

The American “Atmosphere” at the Turn of the Century

American society was undergoing profound changes at the turn of the twentieth century. And while transformative change in a nation’s history is most easily recognizable as a military or political phenomena—a civil war or revolution, for example—the cultural and economic changes in fin de siècle America were equally significant. Immigration, urbanization, the women’s movement, intellectual developments, and an emerging corporate economy all undermined the dominant Victorian culture of the mid to late 1800s. Victorian values such as self-restraint and personal independence no longer resonated with individuals confronting the complex realities of modern America. Contemporaries “sensed that a different order was slowly arising” and historians have described the era as a “watershed of American history.”¹

Middle class Americans reacted to their new surroundings with ambivalence. The increased efficiency made possible by railroads, cheap immigrant labor, and large-scale industry created definite gains in standards of living; however, “machine” politics and the emerging corporate elite “threatened their relative status in society. In addition to concerns of self-interest, most Protestant Americans believed the powerful new forces in society were tearing apart the moral fabric of society. While not wanting to hinder progress, it was clear something had to be done. Until this point the middle class had “set the tone and standards for society as a whole” and now, faced with a challenge to a social hierarchy believed to be sanctioned by morality, they attempted to strengthen the Victorian community into capable leaders through a Progressive agenda that emphasized strenuous living and pragmatic Christianity.²

¹ Hofstadter, Richard. *Social Darwinism*. 118. Commager, Henry Steele. *The American Mind: An interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s*. chap. 2

² Rodgers, Daniel. *The Work Ethic in Industrial America*. 15

The Progressive reformers perceived endemic weakness among Victorians as the primary cause for their weakened hold on prestige and power, regardless of extenuating circumstances.

Neurasthenia, a disease characteristic of the wealthy and indolent, was the most conspicuous example of the Victorians' inability to function in the rough-and-tumble world. A leading advocate of the "strenuous life" among former Victorians, Theodore Roosevelt remarked that "HE WAS TIRED OF SEEING SLOPE SHOULDERED VICTORIANS." Therefore, although the reformers respected the "gentlemanly" attributes of their predecessors, they began to advocate values of dominance and vigor.

The new, more masculine values were not total rejection of their Victorian upbringing; reformers continued to denigrate the ethnic working class culture as barbaric. Instead of adopting the virile lifestyle of the masses, they hoped to inculcate the virtuous, yet feeble, white Protestant middle class with the strength to withstand the immoral and powerful forces of modern America.

Amidst the inexorable changes brought by modernity, however, the reformers were never completely successful. The result was a society with a fascinating blend of Progressive and Modern elements.

There was no single event which threatened Victorian Americans into recreating their identity as warrior Christians. It was a bewildering number of changes that pulled the carpet out from underneath and left them scrambling to find solid ground. Any attempt to list or describe them all would be futile; however, in order to understand the transformation of America at the turn of the century and the Progressive response it is necessary to examine a number of the most important influences.

Immigration presented a major challenge to Victorian America, although the distaste most Victorian Americans had for immigration was not due to foreigners *per se*, but the supposedly inferior type of immigrant arriving in the late 1800s. Britons and Scandinavians were largely welcomed during this era. Italians, Jews, Greeks, Poles, and yet still more Irish all arrived in increasing numbers during the 1880s and their different customs, languages, and physiognomy alarmed many Americans. This fear was due in large part to the perception that the new immigrants were not only of a lesser sort, but that they refused their opportunity to integrate themselves into the existing American culture, and instead sought to claim America as their own. Henry James, the American writer who lived most of his life in England, cannot be dismissed as a jingoist, yet even he reeled at the transformation of Boston's streets. He writes, "no sound of English, in a single instance, escaped their lips; the greater number spoke a rude form of Italian, the others some outland dialect unknown to me...No note of any shade of American speech struck my ear,...the people before me were gross aliens to a man, and they were in serene and triumphant *possession* (my italics)." ³

The Irish in particular, who spoke English and had experience with electoral politics, came to dominate the urban political infrastructure. ⁴ Through machine politics, "immigrants wrested political control from middle-class men in one city after another." The idea of inferior people coming to the United States and ruining it caused great distress among those who considered themselves inheritors of a proud American heritage. One member of the elite, Horace Cleveland, wrote in a personal letter that "it is enough to make the old Bostonians of past generations turn in their graves to think of the city being given over to Irish domination." ⁵ Middle class Americans

³ Levine, 172

⁴ Calhoun, 85

⁵ Blodgett essay, 885

also felt anxiety about the changing demographics. A popular rhyme in Worcester echoes the prevailing nativist sentiment: “The Irish and the Dutch; they don’t amount to much, for the Micks have their whiskey and the Germans guzzle the beer, and all we Americans wish they had never come here.”⁶

