CHAPTER 21

Urban America and the Progressive Era

1900–1917
CHAPTER OUTLINE

THE CURRENTS OF PROGRESSIVISM
- Unifying Themes
- The Female Dominion
- The Urban Machine
- Political Progressives and Urban Reform
- Progressivism in the Statehouse: West and South
- New Journalism: Muckraking
- Intellectual Trends Promoting Reform

SOCIAL CONTROL AND ITS LIMITS
- The Prohibition Movement
- The Social Evil
- The Redemption of Leisure
- Standardizing Education

WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITIES AND PROTEST
- New Immigrants from Two Hemispheres
- Urban Ghettoes
- Company Towns
- The AFL: “Unions, Pure and Simple”
- The IWW: “One Big Union”
- Rebels in Bohemia

WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS AND BLACK AWAKENING
- The New Woman
- Birth Control
- Racism and Accommodation
- Racial Justice, the NAACP, Black Women’s Activism

NATIONAL PROGRESSIVISM
- Theodore Roosevelt and Presidential Activism
- Trustbusting and Regulation
- Conservation, Preservation, and the Environment
- Republican Split
- The Election of 1912: A Four-Way Race
- Woodrow Wilson’s First Term
A shy and frightened young girl appeared in the doorway of a weekly home-nursing class for women on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The teacher beckoned her to come forward. Tugging on the teacher’s skirt, the girl pleaded in broken English for the teacher to come home with her. “Mother,” “baby,” “blood,” she kept repeating. The teacher gathered up the sheets that were part of the interrupted lesson in bed making. The two hurried through narrow, garbage-strewn, foul-smelling streets, then groped their way up a pitch-dark, rickety staircase. They reached a cramped, two-room apartment, home to an immigrant family of seven and several boarders. There, in a vermin-infested bed, encrusted with dried blood, lay a mother and her newborn baby. The mother had been abandoned by a doctor because she could not afford his fee.

The teacher, Lillian Wald, was a twenty-five-year-old nurse at New York Hospital. Years later, she recalled this scene as her baptism by fire and the turning point in her life. Born in 1867, Wald had enjoyed a comfortable upbringing in a middle-class German Jewish family in Rochester. Despite her parents’ objections, she had moved to New York City to become a professional nurse. Resentful of the disdainful treatment nurses received from doctors, and horrified by the inhumane conditions at a juvenile asylum she worked in, Wald determined to find a way of caring for the sick in their neighborhoods and homes. With nursing school classmate Mary Brewster, Wald rented a fifth-floor walk-up apartment on the Lower East Side and established a visiting nurse service. The two provided professional care in the home to hundreds of families for a nominal fee of 10 to 25 cents. They also offered each family they visited information on basic health care, sanitation, and disease prevention. In 1895, philanthropist Jacob Schiff generously donated a red brick Georgian house on Henry Street as a new base of operation.

The Henry Street Settlement stood in the center of perhaps the most overcrowded neighborhood in the world, New York’s Lower East Side. Roughly 500,000 people were packed into an area only as large as a midsized Kansas farm. Population density was about 500 per acre, roughly four times the figure for the rest of New York City, and far more concentrated than even the worst slums of London or Calcutta. A single city block might have as many as 3,000 residents. Home for most Lower East Siders was a small tenement apartment that might include paying boarders squeezed in alongside the immediate family. Residents were mostly recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe: Jews, Italians, Germans, Greeks, Hungarians, Slavs. Men, women, and children toiled in the garment shops, small factories, retail stores, breweries, and warehouses to be found on nearly every street.

The Henry Street Settlement became a model for a new kind of reform community composed essentially of college-educated women who encouraged and supported one another in a wide variety of humanitarian, civic, political, and cultural activities. Settlement house living arrangements closely resembled those in the dormitories of such new women’s colleges as Smith, Wellesley, and Vassar. Like these colleges, the settlement house was an “experiment,” but one designed, in settlement house pioneer Jane Addams’s words, “to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the modern conditions of urban life.” Unlike earlier moral reformers, who tried to impose their ideas from outside, settlement house residents lived in poor communities and worked for immediate improvements in the health and welfare of those communities. Yet, as Addams and others repeatedly stressed, the college-educated women were beneficiaries as well. The settlement house allowed them to preserve a collegial spirit, satisfy the desire for service, and apply their academic training.

With its combined moral and social appeal, the settlement house movement attracted many educated young women and grew rapidly. There were 6 settlement houses in the United States in 1891, some 74 in 1897, more than 200 by 1900, and more
than 400 by 1910. Few women made settlement work a career, but those who did, typically chose not to marry, and most lived together with female companions. As the movement flourished, settlement house residents called attention to the plight of the poor, and fostered respect for different cultural heritages in countless articles and lectures. Leaders of the movement, including Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and Florence Kelley, emerged as influential political figures during the progressive era.

Wald attracted a dedicated group of nurses, educators, and reformers to live at the Henry Street Settlement. By 1909, Henry Street had more than forty residents, supported by the donations of well-to-do New Yorkers. Wald and her allies convinced the New York Board of Health to assign a nurse to every public school in the city. They lobbied the Board of Education to create the first school lunch programs. They persuaded the city to set up municipal milk stations to ensure the purity of milk. Henry Street also pioneered tuberculosis treatment and prevention. Its leaders became powerful advocates for playground construction, improved street cleaning, and tougher housing inspection. The settlement’s Neighborhood Playhouse became an internationally acclaimed center for innovative theater, music, and dance.

