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# A NATION TRANSFORMED

**W**E HAVE JUST CONSIDERED THE CIVIL WAR'S EFFECTS ON the South, but it now remains to consider its more general effects on the nation as a whole. And those effects were enormous. It is no exaggeration to say that the Civil War marks the boundary between early America and modern America.

Like any great historical event, such as a revolution or technological innovation, the Civil War has been subject to all sorts of interpretations: it has been understood as a battle to preserve the Union, a crusade for freedom, a triumph for democracy, a tragic clash between incommensurable cultures, a failed war for Southern independence, a victory for capitalism, and so on. But in any event, it also needs to be understood as a historical watershed, a point of articulation after which almost everything about the country would be changed in some way. In economics, in political and social life, in culture, in the very texture of its self-consciousness, the nation would be altered in the aftermath of this conflict. The decentralized agrarian republic of the nation's earlier history was being left behind in favor of a new, larger, more unified, more consolidated, and more powerful nation-state. In the process, the country found itself in the grip of large and compelling new forces, exhilarating and full of promise, but also bewildering and even threatening.

Such great historical changes can be hard to depict compellingly. We lapse too quickly into using lifeless abstractions, expressed in large words like *industrialization*, *urbanization*, *nationalization*, *centralization*, *professionalization*, and so on. It is right and necessary to use them. But it can be hard to wrap our minds around them or to connect them with anything that we can see or feel. Sometimes a significant moment or thing is needed to make their meaning, as

human experience, more vivid to us. And there was just such a significant moment at the very conclusion of the Civil War, a ceremonial occasion which we passed by in silence two chapters ago, but to which we shall now return.

That moment was the Grand Review of the Union armies, a solemn but celebratory procession ordered by the War Department for May 18, 1865, some thirty-nine days after Appomattox. The participants in the review were the men of the Army of the Potomac, under General George Meade, and of the combined western armies that had fought through Georgia and the Carolinas under General William Tecumseh Sherman. The resulting parade was an astounding spectacle: two hundred thousand men marching for two days through the streets of Washington, D.C., in a line stretching as far back as twenty-five miles, a steady flow of blue uniforms snaking its way through the city and past the shadow of the Capitol dome "like a tremendous python," as one observer put it. Walt Whitman was also there, enraptured by the panorama. "For two days now," wrote the poet, "the broad space of [Pennsylvania Avenue] along to Treasury hill, and so up to Georgetown, and across the aqueduct bridge, have been alive with a magnificent sight, the returning armies," marching in "wide ranks stretching clear across the Avenue." Spectators jammed the streets, sidewalks, doorsteps, windows, and balconies, craning their heads to watch, many having come from hundreds of miles away.

This excited response was a surprise. Few had expected that such a great rush of visitors would pour into Washington for the occasion and would stand and watch for hours, two days in a row, transfixed by what one journalist called "the greatest military pageant ever witnessed on this American continent." There were other celebrations in the land, but there had never been one even remotely like this one. There had been no such Grand Review at the end of the Revolution, or the War of 1812, or the Mexican War. The armies involved had been much smaller and had quickly dispersed in accord with the long-standing American distrust of standing armies and powerful central authority, melting back into the state-based militias whence they had come.

But the Grand Review was something new, a national pageant affirming the new primacy in American life of the American nation – of national power, national unity, national governance, and national consciousness. Whitman had called the marchers "returning armies," but they were not that, not technically. Their actual homes were from almost everywhere else but Washington: there were small-town Yankees from New England, midwestern farm boys, Irish city dwellers, freed Southern slaves who had joined the army in eagerness to serve. But in another sense, it *was* true. Wherever their homes, they had become trans-

formed into national men, through modern war and through their integration into a modern, nationalized military organization. There was no more palpable sign of this change than that long river of blue uniforms flowing through the streets of Washington, the spectacle to which the eyes of the onlooking throngs were riveted.

What a contrast that sight must have seemed to anyone who remembered the motley garb of those first regiments responding to Lincoln's recruitment calls at the beginning of the war. That disorderly riot of diverse uniforms back in 1861 perfectly reflected an older America, with the diffuse cultures and regional loyalties of a far more loosely organized federal republic. Not so the Grand Review, which stilled the laughter and replaced it with awe, suitable for the installation of a new political order. The army visibly represented the welding together of inconsequential individuals into a grand and powerful unit, with great and lofty objectives.

And yet, one wonders how many souls, amid the cheering crowds lining the Washington streets those two days, were quietly harboring worries about what they were seeing, perhaps glimpsing in that invincible army something just as troubling as it was impressive: the possibility that their country was in the process of leaving behind altogether the simpler America of the Founding and moving into something else.

Think of the long refining process that had formed the characteristic Anglo-American institutions, since colonial times and especially since the Revolution, for which the central debates had been about how to divide power, divide authority, divide sovereignty among several competing entities, as a way of preventing the abuses of concentrated power. Were those questions now becoming moot, as the nation marched inexorably into a new era, in which the concentration of force was to be the decisive thing? Had Patrick Henry and the Anti-Federalists been right in their prediction that the Constitution would bring a centralization of power in a regime "incompatible with the genius of republicanism"? Indeed, the more important question of the era to come would be whether the Constitution was outdated: was the eighteenth-century document that had been sufficient for the needs of a small, decentralized, agrarian republic woefully insufficient to meet the needs of a major emerging industrial power?

