concluded the sponsor, Alfred Mosely, a businessman himself.

But America challenged socialism on other grounds than mere material things. Some years ago an obscure Socialist, Leon Samson, undertook to account for the failure of socialism to win the allegiance of the American working class; his psychological explanation merits attention because it illuminates the influence exercised by the American Dream. Americanism, Samson observes, is not so much a tradition as it is a doctrine; it is “what socialism is to a socialist.” Americanism to the American is a body of ideas like “democracy, liberty, opportunity, to all of which the American adheres rationalistically much as a socialist adheres to his socialism—because it does him good, because it gives him work, because, so he thinks, it guarantees him happiness. America has thus served as a substitute for socialism.”

Socialism has been unable to make headway with Americans, Samson goes on, because “every concept in socialism has its substitutive counterconcept in Americanism.” As Marxism holds out the prospect of a classless society, so does Americanism. The opportunities for talent and the better material life which socialism promised for the future were already available in America and constituted the image in which America was beheld throughout the world. The freedom and equality which the oppressed proletariat of Europe craved were a reality in America—or at least sufficiently so to blunt the cutting edge of the Socialist appeal. Even the sense of mission, of being in step with the processes of history, which unquestionably was one of the appeals of socialism, was also a part of the American Dream. Have not all Americans cherished their country as a model for the world? Was not this the “last, best hope of earth”? Was not God on the side of America, as history, according to Marx, was on the side of socialism and the proletariat?

Over a century ago, Alexis de Tocqueville predicted a mighty struggle for the minds of men between two giants of Russia and the United States. In the ideologies of socialism and the American Dream, his forecast has been unexpectedly fulfilled.

POSTSCRIPT



Was the American Labor Movement Radical?

Fink presents a very sophisticated analysis of how the Knights of Labor traced its values back to the republican ideology of the late eighteenth-century enlightenment thinkers. The Knights embraced a unified conception of work and culture which extolled the virtues of individual hard work, love of family, and love of country. All members of the producing classes were invited to join, including businessmen. According to Fink, excluded were "only those associated with idleness (bankers, speculators) and corruption (lawyers, liquor dealers, gamblers)."

During the 1880s the Knights employed a "pre-Marxist economic critique" of the industrial system. There were discussions about the "abolition of the wage system" and the analysis shifted away from the problems of the individual workers to the "general, collective, plight of labor." Yet Fink admits that the Knights never made a frontal attack on capitalism.

The question of why the United States never developed a major socialist movement or labor party has been the subject of much speculation. A good starting point is John H. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Failure of a Dream: Essays in the History of American Socialism* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974), a collection of articles that generally reinforces Degler's arguments. Political scientist Theodore J. Lowi argues that our political system of federalism is the primary reason in "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" *Society* (January/February 1985). Historian Eric Foner tears down all explanations and asks, "Why Has There Been No Socialist Transformation in Any Advanced Capitalist Society?" *History Workshop* (Spring 1984). Finally, see Rick Halpern and Jonathan Morris, eds., *American Exceptionalism? U.S. Working Class Formation in an International Context* (St. Martin's Press, 1997).

To learn more about the rise and fall of the Knights of Labor, see the case studies in Leon Fink's *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (University of Illinois Press, 1983). See also Fink's collection of articles *In Search of the Working Class* (University of Illinois Press, 1994). Three other noteworthy books on the Knights of Labor are Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Cornell University Press, 1993); and Bruce Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (Hill and Wang, 1989).

Professor Carl Degler takes a different approach to this issue. He agrees with the traditional labor historians that the American worker accepted capitalism

and wanted a bigger piece of the pie. But he reverses the radial-conservative dichotomy as applied to the conflict between the worker and the businessman. In his view, the real radicals were the industrialists who created a more mature system of capitalism. Labor merely fashioned a conservative response to the radical changes brought about by big business. The system led to its demise. Its place was taken by the American Federation of Labor, whose long-time leader Samuel Gompers was famous for his acceptance of the wage system and American capitalism. Labor merely fashioned a conservative response to the radial changes brought about by big business. The system led to its demise. Its place was taken by the American Federation of Labor, whose long-time leader Samuel Gompers was famous for his acceptance of the wage system and American capitalism. The American Federation of Labor adopted practical goals; it strove to improve the lot of the worker by negotiating for better hours, wages, and working conditions. "In an age of big business," says Degler, "Samuel Gompers made trade unionism a business, and his reward was the survival of his Federation."

In explaining the failure of socialism in America, Degler argues that Americans lacked a working-class consciousness because they believed in real mobility. Also, a labor party failed to emerge because Americans developed their commitment to the two-party system before the issues of the industrial revolution came to the forefront. The influx of immigrants from a variety of countries created the heterogeneous labor force, and animosities between rival ethnic groups appeared more real than class antagonisms. "In the final reckoning," says Degler, "the failure of socialism in America is to be attributed to the success of capitalism."

For the past three decades, historians have begun to study the social and cultural environment of the American working class. The approach is modeled after E. P. Thompson's highly influential and sophisticated Marxist analysis, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), a work that is the capstone of an earlier generation of British and French social historians. The father of the "new labor history" in the United States is the late Herbert G. Gutman, whose articles collected in *Work, Culture, and Society* (Knopf, 1976) and *Power and Culture: Essays On the American Working Class* (Pantheon, 1987) are the starting point for every student of the period. It was Gutman who first discussed American workers as a group separate from the organized union movement. Gutman's distinction between pre-industrial and industrial values laid the groundwork for a whole generation of scholars who have engaged in case studies of both union and nonunion workers in both urban and rural areas of America.

Gutman's framework differs from mainstream American historians' more traditional approach in several ways. Gutman abandons the division of American history at the Civil War/Reconstruction fault line. He proposes a threefold division for free, white workers: (1) the premodern early industrial period from 1815 to 1843; (2) the transition to capitalism, which encompasses the years 1843–1893; and (3) the development of a full-blown industrial system, which took place from the late 1890s through World War I. Gutman's unique periodization enables us to view the evolution of the free, white,

nonunion worker, whose traditional values withstood the onslaughts of an increasingly large-scale dehumanized factory system that emphasized productivity and efficiency until the depression of 1893.

Gutman also challenges the view that workers were helpless pawns of the owners and that they were forced to cave in every time a strike took place. He shows that on a local level in the 1880s, immigrant workers not only joined unions but also usually won their strikes. This is because small shopkeepers and workers in other industries often supported those who were out on strike. Gutman also argues from census data of the 1880s that immigrant families were more stable and less prone to divorce and desertion than native-born families. Gutman applied many of these insights to slaves in his prizewinning book *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Pantheon, 1976).

Labor histories influenced by Thompson and Gutman should be sampled first in the following collections of articles: Daniel J. Lieb, ed., *The Labor History Reader* (University of Illinois, 1985); Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Working Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (University of Illinois, 1983); Charles Stephenson and Robert Asher, eds., *Life and Labor: Dimensions of American Working Class History* (State University of New York Press, 1986); and Milton Cantor, ed., *American Working Class Culture: Explorations in American Labor and Social History* (Greenwood Press, 1979).

Two journals have devoted entire issues to the American labor movement: the fall 1989 issue of *The Public Historian* and the February 1982 issue of *Social Education*. Students who wish to sample the diverse scholarships on the American workers should consult "A Round Table: Labor, Historical, Pessimism, and Hegemony," *Journal of American History* (June 1988).



ISSUE 5



Were Late Nineteenth-Century Immigrants “Uprooted”?

YES: Oscar Handlin, from *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*, 2nd ed. (Little, Brown and Company, 1973)

NO: Mark Wyman, from *Round-Trip to America: The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880–1930* (Cornell University Press, 1993)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Oscar Handlin asserts that immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth century were alienated from the cultural traditions of the homeland they had left as well as from those of their adopted country.

NO: Mark Wyman argues that as many as four million immigrants to the United States between 1880 and 1930 viewed their trip as temporary and remained tied psychologically to their homeland to which they returned once they had accumulated enough wealth to enable them to improve their status back home.

Immigration has been one of the most powerful forces shaping the development of the United States since at least the early seventeenth century. In fact, it should not be overlooked that even the ancestors of the country's Native American population were migrants to this “New World” some 37,000 years ago. There can be little doubt that the United States is a nation of immigrants, a reality reinforced by the motto “E Pluribus Unum” (one from many), which is used on the Great Seal of the United States and on several U.S. coins.

The history of immigration to the United States can be organized into four major periods of activity: 1607–1830, 1830–1890, 1890–1924, and 1968 to the present. During the first period, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were a growing number of European migrants who arrived in North America, mostly from the British Isles, as well as several million Africans who were forced to migrate to colonial America as a consequence of the Atlantic slave trade. While increased numbers of non-English immigrants arrived in America in the eighteenth century, it was not until the nineteenth century

that large numbers of immigrants from other northern and western European countries, as well as from China, arrived and created significant population diversity. Two European groups predominated during this second major period: As a result of the potato famine, large numbers of Irish Catholics emigrated in the 1850s, and for a variety of religious, political, and economic reasons, so did many Germans. Chinese immigration increased, and these immigrants found work in low-paying service industries, such as laundries and restaurants, and as railroad construction workers.

The Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth century sparked a third wave of immigration. Immigrants by the millions began pouring into the United States attracted by the unskilled factory jobs that were becoming more abundant. Migration was encouraged by various companies whose agents distributed handbills throughout Europe, advertising the ready availability of good-paying jobs in America. This phase of immigration, however, represented something of a departure from previous ones as most of these “new immigrants” came from southern and eastern Europe. This flood continued until World War I, after which mounting xenophobia culminated in the passage by Congress in 1924 of the National Origins Act, which restricted the number of immigrants into the country to 150,000 annually, and which placed quotas on the numbers of immigrants permitted from each foreign country.

In the aftermath of World War II, restrictions were eased for several groups, especially those who survived the Nazi death camps or who sought asylum in the United States in the wake of the aggressive movement into Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union after the war. But restrictions against Asians and Africans were not lifted until the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which set in motion a fourth phase of immigration history. In contrast to earlier migrations, the newest groups have come from Latin America and Asia.

Efforts to curb immigration to the United States reflect an anxiety and ambivalence that many Americans have long held with regard to “foreigners.” Anxious to benefit from the labor of these newcomers but still hesitant to accept the immigrants as full-fledged citizens entitled to the same rights and privileges as native-born residents, Americans have on a number of occasions discovered that they had an “immigrant problem.” Harsh anti-immigrant sentiment based on prejudicial attitudes toward race, ethnicity, or religion has periodically boiled over into violence and calls for legislation to restrict immigration.

What effect did these kinds of attitudes have on those who migrated to the United States in search of a life better than the one they experienced in their native lands? What happened to their Old World customs and traditions? How fully did immigrants assimilate into the new culture they encountered in the United States? Was the United States, in fact, a melting pot for immigrants, as some have suggested?

In the following readings, Oscar Handlin argues that the immigrants were uprooted from their Old World cultures as they attempted to adjust to an unfamiliar and often hostile environment in the United States. Mark Wyman points out that many immigrants to the United States believed that their stay in America would be temporary, a fact that limited their efforts at assimilation and reinforced ties to their original homelands.

The Shock of Alienation

... As the passing years widened the distance, the land the immigrants had left acquired charm and beauty. Present problems blurred those they had left unsolved behind; and in the haze of memory it seemed to these people they had formerly been free of present dissatisfactions. It was as if the Old World became a great mirror into which they looked to see right all that was wrong with the New. The landscape was prettier, the neighbors more friendly, and religion more efficacious; in the frequent crises when they reached the limits of their capacities, the wistful reflection came: *This would not have happened there.*

The real contacts were, however, disappointing. The requests—that back there a mass be said, or a wise one consulted, or a religious medal be sent over—those were gestures full of hope. But the responses were inadequate; like all else they shrank in the crossing. The immigrants wrote, but the replies, when they came, were dull, even trite in their mechanical phrases, or so it seemed to those who somehow expected these messages to evoke the emotions that had gone into their own painfully composed letters. Too often the eagerly attended envelopes proved to be only empty husks, the inner contents valueless. After the long wait before the postman came, the sheets of garbled writing were inevitably below expectations. There was a trying sameness to the complaints of hard times, to the repetitious petty quarrels; and before long there was impatience with the directness with which the formal greeting led into the everlasting requests for aid.

This last was a sore point with the immigrants. The friends and relatives who had stayed behind could not get it out of their heads that in America the streets were paved with gold. *Send me for a coat. . . . There is a piece of land here and if only you would send, we could buy it. . . . Our daughter could be married, but we have not enough for a dowry. . . . We are ashamed, everyone else gets . . . much more frequently than we.* Implicit in these solicitations was the judgment that the going-away had been a desertion, that unfulfilled obligations still remained, and that the village could claim assistance as a right from its departed members.