Lillian Wald became a national figure—an outspoken advocate of child labor legislation and woman suffrage, and a vigorous opponent of American involvement in World War I. She offered Henry Street as a meeting place to the National Negro Conference in 1909, out of which emerged the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It was no cliché for Wald to say, as she did on many occasions, “The whole world is my neighborhood.”

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, millions of Americans identified themselves as “progressives” and most, like Lillian Wald, were first drawn to causes and campaigns rooted in their local communities. But many soon saw that confronting the grim realities of an urban and industrial society required national and even global strategies for pursuing reform. These included cleaning up the political process, harnessing the power of the state to regulate the excesses of capitalism, responding to the influx of new immigrants, and creating innovative forms of journalism to publicize wretched social conditions. By the time America entered World War I in 1917, progressivism had reshaped the political and social landscape of the entire nation.
As a political movement, progressivism flowered in the soil of several key issues: ending political corruption, bringing more businesslike methods to governing, and offering a more compassionate legislative response to the excesses of industrialism. As a national movement, progressivism reached its peak in 1912, when the four major presidential candidates all ran on some version of a progressive platform. This last development was an important measure of the extent to which local reform movements, like the Henry Street Settlement, and new intellectual currents, had captured the political imagination of the nation.

Some progressives focused on expanding state and federal regulation of private interests for the public welfare. Others viewed the rapid influx of new immigrants and the explosive growth of large cities as requiring more stringent social controls. Another variant emphasized eliminating corruption in the political system as the key to righting society’s wrongs. In the South, progressivism was for white people only. Progressives could be forward-looking in their vision or nostalgic for a nineteenth-century world rapidly disappearing. Self-styled progressives often found themselves facing each other from opposite sides of an issue.

**Unifying Themes**

Three basic attitudes underlay the various crusades and movements that emerged in response to the fears gnawing at large segments of the population. The first was anger over the excesses of industrial capitalism and urban growth. At the same time, progressives shared an essential optimism about the ability of citizens to improve social and economic conditions. They were reformers, not revolutionaries. Second, progressives emphasized social cohesion and common bonds as a way of understanding how modern society and economics actually worked. They largely rejected the ideal of individualism that had informed nineteenth-century economic and political theory. For progressives, poverty and success hinged on more than simply individual character; the economy was more than merely a sum of individual calculations. Progressives thus opposed social Darwinism, with its claim that any effort to improve social conditions would prove fruitless because society is like a jungle, in which only the “fittest” survive. Third, progressives believed in the need for citizens to intervene actively, both politically and morally, to improve social conditions. They pushed for a stronger government role in regulating the economy and solving the nation’s social problems.

Progressive rhetoric and methods drew on two distinct sources of inspiration. One was evangelical Protestantism, particularly the late nineteenth-century social gospel movement. Social gospelers rejected the idea of original sin as the cause of human suffering. They emphasized both the capacity and the duty of Christians to purge the world of poverty, inequality, and economic greed. A second strain of progressive thought looked to natural and social scientists to develop rational measures for improving the human condition, believing that experts trained in statistical analysis and engineering could make government and industry more efficient. Progressivism thus offered an uneasy combination of social justice and social control, a tension that would characterize American reform for the rest of the twentieth century.

**The Female Dominion**

In the 1890s, the settlement house movement had begun to provide an alternative to traditional concepts of private charity and humanitarian reform. Settlement workers found they could not transform their neighborhoods without confronting a host of broad social questions: chronic poverty, overcrowded tenement houses, child labor, industrial accidents, public health. As on Henry Street, college-educated, middle-class...
women constituted a key vanguard in the crusade for social justice. As reform communities, settlement houses soon discovered the need to engage the political and cultural life of the larger communities that surrounded them.

Jane Addams founded one of the first settlement houses, Hull House, in Chicago in 1889, after years of struggling to find work and a social identity equal to her talents. A member of one of the first generations of American women to attend college, Addams was a graduate of Rockford College. Many educated women were dissatisfied with the life choices conventionally available to them: early marriage or the traditional female professions of teaching, nursing, and library work. Settlement work
provided these women with an attractive alternative. Hull House was located in a run-down slum area of Chicago. It had a day nursery, a dispensary for medicines and medical advice, a boardinghouse, an art gallery, and a music school. Addams often spoke of the “subjective necessity” of settlement houses. By this she meant that they gave young, educated women a way to satisfy their powerful desire to connect with the real world. “There is nothing after disease, indigence and guilt,” she wrote, “so fatal to life itself as the want of a proper outlet for active faculties.”