For a major industrial power was precisely what the United States was becoming in the latter years of the nineteenth century, and it was doing so at breakneck speed. The country's industrial expansion was not exclusively a product of the war; it was already well under way before the war and continued during the war. If anything, the expansion probably would have occurred even more rapidly

without the distractions and distortions caused by the sectional crisis and war. But the plain fact is that something utterly remarkable would happen in the mere thirty-five years between the end of the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century. In 1865, the year of the Grand Review, American industrial power was inferior to that of any of the major European powers, but by 1900, the United States had become the leading industrial power in the world, as measured by the size of its gross national product (GNP; the total value of all goods and services produced by the citizens of the nation for a given year). The United States was manufacturing at such a prodigious rate that it had surpassed mature industrial powers like Great Britain, France, and Germany, and it seemed poised to grow even more.

It was a phenomenal leap forward on all fronts at once, reflecting the fact that postwar America was blessed with very nearly ideal conditions for rapid and sustained economic growth, which averaged around 4 percent per year, twice the pace of the British economy. It enjoyed the benefit of lavish natural resources, including abundant raw materials, such as coal, iron ore, timber, copper, and other forms of mineral wealth necessary to modern industry. It had a growing population (the population increased by nearly threefold in those years), which added to the size of the domestic market, and it enjoyed an abundant supply of inexpensive labor that was being steadily augmented by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Europe and Asia.

It had access to copious sources of capital, both domestic and foreign, as America came to be an irresistible place for profitable investment. It had an excellent transportation system, featuring extensive networks of railroad lines, waterways, and canals, as well as world-class harbors in its leading port cities. It benefited from numerous new inventions and technologies that steadily increased productivity, a process of inventiveness that was protected by a highly efficient patent system. And American businesses had the benefit of a friendly legal and political structure, one that respected private property, regulated and taxed business only lightly, and imposed protective tariffs to keep foreign competition at a minimum.

It was the era in which big business came into its own, and the first of the big businesses were the railroads, arguably the single most important drivers of American economic development of the time. Small wonder that railroad executives, not politicians, were among the most important people in the rankings of social status among postwar Americans. The railroads were impressive as an industry in their own right and grew with fearful rapidity in the immediate postwar era. In 1865, there had been 35,000 miles of railroad track; by 1900, that number had become 193,000 miles – more track than in all of Europe, including Russia.

The railroads were the first big business in several senses. They were the first American businesses to become a powerful magnet for well-heeled investors from all over the world, whose assets could be drawn on through financial markets and pooled to address the stupendous capital needs of building a railroad from the bottom up – from manufacturing and laying rails to constructing cars, building stations, and erecting telegraph lines, and a dozen other expensive stages of development and management that all have to be in place before a single train can roll or a single penny of income can be sought. A railroad was not something you could build piecemeal or organically; it was by its nature an all-or-nothing proposition. And it was expensive, costing as much as \$36,000 per mile at a time when an average middle-class income was \$1,000 a year.

Because of their size and complexity, and the sheer magnitude of their financial needs, the railroads burst the form of the individual- or family-owned business, and similar forms of business partnership, and instead adopted the form of the modern business corporation. The corporate form was a further iteration of the idea behind the joint-stock company, so important to the settlement of America, and it had many advantages. Unlike a business partnership, it was unaffected by the death of one or another partner, and unlike a partnership, it limited the liability of investors to what they had invested – a protection against financial ruin in the event of business failure and thus an encouragement of experimentation and risk taking. The corporate form also made it possible for the railroads to develop a large management bureaucracy to deal in a coordinated way with all the various aspects of running a railroad line smoothly, efficiently, and safely.

But these bureaucracies could only manage enterprises that individual initiative had put into motion. Like nearly all the most impressive and creative economic activity of the period, the development of the railroads was mainly a product of entrepreneurs, many of whom have very familiar names. One of the key figures was Cornelius Vanderbilt, a poor boy from Staten Island who started out running a ferry service in New York Harbor, enjoyed success in the steamship industry, and chose to shift his interests to railroading during the war years. He ended up consolidating and operating the New York Central rail line with forty-five hundred miles of track, connecting New York City with Chicago and other major midwestern cities.

Railroads stimulated the overall economy in a great many ways, directly and indirectly. They stimulated it by their purchase of goods from other industries, for example, the vast numbers of cars, locomotives, and tracks needed to operate, which in turn made them a major customer of the steel industry. In 1881, the railroads alone purchased 94 percent of the rolled steel manufactured in the United States. They were similarly a mainstay for the coal industry, as

coal was an important locomotive fuel in the steam-engine era. Second, by creating a large and efficient national transportation network, it was possible for there to be a true national-scale market in almost any conceivable goods. This fact in turn stimulated the development of mass production directed at the mass consumption in those larger markets; it also allowed for a higher degree of economic specialization, since the production of niche goods – highly customized tools, for example – would be rendered more economically feasible when there was a larger population to draw upon in creating or finding the appropriate niche market for those goods. Railroads also stimulated growth in the undeveloped parts of the nation (for example, stimulating exponential growth of the steel industry in Alabama in the 1880s) and attracted settlers to locate in areas near the lines by selling the land to them cheaply.