From the United States it seemed there was no comprehension, back there, of the difficulties of settlement. It was exasperating by sacrifices to scrape together the remittances and to receive in return a catalogue of new needs, as if there were not needs enough in the New World too. The immigrants never

From *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*, 2nd ed. by Oscar Handlin (Little, Brown and Company, 1951, 1973), excerpts from pp. 260–266, 270–274, 279–285. Copyright © 1951, 1973 by Oscar Handlin. Reprinted by permission of Little, Brown and Company/Hachette Book Group USA and the author.

shook off the sense of obligation to help; but they did come to regard their Old Countrymen as the kind of people who depended on help. The trouble with the Europeans was, they could not stand on their own feet.

The cousin green off the boat earned the same negative appraisal. Though he be a product of the homeland, yet here he cut a pitiable figure; awkward manners, rude clothes, and a thoroughgoing ineptitude in the new situation were his most prominent characteristics. The older settler found the welcome almost frozen on his lips in the face of such backwardness.

In every real contact the grandeur of the village faded; it did not match the immigrants' vision of it and it did not stand up in a comparison with America. When the picture came, the assembled family looked at it beneath the light. This was indeed the church, but it had not been remembered so; and the depressing contrast took some of the joy out of remembering.

The photograph did not lie. There it was, a low building set against the dusty road, weather-beaten and making a candid display of its ill-repair. But the recollections did not lie either. As if it had been yesterday that they passed through those doors, they could recall the sense of spaciousness and elevation that sight of the structure had always aroused.

Both impressions were true, but irreconcilable. The mental image and the paper representation did not jibe because the one had been formed out of the standards and values of the Old Country, while the other was viewed in the light of the standards and values of the New. And it was the same with every other retrospective contact. Eagerly the immigrants continued to look back across the Atlantic in search of the satisfactions of fellowship. But the search was not rewarded. Having become Americans, they were no longer villagers. Though they might willingly assume the former obligations and recognize the former responsibilities, they could not recapture the former points of view or hold to the former judgments. They had seen too much, experienced too much to be again members of the community. It was a vain mission on which they continued to dispatch the letters; these people, once separated, would never belong again.



Their home now was a country in which they had not been born. Their place in society they had established for themselves through the hardships of crossing and settlement. The process had changed them, had altered the most intimate aspects of their lives. Every effort to cling to inherited ways of acting and thinking had led into a subtle adjustment by which those ways were given a new American form. No longer Europeans, could the immigrants then say that they belonged in America? The answer depended upon the conceptions held by other citizens of the United States of the character of the nation and of the role of the newcomers within it.

In the early nineteenth century, those already established on this side of the ocean regarded immigration as a positive good. When travel by sea became safe after the general peace of 1815 and the first fresh arrivals trickled in, there was a general disposition to welcome the movement. The favorable attitude

persisted even when the tide mounted to the flood levels of the 1840s and 1850s. The man off the boat was then accepted without question or condition.

The approval of unlimited additions to the original population came easily to Americans who were conscious of the youth of their country. Standing at the edge of an immense continent, they were moved by the challenge of empty land almost endless in its extension. Here was room enough, and more, for all who would bend their energies to its exploitation. The shortage was of labor and not of acres; every pair of extra hands increased the value of the abundant resources and widened opportunities for everyone.

The youth of the nation also justified the indiscriminate admission of whatever foreigners came to these shores. There was high faith in the destiny of the Republic, assurance that its future history would justify the Revolution and the separation from Great Britain. The society and the culture that would emerge in this territory would surpass those of the Old World because they would not slavishly imitate the outmoded forms and the anachronistic traditions that constricted men in Europe. The United States would move in new directions of its own because its people were a new people.

There was consequently a vigorous insistence that this country was not simply an English colony become independent. It was a nation unique in its origins, produced by the mixture of many different types out of which had come an altogether fresh amalgam, the American. The ebullient citizens who believed and argued that their language, their literature, their art, and their polity were distinctive and original also believed and argued that their population had not been derived from a single source but had rather acquired its peculiar characteristics from the blending of a variety of strains.

There was confidence that the process would continue. The national type had not been fixed by its given antecedents; it was emerging from the experience of life on a new continent. Since the quality of men was determined not by the conditions surrounding their birth, but by the environment within which they passed their lives, it was pointless to select among them. All would come with minds and spirits fresh for new impressions; and being in America would make Americans of them. Therefore it was best to admit freely everyone who wished to make a home here. The United States would then be a great smelting pot, great enough so that there was room for all who voluntarily entered; and the nation that would ultimately be cast from that crucible would be all the richer for the diversity of the elements that went into the molten mixture.

The legislation of most of the nineteenth century reflected this receptive attitude. The United States made no effort actively to induce anyone to immigrate, but neither did it put any bars in the way of their coming. Occasional laws in the four decades after 1819 set up shipping regulations in the hope of improving the conditions of the passage. In practice, the provisions that specified the minimum quantities of food and the maximum number of passengers each vessel could carry were easily evaded. Yet the intent of those statutes was to protect the travelers and to remove harsh conditions that might discourage the newcomers.

Nor were state laws any more restrictive in design. The seaports, troubled by the burdens of poor relief, secured the enactment of measures to safeguard their treasuries against such charges. Sometimes the form was a bond

to guarantee that the immigrant would not become at once dependent upon public support; sometimes it was a small tax applied to defray the costs of charity. In either case there was no desire to limit entry into the country; and none of these steps had any discernible effect upon the volume of admissions.

Once landed, the newcomer found himself equal in condition to the natives. Within a short period he could be naturalized and acquire all the privileges of a citizen. In some places, indeed, he could vote before the oath in court so transformed his status. In the eyes of society, even earlier than in the eyes of the law, he was an American. . . .



As the nineteenth century moved into its last quarter, a note of petulance crept into the comments of some Americans who thought about this aspect of the development of their culture. It was a long time now that the melting pot had been simmering, but the end product seemed no closer than before. The experience of life in the United States had not broken down the separateness of the elements mixed into it; each seemed to retain its own identity. Almost a half-century after the great immigration of Irish and Germans, these people had not become indistinguishable from other Americans; they were still recognizably Irish and German. Yet even then, newer waves of newcomers were beating against the Atlantic shore. Was there any prospect that all these multitudes would ever be assimilated, would ever be Americanized?

A generation earlier such questions would not have been asked. Americans of the first half of the century had assumed that any man who subjected himself to the American environment was being Americanized. Since the New World was ultimately to be occupied by a New Man, no mere derivative of any extant stock, but different from and superior to all, there had been no fixed standards of national character against which to measure the behavior of newcomers. The nationality of the new Republic had been supposed fluid, only just evolving; there had been room for infinite variation because diversity rather than uniformity had been normal.

The expression of doubts that some parts of the population might not become fully American implied the existence of a settled criterion of what was American. There had been a time when the society had recognized no distinction among citizens but that between the native and the foreign-born, and that distinction had carried no imputation of superiority or inferiority. Now there were attempts to distinguish among the natives between those who really belonged and those who did not, to separate out those who were born in the United States but whose immigrant parentage cut them off from the truly indigenous folk.

It was difficult to draw the line, however. The census differentiated after 1880 between natives and native-born of foreign parents. But that was an inadequate line of division; it provided no means of social recognition and offered no basis on which the *true Americans* could draw together, identify themselves as such.

Through these years there was a half-conscious quest among some Americans for a term that would describe those whose ancestors were in the

United States before the great migrations. Where the New Englanders were, they called themselves Yankees, a word that often came to mean non-Irish or non-Canadian. But Yankee was simply a local designation and did not take in the whole of the old stock. In any case, there was no satisfaction to such a title. Its holders were one group among many, without any distinctive claim to Americanism, cut off from other desirable peoples prominent in the country's past. Only the discovery of common antecedents could eliminate the separations among the really American.

But to find a common denominator, it was necessary to go back a long way. Actually no single discovery was completely satisfactory. Some writers, in time, referred to the civilization of the United States as Anglo-Saxon. By projecting its origins back to early Britain, they implied that their own culture was always English in derivation, and made foreigners of the descendants of Irishmen and Germans, to say nothing of the later arrivals. Other men preferred a variant and achieved the same exclusion by referring to themselves as "the English-speaking people," a title which assumed there was a unity and uniqueness to the clan which settled the home island, the Dominions, and the United States. Still others relied upon a somewhat broader appellation. They talked of themselves as Teutonic and argued that what was distinctively American originated in the forests of Germany; in this view, only the folk whose ancestors had experienced the freedom of tribal self-government and the liberation of the Protestant Reformation were fully American.

These terms had absolutely no historical justification. They nevertheless achieved a wide currency in the thinking of the last decades of the nineteenth century. Whatever particular phrase might serve the purpose of a particular author or speaker, all expressed the conviction that some hereditary element had given form to American culture. The conclusion was inescapable: to be Americanized, the immigrants must conform to the American way of life completely defined in advance of their landing.



There were two counts to the indictment that the immigrants were not so conforming. They were, first, accused of their poverty. Many benevolent citizens, distressed by the miserable conditions in the districts inhabited by the laboring people, were reluctant to believe that such social flaws were indigenous to the New World. It was tempting, rather, to ascribe them to the defects of the newcomers, to improvidence, slovenliness, and ignorance rather than to inability to earn a living wage.

Indeed to those whose homes were uptown the ghettos were altogether alien territory associated with filth and vice and crime. It did not seem possible that men could lead a decent existence in such quarters. The good vicar on a philanthropic tour was shocked by the moral dangers of the dark un-lighted hallway. His mind rushed to the defense of the respectable young girl: *Whatever her wishes may be, she can do nothing—shame prevents her from crying out.* The intention of the reformer was to improve housing, but the summation nevertheless was, *You cannot make an American citizen out of a slum.*

The newcomers were also accused of congregating together in their own groups and of an unwillingness to mix with outsiders. The foreign-born flocked to the great cities and stubbornly refused to spread out as farmers over the countryside; that alone was offensive to a society which still retained an ideal of rusticity. But even the Germans in Wisconsin and the Scandinavians in Minnesota held aloofly to themselves. Everywhere, the strangers persisted in their strangeness and willfully stood apart from American life. A prominent educator sounded the warning: *Our task is to break up their settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people and to implant in them the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law, and order.*

It was no simple matter to meet this challenge. The older residents were quick to criticize the separateness of the immigrant but hesitant when he made a move to narrow the distance. The householders of Fifth Avenue or Beacon Street or Nob Hill could readily perceive the evils of the slums but they were not inclined to welcome as a neighbor the former denizen of the East Side or the North End or the Latin Quarter who had acquired the means to get away. Among Protestants there was much concern over the growth of Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox religious organizations, but there was no eagerness at all to provoke a mass conversion that might crowd the earlier churches with a host of poor foreigners. When the population of its neighborhood changed, the parish was less likely to try to attract the newcomers than to close or sell its building and move to some other section.

Indeed there was a fundamental ambiguity to the thinking of those who talked about "assimilation" in these years. They had arrived at their own view that American culture was fixed, formed from its origins, by shutting out the great mass of immigrants who were not English or at least not Teutonic. Now it was expected that those excluded people would alter themselves to earn their portion in Americanism. That process could only come about by increasing the contacts between the older and the newer inhabitants, by sharing jobs, churches, residences. Yet in practice, the man who thought himself an Anglo-Saxon found proximity to the other folk just come to the United States uncomfortable and distasteful and, in his own life, sought to increase rather than to lessen the gap between his position and theirs.

There was an escape from the horns of this unpleasant dilemma. It was tempting to resolve the difficulty by arguing that the differences between Americans on the one hand and Italians or Jews or Poles on the other were so deep as to admit of no conciliation. If these other stocks were cut off by their own innate nature, by the qualities of their heredity, then the original breed was justified both in asserting the fixity of its own character and in holding off from contact with the aliens. . . .

The fear of everything alien instilled by the First World War brought to fullest flower the seeds of racist thinking. Three enormously popular books by an anthropologist, a eugenicist, and a historian revealed to hundreds of thousands of horrified Nordics how their great race had been contaminated by contact with lesser breeds, dwarfed in stature, twisted in mentality, and ruthless in the pursuit of their own self-interest.

These ideas passed commonly in the language of the time. No doubt many Americans who spoke in the bitter terms of race used the words in a figurative sense or in some other way qualified their acceptance of the harsh doctrine. After all, they still recognized the validity of the American tradition of equal and open opportunities, of the Christian tradition of the brotherhood of man. Yet, if they were sometimes troubled by the contradiction, nevertheless enough of them believed fully the racist conceptions so that five million could become members of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1920s. . . .