Social reformer Florence Kelley helped direct the support of the settlement house movement behind groundbreaking state and federal labor legislation. Arriving at Hull House in 1891, Kelley found what she described as a “colony of efficient and intelligent women.” In 1893, she wrote a report detailing the dismal conditions in sweatshops, and the effects of long hours on the women and children who worked in them. This report became the basis for landmark legislation in Illinois that limited women to an eight-hour workday, barred children under fourteen from working, and abolished tenement labor. Illinois governor John Peter Altgeld appointed Kelley as chief inspector for the new law. In 1895, Kelley published *Hull House Maps and Papers*, the first scientific study of urban poverty in America. Moving to Henry Street Settlement in 1898, Kelley served as general secretary of the new National Consumers’ League. With Lillian Wald, she established the New York Child Labor Committee and pushed for the creation of the U.S. Children’s Bureau, established in 1912. Its director, the first woman to head a federal bureau, was Julia Lathrop, another alumna of Hull House.

New female-dominated occupations, such as social work, public health nursing, and home economics, allowed women to combine professional aspirations with the older traditions of female moral reform, especially those centered on child welfare.

*In this excerpt, Jane Addams details the dual importance of the Hull House.*

*The Settlement . . . is an experimental effort to aid the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city. It insists that these problems are not confined to any one portion of a city. It is an attempt to relieve, at the same time, the overaccumulation at one end of society and the destitution at the other . . .*
The new professionalism, in turn, sustained reform commitments and a female domination that simultaneously expanded the social welfare function of the state, and increased women’s public authority and influence.

Kelley, Addams, Wald, Lathrop, and their circle consciously used their power as women to reshape politics in the progressive era. Electoral politics and the state were historically male preserves, but female social progressives turned their gender into an advantage. Activists like Kelley used their influence in civil society to create new state powers in the service of social justice. “Women’s place is Home,” wrote reformer Rheta Child Dorr, “but Home is not contained within the four walls of an individual home. Home is the community.”

**The Urban Machine**

By the turn of the century, Democratic Party machines, usually dominated by first- and second-generation Irish, controlled the political life of most large American cities. The keys to machine strength were disciplined organization and the delivery of essential services to both immigrant communities and business elites. The successful machine politician viewed his work as a business, and he accumulated his capital by serving people who needed assistance. For most urban dwellers, the city was a place of economic and social insecurity. Recent immigrants in particular faced frequent unemployment, sickness, and discrimination. In exchange for votes, machine politicians offered their constituents a variety of services. These included municipal jobs in the police and fire departments, work at city construction sites, intervention with legal problems, and food and coal during hard times.

For those who did business with the city—construction companies, road builders, realtors—staying on the machine’s good side was simply another business expense. In exchange for valuable franchises and city contracts, businessmen routinely bribed machine politicians and contributed liberally to their campaign funds. George Washington Plunkitt, a stalwart of New York’s Tammany Hall machine, good-naturedly defended what he called “honest graft”: making money from inside information on public improvements. “It’s just like lookin’ ahead in Wall Street or in the coffee or cotton market. . . . I seen my opportunities and I took ‘em.”

The machines usually had close ties to organized prostitution and gambling, as well as more legitimate commercial entertainments. Many machine figures began as saloonkeepers, and liquor dealers and beer brewers provided important financial support for “the organization.” Vaudeville and burlesque theater, boxing, horse racing, and professional baseball were other urban enterprises with economic and political links to machines. Entertainment and spectacle made up a central element in the machine political style as well. Constituents looked forward to the colorful torchlight parades, free summer picnics, and riverboat excursions regularly sponsored by the machines.

On New York City’s Lower East Side, where the Henry Street Settlement was located, Timothy D. “Big Tim” Sullivan embodied the popular machine style. Big Tim, who had risen from desperate poverty, remained enormously popular with his constituents until his death in 1913. Critics charged that Sullivan controlled the city’s gambling and made money from prostitution. But his real fortune came through his investments in vaudeville and the early movie business. Sullivan, whose district included the largest number of immigrants and transients in the city, provided shoe giveaways and free Christmas dinners to thousands every winter. To help pay for these and other charitable activities, he informally taxed the saloons, theaters, and restaurants in the district.

**Class Discussion Question 21.1**

Helen M. Todd, *Getting Out the Vote* (1911)

Plunkitt, *on Honest Graft* (1905)

**Progressive era** An era in the United States (roughly between 1900 and 1917) in which important movements challenged traditional relationships and attitudes.
In the early twentieth century, to expand their base of support, political machines in the Northeast began concentrating more on passing welfare legislation beneficial to working-class and immigrant constituencies. In this way, machine politicians often allied themselves with progressive reformers in state legislatures. In New York, for example, Tammany Hall figures such as Robert Wagner, Al Smith, and Big Tim Sullivan worked with middle-class progressive groups to pass child labor laws, factory safety regulations, worker compensation plans, and other efforts to make government more responsive to social needs. As Jewish and Catholic immigrants expanded in number and proportion in the city population, urban machines also began to champion cultural pluralism, opposing prohibition and immigration restrictions and defending the contributions made by new ethnic groups in the cities.

**QUICK REVIEW**

**Municipal Reform**
- Urban reformers sought to break alliances between city bosses and business leaders.
- Urban reformers developed the concept of the city commission and the city manager.
- Business groups often promoted these reforms.