Creation of an efficient national transportation system to make a national market possible necessarily meant achieving a high degree of standardization in the way the tracks were built and operated, and the railroaders themselves, with Vanderbilt in the lead, were the ones to establish such standards. In 1860, there had been 350 railroad companies in the United States, but there was as yet no national railroad system, in part because there was no universal standard for track gauge (the distance between the inner sides of the rails). That fact made it a major economic nuisance to ship outside one's own region of the country, because, since cars could not roll on tracks of the wrong gauge, a laborious, expensive, and time-consuming process of transferring goods from one train to another would be involved. By the 1890s, that problem would be successfully solved partly by the gradual consolidation of the industry under the leadership of Vanderbilt and a few others.

Even more consequential, and essential to the smooth operation of a transcontinental network, was the standardization of the measure of time. Before this period, time was reckoned by the position of the sun at any given place; noon was the moment when the sun was at its zenith. Obviously the "noon" at one place would not be simultaneous with the "noon" at another place down the road or across the country. But with only local time available, and without a standard grid allowing for the simultaneous reckoning of time across long distances, how would it be possible to schedule train trips over long distances? Particularly when several trains were using the same tracks, going in opposite directions? The solution was the adoption of standard time zones, in which clocks would be synchronized within a designated geographical area and thereby would establish a discrete standard for that whole area. A scheme to do so, based on the British system, was settled upon by the major American railroad executives meeting together in 1883 at the Grand Pacific Hotel in Chicago.

Several technological advances that facilitated the development of the

railroads also deserve mention here. George Westinghouse's invention of the air brake, which allowed an engineer to brake all the cars in a train at the same time, made possible longer trains and higher speeds. The Pullman sleeping car made long-distance travel comfortable, even pleasurable, thus stimulating the growth of travel and tourism. The telegraph was an essential component of the railroads, serving as a kind of nervous system for the lines, a source of near-instant and reciprocal communication, indispensable for the command and control of the line's activity. The two were always built together, a sign that the relationship between them was symbiotic; the railroads could not have functioned efficiently without the telegraph, and the telegraph lines could not have been built without the cleared lands that had been prepared for the construction of the railroad lines.

Hundreds of thousands of patents were granted during this dynamic economic period of American history. There were too many important advances in technology in this era to be able to enumerate them all here, but a few deserve mention. An advance that occupies a category by itself involved the manufacture of steel, which is iron with 1–2 percent carbon added, a material that combines the hardness of cast iron with the toughness of wrought iron. Steel is superior to iron for most purposes, particularly railroad tracks, girders for tall buildings and bridges, and machine tools, but was too expensive to manufacture until the 1855 invention in Great Britain of the Bessemer process, which revolutionized steel production. The numbers tell the story; from 77,000 tons of steel produced in 1870, the number had made an astronomical leap to 11.4 million tons in 1900. By then, Pittsburgh had become the iron and steel capital of the United States, mostly due to the abundant coal deposits in the western Pennsylvania area. Its most prominent entrepreneurial figure was Andrew Carnegie, a poor Scottish immigrant who rose from working as a bobbin boy in a textile mill to becoming the titan of the steel industry.

An even more spectacular expansion was made by the petroleum industry, which did not even exist before 1859. At the end of the Civil War, about two to three million barrels of oil per year were being produced; by 1890, that number had increased to fifty million. At first, the petroleum was used mainly for its kerosene, which was burned in lamps as a cheaper and cleaner substitute for the whale oil or oil from coal that had formerly been used in lamps. By the 1870s, refiners learned how to alter the chemistry of petroleum by heating it, which not only increased the yield of kerosene but generated useful by-products, such as naphtha, gasoline, and various lubricants and waxes.

Here the dominant figure was John D. Rockefeller, who got in on the

ground floor of the business, seeing early on the potential profitability of refining oil. He incorporated Standard Oil Company of Ohio in 1870 and proceeded to buy out his competitors so that by 1879, he was controlling 90 percent of the nation's refining capacity. He soon became the richest man in America, often using harsh and cutthroat business tactics to get his way – in strange contrast to his Baptist piety. He was an early proponent of the idea of vertical integration, which meant that he attempted to control every aspect of the production of oil products, from their extraction to their refining to their distribution. To consolidate and coordinate the administration of all his scattered assets, he used legal instruments like trusts and the device of a “holding company” in ways that were innovative – but that also raised concerns about his holding what was essentially a monopoly over a central and indispensable feature of the economy.

A third major figure deserving of mention, and an inventor of sorts himself, was J. Pierpont Morgan, a wealthy, well-educated investment banker in New York whose firm played a key role in financing and stabilizing the fast-growing American industrial economy. Because giant corporations needed to raise huge sums of capital to function and expand, investment bankers became key players in the economy, and Morgan was the most prominent of them all. A large and forceful man who smoked dozens of cigars a day, Morgan's imposing personality and his ferocious eyes usually saw to it that he got his way; one contemporary said that after a visit from him, it felt as if “a gale had blown through the house.”

