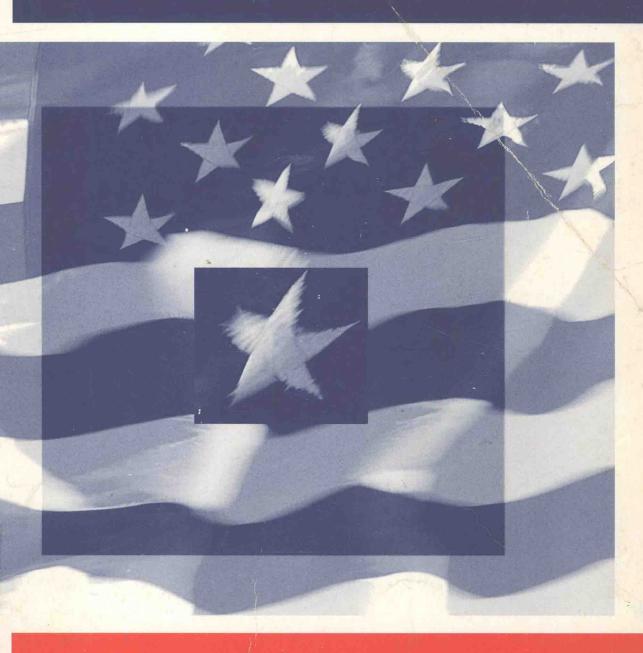
AMERICA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A HISTORY



JAMES T. PATTERSON

America in the * Twentieth Century * A History

Fourth Edition

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* Preface *

This fourth edition of *America in the Twentieth Century* revises my thoughts concerning United States history from about 1900 to the present, a subject I have taught for nearly thirty years. As with the first three editions, this one pays due attention to political and diplomatic events. It also devotes considerable space to areas of special interest to many students today: black history, women's history, urbanization, the role of ethnic groups, the rise of presidential power and of the federal bureaucracy, the power of corporations and the conflict of economic groups, changing sexual mores, and trends in regional and national values.

I have tried to give pace to the narrative by including anecdotes and quotations, by describing key personalities, and by setting aside selections from primary sources that illuminate passages in the text. I hope, however, that readers will not conclude that my purpose is to entertain or to avoid serious issues. On the contrary, I have tried to offer up-to-date interpretations and to state my conclusions about major questions. Without sacrificing my own viewpoint, I have also tried to present various sides of controversial issues. My aim is to stimulate the thinking of college-level students in survey courses and in courses dealing with twentieth-century American history.

Thanks for this edition go to Lucy Barber, who offered criticism and suggested additions.

James T. Paterson

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C H A P T E R

* 1 *

A Frayed Society: America at the Turn of the Century

The historian Frederick Jackson Turner had every reason to rejoice as the nine-teenth century ended. In 1893, when he was only thirty-one years old, he had delivered his widely acclaimed paper describing the influence of the frontier on American history, and by 1899 he was a well-established professor at the University of Wisconsin. Although his salary was only \$3,000 per year and he usually had to teach summer school six days a week to pay his bills, Turner still lived comfortably. Food, fuel, and light for him, his wife, and three small children cost less than \$1,000 a year, taxes and interest on his house around \$500, clothes \$200, and medical bills \$100. Like other Americans, he paid no income tax, and he did without such later "necessities" as a car, freezer, or refrigerator. He owned his lakefront home, employed two servants, and had ample time for the bicycling, fishing, and walking that kept him close to the beauty of his native state.

Turner, a highly successful scholar, seemed especially secure and content. But many others, born and raised on farms or in small towns at the turn of the century, were almost as well off. Burton Wheeler, later a senator from Montana, grew up in Hudson, Massachusetts, an industrial town twenty-five miles from Boston. His father was a cobbler, and the family owned an eight-room frame house on the outskirts of town. They kept a horse and a cow and raised pigs and chickens. Wheeler recalled easygoing days when he picked blueberries for pocket money and wandered through Hudson, a "classic Victorian setting." Hugo Black, who was to achieve fame as a Supreme Court justice, also remembered happy hours of horseshoe pitching, baseball, croquet, and fishing in east-central Alabama. Paul Douglas, later a senator from Illinois, cherished the Maine woods in which he lived as a small boy and where his mother and uncle cleared land for cabins and a summer hotel. Bruce Catton, the Civil War historian, recalled fondly the measured pace and opportunity of the lumber country in upstate Michigan during the 1890s. The famed anthropologist Margaret Mead, born in 1901, was perhaps most rhapsodic of all in remembering her early years in Hammonton, New Jersey, not

far from Philadelphia. Like the others, she was struck by the simplicity of life and the immediacy of the outdoors, where she could roam at will. Among her joys were playing with her mother's possessions and, living in an extended family, listening to her grandmother's imaginative stories.

