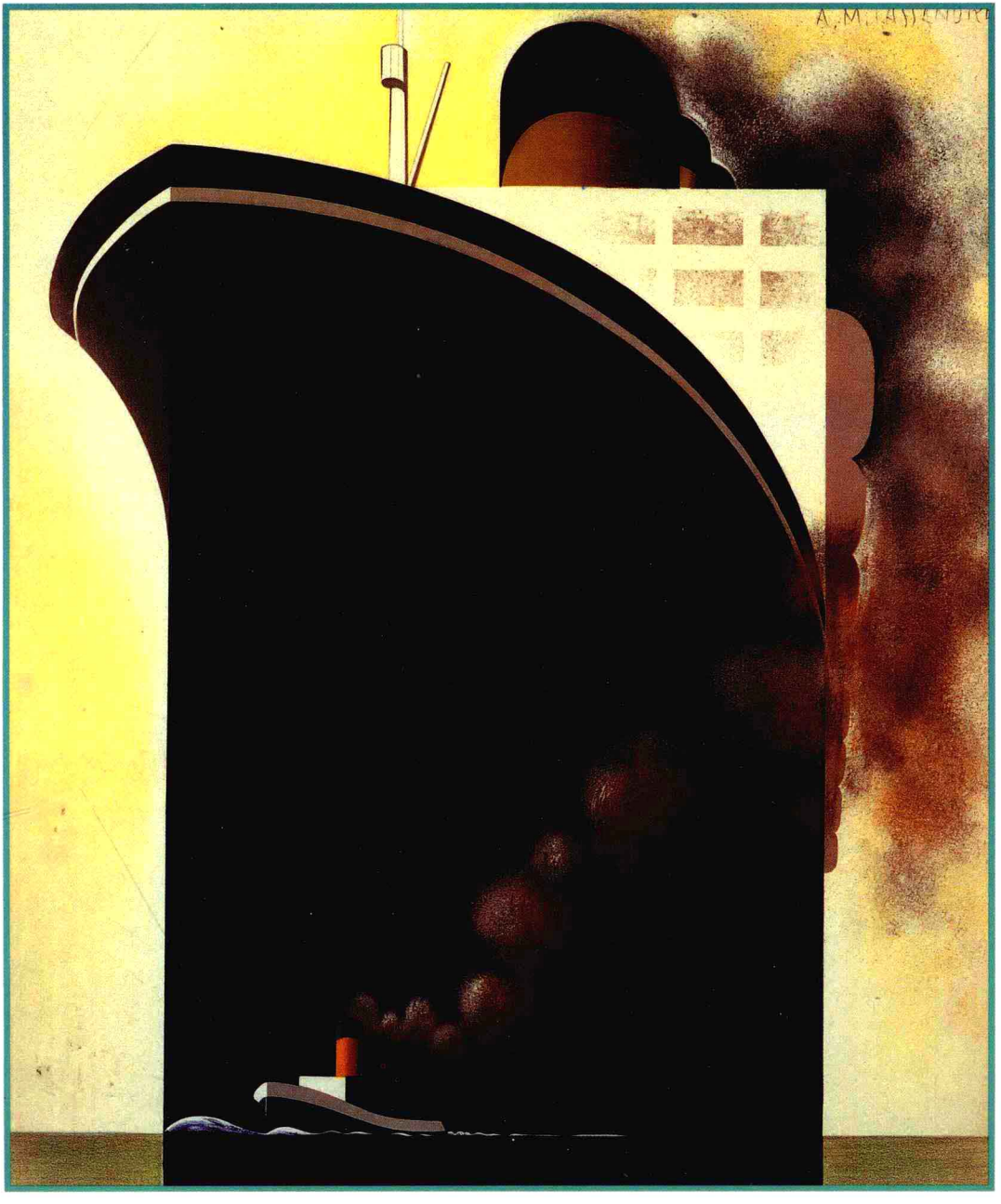
ATLANTIC CROSSINGS

SOCIAL POLITICS IN A PROGRESSIVE AGE



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Social Politics in a Progressive Age

