

A POST ENERGY HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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After the energy crisis of the mid-1970s the papers were full of America's loss of confidence. Editorials predicted the end of the American way of life as we knew it, a dark and cold future. The great industrial cities of the snow belt would close down, and all the people would move to Dallas. After the oil crisis, journalists cried that this was the first time that Americans had so doubted themselves and their prospects. The march of progress seemed to have halted.

At that time I was plodding my way down the nineteenth century into the twentieth, reading Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Ignatius Donnelly, and Jack London. The doomsday cries sounded familiar. The turn of the century is full of utopian and anti-utopian literature. Given the bloody strikes and depressions of that time, pessimism made a lot of sense. And given the 1970s and 1980s, it is beginning to make sense again. I used to say confidently that if we made it through the 1890s, we could make it through the 1970s. But I am not so sure about the 1980s. Not surprisingly, the insecurity of these times has had an influence on my writing about the past.

One great difference between my history and the standard works comes from mine having taken shape after the energy crisis and the near depression. I am writing in a period of doubt about a time of fear. Nearly every Sunday I read predictions of disaster in the Washington Post that might have been written in 1894.

The 1950s and 1960s, when the well-known books on the turn of the century were written, were a different era. The books of Richard Hofstadter, George Mowry, Samuel P. Hays, William Leuchtenburg,

Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Wiebe vary tremendously, but they share a self-confidence that comes from looking backward with the certainty of knowing more about the past than the people who lived in it. These historians assumed that whatever the flaws of the present (1950s and 1960s), overall it represented an improvement on the past. They took progress for granted.

The histories of the 1950s and 1960s see the New Deal as a watershed dividing all that went before it from all that came after. Before the late 1970s, most historians were sure that the New Deal had changed this country irrevocably. They hardly gave a thought to the possibility that it would be undone. With the exception of Hofstadter, who wrote in the shadow of McCarthyism, the historians I mentioned found little in the turn of the century that spoke to their own times. For several, studying the turn of the century (which they called "the progressive era") meant searching for the roots of the New Deal. As one historian said of a central figure: "It is exceedingly difficult for the historian, writing almost half a century after the event, to argue that there is much in [William Jennings] Bryan's experience that is meaningful for America's present concerns" (Challener, 1968: 187). Bryan seemed in the 1960s to have lived in a bygone era with little in common with our own. Historians looked back to a better, simpler time--a separate time that they could judge with confidence.

Writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I do not see the turn of the century as a past long gone. In part that is because many of the deadest of issues have come to life again in the last couple of years: the gold standard, the progressive income tax, protective tariffs, the Federal Reserve System, monopolies, and the trusts. Present-day politics lends these questions, long thought settled, a life I never would have predicted. But more than that, I see the fundamental issues of the turn of the century as the issues of our own times.

Great disparities of wealth in a democracy and the use of money to manipulate democratic institutions were subjects of controversy at the turn of the century. They are very much with us now. Were they to come back from the dead, Republicans, Democrats, and Populists from the 1890s would understand the tax

principles of supply side economics with ease. They would see these principles as a relation of the protective tariff, and they would be able to call the opposing sides by name. As in the 1890s, conservative Republicans would be the great advocates, Democrats and Populists the great opponents. They would see campaign contributions in much the same way as we do now. We are still discussing the attractiveness of a progressive income tax and whether to tamper with excise taxes. These are among the more enduring and basic issues of the period, but there are others that we still debate: preparedness (defense spending), farm debt, the high cost of living (inflation), and organized labor. Although social questions that influence private lives have changed greatly, the basics of political and economic discussion have not, particularly if they are viewed in the terms of their times.

My own book, Standing at Armageddon, begins in 1886, with labor's great upheaval--that inspired Edward Bellamy and frightened respectable people--and ends in 1919, another inspiring and frightening year of strikes. Both years saw unionization at all-time high levels that gave labor strength and confidence. In both years, great numbers of Americans inside and outside the unions predicted that the organization of working people would affect politics and democratize American life.

The great difference between my book and those of the 1950s and 1960s does not lie in subject matter. They are all narrative political histories. But where the earlier books give the most attention to events in Washington, keeping a close eye on the presidents, I seek the impetus for political change in the needs and demands of ordinary people, especially farmers and workers. Farmers are important, but for this period of massive industrialization, I have put more emphasis on labor. While unions did not organize anywhere near a majority of workers and did not speak for most people, they do provide accessible source material that articulates the public concerns of ordinary people. I watch the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor for the inspiration of much that happened in Congress. New labor historians, who concentrate on culture rather than politics and unions, will forgive me this, I hope, in a political rather than a social history. But they will agree with my fundamental refocusing of

attention from the middle class to working people in a book that seeks to understand political changes in the society as a whole.

By shifting from a concentration on how to define "progressives" to an examination of what the respectable classes were worried about, I have found the links of that time with our own as well as a dark strand--very much part of the turn of the twentieth century--that is familiar in our own and in human history as a whole: a fear of the lower orders.

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