

ESSAY: AMERICA, 1880-1899

The 20 years leading to the twentieth century were shaped by major change: the movement of people from farm to factory, the rapid expansion of wage labor, the explosive growth of cities and massive immigration. Nearly everywhere, the economic and social life of working people was changing. Beneath the glitter and exuberant wealth of the Gilded Age swirled an ocean of discontent yearning for the gold laden streets of America promised to millions of immigrants. Health for commoners was primitive and infectious disease was rampant in crowded cities. Children of the working class routinely left school in their teens to work beside their parents. The middle class was small, and college was largely an institution reserved for the elite and wealthy men of America. Farmers, merchants and small town artisans found themselves increasingly dependent on market forces. The new emerging capitalistic order was quickly producing a continent where only few were very rich and many were very poor. Child labor laws were largely non-existent, and on-the-job injuries were common, even expected. It was an economy on a roll with few rudders or regulations—an economy ripe for unrest, reform and new ideas.

The rapid expansion of railroads, along with other technology, opened up the nation to new industries, new markets and the formation of monopolistic trusts that catapulted a handful of corporations into positions of unprecedented power and wealth. At the same time, professionally trained workers were reshaping American economy alongside business managers or entrepreneurs eager to capture their piece of the American pie.

Across America, the economy—along with its work force—was running away from the land. Before the Civil War, the United States was overwhelmingly an agricultural nation. By the end of the century, nonagricultural occupations employed nearly two thirds of workers. As important, two of every three Americans came to rely on wages instead of self employment as farmers or artisans. At the same time, industrial growth began to center around cities, where wealth accumulated for a few who understood how to harness and use railroads, create new consumer markets, and manage a ready supply of cheap, trainable labor. Jobs offering steady wages and the promise of a better life for workers' children drew people from the farms into the cities, which grew at twice the rate of the nation as a whole. A modern, industrially based work force emerged from the traditional farmlands, led by men skilled at managing others and the complicated flow of materials required to keep a factory operating. This led to an increasing demand for attorneys, bankers, and physicians to handle the complexity of the emerging urban economy. In 1890, newspaper editor Horace Greeley remarked, "We cannot all live in cities, yet nearly all seem determined to do so."

The new cities of America were home to great wealth and poverty, both produced by the massive migration and influx of immigrants willing to work at any price. It was a time symbolized by Andrew Carnegie's steel mills, John D. Rockefeller's organization of the Standard Oil monopoly, and the manufacture of Alexander Graham Bell's life-changing invention—the telephone. By 1894, the United States had become the world's leading industrial power, producing more than England, France and Germany—its three largest competitors—combined. For much of this period, the nation's industrial energy focused on providing railroads large quantities of labor, iron, steel, stone, and lumber. In 1883, nine tenths of the nation's entire production of steel went into rails. The most important invention of the period—in an age of tremendous change and innovation—may have been the Bessemer converter, which transformed pig iron into steel at a relatively low cost, increasing steel output 10 times from 1877 to 1892.

The greatest economic event during the last two decades of the nineteenth century was the tidal wave of immigration that swept America. It is believed to be the largest worldwide population movement in

human history, bringing more than 10 million people to the United States, at a time when the need for workers was great and ever expanding. In the 1880s alone, 5.25 million immigrants arrived, more than in the first six decades of the nineteenth century. This number was dominated by Irish, German, and English immigrants, with those from Scandinavia, Italy, and China following close behind. To attract this much needed labor force, railroad and steamship companies advertised throughout Europe and China the glories of American life. To an economically depressed world, it was a welcomed call.

Despite the signs of economic growth and prosperity, America's late-nineteenth-century economy was profoundly unstable. Industrial expansion was undercut by a depression from 1882 to 1885, followed in 1893 by a five-year-long economic collapse that devastated rural and urban communities across the country. As a result, job security for workers just climbing onto the industrial stage was often fleeting. Few wage earners found full time work year round. The unevenness in the economy was caused specifically by the level of change underway and irresponsible speculation, but also, more generally, by the federal government's stubborn adherence to a highly inflexible gold standard as the basis of value for currency.

Between the very wealthy and the very poor emerged a new middle stratum, whose appearance was one of the distinctive features of late-nineteenth-century America. The new middle class fueled the economy—they purchased one million light bulbs a year by 1890, flocked to buy Royal Baking Powder instead of longer-acting yeast, and supported the emergence and spread of department stores. This new middle class was largely composed of old American stock, and immigrants from the British Isles who worked as either self-employed businessmen or at professional jobs. Merchant tailors, for example, who once labored alongside their employees, now dressed more elegantly, received their customers in well-appointed shops, and hid the actual manufacturing process in a back room.

In the midst of these changes, working men and women began to embrace the idea of collectivity and strength in numbers. Unions emerged, along with energetic reform movements designed to protest the abuse of workers. Between 1800 and 1900, unions organized 23,000 strikes, involving 6.5 million workers.