These young people enjoyed life-styles enormously more comfortable than those endured by the large number of people who crowded the cities or scratched at the land. Sharp class distinctions existed in 1900, alarming many contemporaries. But opportunity also beckoned, and right conduct (or "character," as it was popularly called) was believed to count for almost as much as social standing. As the historian William Leuchtenburg described it, the life of small-town, middle-class youth featured "the clang of the trolley, the cry of the carnival pitchman, the oompah of the military band on a summer evening, the clatter of Victorian sulkies, the shouts of children playing blindman's bluff and run-sheep-run." For nostalgic Americans in later decades this description offered an image of a world that seemed to have been overwhelmed by the complexity, breathlessness, and divisiveness of twentieth-century life.

Movement and Tension

Only the favored upper and middle classes, however, could hope to live so well. America had 76 million people in 1900, of whom 35 million were generally underprivileged Negroes, native Americans, or immigrants. Of the remaining 41 million, few enjoyed the advantages of people like the Turners. For every socially secure girl like Margaret Mead there were scores, like Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie, who fled farm or small town, only to be buffeted about in the cities. Thousands resorted to prostitution in order to make a living. For every upwardly mobile young man like Wheeler or Douglas there were many more who migrated again and again without advancing up the social ladder. Constant geographical mobility and social insecurity characterized the lives of millions of Americans at the time.

Moreover, memories suffused with nostalgia have a way of distorting historical reality. Even for people like Turner and his well-placed contemporaries, that reality could be frightening indeed. For Turner the blows were personal, and they came with the suddenness that made life so uncertain for people of that generation. In 1899 he lost both a daughter and a son, his wife had an emotional breakdown and was confined to a sanitarium, and he, stricken by the events, went briefly into seclusion. Personal tragedies also disrupted the early lives of Mead and Douglas. When Mead was a young girl, her father withdrew from the family following the death of her baby sister. When Douglas was four, his mother died and his father took to drink, making life intolerable for a second wife and two sons, who fled to the Maine woods. Black and Catton were spared similar family crises but lived amid social and economic dislocations: Black in a farm region

suffering from depression and Catton in a once-thriving lumber region that was rapidly being cut barren by loggers. By 1900 conservationists began to lament such reckless commercial exploitation of natural resources.

Sensitive Americans worried deeply about this social instability. Millions reacted by seeking opportunity in the city or by moving West—young Burt Wheeler did both. Others, like Douglas, who saw lumberjacks killed or maimed every year, came to demand action from the federal government, which in the 1890s remained more a symbol of unity than an active force affecting lives directly. Others turned for consolation to saloons or, perhaps most frightening to contemporaries, to socialism, radicalism, or newly formed special-interest groups. This apprehension about potential class warfare, intensified by the belief that the frontier was a thing of the past, obsessed many respectable Americans in the depression-ridden 1890s. They were alarmed especially by the pace of social and economic change, which appeared to be destroying the Republic. As the historian Henry Adams complained, "the individual crawled as best he could, through the wreck, and found many values of life upset."

Ethnic and racial tensions, already acute in the large American cities, disturbed even the lives of small-town Americans. Hugo Black's area of Alabama had comparatively few Negroes, but like all who lived in the South, they were systematically oppressed and frequently terrorized. When a local white boy shot and killed a Negro, he was acquitted because his father was respectable. Wheeler had no experience with Negroes, but when he tried to date local Catholic girls, he was driven from their neighborhood by people throwing rocks. Douglas recalled that the Irish in Maine were stoned as they tried to walk to parochial schools. These racial and ethnocultural tensions, sharp and open in late nineteenth-century America, profoundly shaped the residential, educational, and political contours of the era.