Political progressives and urban reform

Political progressivism originated in the cities. It was both a challenge to the power of machine politics and a response to deteriorating urban conditions. City governments, especially in the Northeast and industrial Midwest, seemed hardly capable of providing the basic services needed to sustain large populations. For example, an impure water supply left Pittsburgh with one of the world’s highest rates of death from typhoid, dysentery, and cholera. Most New York City neighborhoods rarely enjoyed street cleaning, and playgrounds were nonexistent. “The challenge of the city,” Cleveland progressive Frederic C. Howe said in 1906, “has become one of decent human existence.”

Reformers placed much of the blame for urban ills on the machines, and looked for ways to restructure city government. The “good government” movement, led by the National Municipal League, fought to make city management a nonpartisan, even nonpolitical, process by bringing the administrative techniques of large corporations to cities. Reformers revised city charters in favor of stronger mayoral power and expanded use of appointed administrators and career civil servants. They drew up blueprints for model charters, ordinances, and zoning plans designed by experts trained in public administration.

Business and professional elites became the biggest boosters of structural reforms in urban government. In the summer of 1900, a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico unleashed a tidal wave on Galveston, Texas. To cope with this disaster, leading businessmen convinced the state legislature to replace the mayor-council government with a small board of commissioners. Each commissioner was elected at large, and each was responsible for a different city department. Under this plan, voters could more easily identify and hold accountable those responsible for city services. The city commission, enjoying both policy-making and administrative powers, proved very effective in rebuilding Galveston. By 1917, nearly 500 cities, including Houston, Oakland, Kansas City, Denver, and Buffalo, had adopted the commission form of government. Another approach, the city manager plan, gained popularity in small and midsized cities. In this system, a city council appointed a professional, nonpartisan city manager to handle the day-to-day operations of the community.

Progressive politicians who focused on the human problems of the industrial city championed a different kind of reform, one based on changing policies rather than the political structure. In Cleveland, for example, wealthy businessman Thomas L. Johnson, served as mayor from 1901 to 1909. He emphasized both efficiency and social welfare. His popular program included lower streetcar fares, public baths, milk and meat inspection, and an expanded park and playground system.

**Prohibition**
A ban on the production, sale, and consumption of liquor, achieved temporarily through state laws and the Eighteenth Amendment.
Their motives and achievements were mixed, but progressive politicians became a powerful force in many state capitals. In Wisconsin, Republican dissident Robert M. La Follette forged a coalition of angry farmers, small businessmen, and workers with his fiery attacks on railroads and other large corporations. Leader of the progressive faction of the state Republicans, “Fighting Bob” won three terms as governor (1900–06), then served as a U.S. senator until his death in 1925. As governor, he pushed through tougher corporate tax rates, a direct primary, an improved civil service code, and a railroad commission designed to regulate freight charges. La Follette used faculty experts at the University of Wisconsin to help research and write his bills. Other states began copying the “Wisconsin Idea”—the application of academic scholarship and theory to the needs of the people.

In practice, La Follette’s railroad commission accomplished far less than progressive rhetoric claimed. It essentially represented special interests—commercial farmers and businessmen seeking reduced shipping rates. Ordinary consumers did not see lower passenger fares or reduced food prices. And as commissioners began to realize, the national reach of the railroads limited the effectiveness of state regulation.

Western progressives displayed the greatest enthusiasm for institutional political reform. In the early 1900s, Oregon voters approved a series of constitutional amendments designed to strengthen direct democracy. The two most important were the initiative, which allowed a direct vote on specific measures put on the state ballot by petition, and the referendum, which allowed voters to decide on bills referred to them by the legislature. Other reforms included the direct primary, which allowed voters to cross party lines, and the recall, which gave voters the right to remove elected officials by popular vote. Widely copied throughout the West, all these measures intentionally weakened political parties.

Western progressives also targeted railroads, mining and timber companies, and public utilities for reform. Large corporations such as Pacific Gas and Electric and the Southern Pacific Railroad had amassed enormous wealth and political influence. They were able to corrupt state legislatures and charge consumers exorbitant rates. An alliance between middle-class progressives and working-class voters reflected growing disillusionment with the ideology of individualism that had helped pave the way for the rise of the big corporation. In California, attorney Hiram Johnson won a 1910 progressive campaign for governor on the slogan “Kick the Southern Pacific Railroad Out of Politics.” In addition to winning political reforms, Johnson also put through laws regulating utilities and child labor, mandating an eight-hour day for working women, and providing a state-worker compensation plan.

In the South, the populist tradition of the 1880s and 1890s had been based in part on a biracial politics of protest. But southern progressivism was for white people only. Indeed, southern progressives believed that the disfranchisement of black voters and the creation of a legally segregated public sphere were necessary preconditions for political and social reform. With African Americans removed from political life, white southern progressives argued, the direct primary system of nominating candidates would give white voters more influence. Between 1890 and 1910, southern states passed a welter of statutes specifying poll taxes, literacy tests, and property qualifications, with the explicit goal of preventing voting by blacks. This systematic disfranchisement of African American voters stripped black communities of any political power. To prevent the disfranchisement of poor white voters under these laws, states established so-called understanding and grandfather clauses. Election officials had discretionary power to decide whether an illiterate person could understand and reasonably interpret the Constitution when read to him. Unqualified white men were also registered if they could show that their grandfathers had voted.

