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Industrializing America: Upheavals and Experiments

1877–1917

Touring the United States around 1900, a Hungarian Catholic abbot named Count Péter Vay visited the steel mills of Pittsburgh. “Fourteen-thousand tall chimneys . . . discharge their burning sparks and smoke incessantly,” he reported. He was moved by the plight of fellow Hungarians, laboring “wherever the heat is most insupportable, the flames most scorching.” One worker had just been killed in a foundry accident. Vay, attending the funeral, worried that immigration was “of no use except to help fill the moneybags of the insatiable millionaires.”

Vay witnessed America’s emergence as an industrial power — and the consequences of that transformation. In 1877, the United States was overwhelmingly rural and dependent on foreign capital. By 1917, its landscapes, population, and ways of life were forever altered. Industrialization brought millions of immigrants from around the globe and built immense cities whose governance and social relations offered unaccustomed rewards and challenges. It sharpened class divisions and led to the rise of national labor movements, while prompting Americans to redefine men’s and women’s roles. Industrialization also created pressure for political innovation. As ex-president Theodore Roosevelt declared in 1910, American citizens needed to “control the mighty commercial forces which they have called into being.” Workers, farmers, and urban reformers sought to regulate corporations, fight poverty, and clean up politics and the environment. In their creative responses to the problems of the industrial age, such reformers gave their name to the Progressive Era.



Corporations and Conflicts

In the post–Civil War decades, giant corporations developed national and even global networks of production, marketing, and finance. In many fields, vertical integration enabled corporate managers to control production from the harvesting of raw materials through the sale of finished products. Nationwide marketing networks developed through innovative use of railroads—and through ruthless competitive tactics such as predatory pricing.

Corporations' complex structures opened career opportunities for middle managers and salesmen. Women, filling new niches as telephone operators and department store clerks, also played an important role in the expanding service sector. At the same time, traditional craftsmen found themselves displaced as deskilled wage work steadily expanded. Factory workers and miners endured dangerous conditions, health hazards, low pay, and frequent bouts of unemployment.

The most dangerous, low-wage work was often allotted to African Americans and immigrants from Europe, Mexico, and Asia. Workers organized to protest these conditions. In addition to creating labor unions, they forged political alliances with farmers, who also found their livelihoods at risk in the changing global economy. Native-born workers and European immigrants successfully agitated for the legal exclusion of Chinese workers. These events are covered in Chapter 17.

A Diverse, Urban Society

While the old values of thrift, piety, and domesticity never entirely faded, they faced challenges in the era of industrialization. Women asserted more independent roles in public life. The new model for men was an aggressive masculinity, embodied in the rise of sports. Widespread acceptance of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution prompted influential thinkers to justify economic inequality as a law of nature. In culture, the rise of literary realism and abstract art marked decisive innovations. Responding to these upheavals, people of religious faith reshaped their institutions. Some accepted modernity, while others called for a return to Christian "fundamentals." See Chapter 18 for these developments.

Great cities arose, becoming playgrounds for the new superrich while also housing millions of poor immigrants in tenements. At the same time, people of all classes in the vibrant cities enjoyed new pleasures, from amusement parks to vaudeville and movies. The fast-growing cities proved challenging to govern. To the frustration of middle-class reformers, many immigrant voters supported political machines like New York's Tammany Hall. By 1900, though, even some machine leaders admitted the need for reform, and big cities began to serve as seedbeds for progressive experiments. On these developments, see Chapters 18 and 19.



Reform Initiatives

Political debates in this era centered on the scope of government power, as reformers called for regulation of corporations and other measures to blunt the impact of industrialization. After the 1880s, Republicans increasingly defended big business. Though Republican Theodore Roosevelt championed landmark legislation during his presidency (1901–1909), much reform energy passed to other parties. Democrats, who had long called for limited government, began to advocate stronger federal intervention to fight poverty and restrain big business. By the 1910s, during the presidency of Democrat Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921), the party enacted an impressive slate of laws. Meanwhile, the Populist, Socialist, and Progressive parties proposed more radical responses to industrialization and concentrated wealth. While none of these parties won national power, their ideas helped shape the course of reform.