The activities of the Klan were an immediate threat to the immigrants and were resisted as such. But there was also a wider import to the movement. This was evidence, at last become visible, that the newcomers were among the excluded. The judgment at which the proponents of assimilation had only hinted, about which the racist thinkers had written obliquely, the Klan brought to the open. The hurt came from the fact that the mouthings of the Kleagle were not eccentricities, but only extreme statements of beliefs long on the margin of acceptance by many Americans. To the foreign-born this was demonstration of what they already suspected, that they would remain as alienated from the New World as they had become from the Old.

Much earlier the pressure of their separateness had begun to disturb the immigrants. As soon as the conception of Americanization had acquired the connotation of conformity with existing patterns, the whole way of group life of the newcomers was questioned. Their adjustment had depended upon their ability as individuals in a free society to adapt themselves to their environment through what forms they chose. The demand by their critics that the adjustment take a predetermined course seemed to question their right, as they were, to a place in American society.

Not that these people concerned themselves with theories of nationalism, but in practice the hostility of the "natives" provoked unsettling doubts about the propriety of the most innocent actions. The peasant who had become a Polish Falcon or a Son of Italy, in his own view, was acting as an American; this was not a step he could have taken at home. To subscribe to a newspaper was the act of a citizen of the New World, not of the Old, even if the journal was one of the thousand published by 1920 in languages other than English. When the immigrants heard their societies and their press described as un-American they could only conclude that they had somehow become involved in an existence that belonged neither in the old land nor in the new.

Yet the road of conformity was also barred to them. There were matters in which they wished to be like others, undistinguished from anyone else, but they never hit upon the means of becoming so. There was no pride in the surname, which in Europe had been little used, and many a new arrival was willing enough to make a change, suitable to the new country. But August Björkegren was not much better off when he called himself Burke, nor the Blumberg who became Kelly. The Lithuanians and Slovenes who moved into the Pennsylvania mining fields often endowed themselves with nomenclature of the older settlers,

of the Irish and Italians there before them. In truth, these people found it difficult to know what were the "American" forms they were expected to take on.

What they did know was that they had not succeeded, that they had not established themselves to the extent that they could expect to be treated as if they belonged where they were.

If he was an alien, and poor, and in many ways helpless, still he was human, and it rankled when his dignity as a person was disregarded. He felt an undertone of acrimony in every contact with an official. Men in uniform always found him unworthy of respect; the bullying police made capital of his fear of the law; the postmen made sport of the foreign writing on his letters; the streetcar conductors laughed at his groping requests for directions. Always he was patronized as an object of charity, or almost so.

His particular enemies were the officials charged with his special oversight. When misfortune drove him to seek assistance or when government regulations brought them to inspect his home, he encountered the social workers, made ruthless in the disregard of his sentiments by the certainty of their own benevolent intentions. Confident of their personal and social superiority and armed with the ideology of the sociologists who had trained them, the emissaries of the public and private agencies were bent on improving the immigrant to a point at which he would no longer recognize himself.

The man who had dealings with the social workers was often sullen and unco-operative; he disliked the necessity of becoming a case, of revealing his dependence to strangers. He was also suspicious, feared there would be no understanding of his own way of life or of his problems; and he was resentful, because the powerful outsiders were judging him by superficial standards of their own. The starched young gentleman from the settlement house took stock from the middle of the kitchen. Were there framed pictures on the walls? Was there a piano, books? He made a note for the report: *This family is not yet Americanized; they are still eating Italian food.*

The services are valuable, but taking them is degrading. It is a fine thing to learn the language of the country; but one must be treated as a child to do so. *We keep saying all the time, This is a desk, this is a door. I know it is a desk and a door. What for keep saying it all the time? My teacher is a very nice young lady, very young. She does not understand what I want to talk about or know about.*

The most anguished conflicts come from the refusal of the immigrants to see the logic of their poverty. In the office it seems reasonable enough: people incapable of supporting themselves would be better off with someone to take care of them. It is more efficient to institutionalize the destitute than to allow them, with the aid of charity, to mismanage their homes. But the ignorant poor insist on clinging to their families, threaten suicide at the mention of the Society's refuge, or even of the hospital. What help the woman gets, she is still not satisfied. Back comes the ungrateful letter. *I don't ask you to put me in a poorhouse where I have to cry for my children. I don't ask you to put them in a home and eat somebody else's bread. I can't live here without them. I am so sick for them. I could live at home and spare good eats for them. What good did you give me to send me to the poorhouse? You only want people to live like you but I will not listen to you no more.*

A few dedicated social workers, mostly women, learned to understand the values in the immigrants' own lives. In some states, as the second generation became prominent in politics, government agencies came to co-operate with and protect the newcomers. But these were rare exceptions. They scarcely softened the rule experience everywhere taught the foreign-born, that they were expected to do what they could not do—to live like others.

For the children it was not so difficult. They at least were natives and could learn how to conform; to them the settlement house was not always a threat, but sometimes an opportunity. Indeed they could adopt entire the assumption that national character was long since fixed, only seek for their own group a special place within it. Some justified their Americanism by discovery of a colonial past; within the educated second generation there began a tortuous quest for eighteenth-century antecedents that might give them a portion in American civilization in its narrower connotation. Others sought to gain a sense of participation by separating themselves from later or lower elements in the population; they became involved in agitation against the Orientals, the Negroes, and the newest immigrants, as if thus to draw closer to the truly native. Either course implied a rejection of their parents who had themselves once been green off the boat and could boast of no New World antecedents.



The old folk knew then they would not come to belong, not through their own experience nor through their offspring. The only adjustment they had been able to make to life in the United States had been one that involved the separateness of their group, one that increased their awareness of the differences between themselves and the rest of the society. In that adjustment they had always suffered from the consciousness they were strangers. The demand that they assimilate, that they surrender their separateness, condemned them always to be outsiders. In practice, the free structure of American life permitted them with few restraints to go their own way, but under the shadow of a consciousness that they would never belong. They had thus completed their alienation from the culture to which they had come, as from that which they had left.



The America Trunk Comes Home

The emigrant who once boarded a ship for America was returning, and with him came the “America trunk” that had been loaded so carefully for the outgoing voyage. In Finland, this *American arkku* was filled when it came home with everything from glass dishes to locks from a baby’s first haircut to such prized American objects as a phonograph player or double-bitted axe. Its contents were the talk of the neighborhood, valued for decades as mementos.

The America trunk is an apt symbol of both emigration and remigration, of immigrants coming to America and returning to their homelands. The symbol persists, for the trunk occupies hallowed positions today in homes of third-generation Americans who cling to an image of their ancestral saga; in many European homes, similarly, the chest that came back is still revered as a remnant, a piece of that dream which once drew an emigrant across the seas.

But there was more, much more, symbolized in the America trunk. Within its recesses were tools or clothes that carried memories of hard struggles abroad. It provided a continuing connection with America, and because the United States increasingly played a leading role in international affairs, remigrants would be called on to interpret that role. They became *americani* and “Yanks”; America’s importance raised their importance. And the items they valued enough to carry back in trunks would provide clues to what America’s impact would be: was it tools the returners brought? or books on political theory, nationalist aspirations, labor organization, new churches? Or were the contents of the America trunk to be used to impress neighbors, perhaps to be sold to help purchase a shop or an extra piece of land? Modern students of immigration who seek answers to such questions are no different than Charles Dickens, who gazed at the emigrants returning home to Europe on his ship in 1842 and admitted that he was “curious to know their histories, and with what expectations they had gone out to America, and on what errands they were going home, and what their circumstances were.” . . .

The Ubiquitous Remigrant

The trunks were but one small part, like the tip of an iceberg, of the enormity of the movement of people, objects, and ideas back to Europe.

Percentage rates of return ranged from 30 to 40 percent for such groups as the Italians, down to 10 percent among the Irish. Using these as a rough

guide, it is possible to estimate that the total return to Europe may have been as high as four million repatriated emigrants during the 1880–1930 era of mass immigration into North America.

Examined within individual countries, these massive totals mean that one in twenty residents of Italy was a returned emigrant at the time of World War I, and shortly thereafter in a Norwegian county of heavy emigration it was found that one-fourth of all males over age fifteen had lived at least two years in America. Such high numbers signify that for the next sixty years visitors to European villages would encounter former residents of Scranton or Cleveland or Detroit, happy to describe their American experiences, wanting to know how the baseball pennant race was shaping up. . . .

A More-Reachable America

The years 1880–1930 stand out in the immigrant experience. Europeans crossed to North America in ever-increasing numbers as major improvements appeared in transportation. For generations before, however, an extensive pattern of short-term, work-seeking migration had existed in most areas of Europe, from Macedonians heading out to jobs around the Mediterranean to Irishmen and women crossing to England and Scotland for farm work. These nearby treks continued into the era of mass transatlantic emigration, as was evident in Polish totals: at the peak of Polish emigration to the United States in 1912–13, 130,000 left for America—compared to 800,000 heading for seasonal work elsewhere in Europe. It is true that development of the oceangoing steamship, coupled with an increasing flow of news and publicity about American jobs, helped shift the destinations of many short-term migrants to the West, across the Atlantic. North and South America were becoming more closely fitted into the Atlantic economy and, if this meant that midwestern pork could now be packed for consumers in Germany, it also signified that Germans from those same consuming areas, and Poles, Italians, and Finns, could easily travel to find employment in those same U.S. packing plants.

These developments welded mass migration closely to the variations, booms, and busts of American industry. To these immigrants, America became basically the site of factory employment, gang labor on a railroad section, a job underground following a coal seam. One Italian could talk of his American experiences only in terms of trains, rails, and crossties, “as if all of America was nothing but a braid of tracks,” a countryman reported.

As the trio of concerns of *journey, job hunt, and employment* became more predictable, less dangerous, the trip to America could then be viewed as something other than a lifetime change. Like short-term labor migration within Europe, it became a means to improve life at home, through earning enough to achieve a higher status or more solid position in the village. It was not so much the start of a new life as another step in the process of social mobility. These factors in turn dictated that life in the American “workshop” would be temporary for many.

. . . In all, it is impossible to know what percentage of immigrants planned to return home, but it is not reaching far beyond the evidence to estimate

that a majority in the 1880–1930 period initially expected to turn their backs on life and labor overseas once they had accumulated some wealth. Various things caused most to change their minds: in the United States these included realizing that opportunities in America outstripped those at home, gaining a better job, becoming accustomed to a higher standard of living, the arrival of news from abroad that removed the necessity for return, or gradual Americanization through learning the language, acquiring American friends, falling in love with a local girl.

Sometimes the shifts in expectations could be traced through a progression of names, as in the case of a Lithuanian immigrant couple who lived in coal towns in Pennsylvania and Illinois, always planning to return to Lithuania until they moved on to Oklahoma and decided to settle down. Their first two children were born in 1896 and 1900, when they still expected to go back to Europe, and were accordingly named Gediminas and Juozas. The third arrived in 1912, when they had become Americans. They named him Edwin.

But until that decision was made, until the carefully plotted return plans were finally abandoned, then every act, every expenditure had to be undertaken with an eye toward repatriation. This fact dawned gradually on an American in 1903 as he traveled about Italy and found that returned emigrants were much different, better persons at home; they had lived in brutal conditions in the United States because of "a feeling among them that they were merely temporizing . . . ; that they had come to America to make a few hundred dollars to send or take back to Italy; and that it did not make much difference what they ate, wore or did, just so long as they got the money and got back." Their day-to-day existence in the United States would not improve until they were "drawn into the real American life" and changed their minds about going back to Europe.

Dreams of the village were especially strong among such persons; their thoughts were directed eastward toward home, even while they lived and worked in the West. This longing made assimilation difficult, and ethnic identities were further maintained by life in immigrant enclaves, blocking or discouraging connections with American institutions. Such isolation drew the fire of many Americans and settled members of the Old Immigration. Angered at the spectacle of U.S. dollars being carried overseas, they were also appalled by living conditions among those expecting to return. Labor unions suffered from the influx of these low-wage immigrants who often rejected invitations to join their fight for better wages and conditions. For years the unions approached the newcomers from two directions, often at the same time: seeking to organize the aliens while attacking them as strikebreakers and cheap competition. And the continued exodus of remigrants added to the pressure on union leaders to side with the restrictionist movement. . . .