**Initiative** Procedure by which citizens can introduce a subject for legislation, usually through a petition signed by a specific number of voters.

**Referendum** Submission of a law, proposed or already in effect, to a direct popular vote for approval or rejection.

**Recall** The process of removing an official from office by popular vote, usually after using petitions to call for such a vote.
Southern progressives also supported the push toward a fully segregated public sphere. Between 1900 and 1910, southern states strengthened “Jim Crow” laws requiring separation of races in restaurants, streetcars, beaches, and theaters. Schools were separate, but hardly equal. A 1916 Bureau of Education study found that per capita expenditures for education in southern states averaged $10.32 a year for white children and $2.89 for black children. And African American teachers received far lower salaries than their white counterparts. Black taxpayers, in effect, subsidized improved schools for whites, even as they saw their own children’s educational opportunities deteriorate. The legacy of southern progressivism was thus closely linked to the strengthening of the legal and institutional guarantees of white supremacy.

Based mostly in New South towns and cities, and with growing strength among educated professionals, small businessmen, and women’s benevolent societies, southern progressives organized to control both greedy corporations and “unruly” citizens. Citizens groups, city boards of trade, and newspapers pressed reluctant legislators to use state power to regulate big business. Between 1905 and 1909, nearly every southern state moved to regulate railroads by mandating lower passenger and freight rates. Prohibition enjoyed wide appeal in the South, as progressives active in the Anti-Saloon League argued that banning the alcohol trade would protect the family structure and victimized women, as well as reduce crime among African Americans. Employing aggressive lobbying, petitions, and massive parades, prohibition forces succeeded in pushing six southern states to ban the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages by 1909. Southern progressives also directed their energies at the related problems of child labor and educational reform. In 1900, at least one-quarter of all southern cotton mill workers were between the ages of ten and sixteen, many of whom worked over sixty hours per week. Led by reform minded ministers Edgar Gardner Murphy and Alexander McKelway, and drawing upon the activism of white club women, reformers attacked child labor by focusing on the welfare of children and their mothers and emphasizing the degradation of “Anglo Saxons.” In 1903, Alabama and North Carolina enacted the first state child labor laws, setting twelve as a minimum age for employment. But the laws were weakened by many exemptions and no provisions for enforcement, as lawmakers also heard the loud complaints from parents and mill owners who resented the efforts of reformers to limit their choices.

**New Journalism: Muckraking**

Changes in journalism helped fuel a new reform consciousness by drawing the attention of millions to urban poverty, political corruption, the plight of industrial workers, and immoral business practices. As early as 1890, journalist Jacob Riis had shocked the nation with his landmark book *How the Other Half Lives*, a portrait of New York City’s poor. Riis’s book included a remarkable series of photographs he had taken in tenements, lodging houses, sweatshops, and saloons. These striking pictures, combined with Riis’s analysis of slum housing patterns, had a powerful impact on a whole generation of urban reformers.

Within a few years, magazine journalists had turned to uncovering the seamiest side of American life. The key innovator was S. S. McClure, a young Midwestern editor who in 1893, started America’s first large-circulation magazine, *McClure’s*. Charging only a dime for his monthly, McClure effectively combined popular fiction with articles on science, technology, travel, and recent history. He attracted a new readership among the urban middle class through aggressive subscription and promotional campaigns, as well as newsstand sales. By the turn
of the century, McClure’s and several imitators—Munsey’s, Cosmopolitan, Collier’s, Everybody’s, and the Saturday Evening Post—had circulations in the hundreds of thousands. Making extensive use of photographs and illustrations, these cheap upstarts soon far surpassed older, more staid and expensive magazines such as the Atlantic Monthly and Harper’s in circulation.

In 1902, McClure began hiring talented reporters to write detailed accounts of the nation’s social problems. Lincoln Steffens’s series The Shame of the Cities (1902) revealed the widespread graft at the center of American urban politics. He showed how big-city bosses routinely worked hand in glove with businessmen seeking lucrative municipal contracts for gas, water, electricity, and mass transit. Ida Tarbell, in her History of the Standard Oil Company (1904), thoroughly documented how John D. Rockefeller ruthlessly squeezed out competitors with unfair business practices. Ray Stannard Baker wrote detailed portraits of life and labor in Pennsylvania coal towns. McClure’s and other magazines discovered that “exposure journalism” paid off handsomely in terms of increased circulation. The middle-class public responded to this new combination of factual reporting and moral exhortation. A series such as Steffens’s fueled reform campaigns that swept individual communities. Between 1902 and 1908, magazines were full of articles exposing insurance scandals, patent medicine frauds, and stock market swindles. Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel The Jungle, a socialist tract set among Chicago packinghouse workers, exposed the filthy sanitation and abysmal working conditions in the stockyards and the meatpacking industry. In an effort to boost sales, Sinclair’s publisher devoted an entire issue of a monthly magazine it owned, World’s Work, to articles and photographs that substantiated Sinclair’s devastating portrait.