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Prologue

"Was there a world outside of America?" the muckraker Ray Stannard Baker tried to recollect his state of mind as an apprentice journalist in Chicago in the 1890s. "If there was, I knew next to nothing at all about it—as a reality . . . I knew something of European history—the old tyranny of kings, the absurdity of aristocracy, the futility of feudal wars—out of which America, the wonderful, had stepped proudly into the enlightenment of the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence. I was a true geocentric American."[1]

In the face of a provincialism this profound, it is hard to resist a knowing smile. Every serious reader of the past instinctively knows what Baker had yet to learn: that nations lie enmeshed in each others' history. Even the most isolated of nation-states is a semipermeable container, washed over by forces originating far beyond its shores. Even the most powerful act their part within world systems beyond their full control.

If complicity in world historical forces marks all nations, it especially marks outpost nations, like the United States, which begin as other nations' imperial projects. From the earliest European settlements in North America forward, the Atlantic functioned for its newcomers less as a barrier than as a connective lifeline—a seaway for the movement of people, goods, ideas, and aspirations. A key outpost for European trade and a magnet for European capital, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States can-

not be understood outside the North Atlantic economy of which it was a part.

Through that trade came human beings, both slave and free, in a world system that bound the fates of four continents together. World markets in manufactured and agricultural goods shaped the landscapes of the great port cities and the interior factory towns; they made and unmade the fate of the cotton South and the western wheatlands. In a land that elevated Shakespeare, Scott, and Dickens into its literary pantheon, books and authors circulated through the North Atlantic economy as well, carrying with them fashion, taste, ideas, and, at times, the seeds of powerful social movements. The American Revolution had itself been part of a larger shift in politics that ran from Bogotá to Berlin. The antislavery movement, the labor movement, the women's movement—these, too, were transnational events. The web of global interdependencies that binds the fate of the late-twentieth-century United States to markets and aspirations around the globe is new only in its details; in the broad sense, this has been the permanent condition of American history.

But if these are facts every historian knows, history writing too often fails to follow its own best instincts. Tangled in simplistic relationships with civics education, national historical accounts absorb their surrounding nationalism. Focused on questions of national difference, historical scholarship bends to the task of specifying each nation's distinctive culture, its peculiar history, its *Sonderweg*, its exceptionalism. Since every nation's history is—in fact and by definition—distinct, the move is not without reason. At its worst, however, the result is to produce histories lopped off at precisely those junctures where the nation-state's permeability might be brought into view, where the transnational forces do their most important work. The narrative field too often shrinks back on the nation; the boundaries of the nation-state become an analytical cage.[2]

Social politics is a case in point. Of studies of progressive and New Deal politics there is no end. On the roots of the impulse to limit the social costs of aggressive, market capitalism, some of the very best American history writing has found its focus. As befits a large-order event, large-scale explanations have been employed to understand it. Thus the rise of the interventionist state in America has been traced to the shock of particularly rapid industrialization, the thin and distended nature of the mid-nineteenth-century American state and society, the status anxieties of a declining middle class, the scientistic ambitions of a new elite of experts and professionals, the social maternalism of middle-class women, the demands from below of

farmers and wage workers, and the demands of industrial capitalists at the top for a more rationalized social order than capitalist competition, by itself, could create. But an unspoken "geocentrism," as Baker styled it, frames them all.

Familiar as these explanations are, they leave unstated what every contemporary who followed these issues knew: that the reconstruction of American social politics was of a part with movements of politics and ideas throughout the North Atlantic world that trade and capitalism had tied together. This was not an abstract realization, slumbering in the recesses of consciousness. Tap into the debates that swirled through the United States and industrialized Europe over the problems and miseries of "great city" life, the insecurities of wage work, the social backwardness of the countryside, or the instabilities of the market itself, and one finds oneself pulled into an intense, transnational traffic in reform ideas, policies, and legislative devices. For a moment, London's East End and New York City's Lower East Side; the "black country" of Pittsburgh, Essen, and Birmingham; and university debates and chancery discussions in Paris, Washington, London, and Berlin formed a world of common referents.