Among Morgan's deepest beliefs, one he shared with Rockefeller, was his conviction that competition was wasteful and disorderly. Accordingly, he sought to bring order and stability, wherever he could, to the wild and often chaotic economy. He was, in short, a firm believer in the virtues of consolidation, and his fingerprints were on many of the most prominent efforts to consolidate entire industries, including most notably the steel industry, which led in 1901 to U.S. Steel becoming the world's first billion-dollar company. The process by which he acquired and consolidated companies, and then controlled them by placing his partners on their governing boards, became known as “Morganization,” and by 1900, he and his partners had places on the boards of corporations accounting for a quarter of the nation's wealth. So wealthy and powerful did Morgan become that he twice (in 1895 and 1907) was called upon by a president of the United States to rescue the government and the national economy from financial panics.

Developments like that were shocking to many ordinary Americans. What had happened to their democracy? How could it be that their national government was so dependent on the private power of the House of Morgan – that is, ulti-

mately, of one massively wealthy and powerful man – that the president himself would have to come, hat in hand, to beg for relief? But such concerns echoed again and again through the economy, through every business and every city and town, as the consolidation of vast quantities of new wealth in the hands of entrepreneurs with potentially monopolistic power gave rise to concerns about the subversion of republican government itself. Even without such concerns, it had to be conceded that big business itself had become a profoundly revolutionizing innovation, disrupting all the conventional and local ways of doing things, centralizing productive and financial power in the offices of a small group of corporate chieftains, giving the great mass of people unprecedented levels of prosperity and access to a wide array of cheap goods with one hand, while taking away much of their capacity for local self-rule and self-sufficiency with the other. It represented a formidable set of trade-offs, and it was not at all obvious which was the best way to go.

On balance, though, a taste of prosperity was a bargain a great many people were willing to strike. A wonderfully vivid example of what this new set of circumstances made possible would be the rise of the mail-order retail business, pioneered first by Montgomery Ward and then by Sears, Roebuck and Company. These companies used huge, lavishly illustrated mail-order catalogs to reach potential customers directly even in the most remote areas of the country. They then put the nation's transportation resources and postal services to good use in shipping the goods that customers wanted directly to their doors. Thus the often bleak and colorless lives of those living in rural isolation, such as the many pioneering farmers lured westward by the Homestead Act and the railroads, were greatly enlivened, their standard of living was raised significantly, and all the while the country was being knit together in a subtle but profound way. Buying goods from Sears, Roebuck was something that nearly every American could do; doing so made one part of an unprecedented and nationwide "community of consumption."

And yet there was a price paid for these new arrangements. Those mail-order companies were able to sell for less because they bought goods from their wholesalers in far larger quantities than any local general stores could. Their success had the potential to undermine the profitability and viability of local institutions. Local businessmen objected to mail-order arrangements and to the development of "chain stores" such as the A&P grocery stores, which operated two hundred stores around the country by 1900 (and more than sixteen thousand by 1930). It is a situation not unlike that faced today by local businesses that find themselves unable to compete with goods being sold at far lower prices by internet-based companies or giant high-volume retailers like Walmart.

It is virtually a law of economics, and perhaps of life itself, that every

benefit comes with an attendant (and sometimes unanticipated) cost. The introduction of the railroad into rural communities meant that farmers were no longer restricted to the immediate vicinity of their farms but now had a larger area within which they could market their goods. But the same change made them vulnerable to a larger range of competitors, many of them invisible and distant and anonymous, and yet making their influence felt across the continent or even across the ocean. With the introduction of standard time, lives that had formerly been measured by, and entwined with, the seasonal local rhythms of agriculture, or by the hours tolled on the local church bells, were now made to conform to a national standard, set and maintained by people far away, for the sake of the railroad's efficiency. And they did not have any choice in the matter.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, and well into the era of the Civil War, America was a nation of what have been called "island communities," more or less insular and self-contained towns and villages whose sense of connection to the larger world was abstract at best. By the end of the century, that was no longer true in a great many places. With the new world emerging, the sense of autonomy enjoyed by such places, for better or worse, had been penetrated and altered by the forces of political, economic, and cultural nationalization.

These economic changes were reflected in the changing conditions experienced by industrial wage laborers. First of all, there were many more of them: from about 885,000 in 1860 to more than 3.2 million in 1890. They benefited from the general rise in the standard of living produced by industrialization; not all the wealth was going into the pockets of the wealthy few, even if a disproportionate amount of it was. Upward mobility, that is, the movement from the lower to the higher ranks of social and economic standing, was common, and the long-term decline of commodity prices meant greater purchasing power for the wage earner.

But the down side of the move to intensified industrialization was a steep decline in the quality of the work environment, with sixty-hour workweeks and dangerous and exploitative conditions in factories being common. In the year 1913 alone, there were twenty-five thousand workplace fatalities in the United States and thirty times that number of serious employment-related injuries. The use of child labor was common; in 1880, one out of every six children in the nation, some of them as young as eight, was working full-time. Even aside from such considerations, under the best of circumstances, the setting of the modern factory was dehumanized and impersonal, with large numbers of

workers working under the tyranny of the clock, engaged in highly repetitive and monotonous tasks that brought them none of the pride of workmanship for which smaller workplaces allowed.