In 1906, David Graham Phillips, in a series for Cosmopolitan called “The Treason of the Senate,” argued that many conservative U.S. senators were no more than mouthpieces for big business. President Theodore Roosevelt, upset by Phillips’s attack on several of his friends and supporters, coined a new term when he angrily denounced Phillips and his colleagues as “muckrakers” who “raked the mud of society and never looked up.” Partly due to Roosevelt’s outburst, the muckraking vogue began to wane. But muckraking had demonstrated the powerful potential for mobilizing public opinion on a national scale. Reform campaigns need not be limited to the local community. Ultimately, they could engage a national community of informed citizens.

Intellectual Trends Promoting Reform

On a deeper level than muckraking, a host of early twentieth-century thinkers challenged several of the core ideas in American intellectual life. Their new theories of education, law, economics, and society provided effective tools for reformers. The emergent fields of the social sciences—sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics—emphasized empirical observation of how people actually lived and behaved in their communities. Progressive reformers linked the systematic analysis of society and the individual characteristic of these new fields of inquiry to the project of improving the material conditions of American society.

Sociologist Lester Frank Ward, in his pioneering work Dynamic Sociology (1883), offered an important critique of social Darwinism, the then orthodox theory that attributed social inequality to natural selection and the “survival of the fittest.” Ward argued that the conservative social theorists responsible for social Darwinism, such as Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, had wrongly applied evolutionary theory to human affairs. They had confused organic evolution with social evolution. Nature’s method was genetic: unplanned, involuntary, automatic, and mechanical. By contrast, civilization had been built on successful human intervention in the natural
processes of organic evolution. “Every implement or utensil,” Ward argued, “every mechanical device, every object of design, skill, and labor, every artificial thing that serves a human purpose, is a triumph of mind over the physical forces of nature in ceaseless and aimless competition.”

Philosopher John Dewey criticized the excessively rigid and formal approach to education found in most American schools. In books such as The School and Society (1899) and Democracy and Education (1916), Dewey advocated developing what he called “creative intelligence” in students, which could then be put to use in improving society. Schools ought to be “embryonic communities,” miniatures of society, where children were encouraged to participate actively in different types of experiences. By cultivating imagination and openness to new experiences, schools could develop creativity and the habits required for systematic inquiry. Dewey’s belief that education was the “fundamental method of social progress and reform” inspired generations of progressive educators.

At the University of Wisconsin, John R. Commons founded the new field of industrial relations and organized a state industrial commission that became a model for other states. Working closely with Governor Robert M. La Follette, Commons and his students helped draft pioneering laws in worker compensation and public utility regulation. Another Wisconsin faculty member, economist Richard Ely, argued that the state was “an educational and ethical agency whose positive aim is an indispensable condition of human progress.” Ely believed the state must directly intervene to help solve public problems. He rejected the doctrine of laissez faire as merely “a tool in the hands of the greedy.” Like Commons, Ely worked with Wisconsin lawmakers, applying his expertise in economics to reforming the state’s labor laws.

Progressive legal theorists began challenging the conservative view of constitutional law that had dominated American courts. Since the 1870s, the Supreme Court had interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) as a guarantee of broad rights for corporations. That amendment, which prevented states from depriving “any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law,” had been designed to protect the civil rights of African Americans against violations by the states. But the Court, led by Justice Stephen J. Field, used the due process clause to strike down state laws regulating business and labor conditions. The Supreme Court and state courts had thus made the Fourteenth Amendment a bulwark for big business and a foe of social welfare measures.

The most important dissenter from this view was Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. A scholar and Massachusetts judge, Holmes believed the law had to take into account changing social conditions. And courts should take care not to invalidate social legislation enacted democratically. After his appointment to the Supreme Court in 1902, Holmes authored a number of notable dissents to conservative court decisions overturning progressive legislation. Criticizing the majority opinion in Lochner v. New York (1905), in which the Court struck down a state law setting a ten-hour day for bakers, Holmes insisted that the Constitution “is not intended to embody a particular theory.” Holmes’s pragmatic views of the law seldom convinced a majority of the Supreme Court before the late 1930s. But his views influenced a generation of lawyers who began practicing what came to be called sociological jurisprudence. In Muller v. Oregon (1908), the Court upheld an Oregon law limiting the maximum hours for working women, finding that the liberty of contract “is not absolute.” Noting that “woman’s physical structure and the performance of maternal functions place her at a disadvantage,” the Court found that “the physical well-being of woman becomes an object of public interest and care.” Louis Brandeis, the state’s attorney, amassed statistical, sociological, and economic data, rather than traditional legal arguments, to support his arguments. The “Brandeis Brief” became a common strategy for lawyers defending the constitutionality of progressive legislation.
Social Control and Its Limits

Many middle- and upper-class Protestant progressives feared that immigrants and large cities threatened the stability of American democracy. They worried that alien cultural practices were disrupting what they viewed as traditional American morality. Edward A. Ross’s landmark work *Social Control* (1901), a book whose title became a key phrase in progressive thought, argued that society needed an “ethical elite” of citizens “who have at heart the general welfare and know what kinds of conduct will promote this welfare.” Progressives often believed they had a mission to frame laws and regulations for the social control of immigrants, industrial workers, and African Americans. This was the moralistic and frequently xenophobic side of progressivism, and it provided a powerful source of support for the regulation of drinking, prostitution, leisure activities, and schooling. Organizations devoted to social control constituted other versions of reform communities. But these attempts at moral reform met with mixed success amid the extraordinary cultural and ethnic diversity of America’s cities.