Stretching from the 1870s, when the first American students began to catch wind of the assault on laissez-faire in the late-nineteenth-century German universities, through the convulsions of the Second World War, that moment marks off a more distinctive phase in the American past than history writing has yet fully to grasp. Politics in the previous half century had marched to a more internalist drummer. The formation of a democratic nation had been early- and mid-nineteenth-century America's core political project; from Jackson's era to Lincoln's, Americans with an eye cocked on the rest of the world had reason to think themselves in the vanguard of a world democratic movement.

After 1945, when the United States found itself suddenly astride a global system of its own, the exceptionalist theme returned, full volume. In the United States of the 1990s, university-based experts on the world's ways in social politics are more numerous than ever before, but in day-to-day American political debates, their knowledge of other nations' policies carries virtually negligible weight. The strangers abroad are not us; their experience is not usable. In the terms Max Weber once applied to the early Protestants, the United States is *in* but not *of* the world it commands; its destiny and experience are, by the very nature of things, exceptional. Bill Clinton's bid for historical greatness—the national health insurance debates of 1993 and 1994—replayed the postwar, exceptionalist theme. After a per-

functory nod toward Canada, the Democrats proceeded to set aside the rest of the world's experience as inapplicable to the special political character of the United States and to concoct a health insurance system unlike any other in the world. The Republicans, in return, lambasted their effort for not being "American" enough.

In comparison, the years between the 1870s and the Second World War were indeed different. Between the democratic confidence of the early nineteenth century and the hubris of the late twentieth century, one begins to discern a moment when American politics was peculiarly open to foreign models and imported ideas—when the North Atlantic economy formed, for many strategically placed Americans, a world mart of useful and intensely interesting experiments. These were years in which city politicians in the United States could battle the pros and cons of city-owned streetcars on the basis of Glasgow's experience, when the workings of European social insurance systems were grist for highly publicized investigatory commissions, when certain model cities in England and Germany drew social progressives from around the world, when other nations' social politics, in short, were *news.*

The making of the Atlantic era in social politics hinged on a new set of institutional connections with the industrializing nations of Europe. It required new sorts of brokers to span that connection. It required, finally, an intellectual shift, a sense of complicity within historical forces larger than the United States: a suspension of confidence in the peculiar dispensation of the United States from the fate of other nations. Against the pitchmen for made-in-America-only ideas and politics, the cosmopolitan progressives fought across a hundred fronts. But in their defeats as well as their victories, in the connections they tried to forge with progressive ideas and movements elsewhere and the battles those efforts precipitated, their endeavors shaped the era more than the conventional wisdom—preoccupied with the Americanness of American progressive politics—has yet comprehended.

In part, it is these brokers' story I have tried to tell, following a portion of the threads they themselves spun out across the Atlantic. Like their stories, this too tacks back and forth across the core domain of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century industrial capitalism. Britain and Germany were the Americans' primary models, and rivals, abroad, but their borrowings often took them still farther afield. The North Atlantic economy I have called this broader region, stretching roughly from Berlin to San Francisco.

The result is not comparative history as that term is generally under-

stood. The crux of comparative history is difference. By masking interdependencies between nations, freezing historically contingent processes into ideal types, and laying across them a grid of social and political characteristics, the method of comparison throws a powerful light on differences.[3] No one can work in this field without amassing a debt to the best of this comparative work. In the end, however, it is the connections between the industrializing countries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—their vulnerability to the same economic forces, the closeness with which they read each others' experience and policy experiments—that makes the differences between their policy choices historically interesting. Robert Kelley's admonition still carries weight: to take seriously "the appearance of similar movements within the several countries, like the outcroppings of common strata, derived from shared intellectual and social influences."[4] Atlantic-era social politics had its origins not in its nation-state containers, not in a hypothesized "Europe" nor an equally imagined "America," but in the world between them. There are gains to be made by starting with connections.