Huge and vastly expensive machinery was the very core of the industrial enterprise, the machinery that propelled the steel mills, the oil refineries, the manufacturing plants. And it was the machinery that called the tune and controlled the pace of work, because in many respects, the machinery was far more important than the workers themselves. The steel mills had to be run twenty-four hours a day; they could not be stopped and restarted. So the work schedules of the actual laborers tending to them, which generally meant two crews working alternating twelve-hour shifts, had to adjust accordingly. The concentration of power made possible by the machine also came at a human cost.

Laborers had few effective ways of resisting these conditions. Even the passive-resistance tools used by slaves were not available to them, because they could easily be fired, cut loose, and replaced. Many changed jobs frequently, and about 20 percent would abandon factory work entirely. The best weapon industrial workers had at their disposal was the formation of unions, which allowed workers to organize, bargain as a group, and withhold their labor altogether in the form of a strike, as a way of countering the otherwise unchallengeable power of factory owners and managers.

But American workers were historically reluctant to join unions, for many reasons. The strong sense of individualism that prevails in American culture militated against it; so too did a lack of working-class identity among American workers, who tended to see their "hireling" status as temporary and hoped to rise eventually into the middle and upper classes, thus fulfilling the aspiration to be self-made men. Racial and ethnic tensions within the workforce also made unification difficult, particularly as the industrial workforce became more and more dominated by immigrants, whose cultural differences from native-born Americans and from one another often overshadowed their economic commonalities. The most successful unions were the craft unions associated with the American Federation of Labor, led by the feisty and tireless Samuel Gompers. But they had the advantage of being skilled workers, such as typographers or (like Gompers) cigar makers, and of being narrowly focused on higher wages, shorter hours, improved working conditions, and the like. For the large numbers of unskilled workers, who felt the need for more dramatic changes, there was no similarly effective organization or voice.

Nevertheless, the period from the early 1870s to the mid-1890s was a turbulent time for American labor, the most intensely violent such period in American history. Beginning with the quasi-terroristic activities of the Molly Maguires, directed against the mine owners of western Pennsylvania, through

the violence and looting associated with the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, to the Haymarket riot in 1886, building finally to the Homestead steel strike of 1892 and the Pullman strike of 1894, labor suffered setback after setback, both in achieving its objectives and in winning over the American public to its cause.

Perhaps the only ray of hope for organized labor was the success of the Socialist Party, under the leadership of Eugene V. Debs, the tall, charismatic organizer of the American Railway Union, a rare union that embraced skilled and unskilled workers alike. Debs was a prominent figure in the Pullman strike and was jailed for his efforts, which contributed to his stature in the labor movement. He drew some of the discontented to his party's cause, to the extent that Debs was able, by 1912, to draw nearly a million votes in that year's presidential election. With socialist mayors in thirty-three cities, and a following developing among workers and farmers alike – the party was strong in highly agricultural Oklahoma, which gave almost 17 percent of its vote to Debs – it seemed that his party might have a future.

There is another *-ization* word that has to be invoked in understanding the disruptive nature of this period in American history. That word is *urbanization*: the growth of cities. And urbanization was disruptive not only because it took so many country people off the land but also because Americans have, for most of their history, lacked an urban ideal.

To put it another way, Americans have had a hard time reconciling what they think of as characteristically American aspirations with the actual life of modern American cities. The fierce attachment to ideals of individualism, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and closeness to nature that we saw in the generation of Emerson and Thoreau does not always seem, for many Americans, to comport with the conditions of modern urban life. Perhaps that is because America, as historian Richard Hofstadter quipped, is a nation that “was born in the country and has moved to the city,” while never entirely adapting to the city's mentality.

Resistance to urban identity goes back to the very beginnings of American history. At the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, there were only six places featuring populations of more than eight thousand, a number that is hardly a city by most present-day standards, and the combined population of these six was 183,000 in a nation of five million. Agriculture was not only the predominant mode of economic activity but the one held to be most exemplary, a sentiment most vividly expressed in Jefferson's famous encomium to “those who labor in the earth.” Nor was Jefferson shy about extending the implications of this analysis to urban life: “The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the

human body." His fellow Virginian George Washington agreed: "the tumultuous populace of large cities are ever to be dreaded."

Such sentiments were not restricted to Virginians. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia civic leader, agreed on both counts, asserting that "farmers and tradesmen are the pillars of national happiness and prosperity," while cities, by contrast, are rightly compared to "abscesses on the human body, viz., as reservoirs of all the impurities of a community." And John Adams of Massachusetts, like Jefferson a zealous advocate for the American republican experiment, found much to be hopeful about in the new nation's dispersed cultural geography:

*In the present state of society and manners in America, with a people living chiefly by agriculture, in small numbers, sprinkled over large tracts of land, they are not subject to those panics and transports, those contagions of madness and folly, which are seen in countries where large numbers live in small places, in daily fear of perishing for want.*

Urbanism did not come immediately thereafter for America, but when it did, it came in a rush, in tandem with all the other wrenching changes we have been exploring in this chapter. In 1790, 3.3 percent of the population lived in cities, defined as a population of eight thousand or more. By 1890, that number was 33 percent. The nation grew, but cities grew faster; the nation's population increased by 12 times between 1800 and 1890, but the population of cities increased by 87 times. By 1890, there were not merely six cities but 448 cities with greater than eight thousand in population. And there were six metropolises by 1900 with populations totaling more than a half million. Much of this growth took place in the postwar years; Chicago *tripled* its population between 1880 and 1900, while New York grew from two million to three and a half million in the same years.