Epidemics, high mortality rates, drunkenness, prostitution, agricultural disaster, unemployment, radicialism, ethnic and racial divisions—all these frightened well-placed Americans in the 1890s. A supposed harmony of interests seemed in danger of demolition. In retrospect it is clear that the wellborn were to maintain their social and economic hegemony under a capitalistic economy and a republican form of government—in short, that in twentieth-century America much from the nineteenth century was to be preserved. Yet many values and life-styles did change rapidly after 1900. Moreover, the durability of existing institutions was by no means so clear at the time, for three overwhelming forces seemed destined to transform the nation. These were urbanization, massive immigration, and industrialization.

FEAR OF THE CITY

The scope of urbanization in America by 1900 is sometimes exaggerated. Only 21.5 million of the country's population of 76 million dwelled in places with 25,000 or more people. Many cities that later became metropolises were still moderate in size: the population of Dallas in 1900 was 42,000, of Houston, 44,000.

In all but a few large cities it was still possible to climb aboard a trolley and ride quickly into the country. The slums, tenements, and ghettos described by Jacob Riis and other urban reformers proliferated in only a few older, predominantly eastern urban areas. Only one city, Boston, had a subway, and very few had skyscrapers. New York, whose tallest building in 1900 had only twenty-nine stories, was not the vertical wonder it was to become in the next thirty years but a sprawling conglomeration of low, gray tenements, brownstone houses, and commercial buildings with cast-iron grillwork.

Yet contemporaries were correct in pointing to the pace of urban growth, for it had been astonishing. In 1860 Pittsburgh had a population of 67,000; by 1900 it had 450,000. During the same period the population of Minneapolis grew from 2,500 to 200,000, that of Los Angeles from 5,000 to 100,000. Chicago, with 30,000 inhabitants in 1850, had 1.7 million by 1900, and Kansas City, only a small town in 1850, had 200,000. By 1900 not only Chicago but also Philadelphia, with 1.3 million, and New York–Brooklyn, with 3 million, housed more than a million residents. And the urban expansion continued: by 1930 nearly 50 million Americans (of 122 million in all) lived in places with 25,000 or more people. Almost 30 million of these dwelled in large metropolitan areas of 250,000 or more.

At the root of this growth were sweeping developments in technology. Electrification made possible trolleys, which transformed the "walking city" of pre-Civil War days and promoted the rapid expansion of suburbs; these housed millions of people as early as 1900. Electrification led also to the installation of elevators, without which the vertical metropolis could not have developed, and accelerated the urban concentration of industry, which had previously relied heavily on scattered sources of water power. The mechanization of farming, the growth of railroads, and the increasing use of the refrigerator car facilitated the rapid shipment

Growth of U.S.	Cities: Ten L	Largest in Populatio	n in 1860	1900,	1920, and	1984
		(in thousands)				

1860		1900		1920		1984	
New York ^a	1,072	New York ^a	3,437	New York ^a	5,620	New York ^a	7,165
Philadelphia	585	Chicago	1,699	Chicago	2,701	Los Angeles	3,097
Baltimore	212	Philadelphia	1,294	Philadelphia	1,824	Chicago	2,992
Boston	178	St. Louis	575	Detroit	994	Houston	1,706
New Orleans	169	Boston	561	Cleveland	797	Philadelphia	1,647
Cincinnati	161	Baltimore	509	St. Louis	773	Detroit	1,089
St. Louis	161	Pittsburgh	452	Boston	748	Dallas	974
Chicago	109	Cleveland	382	Baltimore	734	San Diego	960
Buffalo	81	Buffalo	352	Pittsburgh	588	Phoenix	853
Newark	72	San Francisco	343	Los Angeles	576	San Antonio	843

SOURCE: Donald B. Cole, *Handbook of American History* (New York, 1968), p. 166; and George E. Delury, *World Almanac and Book of Facts* 1975 (New York, 1974), p. 148; *Statistical Abstract of the United States:* 1987 (Washington, D.C., 1986), pp. 31–33.

^aManhattan and Brooklyn.

of foodstuffs and other raw materials in the quantities necessary to support huge agglomerations of people. The rise of cities and of suburbs, like much else in modern American history, stemmed in large part from rapid technological change.