Progressive Era reformers—a diverse group who were not at all united—sought to enhance democracy, rein in the power of corporations, uphold labor rights, protect the environment, and promote public health and safety. They faced formidable obstacles, especially from Supreme Court rulings. Nonetheless, by 1917, national, state, and local governments enacted a range of new laws, representing the early emergence of the modern state. Chapter 20 traces these events.

Industrializing America: Upheavals and Experiments 1877–1917

Thematic Understanding

This timeline arranges some of the important events of this period into themes. What was the relationship of the two severe economic depressions listed under “Work, Exchange, and Technology” to political reform? Did reform tend to come during or after periods of economic crisis? Why do you think this was the case? In what ways did Americans respond politically to the depression of the 1870s? What continuities and changes do you see in their responses to the next severe depression, in the 1890s? >

	WORK, EXCHANGE, & TECHNOLOGY	MIGRATION & SETTLEMENT	GEOGRAPHY & THE ENVIRONMENT	POLITICS & POWER	CULTURE & SOCIETY
1870	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic depression (1873–1879) First department store opens in Philadelphia (1874) Great Railroad Strike (1877) Deskilling of labor under mass production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hostility toward Chinese immigrants grows 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Successful containment of New York cholera outbreak spurs movement for public health (1866) First national park established at Yellowstone (1872) Appalachian Mountain Club founded (1876) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Democrats make sweeping congressional gains (1874) Era of close party competition in national elections (1874–1894) Reconstruction ends (1877) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comstock Act bans circulation of most information about sex and birth control (1873) National League launches professional baseball (1876) Henry George, <i>Progress and Poverty</i> (1879)
1880	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First vertically integrated corporations Rockefeller establishes Standard Oil Trust Emergence of white-collar managerial work Women enter paid labor as office workers Knights of Labor grows rapidly (mid-1880s) American Federation of Labor founded (1886) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rapid industrialization draws immigrants from around the world; American cities grow rapidly Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1943) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drought on the plains prompts calls for federal irrigation Hatch Act (1887) provides federal support for agricultural research and experiment stations Industrialization and urban growth cause rising pollution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pendleton Civil Service Act (1883) Peak influence of Woman's Christian Temperance Union (1880s) Interstate Commerce Act (1887) Hull House settlement founded (1889) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing numbers of students attend college Booker T. Washington founds Tuskegee Institute (1881) William Dean Howells calls for realism in literature (1881) Birth of American football Popularity of vaudeville (1880s–1890s)
1890	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Severe economic depression (1893–1897) Accelerated corporate mergers in key industries Birth of modern advertising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gorras Blancas confront wealthy Anglo interests in New Mexico Ellis Island opens (1892) Supreme Court upholds segregation of schools and public facilities in <i>Plessy v. Ferguson</i> (1896) Unemployed whites attack and drive Chinese farmworkers out of California 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sierra Club founded (1892) "Bicycle craze" and rise of hiking and camping get more Americans outdoors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rise of People's Party (1890–1896) Sweeping Republican gains (1894) "Solid South" emerges; African American disenfranchisement in South (1890–1905) William McKinley defeats William Jennings Bryan (1896) National Consumers' League founded (1899) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chicago World's Fair (1893) Literary realism and naturalism gain recognition Popularity of ragtime music (1890s–1900s) Armory Show introduces modern art (1913) Rise of Social Gospel Joseph Pulitzer pioneers "yellow journalism"
1900	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. Steel becomes nation's first billion-dollar corporation (1901) Women's Trade Union League founded (1903) International Workers of the World founded (1905) Marianna mine disaster (1907) <i>Muller v. Oregon</i> (1908) permits state regulation of women's working hours Triangle Shirtwaist fire (1911) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rising immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe Height of eugenics (1900s–1920s) Increasing numbers of blacks move to cities; responses include "race riots" by whites Japanese immigrants barred from becoming U.S. citizens (1906) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacey Act (1900) Antiquities Act (1906) gives president authority to create and protect national monuments National Audubon Society forms (1901) Newlands Reclamation Act (1902) First national wildlife refuge created (1903) U.S. Forest Service created (1905) National Park Service created (1916) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> William McKinley assassinated; Theodore Roosevelt becomes president (1901) Niagara Movement calls for full voting rights and equal opportunities for blacks Women's suffrage movement grows 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nickelodeons introduce commercial motion pictures Custom of unchaperoned "dating" arises Rise of the Negro Leagues Peak in overseas missionary activity Advent of literary and artistic modernism