Cities did not just get bigger, but as they did, they changed their character. Before roughly 1870, the American city was a "walking city," meaning that it consisted of a highly compact urban core of residential, commercial, and industrial buildings, along with churches and courthouses and other public buildings, all piled in together, with dependent rural farming in the surrounding countryside. If the city had a significant harbor, the downtown business district would be located near it, along with factories, banks, and the like: all side by side. Closeness to work was all-important, so that slum streets and fashionable streets were mixed together and different classes and ethnic groups lived in proximity to one another.

After 1870 and the dramatic economic changes we have been describing, all that changed quite noticeably. The modern segregated or segmented city

came into being, a larger and more sprawling entity with an inner core of poverty surrounded by rings of rising affluence. Although there was no single cause for this development, it would not have been possible without the mechanically powered streetcar and variants such as cable cars and trams. With a network of streetcar lines in place, it became possible for people of sufficient means to live outside the city and commute in to work on a daily basis, and the very possibility of such a way of living worked a geographical transformation of the city in very short order. It was the first system of urban mass transit, and the result was an increasingly segmented and fragmented city, structured largely along socioeconomic lines, with wealth tending to move toward the city's edges and poverty tending to remain, and grow, in the city's core.

Living conditions in those urban cores deteriorated rapidly and could become dreadful. The poor increasingly lived in crowded tenement buildings, which maximized the number of living units but created unhealthy conditions that were a constant fire hazard and became breeding grounds for disease and crime. Infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and measles, were rampant, as were gangs and street crime in chaotic and lightly policed neighborhoods. Public sanitation was very poor, with many places relying on cesspools rather than sewer systems to manage waste, resulting in water supplies being subject to pollution. Baltimore in summer, quipped H. L. Mencken, smelled like "a billion polecats," and he wasn't exaggerating. Those who could afford to had withdrawn from such conditions, understandably – and their withdrawal only made matters worse.

A new form of urban politics sprang up in such circumstances to address the needs of disoriented urban dwellers, many of whom were new not only to urban life but to the United States itself. Such individuals often found themselves in desperate need of the services of city government but were unsure how to gain access to them. Such matters were increasingly handled through powerful and well-positioned political "bosses" and their "machines," informal but highly disciplined networks of influence and officeholding, generally tied to the Democratic Party, which worked according to the age-old patterns of bribes and payoffs, patronage and graft, buying and selling votes. At bottom, it was an intricate system of mutual favors; I scratch your back, you scratch mine. It was thoroughly corrupt, and the bosses got rich from it. But at the same time, the political machines took care of urgent needs for their constituents – food for the poor, employment help, problems with City Hall, social clubs, immigration issues – and in return received their reward in money, favors, or other preferments: a far cry from the republican vision of the Founders, indeed, but at least providing a modicum of order, and humane concern for the needs of the poor and disadvantaged, in an otherwise disjointed and disorganized situation.

A great many of the urban dwellers who turned to the bosses for help were recent immigrants to America, and that fact constitutes a huge part of the post-war industrialization and urbanization story. The period of American history beginning in 1870 was a period not only of massive industrial expansion but also of massive immigration, on a scale unlike anything seen before in American history.

Immigration had, of course, always been a theme of American history, and the idea of America as an asylum for the world, a land of hope, had been firmly in place even before the nation's founding. What were the New England Puritans, after all, but a group of hope-filled immigrants seeking their Zion in the American wilderness? What was different about this new immigration was not only its scale but its ethnic and religious character.

Up to the 1870s, the bulk of American immigrants had come from Northern and Western Europe and were overwhelmingly from a British background, with Germanic and Celtic elements in the mix. In the pre-Civil War years, there was an uptick in Irish and German immigration, the former driven to emigrate by crushing poverty resulting from famines and crop failures, the latter consisting of political refugees fleeing the turbulence in the wake of the failed German Revolution of 1848. There was also a significant number of Asian immigrants, lured by news of the California gold rush; some twenty-five thousand Chinese had migrated there by the early 1850s. But after the Civil War, there was a big change, a change full of implications for American social history.

For one thing, the numbers of immigrants increased massively. Between 1880 and 1920, it is estimated that twenty million immigrants came to America, a number that probably understates the actual total. And for another thing, there was an increasing proportion of Latin, Slavic, and Jewish people in the immigrant ranks; by 1890, that proportion had become a majority. Now the bulk of immigration was coming from Eastern and Southern Europe, as well as Asia, with large numbers of Italians, Russians, Poles, Greeks, Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Rumanians, Japanese, and Chinese being among their numbers. Most of them were either Catholic or Eastern Orthodox or Jewish; most were emphatically not Protestants. Their numbers were unprecedented, their religions were different, their languages were different, their customs were different, their political experiences were radically different – indeed, almost everything about them was different, and that difference was changing the face of the country in ways no one could predict.