The Prohibition Movement

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union had grown into a powerful mass organization. The WCTU appealed especially to women angered by men who used alcohol and then abused their wives and children. It directed most of its work toward ending the production, sale, and consumption of alcohol. But local WCTU chapters put their energy into non-temperance activities as well, including homeless shelters, Sunday schools, prison reform, child nurseries, and woman suffrage. The WCTU thus provided women with a political forum in which they could fuse their traditional moral posture as guardians of the home with broader public concerns. By 1911, the WCTU, with a quarter million members, was the largest women’s organization in American history.

Other temperance groups had a narrower focus. The Anti-Saloon League, founded in 1893, began by organizing local-option campaigns in which rural counties and small towns banned liquor within their geographical limits. It drew much of its financial support from local businessmen, who saw a link between closing a community’s saloons and increasing the productivity of workers. The league was a one-issue pressure group that played effectively on antiurban and antiimmigrant prejudice. League lobbyists hammered away at the close connections among saloon culture, liquor dealers, brewers, and big-city political machines.

The battle to ban alcohol revealed deep ethnic and cultural divides within America’s urban communities. Opponents of alcohol were generally “pietists,” who viewed the world from a position of moral absolutism. These included native-born, middle-class Protestants associated with evangelical churches, along with some old-stock Protestant immigrant denominations. Opponents of prohibition were generally “ritualists” with less arbitrary notions of personal morality. These were largely new-stock, working-class Catholic and Jewish immigrants, along with some Protestants, such as German Lutherans.

The Social Evil

Many of the same reformers who battled the saloon and drinking also engaged in efforts to eradicate prostitution. Crusades against “the social evil” had appeared at intervals throughout the nineteenth century. But they reached a new level of intensity between 1895 and 1920. In part, this new sense of urgency stemmed from the sheer growth of cities and the greater visibility of prostitution in red-light districts and neighborhoods. Antiprostitution campaigns epitomized the diverse makeup and...
mixed motives of so much progressive reform. Male business and civic leaders joined forces with feminists, social workers, and clergy to eradicate “commercialized vice.”

Between 1908 and 1914, exposés of the “white slave traffic” became a national sensation. Dozens of books, articles, and motion pictures alleged an international conspiracy to seduce and sell girls into prostitution. Most of these materials exaggerated the practices they attacked. They also made foreigners, especially Jews and southern Europeans, scapegoats for the sexual anxieties of native-born whites. In 1910, Congress passed legislation that permitted the deportation of foreign-born prostitutes or any foreigner convicted of procuring or employing them. That same year, the Mann Act made it a federal offense to transport women across state lines for “immoral purposes.”

Reformers had trouble believing that any woman would freely choose to be a prostitute; such a choice was antithetical to conventional notions of female purity and sexuality. But for wage-earning women, prostitution was a rational choice in a world of limited opportunities. Maimie Pinzer, a prostitute, summed up her feelings in a letter to a wealthy female reformer: “I don’t propose to get up at 6:30 to be at work at 8 and work in a close, stuffy room with people I despise, until dark, for $6 or $7 a week! When I could, just by phoning, spend an afternoon with some congenial person and in the end have more than a week’s work could pay me.” The antivice crusades succeeded in closing down many urban red-light districts and larger brothels, but these were replaced by the streetwalker and call girl, who were more vulnerable to harassment and control by policemen and pimps. Rather than eliminating prostitution, reform efforts transformed the organization of the sex trade.

**The Redemption of Leisure**

Progressives faced a thorny issue in the growing popularity of commercial entertainment. For large numbers of working-class adults and children, leisure meant time and money spent at vaudeville and burlesque theaters, amusement parks, dance halls, and motion picture houses. These competed with municipal parks, libraries, museums, YMCAs, and school recreation centers. For many cultural traditionalists, the flood of new urban commercial amusements posed a grave threat. As with prostitution, urban progressives sponsored a host of recreation and amusement surveys detailing the situation in their individual cities. “Commercialized leisure,” warned Frederic C. Howe in 1914, “must be controlled by the community, if it is to become an agency of civilization rather than the reverse.”

By 1908, movies had become the most popular form of cheap entertainment in America. One survey estimated that 11,500 movie theaters attracted 5 million patrons each day. For 5 or 10 cents, “nickelodeon” theaters offered programs that might include a slapstick comedy, a Western, a travelogue, and a melodrama. Early movies were most popular in the tenement and immigrant districts of big cities, and with children. As the films themselves became more sophisticated and as “movie palaces” began to replace cheap storefront theaters, the new medium attracted a large middle-class clientele as well.

Progressive reformers seized the chance to help regulate the new medium as a way of improving the commercial recreation of the urban poor. Movies held out the promise of an alternative to the older entertainment traditions, such as concert saloons and burlesque theater, that had been closely allied with machine politics and the vice economy. In 1909, New York City movie producers and exhibitors joined with the reform-minded People’s Institute to establish the voluntary National Board of Censorship (NBC). Movie entrepreneurs, most of whom were themselves immigrants, sought to shed the stigma of the slums, attract more middle-class patronage, and increase profits. A revolving group of civic activists reviewed new movies, passing them,
suggesting changes, or condemning them. Local censoring committees all over the nation subscribed to the board’s weekly bulletin. They aimed at achieving what John Collier of the NBC called “the redemption of leisure.” By 1914, the NBC was reviewing 95 percent of the nation’s film output.