As these immigrants held back from identifying with their new country of residence, many became part of a subculture within their own immigrant culture; that is, the temporary immigrant did even less than other immigrants to learn English, adapt to American ways, join American organizations. This reluctance further stimulated nativist attacks, which reached a climax with the

restriction legislation of the postwar 1920s. Remigrants were not the only cause of the nativist surge, but their lifestyles in America helped fuel the restrictionist drive and they became one of the nativists' easiest targets.

Praise and Scorn at Home

As they returned to Europe the remigrants found a mixed welcome. Constructing new-style houses of brick rather than wood, many wore fancy clothes and endeavored to climb the social ladder. But villagers often looked askance at these people who seemed all too often to be putting on airs. One critic was the father of later emigrant Stoyan Christowe, who observed the well-dressed remigrants parading around their Bulgarian village and spat out, "An ox is an ox even if you put golden horns on him."

Their stories were often too fantastic, too farfetched. Norwegians began referring to them as *Amerikaskroner*—"tall tales from America." One man recalled his uncle's return to Norway in 1929 and his strange revelations about the things he had seen: "He told us about the Christmas trees that went round and round, he talked about streetcars, he talked of electric lights, he told of huge buildings, skyscrapers, he told us how they built them, he talked about the communications, railroads that went to every corner in the land, he told us about an industrial society which was so different from what we knew that it was like a completely different world." Was it all believable? Perhaps not. More recently, a returned emigrant showed his Norwegian grade school pupils a U.S. postcard with a photo graph of a giant Pacific Northwest log on a logging truck, the driver standing proudly on top. When he translated the postcard's legend, "Oregon Toothpick," one child retorted, "I've always heard that Americans have big mouths."

Their money was a reality that could not be denied, however. The cash carried home, together with the vast sums mailed back by those still toiling across the ocean, helped stabilize the economies of Europe and served as a stimulus for local booms. Business experience and connections became the most obvious gains from remigration in many districts, especially in Germany. Land, apartment houses, taverns, shops, and other firms were purchased by those coming home with "golden horns." For a time in Bydgoszcz, a Polish city in Pomerania, seventy agencies worked primarily to help remigrants obtain or sell properties. Two generations later the flow of retirees back from America would stimulate similar activities through their Social Security checks and factory pensions.

Most who returned in the 1880–1930 era went into agriculture, and this activity was at the center of much of the debate over their impact. Certainly agriculture was extremely backward in many areas; one estimate by returning Norwegians was that farming in Norway was fifty years behind that in the United States. But would returned emigrants be the ones to launch the required changes? Remigrants rushed to buy farmland, and large-scale commercialization of land became one of the most noted results of the vast emigration and return. But early evidence indicated that remigrants then continued or even expanded traditional and backward farming practices.

In contrast, areas such as Prussia and the English Midlands, where farm progress was extensive in the late nineteenth century, featured either the growth of larger land units with major investments of capital or the contrary development of smaller but more specialized farms that used the latest in farm technology and benefited from growing consumer demand. A student of the transformation of British agriculture notes increased farming complexity through use of artificial manures and new seeds and livestock breeds and adds that this "no doubt . . . also required flexibility of mind." But flexibility of mind regarding agricultural improvements may have been missing among many remigrants coming back to traditional farming in such areas as southern Italy or Poland. Few had worked on American farms, and this fact alone predicted that their impact on the Continent's agriculture would be minimal. Sporadic improvements and changes were widely publicized, but these were unusual, like the tomatoes planted by some Finns or the new flowers appearing in Polish gardens. Only in certain areas, such as parts of Scandinavia, could it be said that the remigrants were a definite mainstay of drives to modernize agriculture.

But in other occupations and situations, where emigrants had been able to learn American methods, improvements were obvious. To begin with, more vigorous work habits were widely noted. Also, many carried home sewing machines, which led to improvements in clothing, and holiday garb began to be worn more regularly. Homemaking benefited: when Irish women returned, they refused to continue traditional hearth cooking because it only permitted meat to be boiled; soon they installed grates or bought ranges. Personal hygiene improved, and a Hungarian report indicated that remigrants even kept their windows open at night, rejecting the traditional belief that night air held evils.

Many threw themselves into various campaigns for government change: Irish Home Rulers sought to throw off British control, Slovaks and Croats pushed for separate nations, some Finns who had attended the Duluth Work People's College wanted to destroy capitalism. Others agitated for the development of public schools, and the remigrants' presence helped spread English through Gaelic-speaking areas of Ireland and in many other districts across Europe. Returned emigrants began to appear as members of village councils, school boards, even national legislatures; three of them became prime ministers, of Norway, Latvia, and Finland. . . .

Conclusions

In an examination of the remigrant from 1880 to 1930, before leaving Europe, at work in America, and after the return home, nine broad conclusions emerge:

1. The temporary immigrant was in truth far different from the immigrant who planned to stay. The expectations of any immigrant were all-important in directing his or her job-seeking, assimilation, and adjustment to American life, and the immigrant who stepped onto American soil planning permanent residence saw these goals differently than did the short-term industrial migrant. The latter was basically a *sojourner*, defined by sociologists as a deviant form

of the stranger, who remains psychologically in his homeland while living somewhere else, culturally isolated, tied physically but not mentally to a job. He may have changed his mind eventually, but until that point he lived the life of one who saw his future back in Europe.

Employment became the critical part of the remigrant's American existence. Like a New England girl arriving to work briefly in the Lowell mills in the 1830s, or a Turkish *Gastarbeiter* in Germany today, the temporary industrial migrant in the 1880–1930 period saw the world through different eyes than did (or does) the worker planning to remain. To ignore this fact and its implications is to miss a major facet of immigration's impact and an important explanation of immigrants' failure to assimilate despite lengthy residence abroad. Failing to take it into account would also make it difficult to understand why so many who returned home took up farming rather than the industrial occupations they had known overseas. If one task of the historian is to see the past from different angles, then following the contrary path of the temporary immigrant can provide an important new perspective.

2. The American immigration story becomes less unified, more diverse, when remigrants are considered within the broad picture of the peopling of a continent. There was little in common between the Bohemian family settling the Nebraska prairies in the 1890s and Bohemian men arriving for a year's work in a Chicago stockyard. Assimilation was soon forced on those farming in Nebraska; it was not even a remote goal of most of those lining up for their wages each fortnight in Chicago. One immigrant is not always equal to another—an obvious fact, but one made both more apparent and more significant when the remigrant experience is considered. . . .

3. There were many Americas contained within the broad vision of the United States by the 1880s, but America as the symbol of economic opportunity increasingly became uppermost for immigrants, especially those planning a temporary stay. Democracy was of little importance to a sojourner dreaming of adding to his piece of earth in the Mezzogiorno. When economic opportunity and democracy were seen as two branches of the same trunk, however, one could buttress the other in forming an image of the nation. But a remigrant who had witnessed few examples of democracy in his twelve-hour days in a steel mill would consider America in a different light than would another new resident escaping from religious unrest and finding herself in the competitive free-for-all of U.S. church denominations. Economic opportunity became the representative American symbol to millions.

4. The basis of American nativism was not opposition to return migration, but it gained several major arguments in the course of reacting to temporary immigrants. Nativists began to erupt in anger as thousands and thousands of short-term residents avoided assimilation and escaped abroad with their American earnings. The exodus goaded many Americans into ever stronger condemnations of immigration in general, and the identification of European remigrants with Chinese sojourners became complete. This provided an opening for earlier, permanent immigrants to condemn later arrivals and to become in effect immigrant nativists. Anti-foreign sentiment among U.S. labor groups leaned especially hard on the temporary immigrant.

5. The striving for status—to hold onto a vanishing position, or even to climb higher—emerges as one of the main forces behind remigration as well as emigration. Remigrants often left Europe to seek a higher status at home; they did not seek a permanent existence and better status in America. The New World may have represented a horn of plenty, but its wealth would be more useful back in Europe. Basic subsistence could be met, and after that the possibility of becoming landowners of importance in the village. Immigrants knew enough about life in the United States to understand the saying, "America for the oxen, Europe for the peasant." It was in Europe, not America, that the opportunity to reach a new level of existence waited.

6. The remigrant's importance in stimulating further immigration may have eclipsed even that of the much-maligned steamship agent. A large-scale exodus developed mainly from European areas where there had been an earlier emigration, which had produced a return flow of successes with money to purchase land and to construct "American houses." These acts promoted America with more impact than did handbills posted on village walls. There is also evidence of what might be called "emigration families," providing members from each generation who spent time in the United States and then returned, their tales handed down to stimulate others to try America later. The process was then repeated, generation after generation, and the remigrant ancestors became long-term role models. Their example competed with the emigrant letter as the chief propagandist of emigration. And the picture of America as a horn of plenty became indelibly fastened on a people who grew up hearing American stories around the winter hearth.

7. The return flow must be counted as a major reason that Europe's enormous exodus to America did not result in a net loss for the home society. Some form of general decline might have been expected for a continent that lost 36 million of its most active and future-oriented citizens to the United States from 1820 to 1975. The same could have been predicted for other regions that sent their people to America; one might even apply it to Mexico and the Caribbean nations today. But instead of causing a deterioration, the era of mass emigration proved overall to be one of general advance and progress for the people of many nations. This pattern continues. Certainly many things, tangible and intangible, have contributed to this result, but one is the extensive return flow of people, money, and ideas. As a Polish priest concluded from his study of the emigration from Miejsce parish in 1883, the returns from America meant that the exodus was "not a loss but a gain for this province." It could be said for most of Europe.

The Continent benefited as well from the return of organizational and political skills, as men and women of all ideologies and aspirations came back to launch labor unions and community organizations and to become involved in political affairs. Churches were challenged and new philosophies began to circulate. When Finland and Latvia achieved independence amid scenes of enormous chaos, leadership in each new country fell to those already experienced in labor and political struggles in America. Norway also chose a remigrant as its prime minister to lead the country through the dark days of depression and World War II. Many others coming back occupied government posts in municipalities as well as in national regimes.

The remigrants brought change in many forms. New words were carried home: modern Finnish has been enriched by many remigrant words and phrases, according to recent studies. Beyond this, many of those returning to Europe displayed an openness, an attitude that shook off the old and helped transform the peasant world. And remigration contributed further to a mingling of cultures which encouraged change as well as helping bring a gradual integration of the cultures of Europe and America.

The United States is more than just people transferred from Europe; Europe is guided by more than influences from America. But the two-way exchange was one crucial factor in the historical development of both, and the remigrant helped in both directions, a continuing link between two cultures.

8. American "exceptionalism," the view that the American experience has been unique and that developments in the United States were basically different from those elsewhere, is dealt a further blow by the remigration story. The United States was not a land where every immigrant came to stay; it was a country seen by many foreigners as a means rather than an end. As such, the American immigration pageant contained many scenes known elsewhere, for temporary stays as well as permanent moves have long been part of human migrations.

Parallels are numerous. Just as was often the case in the United States, temporary migrants were unpopular in the Ruhr, where German unions fought Poles, employers put aliens in the dirtiest jobs, and officials sought their removal. Swiss workers assaulted Italians in 1896, the government meanwhile blocked their naturalization, and welfare groups refused to give aid. This was nativism run wild. Riots erupted against Italian workers in France from the 1880s on; in 1893, fifty Italians were killed and 150 wounded during an attack by French miners at the Aigues-Mortes salt-works. There was physical violence in the United States, but as in Europe the opposition to those planning to return usually took other forms: unions sought their dismissal, politicians argued for bans on their employment, and editorial writers aimed darts at those who carried off national wealth. . . .

9. Finally, the story of the returned immigrant brings the historian face to face with the importance of human feelings, human emotions, in world events. Scholars often stress impersonal forces when discussing developments involving masses of people. But the fact that several million immigrants could turn around and leave a land with a higher standard of living and all the glitter of modernization, to cross the ocean again and return to a backward peasant village, with its distinctive culture and traditions, stands as supreme testimony to the pull of kin and home.

The Psalmist cried, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" And the longing to be within the family circle, in the familiar pathways and fields of home, has always been part of the human condition. The human heart must be given equal rank here with cold economic statistics and the pleadings of steamship agents. For the sense of being lost, away from moorings, left thousands of immigrants with the feeling that nothing seemed right in the New World—not holidays, not religious rites, not even the summer sunrise. They like the Psalmist felt lost in a strange land. The Swedish novelist of

emigration, Vilhelm Moberg, reflected on these feelings in his autobiographical novel *A Time on Earth*:

Man must have a root in the world; he must belong somewhere. He cannot abandon the land where he was born and adopt another country as his birthplace. Prattle about old and new mother countries is prattle only, and a lie. Either I have a country of my own, or I have not. Mother country is singular, never plural.