Why did they come? Some came for the same reasons that immigrants had always come to America: to escape the poverty, famine, and religious or

political persecution of their native lands. But many more were pulled to America by its promise than were pushed to it by the conditions in their homelands. Those who had seen relatives become successful in America were inclined to follow in their wake, and in time whole extended families were affected. Real wages were relatively higher in the United States than in Europe, and burgeoning American industries, ever in need of fresh sources of unskilled labor, were only too happy to appeal to members of economically struggling groups in European countries with the promise of steady employment and an ability to rise in the world. Such companies sought out immigrants in their native lands and actively recruited them to come to America and work in the steel mills and on the railroads. Many did just that. Thus did the three great *-ations* converge – industrialization, urbanization, immigration – in the experience of these people.

There might be a fourth: *modernization*, because, in a sense, most of these people were dual migrants: not only were they migrating from Europe to America but they were migrating from Old World rural life to New World city life, and the adjustment was enormous. The immigration historian Oscar Handlin called these immigrants the “uprooted,” a term that captures much about their experience, moving not only from country to country but from era to era, as if they were traveling in time as well as in culture, from feudalism to modernity in one great leap. They had left behind a form of rural life as it had been lived for many centuries, with primitive agricultural techniques that allowed for little more than scratching out a living, and with one’s personal horizons severely limited by the conditions of one’s birth. It took enormous courage, or desperation, to make the step into something completely unknown, and to shed so much that was familiar, for the sake of an opportunity that one could not yet see or touch, and to persist if they found themselves, as many did, in an unexpected and disorienting world of modernity, of those tenement slums located in the decaying urban cores of the disorderly new American cities.

And yet they did come, and did persist. Many of them passed through the famous reception center at Ellis Island in New York harbor after making long voyages in steerage compartments deep in the ships’ hulls. In 1907, more than a million people passed through, an average of five thousand a day. Once released, they were likely to connect with family or friends clustered into ethnic neighborhoods, hence the ubiquity in the older American cities of Little Italy, Chinatown, Greektown, and other ethnic neighborhoods made up of Poles, Czechs, and Russian Jews. These neighborhoods were like beachheads and staging areas, or mediating zones between the world they had come from and the bewildering new world they were encountering. In them, they could preserve the old ways – the language, the foods, the religion, the family life – while shielding newcomers from culture shock and helping them reorient to life in a speeded-

up, hyperpowered land of towering buildings, clattering streetcars, blazing electric lights, and crowds of transient strangers.

In that sense, the ideal of America as a melting pot was not realized in the short term; on the contrary, it was more of a salad for recent immigrants and a stew for the more acclimated, meaning that the distinct elements of immigrant groups retained their distinctiveness and did not melt immediately into the alloy of the larger culture. Indeed, a separateness bordering on clannishness that immigrant groups naturally fell into was one of the many reasons they were regarded with suspicion by many of the native-born. Their sheer numbers also made them impossible to ignore. In 1890, four out of five residents of New York City were foreign born. There were more Irish in America than in the city of Dublin. Chicago had the largest Czech population in the world and the second largest Polish population, second only to Warsaw. How on earth could such a diverse population of very different kinds of people be assimilated into a cohesive America, particularly if they seemed determined to hold on to their old ways?

It was a fair question, and many Americans of native birth began asking it. Some began to act on their concerns and seek to restrict immigration, with a mixture of motivations. Some felt their jobs threatened by cheap immigrant labor, a reason why Samuel Gompers and other labor leaders supported immigration restriction. Some thought that the immigrants threatened American culture, in light of their lack of exposure to American ideals of self-reliance; some distrusted Catholics for the same reasons that Protestants had always distrusted them, fearing their fealty to the pope and unquestioning devotion to the authority of their priests would make them bad republicans and unreliable citizens. Some believed in the genetic inferiority of the Slavic and Latin peoples or in their cultural predisposition to criminal behavior and drunkenness. Immigration restriction was not to come until the 1920s, but sentiment in its favor was building.

Some of these attitudes appear to us noxious and ugly, others (such as those of Gompers) understandable, even defensible. But for our purposes, it is important to draw back and look at the matter as broadly and historically as we can and to reserve our moral judgments. As the historian Herbert Butterfield once put it, the historian is of greater service when he is a recording angel rather than a hanging judge. What we can see is this: the massive waves of immigration in these years cannot be understood in isolation from the other massive *ations* that were reshaping America, and the world, in the peculiarly troubled years after the Civil War. All these forces were so much greater than the power of any individual or group of individuals to resist them, and they had the effect of rendering what was known into something unknown, what had been familiar into something strange to them – natives and immigrants alike.

They all were part and parcel of a great unsettling, in a nation that was not unaccustomed to such things – indeed, a nation that had its very beginnings in a great unsettlement. And yet there was something especially grand and terrifying about this transformation, which unsettled and uprooted the lives of so many individuals, even as it was improving the lot of so many. We should not forget the countless human dramas that immigration entailed, the immense losses that came with every gain. Even assimilation, when it was successful, had its bitter side, in the experience of grandmothers and grandfathers who watched their progeny grow up, and away from them, into a culture and language they did not understand and could never enter into fully without denying their very identities – especially if those identities had been rooted in a world that no longer existed outside their memories. What more poignant experience of uprooting could there be than that?