The first aim of these pages, then, is to reconstruct a distinctive era in the American past, in which American social politics were tied to social political debates and endeavors in Europe through a web of rivalry and exchange. Still, it would be foolish to wish to escape the question of difference. Like all polities, America *was* different. Its state structure differed from those of its European rivals, its ideology swung to different poles, its structures of interests were different, its history was distinct. The difficulty in the face of so overdetermined a list of distinctions lies in specifying what difference these differences actually made.

The proposals and policies that the cosmopolitan progressives tried to carry over the Atlantic network form, for these purposes, a laboratory rare in historical studies. Each imported measure had to be disposed of, from old-age insurance to subsidized workers' housing, from city planning to rural reconstruction. Some made the crossing to the United States with relatively little difficulty. Others sank in mid passage. Still more were transformed, their "Americanization" leaving a precise and revealing trace of the forces and circumstances they had come up against. Follow these processes through, from foreign model to domestic outcome, and there are surprises as well as confirmations to be found.

Finally, a prefatory word about ideas in politics.[5] The central protagonists of these pages were rarely intellectuals, but they cared passionately about issues and ideas. To a type of political historian and political scientist,

that will be enough to set in motion, at the very outset, a certain instinctual discomfort. Conventional political analysis cleaves hard to what is called outcomes analysis; its home turf is the legislative process and the heavy claims of interest and political advantage brought to bear there. This emphasis is not without ample reason. But the political process is broader than outcomes. One must also ask how issues get into the political stream itself, how problems are defined and issues framed.

The conventional wisdom settles too often for a relatively unreflective functionalism. Be the issue intolerable poverty, chaotic urban transport, or strangling monopoly, the problem itself is imagined ultimately to drive the political engine forward. Metastasizing into crisis, it forces itself by its very urgency onto the political agenda—mediated sometimes through public opinion, sometimes through interest groups, sometimes through social movements. Between the moment when the problem wedges its way into the political arena and the moment when the heavy forces of interests and politics dispose of it, those with "ideas" have a brief role to play framing alternatives and solutions. But since in the nature of things the legislative result is always different and commonly far messier than their design, those who compete merely with words and proposals are almost always chalked up among the losers.

But this is not the real world of politics. There, as John Kingdon has shrewdly observed, ideas and problems, solutions and potential crises, circulate remarkably independently through the political stream.[6] Generated from myriad sources, their futures depend on their finding one another. Just as a political idea becomes politically viable only when it is successfully attached to a sense of need and urgency, no less do problems become politically significant only when they become attached to politically imaginable solutions. The framers of solutions do not come into the act at the last minute. They are present at the moment of creation, transforming a tragic but incurable condition into a politically solvable problem and, by that very act, defining the field within which legislators and executives will ultimately maneuver.

It was this agenda-setting role of ideas that gave political consequence to the new world of transferable social experience and appropriable policy models thrown open at the end of the nineteenth century. Americans in the Progressive Era between the 1890s and the First World War did not swim in problems—not more so, at any rate, than Americans who lived through the simultaneous collapse of the economy and the post–Civil War racial settlement in the 1870s. It would be more accurate to say that they swam in

a sudden abundance of solutions, a vast number of them brought over through the Atlantic connection. The existence of a large external stock of working solutions helped denaturalize the "laws" of economics. It eased policy makers past many a political impasse. Come back to the New Deal in the same way, placing it in the stream of transnational models and influences that converged on it, and it, too, takes on a new and unexpected character.

These, then, form our central questions: how an era of transatlantic social politics came into being; how it was sustained; what difference the web of transnational connections made; how much it shaped political choices; and how like and different it shows, in retrospect, the United States to have been from its closest economic counterparts. Attending to events and processes throughout the north Atlantic economy, to both near and distant contexts, to politics as well as ideas, these pages comprise an experiment in shifting the frames and boundaries of a classic American story.