The country you knew as child and young man was the country you left. That was your fate; you could never find another homeland.

In the final analysis, the story of the returned immigrants is a record of the endurance of home and family ties. It provides further evidence that, for many, immigration demonstrated the strength and unity of the family—both in going to America and in returning—rather than the family's weakening or destruction. For it was to rejoin their people, to walk again on their own land, to sit in the parish church once more, that the temporary immigrants repacked their America trunks and booked passage again, this time for home. The journey to America had been round-trip. And as they had helped shape life in the United States, its world of work, its image of itself and of foreigners, now they would affect the lives of their own families, their villages, their homelands. It would be a different future on both continents because of the returned immigrants.



POSTSCRIPT



Were Late Nineteenth-Century Immigrants “Uprooted”?

Oscar Handlin has been recognized as the most influential scholar on immigration history since his doctoral dissertation won the Dunning Prize when he was only twenty-six years old. Published as *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation* (Harvard University Press, 1941), this was the first study of immigration to integrate sociological concepts within a historical framework. A decade later, Handlin published *The Uprooted*, in which he combined the interdisciplinary framework with a personal narrative of the immigrants' history. Although many historians criticized this approach, the book earned Handlin a Pulitzer Prize.

John Bodnar's *The Transplanted*, while offering a contrasting metaphor for the immigration experience to the United States, shares with Handlin's work an attempt to present a general account of that experience, to portray the immigrants in a sympathetic light and to employ an interdisciplinary approach by borrowing concepts from the social sciences. Handlin and Bodnar, however, differ in their perspectives about America's ethnic past. Handlin views the immigrants as people who were removed from their particular Old World cultures and who assimilated into the New World value system within two generations. In contrast, Bodnar argues that some first-generation immigrants may have shed their traditional culture quickly upon arrival in the United States, but more continued to maintain a viable lifestyle in their adopted homeland that focused upon the family household and the neighboring ethnic community. “Not solely traditional, modern or working class,” says Bodnar, “it was a dynamic culture, constantly responding to changing needs and opportunities and grounded in a deep sense of pragmatism and mutual assistance.”

The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups (Harvard University Press, 1980), edited by Stephan Thernstrom and Oscar Handlin, is a valuable collection of articles on every ethnic group in the United States. It also contains twenty-nine thematic essays on such subjects as prejudice, assimilation, and folklore. Also useful and more manageable is Stephanie Bernardo, *The Ethnic Almanac* (Doubleday, 1981), whose purpose is to “amuse, inform and entertain you with facts about your heritage and that of your friends, neighbors and relatives.” Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers's *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration and Assimilation*, 2nd ed. (Harper & Row, 1982), is a short but accurate text, while Joe R. Feagan's *Racial and Ethnic Relations*, 2nd ed. (Prentice Hall, 1985), is a useful sociological text that examines the major ethnic groups through assimilationist and power-conflict models.

In the last generation, dozens of studies have focused on the experiences of particular immigrant groups in the United States. See, for example, Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Harvard University Press, 1962); Jack Chen, *The Chinese in America* (Harper & Row, 1980); Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans* (Hill and Wang, 1972); Humbert Nelli, *Italians in Chicago, 1880–1930: A Study of Ethnic Mobility* (Oxford University Press, 1970); and Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880–1915* (Oxford University Press, 1977). The reaction to the immigration of the late nineteenth century can be observed in Jacob Riis's contemporary account of New York City, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890; reprint, Hill and Wang, 1970), and in John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (Rutgers University Press, 1955), which is considered the best work on anti-immigrant prejudice in this time period.



ISSUE 6



Were the Populists Irrational Reactionaries?

YES: Richard Hofstadter, from *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1955 and 1972)

NO: Charles Postel, from *The Populist Vision* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: According to Richard Hofstadter the Populists created a conspiracy theory around the issues of industrialism that activated a virulent strain of nativism and anti-Semitism, and revealed their desire to return to a rural utopia that they associated with the early nineteenth century.

NO: Charles Postel characterizes the Populists as forward-thinking reformers who hoped to use the government to manage an increasingly modern, technologically sophisticated, and globally connected society for the benefit of ordinary citizens.

Industrialism produced significant changes and affected every major group in American society. Manufacturers and laborers obviously experienced the impact of these new forces, but industrial influences were felt beyond the confines of the nation's growing cities. Industrialism also altered the lives of rural Americans who depended upon the soil for their livelihoods. Although they hoped to benefit from new markets and increased prosperity, the reality for most American farmers was greater poverty. After 1815, the independent, self-sufficient farmer began his retreat into American mythology in the wake of the relentless advance of commercial agriculture.

Between 1860 and 1900, American farmers confronted a steady downward spiral of agricultural prices, especially among major cash crops like wheat, corn, and cotton. Greater efficiency created higher production levels which in turn drove prices to lower levels. Meanwhile, farmers and their families had to purchase manufactured goods, many of which were inflated artificially in price by existing tariff schedules. Purchasing new land and better machinery to offset declining prices only compounded the problem and created a new

one—the difficulty of repaying credit. By 1890, many farmers were losing their lands to foreclosure and were forced into tenancy or sharecropping; others abandoned the countryside for the city.

The discontent bred by these factors led American farmers to conclude that the best solution lay in organization. This was a momentous decision on the part of a group of citizens who for generations had expressed a commitment to individualism of the most rugged sort. But with industrialists forming managers' associations and urban workers pushing for the recognition of their unions, many farmers decided to follow suit. Initial attempts to organize resulted in the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry in the 1860s, a social group, and the Alliance movement of the 1870s and 1880s. Finally, farmers attempted to organize an effective political movement in the 1890s, which culminated in the People's, or Populist's, Party. The Populists mounted opposition to the forces that threatened to make beggars of agricultural and urban workers alike, but with the defeat of William Jennings Bryan in the presidential election of 1896, Populism passed quickly from the scene. Nevertheless, many of the ideas and programs advanced by the People's Party subsequently were secured by reformers in the twentieth century.

Who were the Populists? How were their goals and ideology molded by the times in which they lived? How did the Populist Party react to the urban, industrial values that seemed to be dominating American society in the late nineteenth century? Was the revolt of the Populists in large part an effort to return American society to the simpler utopia that they believed had characterized the United States in the early 1800s? These are some of the questions addressed in the essays that follow.

Richard Hofstadter credits the Populist Party with releasing reform sentiments that fueled the protests of the Progressive era and for being the first political movement to insist upon federal responsibility for the common good of American society. At the same time, Hofstadter claims, Populism was provincial, nationalistic, nativistic, and anti-Semitic, characteristics that Hofstadter ascribes to a group of reactionary agrarians living uncomfortably in a modern, industrialized nation. According to Charles Postel, the Populists were neither irrational nor reactionary. Their vision for the United States involved the use of an active federal government as an agency of the majority, rather than the corporate and wealthy elite, in order to insure fair access to the benefits of modernity.

In addition to Hicks' work cited above, the origins of the farmers' revolt of the late nineteenth century are explored in D. Sven Nordin, *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867–1900* (University Press of Mississippi, 1974); Robert C. McMath, Jr., *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Michael Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure: The Southern Farmers' Alliance and Cotton Tenancy, 1880–1890* (Academic, 1976); Stephen Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (Oxford University Press, 1983); and Donna Barnes, *Farmers in Rebellion: The Rise and Fall of the Southern Farmers' Alliance and People's Party in Texas* (University of Texas Press, 1984).

The Folklore of Populism

The Two Nations

For a generation after the Civil War, a time of great economic exploitation and waste, grave social corruption and ugliness, the dominant note in American political life was complacency. Although dissenting minorities were always present, they were submerged by the overwhelming realities of industrial growth and continental settlement. The agitation of the Populists, which brought back to American public life a capacity for effective political indignation, marks the beginning of the end of this epoch. In the short run the Populists did not get what they wanted, but they released the flow of protest and criticism that swept through American political affairs from the 1890s to the beginning of the first World War.

Where contemporary intellectuals gave the Populists a perfunctory and disdainful hearing, later historians have freely recognized their achievements and frequently overlooked their limitations. Modern liberals, finding the Populists' grievances valid, their programs suggestive, their motives creditable, have usually spoken of the Populist episode in the spirit of Vachel Lindsay's bombastic rhetoric:

Prairie avenger, mountain lion,
Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan,
Gigantic troubadour, speaking like a siege gun,
Smashing Plymouth Rock with his boulders from the West.

There is indeed much that is good and usable in our Populist past. While the Populist tradition had defects that have been too much neglected, it does not follow that the virtues claimed for it are all fictitious. Populism was the first modern political movement of practical importance in the United States to insist that the federal government has some responsibility for the common weal; indeed, it was the first such movement to attack seriously the problems created by industrialism. The complaints and demands and prophetic denunciations of the Populists stirred the latent liberalism in many Americans and startled many conservatives into a new flexibility. Most of the "radical" reforms in the Populist program proved in later years to be either harmless or useful. In at least one important area of American life a few Populist leaders

in the South attempted something profoundly radical and humane—to build a popular movement that would cut across the old barriers of race—until persistent use of the Negro bogey distracted their following. To discuss the broad ideology of the Populists does them some injustice, for it was in their concrete programs that they added most constructively to our political life, and in their more general picture of the world that they were most credulous and vulnerable. Moreover, any account of the fallibility of Populist thinking that does not acknowledge the stress and suffering out of which that thinking emerged will be seriously remiss. But anyone who enlarges our portrait of the Populist tradition is likely to bring out some unseen blemishes. In the books that have been written about the Populist movement, only passing mention has been made of its significant provincialism; little has been said of its relations with nativism and nationalism; nothing has been said of its tincture of anti-Semitism.

The Populist impulse expressed itself in a set of notions that represent what I have called the “soft” side of agrarianism. These notions, which appeared with regularity in the political literature, must be examined if we are to re-create for ourselves the Populist spirit. To extract them from the full context of the polemical writings in which they appeared is undoubtedly to oversimplify them; even to name them in any language that comes readily to the historian of ideas is perhaps to suggest that they had a formality and coherence that in reality they clearly lacked. But since it is less feasible to have no labels than to have somewhat too facile ones, we may enumerate the dominant themes in Populist ideology as these: the idea of a golden age; the concept of natural harmonies; the dualistic version of social struggles; the conspiracy theory of history; and the doctrine of the primacy of money. . . .

The utopia of the Populists was in the past, not the future. According to the agrarian myth, the health of the state was proportionate to the degree to which it was dominated by the agricultural class, and this assumption pointed to the superiority of an earlier age. The Populists looked backward with longing to the lost agrarian Eden, to the republican America of the early years of the nineteenth century in which there were few millionaires and, as they saw it, no beggars, when the laborer had excellent prospects and the farmer had abundance, when statesmen still responded to the mood of the people and there was no such thing as the money power. What they meant—though they did not express themselves in such terms—was that they would like to restore the conditions prevailing before the development of industrialism and the commercialization of agriculture. It should not be surprising that they inherited the traditions of Jacksonian democracy, that they revived the old Jacksonian cry: “Equal Rights for All, Special Privileges for None,” or that most of the slogans of 1896 echoed the battle cries of 1836. General James B. Weaver, the Populist candidate for the presidency in 1892, was an old Democrat and Free-Soiler, born during the days of Jackson’s battle with the United States Bank, who drifted into the Greenback movement after a short spell as a Republican, and from there to Populism. His book, *A Call to Action*, published in 1892, drew up an indictment of the business corporation which reads like a Jacksonian polemic. Even in those hopeful early days of the People’s Party, Weaver projected no grandiose plans for the future, but

lamented the course of recent history, the growth of economic oppression, and the emergence of great contrasts of wealth and poverty, and called upon his readers to do "All in [their] power to arrest the alarming tendencies of our times."

Nature, as the agrarian tradition had it, was beneficent. The United States was abundantly endowed with rich land and rich resources, and the "natural" consequence of such an endowment should be the prosperity of the people. If the people failed to enjoy prosperity, it must be because of a harsh and arbitrary intrusion of human greed and error. "Hard times, then," said one popular writer, "as well as the bankruptcies, enforced idleness, starvation, and the crime, misery, and moral degradation growing out of conditions like the present, being unnatural, not in accordance with, or the result of any natural law, must be attributed to that kind of unwise and pernicious legislation which history proves to have produced similar results in all ages of the world. It is the mission of the age to correct these errors in human legislation, to adopt and establish policies and systems, in accord with, rather than in opposition to divine law." In assuming a lush natural order whose workings were being deranged by human laws, Populist writers were again drawing on the Jacksonian tradition, whose spokesmen also had pleaded for a proper obedience to "natural" laws as a prerequisite of social justice.