But what of the great American West, that other mythic land of dreams? Had it been affected by these forces? With its great open spaces, its magnificent mountains and craggy canyons, its mighty rivers and verdant timberlands, surely it was majestically unconquerable, still resolutely the land of individualism and personal freedom so central to the American identity and way of life?

Maybe, but maybe not. The flow of migrants into the region after the Civil War was just as relentless as it was elsewhere, and the growing importance of the mining and cattle industries combined with the reach of the railroads was bringing the West into the more general range of the nation's consolidating forces. The heyday of the romantic cowboy, riding the open range and steering cattle drives of three thousand head or more northward to cow towns like Sedalia and Abilene, looms large in our imaginations. But it was actually quite brief, only a couple of decades between the end of the Civil War and the late 1880s, as farmers and ranchers began butting up against one another and settled property lines became a necessity. Ironically, the heavy involvement of the federal government in the western states, and federal ownership of roughly half the land of the West, would soon make the West the region least free of federal influence.

Nowhere was that truer than in Indian policy, where the national government's authority was paramount. Among the most tragic victims of the relentless drive toward national consolidation were the Plains Indians, some 250,000 of them, who faced constant encroachment on their lands. They fought back. Hundreds of battles took place on the Great Plains before these indigenous peoples were subdued. But they eventually lost everything. When the surrendering Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe declared, movingly, "I will fight no more forever," he was not merely surrendering in combat; he was surrendering

an entire way of life. To make matters even worse, he was turning that way of life over to the duplicities and ham-handed mercies of U.S. Indian policy, which sought to "Americanize" the Indians, notably through measures such as the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, but succeeded only in uprooting them from all they had known. They, too, found their lives in the grip of forces larger than themselves and were left disoriented, displaced, and dispossessed.

Yet belief in the radical freedom and opportunity of the Western frontier continued to be something hard-wired in the American imagination, going back perhaps as far as the imaginations of its first settlers. That perhaps explains why the 1890 Census caused such a stir when it declared, in bland and bureaucratic language, that the western part of the country had so many pockets of unsettled area that "there can hardly be said to be a frontier line" anymore. More pungently stated, the Census - itself a quintessential agency of a consolidating national regime, a key tool for the administrative ordering of society - had declared that the age of the frontier was over. This was a shocking assertion. What were the implications of it? Could America endure as America without having a frontier? The Census did not answer; that was not its department.

More suited to the task, though, was a young historian from Wisconsin named Frederick Jackson Turner, whose 1893 essay called "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" went on to become one of the most influential works of American historical writing ever produced. The essay had its debut as a paper at 1893 Chicago's World Columbian Exposition, four hundred years after Columbus's first voyage to the New World. Turner's central contention in his paper and his essay was that the availability of free land on a Western frontier had "explained" American development, and he took care to link his inspiration directly to the heroic image of Columbus as explorer and discoverer, reminding the audience that ever since "the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity."

Turner himself, as a Wisconsin native, was a man of the West by the standards of his day, and his historical vision reflected that fact. The West, he argued, was the most powerful agent of national consolidation, the region most progressive and democratic in its political and social life and most responsible for the "vitalizing of the general government," the cradle of the finest democratic statesmen, the source of America's "composite nationality," and the section that finally forced the nation to confront slavery - in fine, the only area from which the American national experience could be understood. Most important, he believed, the western frontier had given rise to the salient traits of the "American intellect" - its "coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness," its "practical, inventive turn of mind," its "dominant individualism" with

“that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom,” its “freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons.”

In Turner's view, the West played a necessary role in refreshing and purifying the country's outlook and morals, turning the United States away from Europe. While the material development of American society had streamed forth in an east-to-west direction, its moral development, which was linked to the purity of its Americanness, relied on a west-to-east eddying, a constant invigoration from the frontier source.

Indeed, Turner had a marvelously fresh and exciting view of the West's cultural effects. “The frontier,” as he famously put it, “is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe.” The wilderness was the place where “civilization” confronted the untamed elements of nature and where “the bonds of custom” were “broken,” creating the possibility of a new life.

For Turner, the bold exploratory energy of Columbus's quest virtually defined the meaning of America. Hence his thesis is often read as the quintessential example of optimistic, forward-looking, triumphant American exceptionalism. But there was more to it than that. Turner's thesis was also a reflection of and comment on his own soul-searching times. Few works of the time better expressed the tension between a traditional vision of America as the land of boundless possibility and an emerging sense of America as a closed and finished nation, for which the cleanup job of consolidation was all that remained. There had been no more potent symbol of boundlessness than the frontier, and the process by which it had yielded to settlement and civilization – the process Turner attempted to describe – seemed to dramatize the nation's reckoning with consolidation and constraint.

Turner argued that, with the closing of the frontier, the factors that had shaped American development were now gone. Turner was understandably reluctant to speculate, before an audience of historians, about what the future might bring. Yet the essay's abrupt ending, with its bold proclamation that “the first period of American history” was over, tantalized its many readers with unanswered questions about the second period now getting under way. Would the American individualism nurtured by the frontier become a thing of the past now that the frontier was gone? Did the future now belong to the organized, the centralized, the consolidated, the nationalized – to the tramp, tramp, tramp of those endless boots marching down Pennsylvania Avenue? Or to save the Republic, would people have to look elsewhere for new frontiers to conquer outside the continent? One could only wonder.