The burgeoning women’s movement of the late nineteenth century dismantled traditional Victorian views on gender roles and provided a new source of competition for social status and political power. For generations middle class women were idealized and marginalized as the “True Woman.” In her domestic role she was expected to both support her husband as a passive inferior and also act as the moral pillar of the family. In urban parks women either had separate areas—ostensibly to protect them from the “degraded” public—or depended upon to exert a civilizing influence. The famous “White City” of the 1894 World’s Fair depicted the achievements and superiority of Anglo-Saxon nations; and relegated women’s contributions to a small, separate, and peripheral area within the grounds. Women activists decried the patronizing portrayal to no success. But while they were not able to change the lay-out of the “White City,” they did serve notice that they would no longer accept being depicted as insignificant.

Using the idealized feminine morality of the “True Woman” as justification for involvement in social projects, women transcended their assigned domestic role. The public saw Settlement Houses and their female directors as a macrocosm of the traditional family home. After establishing a foothold in public affairs, women became further engaged with the city and created new standards of independence. COLLEGES, SPORTS, DELAYED MARRIAGE (DC). CRITICISM (DC). Eventually the “New Woman,” a term coined by Henry James in the 1880s, replaced the ideal of the “True Woman” as the archetype of middle-class femininity.

⁶ Rosenzweig, 50

Still, the transformation was not complete. Many women sought to use their newfound power to support Progressive reforms. These women, like their male counterparts, were primarily concerned with preserving traditional values in modern society. QUOTE ON BAKING BREAD (MM). Other women, in general the younger women activists, were more thoroughly modern and emphasized self-fulfillment and equality.

The emerging corporate economy of the late 1800s undermined Victorian America in a number of ways. First, the sheer scale of the new business empires threatened the Victorian concept of democracy—a vision predicated on a nation of independent and equal individuals. QUOTE ON THE NUMBERS OF CORPORATE GROWTH. Second, in the minds of Victorians the nature of the new economy severed the connection between economics and morality. Tycoons such as Jay Gould and J.P Morgan gained millions as financiers, yet they “engage in no commerce, no trade, no manufacturing. They produce nothing.”⁷ Meanwhile, hard-working and self-sacrificing individuals found a ceiling to success in their new roles as employees.

Victorians had always disliked wage labor. Working for someone else instead of being an independent entrepreneur such as an artisan or farmer was emasculating. In fact, the term “servant” was so repugnant that most people used the French word “employee” to act as a thinly veiled euphemism, as if “evasive labels would rectify the anomaly of dependence in a society in which self-employment was the norm.”⁸ The eventual solution to the dilemma of wage labor was “the promise of upward mobility.”⁹ However, by the turn of the century more and more men found themselves working without hope of achieving financial independence. During the

⁷ Wiebe, 98

⁸ Rodgers, 31

⁹ Rodgers, 35

years “1870 and 1910 the proportion of middle-class men who were self-employed dropped from 67 percent to 37 percent.”¹⁰

In addition to undermining Victorian independence and the ideal of the self-made man, the new economy also threatened the value of self-restraint. Ironically, this process began during the early phases of industrialization, when workers were forced to abandon their casual attitude towards labor: most notably the lack of a set schedule and drinking on the job. With increased economic discipline and efficiency came shorter working hours. The workweek,” which had already dropped by about 3 percent per decade in the second half of the nineteenth century, plummeted an additional 10 percent in the first ten years of the twentieth century –from 55.9 to 50.3.”¹¹ The average worker used his time off to indulge in commercial and superficial leisure, in part because work and play had become distinct activities.

Immigration, the women’s movement, and the emerging corporate economy were three of the most powerful challenges to the Victorians’ social status and sense of moral order. In response, Victorian Americans abandoned certain aspects of their identity—primarily self-restraint and independence—to re-define themselves as masculine Progressive reformers capable of maintaining leadership and upholding traditional values. The new Christian gentleman was guided by the tenets of “The Strenuous Life.” Theodore Roosevelt succinctly articulated this philosophy with his advice to “speak softly, and carry a big stick.” Roosevelt attributed this proverb to West African literature and it demonstrates both his commitment to being a gentlemen (speak softly), and his hope to incorporate “barbaric” vitality into the Victorian ethos (carry a big stick). The new, more “masculine” values permeated all aspects of life at the turn of the century.