Somewhat akin to the notion of the beneficence of nature was the idea of a natural harmony of interests among the productive classes. To the Populist mind there was no fundamental conflict between the farmer and the worker, between the toiling people and the small businessman. While there might be corrupt individuals in any group, the underlying interests of the productive majority were the same; predatory behavior existed only because it was initiated and underwritten by a small parasitic minority in the highest places of power. As opposed to the idea that society consists of a number of different and frequently clashing interests—the social pluralism expressed, for instance, by Madison in the *Federalist*—the Populists adhered, less formally to be sure, but quite persistently, to a kind of social dualism: although they knew perfectly well that society was composed of a number of classes, for all practical purposes only one simple division need be considered. There were two nations. "It is a struggle," said Sockless Jerry Simpson, "between the robbers and the robbed." "There are but two sides in the conflict that is being waged in this country today," declared a Populist manifesto. "On the one side are the allied hosts of monopolies, the money power, great trusts and railroad corporations, who seek the enactment of laws to benefit them and impoverish the people. On the other are the farmers, laborers, merchants, and all other people who produce wealth and bear the burdens of taxation. . . . Between these two there is no middle ground." "On the one side," said Bryan in his famous speech against the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, "stand the corporate interests of the United States, the moneyed interests, aggregated wealth and capital, imperious, arrogant, compassionless. . . . On the other side stand an unnumbered throng, those who gave to the Democratic party a name and for whom it has assumed to speak." The people versus the interests, the public versus the plutocrats, the toiling multitude versus the money

power—in various phrases this central antagonism was expressed. From this simple social classification it seemed to follow that once the techniques of misleading the people were exposed, victory over the money power ought to be easily accomplished, for in sheer numbers the people were overwhelming. “There is no power on earth that can defeat us,” said General Weaver during the optimistic days of the campaign of 1892. “It is a fight between labor and capital, and labor is in the vast majority.” . . .

History as Conspiracy

. . . There was something about the Populist imagination that loved the secret plot and the conspiratorial meeting. There was in fact a widespread Populist idea that all American history since the Civil War could be understood as a sustained conspiracy of the international money power. . . .

Wherever one turns in the Populist literature of the nineties one can find this conspiracy theory expressed. It is in the Populist newspapers, the proceedings of the silver conventions, the immense pamphlet literature broadcast by the American Bimetallic League, the Congressional debates over money; it is elaborated in such popular books as Mrs. S. E. V. Emery's *Seven Financial Conspiracies which have Enslaved the American People* or Gordon Clark's *Shylock: as Banker, Bondholder, Corruptionist, Conspirator*.

Mrs. Emery's book, first published in 1887, and dedicated to “the enslaved people of a dying republic,” achieved great circulation, especially among the Kansas Populists. According to Mrs. Emery, the United States had been an economic Garden of Eden in the period before the Civil War. The fall of man had dated from the war itself, when “the money kings of Wall Street” determined that they could take advantage of the wartime necessities of their fellow men by manipulating the currency. “Controlling it, they could inflate or depress the business of the country at pleasure, they could send the warm life current through the channels of trade, dispensing peace, happiness, and prosperity, or they could check its flow, and completely paralyze the industries of the country.” With this great power for good in their hands, the Wall Street men preferred to do evil. Lincoln's war policy of issuing greenbacks presented them with the dire threat of an adequate supply of currency. So the Shylocks gathered in convention and “perfected” a conspiracy to create a demand for their gold. The remainder of the book was a recital of a series of seven measures passed between 1862 and 1875 which were alleged to be a part of this continuing conspiracy, the total effect of which was to contract the currency of the country further and further until finally it squeezed the industry of the country like a hoop of steel.

Mrs. Emery's rhetoric left no doubt of the sustained purposefulness of this scheme—described as “villainous robbery,” and as having been “secured through the most soulless strategy.” She was most explicit about the so-called “crime of 1873,” the demonetization of silver, giving a fairly full statement of the standard greenback-silverite myth concerning that event. As they had it, an agent of the Bank of England, Ernest Seyd by name, had come to the United States in 1872 with \$500,000 with which he had bought enough support in Congress to secure the passage of the demonetization measure. This measure was supposed to have

greatly increased the value of American four per cent bonds held by British capitalists by making it necessary to pay them in gold only. To it Mrs. Emery attributed the panic of 1873, its bankruptcies, and its train of human disasters: "Murder, insanity, suicide, divorce, drunkenness and all forms of immorality and crime have increased from that day to this in the most appalling ratio."

"Coin" Harvey, the author of the most popular single document of the whole currency controversy, *Coin's Financial School*, also published a novel, *A Tale of Two Nations*, in which the conspiracy theory of history was incorporated into a melodramatic tale. In this story the powerful English banker Baron Rothe plans to bring about the demonetization of silver in the United States, in part for his own aggrandizement but also to prevent the power of the United States from outstripping that of England. He persuades an American Senator (probably John Sherman, the *bête noire* of the silverites) to co-operate in using British gold in a campaign against silver. To be sure that the work is successful, he also sends to the United States a relative and ally, one Rogasner, who stalks through the story like the villains in the plays of Dion Boucicault, muttering to himself such remarks as "I am here to destroy the United States—Cornwallis could not have done more. For the wrongs and insults, for the glory of my own country, I will bury the knife deep into the heart of this nation." Against the plausibly drawn background of the corruption of the Grant administration, Rogasner proceeds to buy up the American Congress and suborn American professors of economics to testify for gold. He also falls in love with a proud American beauty, but his designs on her are foiled because she loves a handsome young silver Congressman from Nebraska who bears a striking resemblance to William Jennings Bryan!

One feature of the Populist conspiracy theory that has been generally overlooked is its frequent link with a kind of rhetorical anti-Semitism. The slight current of anti-Semitism that existed in the United States before the 1890s had been associated with problems of money and credit. During the closing years of the century it grew noticeably. While the jocose and rather heavy-handed anti-Semitism that can be found in Henry Adams's letters of the 1890s shows that this prejudice existed outside Populist literature, it was chiefly Populist writers who expressed that identification of the Jew with the usurer and the "international gold ring" which was the central theme of the American anti-Semitism of the age. The omnipresent symbol of Shylock can hardly be taken in itself as evidence of anti-Semitism, but the frequent references to the House of Rothschild make it clear that for many silverites the Jew was an organic part of the conspiracy theory of history. Coin Harvey's Baron Rothe was clearly meant to be Rothschild; his Rogasner (Ernest Seyd?) was a dark figure out of the coarsest anti-Semitic tradition. "You are very wise in your way," Rogasner is told at the climax of the tale, "the commercial way, inbred through generations. The politic, scheming, devious way, inbred through generations also." One of the cartoons in the effectively illustrated *Coin's Financial School* showed a map of the world dominated by the tentacles of an octopus at the site of the British Isles, labeled: "Rothschilds." In Populist demonology, anti-Semitism and Anglophobia went hand in hand.

The note of anti-Semitism was often sounded openly in the campaign for silver. A representative of the New Jersey Grange, for instance, did not hesitate

to warn the members of the Second National Silver Convention of 1892 to watch out for political candidates who represented "Wall Street, and the Jews of Europe." Mary E. Lease described Grover Cleveland as "the agent of Jewish bankers and British gold." Donnelly represented the leader of the governing Council of plutocrats in *Cæsar's Column*, one Prince Cabano, as a powerful Jew, born Jacob Isaacs; one of the triumvirate who lead the Brotherhood of Destruction is also an exiled Russian Jew, who flees from the apocalyptic carnage with a hundred million dollars which he intends to use to "revive the ancient splendors of the Jewish race, in the midst of the ruins of the world." One of the more elaborate documents of the conspiracy school traced the power of the Rothschilds over America to a transaction between Hugh McCulloch, Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln and Johnson, and Baron James Rothschild. "The most direful part of this business between Rothschild and the United States Treasury was not the loss of money, even by hundreds of millions. It was the resignation of the country itself INTO THE HANDS OF ENGLAND, as England had long been resigned into the hands of HER JEWS."

Such rhetoric, which became common currency in the movement, later passed beyond Populism into the larger stream of political protest. By the time the campaign of 1896 arrived, an Associated Press reporter noticed as "one of the striking things" about the Populist convention at St. Louis "the extraordinary hatred of the Jewish race. It is not possible to go into any hotel in the city without hearing the most bitter denunciation of the Jews as a class and of the particular Jews who happen to have prospered in the world." This report may have been somewhat overdone, but the identification of the silver cause with anti-Semitism did become close enough for Bryan to have to pause in the midst of his campaign to explain to the Jewish Democrats of Chicago that in denouncing the policies of the Rothschilds he and his silver friends were "not attacking a race; we are attacking greed and avarice which know no race or religion."

It would be easy to misstate the character of Populist anti-Semitism or to exaggerate its intensity. For Populist anti-Semitism was entirely verbal. It was a mode of expression, a rhetorical style, not a tactic or a program. It did not lead to exclusion laws, much less to riots or pogroms. There were, after all, relatively few Jews in the United States in the late 1880s and early 1890s, most of them remote from the areas of Populist strength. It is one thing, however, to say that this prejudice did not go beyond a certain symbolic usage, quite another to say that a people's choice of symbols is of no significance. Populist anti-Semitism does have its importance—chiefly as a symptom of a certain ominous credulity in the Populist mind. It is not too much to say that the Greenback-Populist tradition activated most of what we have of modern popular anti-Semitism in the United States. From Thaddeus Stevens and Coin Harvey to Father Coughlin, and from Brooks and Henry Adams to Ezra Pound, there has been a curiously persistent linkage between anti-Semitism and money and credit obsessions. A full history of modern anti-Semitism in the United States would reveal, I believe, its substantial Populist lineage, but it may be sufficient to point out here that neither the informal connection between Bryan and the Klan in the twenties nor Thomas E. Watson's conduct in the Leo Frank case were altogether fortuitous. And Henry Ford's notorious anti-Semitism of the 1920s,

along with his hatred of "Wall Street," were the foibles of a Michigan farm boy who had been liberally exposed to Populist notions.

The Spirit Militant

The conspiratorial theory and the associated Anglophobic and Judophobic feelings were part of a larger complex of fear and suspicion of the stranger that haunted, and still tragically haunts, the nativist American mind. This feeling, though hardly confined to Populists and Bryanites, was none the less exhibited by them in a particularly virulent form. Everyone remote and alien was distrusted and hated—even Americans, if they happened to be city people. The old agrarian conception of the city as the home of moral corruption reached a new pitch. Chicago was bad; New York, which housed the Wall Street bankers, was farther away and worse; London was still farther away and still worse. This traditional distrust grew stronger as the cities grew larger, and as they were filled with immigrant aliens. As early as 1885 the Kansas preacher Josiah Strong had published *Our Country*, a book widely read in the West, in which the cities were discussed as a great problem of the future, much as though they were some kind of monstrous malignant growths on the body politic. Hamlin Garland recalled that when he first visited Chicago, in the late 1880s, having never seen a town larger than Rockford, Illinois, he naturally assumed that it swarmed with thieves. "If the city is miles across," he wondered, "how am I to get from the railway station to my hotel without being assaulted?" While such extreme fears could be quieted by some contact with the city, others were actually confirmed—especially when the farmers were confronted with city prices. Nativist prejudices were equally aroused by immigration, for which urban manufacturers, with their insatiable demand for labor, were blamed. "We have become the world's melting pot," wrote Thomas E. Watson. "The scum of creation has been dumped on us. Some of our principal cities are more foreign than American. The most dangerous and corrupting hordes of the Old World have invaded us. The vice and crime which they have planted in our midst are sickening and terrifying. What brought these Goths and Vandals to our shores? The manufacturers are mainly to blame. They wanted cheap labor: and they didn't care a curse how much harm to our future might be the consequence of their heartless policy." . . .