Like all reframings, its aim is to make difficulties—to make it hard to view the familiar picture in old, familiar ways. Follow the lines of progressive and New Deal social politics as they spill across the nation-state's boundaries, and one begins to rediscover a largely forgotten world of transnational borrowings and imitation, adaptation and transformation. In the transatlantic progressive moment one begins to recover a phase of American history and politics we have all but lost.

1

Paris, 1900

World of Iron

Every age, even the most calculating and material, needs a symbol, and Gustave Eiffel, who knew a promotional opportunity when it came his way, was eager to provide one. A "factory chimney," critics called his tower at its birth in 1889, "gigantic and hideous." An upended illustration of the principles of railroad bridge design, it defied the scale of the city below it. The tile roofs of old Paris's neighborhoods, the mansards and boulevards of the Second Empire, even the great towers of Notre Dame (as the sketches by Eiffel's engineers pointedly showed) all shrank to Lilliputian dimensions beside this display of engineering hubris. The Eiffel Tower was an advertisement for the tradition-shattering, revolutionary possibilities of industrial technology. Little wonder that Paris's artists immediately petitioned to have it torn down.[1]

Eiffel's tower had a second purpose as well. Built for the Paris exposition of 1889, it was designed as a giant billboard for a great, temporary market of the wares of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. The exposition's official purpose was to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution and, in its reflected glory, the still fragile political fortunes of the Third Republic. In fact, trade—not politics—had dominated every world exposition since the iron and glass Crystal Palace Exposition in London in 1851, and the Paris exhibition was no exception. Machines and machine-

made commodities of all sorts, a swarming bazaar of buyers, sellers, and admirers of the marketable fruits of capital and enterprise all crowded onto the Champ de Mars beneath the iron frame of Eiffel's tower. Call it a fair or an *exposition universelle*, what was constructed in its name was a marketplace: vendors' stalls, sellers' cries, the haggling of exchanging parties all pushed to outsized dimensions.

Eleven years later, in 1900, the French convened a still larger fair on the same site, this time to inventory the century itself. The Eiffel Tower was repainted a bright yellow for the occasion, its gas jets replaced by hundreds of new electric lights to keep it abreast of the onward rush of technological progress. On the fairground itself, a still larger stock of goods—the largest to be displayed in this fashion anywhere until the world's fairs of the 1930s—was crammed still more tightly into still more numerous galleries. The 1889 exposition, despite its planners' intentions, had been largely a French affair. This time both Germany, ostracized in 1889, and the United States were represented in force, elbowing Britain for exhibition space and prestige in their race for industrial primacy. In 1889 visitors sated with machinery had found distraction in the belly dancers in the "Streets of Cairo" and the manly heroics of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show; in 1900, the non-European world spoke more pointedly of markets than of sexuality. From the elaborate French colonial exhibits to the rolling dioramas of the "Around the World" illusion on the Champ de Mars, one could not avoid reminders of the headlong expansion, to a global scale, of the turn-of-the-century market. From workshops throughout the world, greased with the sweat of distant workers and hauled to Paris over elaborate networks of steam transport, acre upon acre of goods came to rest in Paris.[2]

Not all the visitors who thronged the fair in the summer of 1900 would have been comfortable thinking of the exposition as merely a great department store, a Macy's of Western civilization. In their own inventory of the century, not many would have given first rank to the penetration of the market—the domain of things salable, commodifiable, exchangeable in the private contract of buyers and sellers—into ever more extensive realms of social life. Progress, refinement, and civilization demanded their due. It was in acknowledgment of these sensibilities that the functional iron frames of the exposition buildings were iced with a nervous froth of colored plaster, allegorical sculpture, and beaux arts excesses. It was for them that the showcase buildings at the exposition's entrance were given over to art, as if their marble and oils could ennoble the material core of the century's achievements.