¹⁰ Bederman, 12

¹¹ Rosenzweig, 179

The main theme in the “Strenuous Life” was the replacement of Victorian “manliness” with Progressive “masculinity,” two terms used by historian Gail Bederman to depict the former’s ethos of self-restraint and independence, and the latter’s discipline and dominance. Reformers were convinced that an undo amount of feminine influence in the churches and schools, which were largely staffed by women, had created a generation of delicate men. Leading public figures lined up to criticize Victorian femininity—an important development because it signified that the working class’s negative opinion of Victorian restraint was now shared by members of the Protestant elite themselves. Henry James, for example, complained that “the whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world.”¹² And Oliver Wendell Holmes declared that “such a set of black-coated, stiff-jointed, soft-muscled, paste-complexioned youth (had)...never before sprung from loins of Anglo-Saxon lineage.”¹³

Theodore Roosevelt’s life serves as a great example of the conscious transformation of Protestant culture. Other individuals, of course, played large roles in the movement, notably Bernarr MacFadden and his popularization of Physical Culture and, later, Jack London with his heroic literature, but it is Roosevelt who personifies the era as no else can. Perhaps this is because he grew up committed to Victorian values and then dedicated himself to achieving physical and political power after his manliness was challenged.

As a child Roosevelt learned to value “gentleness, tenderness, and great unselfishness,” and he was taught that “the same standard of clean living was demanded for boys as for girls; that what was wrong in a woman could not be right for a man.”¹⁴ Because of his privileged background and aristocratic mannerisms he was ridiculed as a “weakling” and “sissy” during his early

¹² Putney, 26

¹³ Putney, 31

¹⁴ Bederman, 172

political career. A number of daily newspapers nicknamed him Oscar Wilde and one even hinted he was “given to sucking the knob of an ivory cane.”¹⁵ The very next year, 1884, he set off to the West to establish himself as a rugged frontiersman. While on his ranch in South Dakota he wrote, “it would electrify some of my friends who have accused me of representing the kid-glove element in politics if they could see me galloping over the plains, day in and day out, clad in a buckskin shirt and leather chaparajos.”¹⁶ Upon his return to New York and politics he soon had an opportunity to prove that his days as whipping-boy were over: when Tammany Hall sent a thug to rough-up Roosevelt in an attempt to dampen his reformist zeal the future President handily defeated him.¹⁷

A direct result of the “strenuous life” was an increase in militarism. The Civil War, now that enough time had passed and the memory of actual combat was dim, began to be eulogized as a heroic chapter from which heroes were made. Reformers believed war would teach the values that had been missing in late Victorian culture: courage, discipline, and sacrifice.. Prominent militarists Albert Mahan and Brooks Adams “urged war as a path to overseas economic expansion as well as moral revival.”¹⁸ In this atmosphere of glorified violence men were chomping at the bit to prove their masculinity, so in 1900 when the “Splendid Little War” began, Americans rushed to participate.

The older generation of the Protestant elite protested American involvement in the war. These men represented the aging Victorians and they believed imperialism undermined America’s founding principles. Senator Crosby, writing in an ironic tone, argued “there is another false

¹⁵ Bederman, 170

¹⁶ Bederman, 175

¹⁷ Putney, 34

¹⁸ Lears, 117

conception which we must get rid of before we can appreciate the new manliness, and that is the ancient belief in freedom and independence.”¹⁹ Senator Hoar believed honor was defined as “the moral and spiritual side of man’s nature.”²⁰ The younger generation of militarists attacked the pacifists mercilessly. In “The Strenuous Life” Roosevelt wrote “I have even scantier patience with those who make a pretense of humanitarianism to hide and cover their timidity, and who cant about liberty and ‘the consent of the governed’.”²¹ And Congressman Mann declared “we fight because it has become necessary to fight if we would uphold our manhood.”²² Republican idealism was under attack by Progressive militarism and it was clear which way the wind was blowing; not a single senator voted against the Spanish-American War.

The influence of the “strenuous life” stretched far beyond the blood-stained battlefields of Cuba. Protestant churches across America—known for their congregations of largely women—adopted the masculine values at the turn of the century. Progressives believed Protestantism had become too feminine and responded by trying to change the culture of the Church. Fred Smith, an organizer of the Men and Religion Forward movement wanted to emphasize the “masculine, militant, and warlike” side of Christianity, because “if these elements are not made manifest, men and boys will not be found in increasing numbers as participants in the life of the church.”²³ The Salvation Army, with its uniforms, flag, and salute, is a clear example of the militarization of religion during this era. Efforts to muscularize the Church sometimes reached comical levels; Prayers in the Salvation Army were referred to as “knee drills” and, in 1910, G. C Tullar published a book of songs titled “Manly Songs for Christian Men” that featured lyrics such as

¹⁹ Rotundo, 236

²⁰ Hoganson, 165

²¹ TR, Strenuous Life

²² Hoganson, 70

²³ Putney, 75

“Christ is our Commander, Vic’try (sic) is our song.” In addition to military rhetoric, Protestant America demonstrated its affiliation with Progressive reformers by embracing pragmatic social programs. MUSCULAR CHRISTIANITY. DIFFERENT PARAGRAPH ORDER.