As we review these aspects of Populist emotion, an odd parallel obtrudes itself. Where else in American thought during this period do we find this militancy and nationalism, these apocalyptic forebodings and drafts of world-political strategies, this hatred of big businessmen, bankers, and trusts, these fears of immigrants and urban workmen, even this occasional toying with anti-Semitic rhetoric? We find them, curiously enough, most conspicuous among a group of men who are in all obvious respects the antithesis of the Populists. During the late 1880s and the '90s there emerged in the eastern United States a small imperialist elite representing, in general, the same type that had once been Mugwumps, whose spokesmen were such solid and respectable gentlemen as Henry and Brooks Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, John Hay, and Albert J. Beveridge. While the silverites

were raging openly and earnestly against the bankers and the Jews, Brooks and Henry Adams were expressing in their sardonic and morosely cynical private correspondence the same feelings, and acknowledging with bemused irony their kinship at this point with the mob. While Populist Congressmen and newspapers called for war with England or Spain, Roosevelt and Lodge did the same, and while Mrs. Lease projected her grandiose schemes of world partition and tropical colonization, men like Roosevelt, Lodge, Beveridge, and Mahan projected more realistic plans for the conquest of markets and the annexation of territory. While Populist readers were pondering over Donnelly's apocalyptic fantasies, Brooks and Henry Adams were also bemoaning the approaching end of their type of civilization, and even the characteristically optimistic T. R. could share at moments in "Brooks Adams' gloomiest anticipations of our gold-ridden, capitalist-bestridden, usurer-mastered future." Not long after Mrs. Lease wrote that "we need a Napoleon in the industrial world who, by agitation and education, will lead the people to a realizing sense of their condition and the remedies," Roosevelt and Brooks Adams talked about the threat of the eight-hour movement and the danger that the country would be "enslaved" by the organizers of the trusts, and played with the idea that Roosevelt might eventually lead "some great outburst of the emotional classes which should at least temporarily crush the Economic Man."

Not only were the gentlemen of this imperialist elite better read and better fed than the Populists, but they despised them. This strange convergence of unlike social elements on similar ideas has its explanation, I believe, in this: both the imperialist elite and the Populists had been bypassed and humiliated by the advance of industrialism, and both were rebelling against the domination of the country by industrial and financial capitalists. The gentlemen wanted the power and status they felt due them, which had been taken away from their class and type by the *arriviste* manufacturers and railroaders and the all-too-potent banking houses. The Populists wanted a restoration of agrarian profits and popular government. Both elements found themselves impotent and deprived in an industrial culture and balked by a common enemy. On innumerable matters they disagreed, but both were strongly nationalistic, and amid the despairs and anxieties of the nineties both became ready for war if that would unseat or even embarrass the moneyed powers, or better still if it would topple the established political structure and open new opportunities for the leaders of disinherited farmers or for ambitious gentlemen. But if there seems to be in this situation any suggestion of a forerunner or analogue of modern authoritarian movements, it should by no means be exaggerated. The age was more innocent and more fortunate than ours, and by comparison with the grimmer realities of the twentieth century many of the events of the nineties take on a comic-opera quality. What came in the end was only a small war and a quick victory; when the farmers and the gentlemen finally did coalesce in politics, they produced only the genial reforms of Progressivism; and the man on the white horse turned out to be just a graduate of the Harvard boxing squad, equipped with an immense bag of platitudes, and quite willing to play the democratic game.

The Populist Vision

“You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.” With this indictment of the financial establishment, William Jennings Bryan, a young congressman from Nebraska, electrified the delegates to the Democratic Convention gathered under the hot roof of the Chicago Coliseum in July of 1896. On the fifth ballot, Bryan won a surprise nomination as the presidential candidate. The nomination marked a historic shift in party alignment, with the Democratic party embracing a platform of minting silver, a federal income tax, and other reforms demanded by rural and labor constituencies. Two weeks later, at its convention in St. Louis, the People’s party also endorsed Bryan for president.

For Republicans, and a considerable number of “sound money” Democrats, the Populist endorsement confirmed their worst fears about the Bryan campaign. They viewed the Populists and their reckless currency doctrines as instruments of “anarchy” and “lawlessness.” Theodore Roosevelt, the police commissioner of New York City at the time, believed that the Populists were “plotting a social revolution,” and to check their efforts at “subversion” he proposed lining up twelve Populist leaders against a wall and “shooting them dead.” Similarly apocalyptic and fearful language characterized the hard-fought election campaign that pitted the Democratic-Populist Bryan against the “goldbug” Republican William McKinley.

Bryan’s loss that November inflicted wounds on the People’s party from which it never recovered. Populism failed in presidential politics. It failed to sustain a viable presence at the polls. And it failed to maintain any semblance of cohesion, as the movement slid into rancorous discord over who was to blame. “Middle-of-the-road” Populists accused the architects of “fusion” with the Democrats of betraying principles. The “fusionists” accused their critics of failing to recognize political realities. The faithful of both camps continued to keep the People’s party name alive into the twentieth century. But their small numbers only confirmed that what had once been a powerful social and political movement was no longer so. Populism failed, leaving in its wake the question of why.

Lawrence Goodwyn has provided the most stirring explanation: the “democratic promise” of Populism fell victim to an insidious and Judas-like “shadow movement” (“fusionists”) that betrayed honest and straight “middle-of-the-road” Populism to the tender mercies of corporate power. Such a

rendering makes for gripping tragedy. However, it has little to do with the interior fault lines of Populist politics and ideology. It also fails to take into account the external obstacles that the movement faced. Among other things, the Populists had to break the formidable grip in which the two established parties held the political system. This presented a challenge that the People's party came as close to meeting as any third party had since prior to the Civil War. That the Populists realized the electoral strength that they did is at least partly attributable to their innovative melding of "middle-of-the-road" and "fusionist" tactics. Such flexibility was facilitated by the Populists' distrust of partyism, a distrust that also contributed to the Populists' undoing.

Goodwyn's tragedy fits within the larger narrative of the defeat of traditional society by modernity: Populism failed because the wheels of history rolled over it. When social and cultural historians portray late nineteenth-century social movements as expressions of resistance to the market and modernity, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that such movements, despite the heroism and humanity they may have revealed, were doomed from the outset by an inexorable historical process. In a provocative dissent, James Livingston recognizes comedy where others see tragedy. For Livingston, . . . Populism represented the premodern and republican past. But, unlike the others, he rejects the notion that the destruction of that past frames the tragic narrative of the twentieth century. Modernity offered democratic and progressive possibilities, Livingston contends, and farm and labor movements—with their soft-money doctrines and fear of "concentrated market power"—opposed the advent of the modern market society. The demands of modernity, Livingston implies, required the "eradication of Populism."

The setbacks suffered by the People's party at the polls, however, must not be read as extended referenda on the historical rights or wrongs of the Populist program. Populist electoral setbacks said little about the historic necessity, much less inevitability, of gold or silver, greenbacks or subtreasury loans. Summing up the defeat of the Populists and other late nineteenth-century reform movements, Gretchen Ritter writes that their loss was not determined by either destiny or nature. Their defeat "was not dictated by the anonymous forces of historical progress and economic modernity." Rather, she concludes, "political choice, structural constraints, and historical contingency shaped the fate of the antimonopolists."

Nor did the Populists lose because their views were unrealistic. True, their rhetoric could be far-fetched. Their discussion of the currency, for example, although grounded in plausible assumptions about the benefits of inflation, could also be utopian, paranoid, or apocalyptic. This, however, cannot explain the movement's failures, because the movement had no monopoly on delusional thinking. If anything, the Populists were outdone in this respect by academic and corporate elites who convinced themselves of numerous absurdities. Gold standard advocates, for example, could match any contenders when it came to absurd and paranoid arguments, as they dogmatically insisted that any deviation from a gold-based currency would immediately dispatch civilization to the hell fires of anarchy. Such flights of fancy—"superstition" as the Populists rightly called it—circulated as profound wisdom among American scholars and

business leaders. As C. Vann Woodward noted, "The political crisis of the nineties evoked hysterical responses and apocalyptic delusions in more than one quarter." The Populist electoral failure therefore provides for a poor measure of the fanciful or overwrought. But it does say a great deal about which quarter had what political resources in terms of political machinery, mass media, bribery, and fraud—and the will to energetically use such resources.

Populism's failure must also be viewed in light of what came after. In the wake of the defeat of the People's party, a wave of reform soon swept the country. Progressive Era legislation in the first years of the new century expanded the role of government in American life and laid the foundations of modern political development. Populism provided an impetus for this modernizing process, with many of their demands co-opted and refashioned by progressive Democrats and Republicans. By a turn of fate, Populism proved far more successful dead than alive. At the same time, the process of co-optation and refashioning produced a reconfiguration of the social dynamics of reform. The Populist vision for a modern America was increasingly eclipsed by a corporate vision. . . .

The passage of the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 pointed to the direction of the shifting nexus of reform. Aroused to action by the financial panic of 1907, a wide range of banking, industrial, farming, and other business leaders sought to modernize America's archaic and patchwork monetary and financial systems. The banking establishment sought to protect the prerogatives of corporate managers and their control over the new system. The farm lobby and reform Democrats from the West and the South sought to ensure that rural constituencies would be given equitable access. The final product reflected concessions to all parties. Provisions long sought by rural reform included a more elastic currency to facilitate circulation and economic expansion. Later in the twentieth century, the need for such elasticity was well established in financial orthodoxy, although in 1913 some members of the financial establishment continued to denounce the notion as Populist financial heresy. The Federal Reserve Act also provided for a regulated and standardized system of rural lending, making a reality of farmers' demands for access to reliable lines of credit.

In significant ways, however, the Federal Reserve Act represented the eclipse of Populist ideals. The money question, as the Farmers' Alliance Committee on the Monetary System had explained, was ultimately about the "levers of power" and who controlled them. People's party leader Herman Taubeneck had expressed the same idea: "Who shall issue the necessary paper money and control its volume? This is the pivot upon which the money question revolves. It is the pith, the marrow, the alpha and omega of this great subject." To put the levers of control in the hands of the public, the Populists believed, required centralization. It meant replacing the federally chartered and corporately owned banks of the National Banking System with a federal subtreasury system and other institutions centered in the Treasury and Post Office departments in Washington. Alternative proposals circulated within the Farmers' Alliance, including a scheme for regional centralization with a "Cotton States Bank" and a "Grain States Bank" under the direction of regional "Mother Banks." The

People's party, however, insisted on centralizing the power to issue money and credit in the national bureaucracy in Washington.

In this regard, the Populists were no less "centralizers" than their corporate opponents. James Livingston argues that only the corporate elite and their intellectual allies favored monetary centralization because they alone represented modernity, whereas the Populist coalition of farmers and laborers stood for premodern "dispersed assets." But simply because the corporate elite claimed that their views were the only ones that conformed to the requirements of modernity did not necessarily make it so. The Populists were equally committed, if not more committed, to centralization as a means to rationalize and modernize the nation's monetary and credit systems. They looked to the Bank of France as a model, a system that was centralized, rationalized, bureaucratic, and modern, and that formed quite independently of corporate industry. If monetary centralization provides a test of modernity, then the Populists were at least a step ahead of most of their adversaries.

In terms of the levers of power, however, the Federal Reserve System bore little resemblance to the Populist ideal. The problem lay not with centralization, but in the structural distribution of control. If anything, the devolution of responsibilities to regional reserve banks only weakened the possibility of public accountability. The requirement that gave bankers and their business allies a majority on the regional boards of directors did the same. Most strikingly, the enormous power conferred on an unelected Federal Board of Directors epitomized how far monetary "science" had evolved toward an exclusive enterprise. Populists believed that the regulation of the money supply could and must be understood by the people whose business interests and livelihoods were affected by it. Expert statisticians and economists provided an essential service. But when properly compiled and presented, "any mechanic" could understand the essential rules governing currency volume, production, and demand. Gathered in their meeting lodges, farmers and laborers could master the "science of money" and thereby wrest the levers of monetary power from the corporate elite. Such was the Populist vision that faded into memory as a handful of financial wizards took the reins at the Federal Reserve.

The Country Life Movement reflected a change in the social dynamics of rural reform. In the 1880s and 1890s, rural modernization was largely driven by rural people. In the first years of the new century, urban people—government officials, academics, ministers, business leaders—grew alarmed at what they perceived as rural backwardness. The Roosevelt administration set up a Commission on Country Life to explore paths to "better farming, better business, and better living on the farm." The Commission's 1909 report warned that the "incubus of ignorance and inertia is so heavy and widespread" in rural America "as to constitute a national danger." The report pointed to stagnant farm productivity, crude business methods, appalling sanitation and hygiene, overworked women, poor schools, and primitive churches. Country Life reformers looked for remedies. They exuded a sublime self-confidence that through education and regulation, social ills could be healed and those deemed dangerously on the margins could be safely integrated into the progressive society. Much as upper- and middle-class

Progressives had set their sights on “cleaning up” the urban slums, now they would also bring modernity to the rural districts.

The recommendations of the Country Life Commission translated into policy that, for the most part, enjoyed support among rural constituencies. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 formalized a national system of agricultural extension services to help farmers apply scientific and business methods. Federal and state agencies committed resources to fact-finding surveys and to a broad campaign to improve rural homes, schools, and churches. Progressive Era urban reformers focused on many of the goals of rural modernization that rural Populism had articulated a generation before—a fact that was both the greatest strength and the most glaring weakness of the Country Life Movement.