Technological change also disrupted rural and small-town life. The mechanization of agriculture contributed to regular overproduction of cash crops and to plummeting prices (especially before 1897) for farm products on domestic and world markets. Small farmers, tenants, and rural laborers found themselves squeezed off the land or burdened with ever-greater debts. Faced with ruin, thousands of people, especially in the Plains and the South, joined the Populists in the early 1890s and cursed their enemies. "The great common people of this country are slaves," said Mary Ellen Lease, a prominent Populist orator, "and monopoly is the master. The West and South are prostrate before the manufacturing East." The folksinger Woody Guthrie, son of poor rural folk from the Plains, remembered his mother rocking him to sleep:

Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top; When you grow up, you'll work in a shop. When you are married, your wife will work, too So that the rich will have nothing to do.

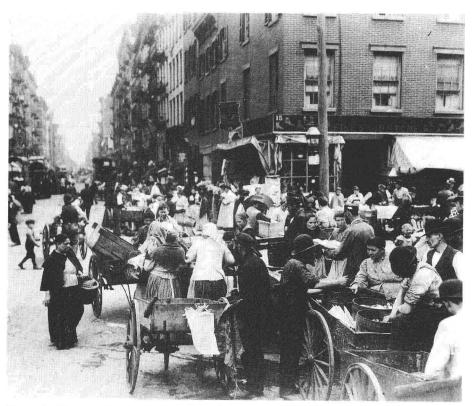
Hush-a-bye baby, on the tree top; When you grow old, your wages will stop. When you have spent the little you've made First to the poorhouse, then to the grave.

Some of the reforms sought by the agrarian rebels—the eight-hour day, progressive taxation of incomes, popular election of senators, governmental control of railroads and utilities, public support for farm prices—later became part of American life. The Populist dream at its best envisioned a harmonious and egalitarian society of industrious workers and productive farmers—all safe from the grasping hands of monopolists and money-lenders centered in strange and alien cities. In the 1890s, however, the Populists failed in their once-promising bid for national power in politics. Instead they frightened "respectable" people, who perceived them as harbingers of class warfare. Moreover, the embattled farmers were fighting a losing battle against inexorable technological forces, and thousands gave up the struggle every year by fleeing to the cities. Though America's rural population continued to rise, the urban population jumped much more rapidly. Millions of these urbanites were immigrants from abroad. Millions more, however, came from the American countryside. This vast rural-urban migration testified vividly to the unsettled economic and social conditions of the age.

A variety of motives impelled the throngs who left the farms and small towns. For some, the city was a magnet—a place where bright lights, noise, and color might bring excitement to life. By 1910 cities offered such attractions as dance halls, amusement parks, professional sports, and—most alluring, perhaps—the new medium of motion pictures. For other migrants, urban life was the new frontier—a place that promised to enhance social status or economic opportunity, a "safety valve" for economic discontent, cultural isolation, and social stagnation. To such

migrants rural life had been monotonous, lonely, and exhausting. "I'm sick of farm life," one of Hamlin Garland's characters complained bitterly. "It's nothing but fret, fret, fret, and work the whole time, never seeing anybody but a lot of neighbors just as big fools as you are. I spend my time fighting flies and washing dishes and churning. I'm sick of it all."

Many Americans responded to the massive shift from country to city and suburb by reaffirming the presumed virtues of rural life. Reflecting this response, writers rhapsodized about life in small towns, until realists like Sinclair Lewis delivered powerful (though still not fatal) counterattacks in the 1910s and 1920s. Booth Tarkington's *Gentleman from Indiana*, published in 1900, was a characteristic hymn of praise to small-town values. The inhabitants of fictional Plattville, a Tarkington character observed, were "one big happy family." Plattville was "the one place for a man to live who likes to live where people are kind to each other, and where they have the old-fashioned way of saying 'Home." Even Theodore Dreiser, product of a harsh, lower-class background in small-town Indiana, was moved by a trip through his native state in 1916. "Every one of those simple towns through which we had been passing," he conceded, "has its red light district." But "the center of Indiana is a region of calm and simplicity, untroubled



The pull of the city: street vendors in New York

When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now. When Dorothy, who was an orphan, first came to her, Aunt Em had been so startled by the child's laughter that she would scream and press her hand upon her heart whenever Dorothy's merry voice reached her ears; and she still looked at the little girl with wonder that she could find anything to laugh at.

Henry never laughed. He worked hard from morning till night and did not know what joy was. He was gray also, from his long beard to his rough boots, and he looked stern and solemn, and rarely spoke.