The “Social Gospel” was a movement in Protestantism led by preachers who grew up in the traditional Victorian faith but changed their views, most notably Walter Rauschenbusch, Lyman Abbot, and Washington Gladden. The Social Gospel preferred active involvement in community projects to metaphysical musings. Concern for the afterlife was too passive, and therefore feminine, to have a place in the new Protestant culture. In addition, by emphasizing the salvation of society rather than the individual, church leaders reflected the Progressive rejection of Victorian individualism. The phrase “what would Jesus do?” originated among Social Gospelers, and it demonstrated their concern for putting into practice their religious beliefs.²⁴ As a result, Protestant America became increasingly involved in urban politics. Gladden preached that “if the kingdom of heaven ever comes to your city, it will come in and through the City Hall.”²⁵

The acceptance of leisure in Protestant religious life was another dramatic step. Early Americans idealized work and viewed leisure as wasteful, if not sinful. According to the Calvinist tradition which dominated 18th century American theology, sports were counter to morality. In his youth, Washington Gladden believed, “If I became a Christian it would be wrong for me to play ball,” and his contemporary, Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale, remembered that “to play cricket was a sin, in the eyes of the fathers.”²⁶ Calvinist orthodoxy, however, lost its footing on the terrain of modern America. Biblical criticism challenged scriptural authority; Darwinian biology

²⁴ Curtis, 82

²⁵ Curtis, 130

²⁶ Washington Gladden, *Amusements: Their Uses and Abuses* (North Adams, Mass., 1866), p.6

upset notions of absolute truth; the industrial and corporate economy undermined Calvinist self-discipline by replacing scarcity with prosperity and rewarding teamwork over individual effort.

The emerging theology transformed God from fearsome judge to omnipresent love. In *The Friendly Life*, Henry Cope wrote that God had changed “from a giant who makes worlds to a heart that suffers with ours, a soul that seeks ours, a being who is a man’s friend.”²⁷ It was during this time that the figure of Jesus became the central figure in Christianity. Reverend Horace Bushnell was an early leader in developing the new Protestantism. He argued that “religion is to be the friend of play.”²⁸ Another preacher, the popular Henry Ward Beecher, perfectly captured the new mood in American theology. Understanding that abundant love, and not fear of hell, was now the central tenet, he preached, “In every part of life God has fruit ready to drop into your lap.”²⁹ Billy Sunday and Amos Alonzo Stagg used their renown as athletes to bring the new Christianity to even wider audiences.

Sports exploded in popularity at the turn of the 20th century, largely because they embodied the prevailing ethos of leisure, militarism, and cooperation. Although middle class men had more leisure in the new economy, they still did not wish to “waste” their time. Progressives saw saloons and pool-halls as immoral and unproductive. Sports, on the other hand, served to instill the values and skills necessary for corporate citizens. A blend of individual initiative and discipline was paramount to success in both sports and work. Clear rules to the game required discipline—a necessary trait for an employee. And team sports compelled athletes to think beyond individual gain and put the team first.

²⁷ Henry Cope, *The Friendly Life* (New York: Revell, 1909), 50

²⁸ Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York, 1861), pp. 356-357

²⁹ Rodgers, 97

Men also found sports to be an activity which established their masculinity identity as work now failed to do so.³⁰ By creating a public space where “masculine supremacy is incontestable,” athletics served as an effective “line of defense against effeminization for American men.”³¹ For this reason, among others, women’s participation in sports was criticized by many Progressive reformers. The connection between sports and masculinity was so clear that author Stephen Crane felt comfortable using his experience watching football as a guide to writing about war in his famous novel *The Red Badge of Courage*.³²

Progressivism and the “strenuous life” were reactions to perceived threats to Victorian Americans’ status and sense of moral order. Progressive reformers, educated and middle-class Yankees for the most part, who sought to confront that threat, were essentially trying to “realize familiar and traditional ideals under novel circumstances.”³³ By adopting the masculine values embodied in the “strenuous life,” they hoped to empower their generation of white, Protestant Americans with the vigor necessary to maintain social and moral leadership in an increasingly modern society. Sports, militarism, and the transformation of the Church were all efforts to withstand the most destructive forces of modernity: immigration, a corporate economy, and the women’s movement. Progressivism was a struggle against the tide of modernity, but the modernization of the country was inevitable and the reformers were no Moses. The resulting cultural landscape of early twentieth century was a unique blend of Progressive and modern America.

PARAGRAPH ON CONSUMER CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT?

³⁰ Chauncy, 113

³¹ Dubbert, 446

³² Rotundo, 240

³³ Hofstadter, Reform, 213