A number of farm reformers resented what they perceived as an act of usurpation. They pointed out that for years farm organizations had pointed to the same rural deficiencies and the same needs for reform the Country Life Commission presented as new discoveries. Nahum J. Bachelder of the national Grange caustically noted that the Grange itself was a “country life commission,” and one with greater knowledge of rural conditions. Bachelder suggested that perhaps the Grange should set up a “commission on city life” to study deficiencies in urban life. Farm reformers who had spent their lives toiling in the traces of rural modernization often resented the paternalistic assumptions that inspired the Country Life Movement.

Country Life reformers paid special attention to improving the lot of rural women. Their proposals closely resembled those heard in the Farmer’s Alliance in the 1880s and 1890s to modernize women’s lives. They sought to place women’s work in the home and garden on systematic and business lines, to boost efficiency by equipping kitchens and laundries with the latest appliances, and to improve women’s cultural, social, and economic opportunities. However, when rural women and men discussed these issues among themselves in their suballiance meetings, it carried a different meaning from the concerted campaign of university professors, trained ministers, and other perceived outsiders. Despite their best efforts to reassure their rural subjects of their good intentions, the urban-based reformers often appeared as zealous missionaries seeking, as the Country Life Commission put it, “to teach persons how to live.” Farmwomen at times responded coolly to expert lectures on hygiene and health. After wearing themselves out scrubbing and cleaning, they had reason to resent the exhortations from learned professors about clean homes and the civilizing effects of “combating dirt.”

Urban reformers expressed similarly paternalistic and condescending attitudes toward the rural church. Again, the agrarian reformers of the previous generation had addressed the same deficiencies of the country churches that the Country Life reformers did. They, too, had criticized the “intense sectarian consciousness” that tended to put doctrine and creed above the social needs of the farmers. As the Country Life Commission put it, the country church failed as “effective agents in the social evolution of their communities.” The Populists had felt similarly, and many of them had abandoned the church in search of other avenues of spiritual expression. The Country Life Movement, however, looked to reorganize the country church on the urban model, as

urban professors and ministers tried to replace the small rural church with a new, modern, and consolidated church.

Predictably, the urban-based campaign for rural modernization opened fissures of distrust. Although rural people tended to support Progressive Era reforms, they also questioned the intentions of academics, urban ministers, and state and federal government agents seeking to refashion their homes, schools, and churches. Skepticism occasionally led to resistance. Historians have noted that the 1925 Tennessee law against teaching evolution in the public schools, for example, was driven less by ideological objections to Darwin than by an effort to reassert majority will over matters of education and religion in the face of intervention by perceived outsiders.

Meanwhile, academics, church officials, and government experts undertook extensive surveys of "rural problems." Among the problems they sought to resolve was why farmers responded with such ambivalence to urban efforts at rural uplift. Part of the explanation lay with farmers' skepticism about the intentions of their self-appointed urban benefactors. At the same time, a working assumption of the burgeoning field of rural sociology was the need to look deeper into the peculiar features of the rural environment and rural mind that led farmers to resist innovation, science, and progress. For modernity to come to the American countryside, it would take the concerted efforts of scientific experts and state agencies to convince the farmers to go along.

As the influence of urban-based elites in rural reform grew, the reform impulse was channeled along a narrower and more exclusive path. The Farmers' Alliance had originally promised to organize cotton, wheat, and other producers as a class. Rich and poor farmers alike would find strength in business organization. Alliance enterprises quickly demonstrated, however, that such organization was far more accessible to prosperous and land-owning farmers than cash-poor and debt-strapped small farmers and tenants. The Progressive Era system of business organization tilted even more sharply in favor of the former, and largely excluded the latter. The broad Populist "confederation of industrial orders" gave way to a narrower coalition of the propertied and the exclusively white. . . .

The Progressive reformers of the early twentieth century saw themselves uplifting the human condition, shaping popular modes of thought, and engineering the society of the future. The efforts of the Country Life Movement to remake rural life reflected a vision that agrarian scholar James C. Scott describes in a broader context as "high modernism." The concept of "high modernism," Scott writes, is "best conceived as a strong (one might even say muscle-bound) version of the beliefs in scientific and technical progress that were associated with industrialization in Western Europe and in North America from roughly 1830 until World War I." It displayed "a supreme self-confidence about continued lineal progress" and "increasing control over nature." "High modernism," Scott concludes, was a "sweeping vision of how the benefits of technical and scientific progress might be applied—usually through the state—in every field of human activity."

Bringing Scott's concept to bear on American rural history, Deborah Fitzgerald writes that "high modernist" urban leaders of the 1920s and 1930s persuaded reluctant farmers to "become modern." By her account agricultural college

professors, government agents, bankers, and other business leaders sought "to bring agriculture kicking and screaming into the modern world." In other words, modernity was imposed from the outside on a largely static rural environment.

Fitzgerald's narrative poses a number of outstanding questions, especially about earlier developments. What does it say about late nineteenth-century social conflict and the historic role of Populism and similar movements? Would the term "high modernism" apply to the Populist vision, at least as Scott defines it? No less than their industrial counterparts, Leonidas Polk, Charles Macune, Mary Elizabeth Lease, Marion Cannon, Reuben Kolb, Herman Taubeneck, Marion Butler, Thomas Nugent, Marion Todd, William Pepper, and a host of other Populist leaders displayed a "muscle-bound" belief in progress, science, and technology. Their "evolutionary imagination" gave them enormous self-confidence that the course of progress was both lineal and knowable. They believed in the human capacity, through government action and otherwise, to harness nature and cure a broad range of society's ills. And they acted accordingly as agricultural commissioners, politicians, state appointees, and executives of powerful farm organizations.

Yet, if the Populist leaders counted among the "high modernists" of their day, they were of a special type. Unlike the Country Life Movement of the early twentieth century, rural Populism grew from rural roots. These roots were evident in the network of men and women—Populism's "organic intellectuals"—that sustained the movement's systems of lectures and rural newspapers and brought a modernizing vision to farmers' homes and meeting lodges. Where the Country Life Movement looked to improve the lot of others, the Populists were modernizers from within. They spoke in the language of self-help and sought improvements on the principle of self-activation.

The Populists incorporated into their modernizing vision mass organizations enrolling millions of common working people. In late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa "high modernists" of various types—socialists, radicals, nationalists, populists—built their modern systems on labor, peasant, and other mass organizations. In the United States, the Populists took extraordinary strides toward making mass organizations of farmers and laborers the mainspring of their vision of social reconstruction. The Farmers' Alliance and associated "industrial orders" gave flesh to the majoritarian, if not entirely democratic, principles that Populism pursued.

Where the Country Life leaders may have felt most comfortable in the university laboratory or business board meeting, the Macunes and Polks of Populism were at home in gatherings of people with callused hands and sunburned necks. Manual labor was part of the ethos that shaped the possibilities for a broad and inclusive coalition. Many rural Populists disapproved of strikes and labor boycotts and erected walls of hostility against immigrant and Chinese workers in particular. Yet the emergence of labor Populism within the ranks of railway employees, miners, and other sections of the working class revealed that Populism had the potential of an expansive organizational alliance.

As social engineers, the Populists were second to none in terms of earnest commitment and scope of vision. The Populist movement contained too many diverse and contradictory elements to speak of a single Populist social blueprint.

Some of these elements, such as Bellamy's Nationalism, represented influential mental constructs more than a practical system of reform. Other elements were not unique to the Populists at all but were broadly pursued by modernizers among business, academic, and political leaders. This was especially true in regard to race, with all of the ominous implications that entailed.

Nonetheless, the sum of Populist strivings leaves a distinct outline of what their "cooperative commonwealth" might have looked like. In regard to the nation's business, the Populists hoped to take the materials at hand—the latest technologies and organizational systems—and use them to rationalize markets and regulate and centralize the channels of commerce and finance. Their vision involved a complex and dynamic combination of public and private, cooperative and corporate, municipal and nationalized property relations. Progressive Era models contained elements of this complexity. However, the Populist version was more flexible in terms of encroachments on private and corporate prerogatives. This included a major role for the self-organization of labor within the management and structure of the economy, a role that American corporate managers would fiercely—and successfully—resist.

The Populists wanted an active government to ensure fair access to the benefits of modernity. By way of the referendum and the initiative and other political reforms, Populists sought to reshape government as an agency of the majority rather than of the corporate and wealthy minority. A federal income tax on high incomes was part of the Populist goal of checking the concentration of wealth and spreading the abundance of farm and factory to those who produced it. But there was a reason why so much of the Populist imagination focused on publicly owned and subsidized systems of postal delivery, telecommunications, railways, and the perfection of the public system of education. The Populist republic would squarely and equitably place even the rural "clodhopper" on the national and international grid of modern culture and knowledge.

For the 1892 electoral canvass, Thomas Watson published a campaign book under the title *Not a Revolt; It Is a Revolution*. Populism would usher in "a new order of things," "re-mark the lines of life," and bring a complete "revolution in the old systems." In the fever of electoral warfare, both friends and foes of the third-party movement tended to accept similar terms: for better or for worse, a Populist victory at the polls meant a momentous transformation of American society. Through the prism of time, it is apparent that a Populist triumph would have been less of a revolution than advertised. A Populist United States would have taken evolutionary steps to reform and rationalize the capitalist system. Perhaps it would have placed American institutions on paths akin to those of Canada or even Denmark—significant changes but hardly the overthrow of existing conditions. Yet, Populism did indeed represent something momentous. It mobilized millions of ordinary men and women in an effort to steer the political and economic institutions of an increasingly modern, technologically sophisticated, and globally connected society. The significance of this movement lay in the act of trying.

POSTSCRIPT



Were the Populists Irrational Reactionaries?

Richard Hofstadter's thesis represented the first major challenge to the favorable interpretation of the Populists presented in John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (University of Minnesota Press, 1931). This critique was extended, however, by Victor C. Ferkiss, a political scientist, whose "Populist Influences in American Fascism," *Western Political Quarterly* (June 1957) argued that the Populist movement was not based upon egalitarian goals of human freedom. In fact, Ferkiss concluded, by encouraging majority rule over governmental institutions, the Populists committed themselves to a "plebiscitary democracy" very similar to that proposed for Germany by Adolf Hitler. A rejoinder to Ferkiss' argument appears in Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (University of Chicago Press, 1963). In this effort to rehabilitate the Populist image, Nugent concluded that in Kansas, agrarian reformers were not xenophobic, anti-Semitic, or consumed by the bugaboo of a conspiracy of the "money interests." For an insightful analysis of Hofstadter's rendering of Populism within the context of the historian's craft, see Robert M. Collins, "The Originality Trap: Richard Hofstadter on Populism," *Journal of American History* 76 (June 1989):150-167.



Internet References . . .

Booker T. Washington Papers

The complete 14-volume set of Washington's papers is available on this Web site, including the well-known "Atlanta Compromise Address" and his autobiography *Up from Slavery*. Texts include books, articles, speeches, and correspondence covering the years 1860 to 1915.

<http://www.historycooperative.org/btw/index.html>

Gilded Age and Progressive Era Resources

General Resources on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

<http://www.tntech.edu:8080/www/acad/hist/gilprog.html>

Alcohol, Temperance & Prohibition

This useful Web site offers a wide range of primary source material for researching the history of the prohibition movement, temperance, and alcoholism.

<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/temperance/>

Anti-Saloon League, 1893–1933

These printed materials are representative of the public campaigns of the Anti-Saloon League from 1893 to 1933. A six-page history of the League and the temperance movement and six biographical essays of movement leaders provide context.

<http://wpl.lib.oh.us.:80/AntiSaloon/>

The 1920s

This Web site aims to raise awareness about an amazing time in history.

<http://www.louisville.edu/~kprayb01/1920s.html>

New Deal Network

Offering more than 20,000 items, this Web site focuses on objects, documents, and images relevant to the New Deal. "Document Library" contains more than 900 newspaper and journal articles, speeches, letters, reports, advertisements, and other textual materials that treat a broad array of subjects.

<http://www.newdeal.feri.org>

After the Day of Infamy: "Man on the Street" Interviews Following the Attack on Pearl Harbor

More than 12 hours of audio interviews conducted in the days following the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor in January and February 1942 are included on this Web site. Interviews include the voices of 200 "ordinary Americans" recorded in 10 places across the United States. December recordings were made by field-workers contacted by the Library of Congress Radio Research Project to gather opinions of a diverse group of citizens regarding American entrance in the war.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afcphtml/afcpphome.html>