The reality of life on the Plains, as described by L. Frank Baum in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). Aunt Em and Uncle Henry were the guardians of Dorothy, the heroine, who is swept away from her humdrum life.

to a large extent . . . by the stormy emotions and distresses which so often affect other parts of America and the world."

The celebration of the small town was but one manifestation of the desire to affirm a usable past, which Americans needed in order to find an anchor amid the storms of social change. Other indications were the nostalgia implicit in Turner's thesis that democracy and individualism were products of the frontier, the joyful release many Americans felt at the "safe" William McKinley's triumph over the "radical" William Jennings Bryan in 1896, and the passion with which people embraced the "splendid little war" against Spain in 1898. Disoriented by social change, many Americans persistently emphasized the virtues of their agrarian heritage. Accordingly, their portrayal of cities was hardly flattering, and even historians have echoed their emphasis on the dingy, the violent, and the pathological side of urbanization. Such a portrayal, sometimes distorted and overgeneralized, deserves a careful look.

THE QUALITY OF URBAN LIFE

James Bryce, the sophisticated English observer whose American Commonwealth (1888) remains one of the most discerning descriptions of late nineteenth-century American life, emphasized one theme that underlay the verbal assault on American cities. This was aesthetic revulsion. American cities, he observed, "differ from one another only herein, that some are built more with brick than with wood, and others more with wood than with brick." A year later, his countryman Matthew Arnold agreed. "American cities," he wrote, "have hardly anything to please a trained or a natural sense for beauty . . . a great void exists in the civilization over there [in America]; a want of what is elevating and beautiful, of what is interesting."

Bryce and Arnold reflected a widespread view that American cities, among the fastest growing in human history, were unplanned and ugly. The architect Louis Sullivan described Chicago as "this flat smear, this endless drawl of streets and shanties, large and small, this ocean of smoke. . . . New York may be revolting to you, but this Chicago thing is infinitely repulsive to me. . . . Seventy years ago it was a mudhole—today it is a human swamp." Rudyard Kipling concluded simply of Chicago, "I urgently desire never to see it again," and the novelist Henry James, who moved to London to escape the crassness of his native land, called the American city a "huge continuous 50-floored conspiracy against the very idea of the ancient graces."

To contemporary observers ugliness was merely the most obvious manifestation of urban ills. Another was city government, which by 1900 was too often in the hands of immigrant political "machines" to suit old-stock residents and "googoos," or "good government" reformers. In fact, the better urban machines served important functions, offering to city government some much needed efficiency and expansion of municipal services. At their most humane they furnished rudimentary welfare to people in need. As Martin Lomasney, the boss of Boston, put it, "there's got to be in every ward somebody that any bloke can come to—no matter what he's done—and get help. Help, you understand; none of your law and justice, but help." Men like Lomasney or New York's Charles Murphy, boss of Tammany Hall, provided on the local level the beginnings of welfare functions that state and federal government were later to assume.

Some of these bosses proved wasteful or corrupt. More often, they treated politics as an occupation, not as a forum for disinterested public service. "There's an honest graft," Tammany's George Washington Plunkitt observed, "and I'm an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by sayin': I seen my opportunities and I took 'em." By this comment Plunkitt meant that the political machine—for him and for many other aspiring immigrants—was a business like any other. Those who worked for the machines provided services to people and were paid for their efforts. In these ways the immigrant political organizations were sources of social mobility for ethnic groups (especially the Irish then), as well as institutions that offered what nothing else did at the time—a more centralized way of managing increasingly large and unwieldy urban centers. It was not surprising that such organizations tended to overturn the wealthier but less populous Yankee elites.

Many people recoiled from such machines, especially because immigrants ran them. Bryce contemptuously referred to the "ignorant multitude, largely composed of recent immigrants, untrained in self-government." Novelists of the period commonly agreed. The progressive David Graham Phillips in his political novel *The Plum Tree* (1905) described a city boss, Dominick, as a "huge tall man, enormously muscular, with a high head like a block, straight in front, behind and on either side; keen, shifty eyes, pompous cheeks, a raw, wide mouth; slovenly dress, with a big diamond on his puffy little finger." Tarkington in "The Aliens," a short story, portrayed a precinct chairman as a "pockmarked, damplooking, soiled little fungus of a man." Even Jane Addams, a humane and en-