**Standardizing Education**

Along with reading, writing, and mathematics, schools inculcated patriotism, piety, and respect for authority. Progressive educators looked to the public school primarily as an agent of “Americanization.” Elwood Cubberley, a leading educational reformer, expressed the view that schools could be the vehicle by which immigrant children could break free of the parochial ethnic neighborhood. “Our task,” he argued in *Changing Conceptions of Education* (1909), “is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government.”

The most important educational trends in these years were the expansion and bureaucratization of the nation’s public school systems. In most cities, centralization
served to consolidate the power of older urban elites who felt threatened by the large influx of immigrants. Children began school earlier and stayed there longer. Kindergartens spread rapidly in large cities. They presented, as one writer put it in 1903, “the earliest opportunity to catch the little Russian, the little Italian, the little German, Pole, Syrian, and the rest and begin to make good American citizens of them.” By 1918, every state had some form of compulsory school attendance. High schools also multiplied, extending the school’s influence beyond the traditional grammar school curriculum. In 1890, only 4 percent of the nation’s youth between fourteen and seventeen were enrolled in school; by 1930, the figure was 47 percent.

High schools reflected a growing belief that schools should be comprehensive, multifunctional institutions. In 1918, the National Education Association offered a report defining Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education. These included instruction in health, family life, citizenship, and ethical character. Academic programs prepared a small number of students for college. Vocational programs trained boys and girls for a niche in the new industrial order. Boys took shop courses in metal trades, carpentry, and machine tools. Girls learned typing, bookkeeping, sewing, cooking, and home economics. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 provided federal grants to support these programs and set up a Federal Board for Vocational Education.

Working-Class Communities and Protest

The Industrial Revolution, which had begun transforming American life and labor in the nineteenth century, reached maturity in the early twentieth. In 1900, out of a total labor force of 28.5 million, 16 million people worked at industrial occupations and 11 million on farms. By 1920, in a labor force of nearly 42 million, almost 29 million were in industry, but farm labor had declined to 10.4 million. The world of the industrial worker included large manufacturing towns in New England; barren mining settlements in the West; primitive lumber and turpentine camps in the South; steelmaking and coal-mining cities in Pennsylvania and Ohio; and densely packed immigrant ghettos from New York to San Francisco, where workers toiled in garment-trade sweatshops.

All these industrial workers shared the need to sell their labor for wages in order to survive. At the same time, differences in skill, ethnicity, and race proved powerful barriers to efforts at organizing trade unions that could bargain for improved wages and working conditions. So, too, did the economic and political power of the large corporations that dominated much of American industry. Yet there were also small, closely knit groups of skilled workers, such as printers and brewers, who exercised real control over their lives and labors. And these years saw many labor struggles that created effective trade unions or laid the groundwork for others. Industrial workers also became a force in local and national politics, adding a chorus of insistent voices to the calls for social justice.

New Immigrants from Two Hemispheres

On the eve of World War I, close to 60 percent of the industrial labor force was foreign-born. Most of these workers were among the roughly 9 million new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who arrived in the United States between 1900 and 1914. In the nineteenth century, much of the overseas migration had come from the industrial districts of northern and western Europe. English, Welsh, and German artisans had brought with them skills critical for emerging industries such as steelmaking and coal mining. Unlike their predecessors, nearly all the new Italian, Polish,
Hungarian, Jewish, and Greek immigrants lacked industrial skills. They thus entered the bottom ranks of factories, mines, mills, and sweatshops.

These new immigrants had been driven from their European farms and towns by several forces, including the undermining of subsistence farming by commercial agriculture; a falling death rate that brought a shortage of land; and religious and political persecution. American corporations also sent agents to recruit cheap labor. Except for Jewish immigrants, a majority of whom fled virulent anti-Semitism in Russia and Russian Poland, most newcomers planned on earning a stake and then returning home. Hard times in America forced many back to Europe. In the depression year of 1908, for example, more Austro-Hungarians and Italians left than entered the United States (see Map 21-1).

The decision to migrate usually occurred through social networks—people linked by kinship, personal acquaintance, and work experience. These “chains,” extending from places of origin to specific destinations in the United States, helped migrants cope with the considerable risks entailed by the long and difficult journey. A study conducted by the U.S. Immigration Commission in 1909, found that about 60 percent of the new immigrants had their passage arranged by immigrants already in America.

Immigrant communities used ethnicity as a collective resource for gaining employment in factories, mills, and mines. One Polish steelworker recalled how the process operated in the Pittsburgh mills: “Now if a Russian got his job in a shear department, he’s looking for a buddy, a Russian buddy. He’s not going to look for a Croatian buddy. And if he sees the boss looking for a man he says, ‘Look, I have a good man,’ and he’s picking out his friends. A Ukrainian department, a Russian department, a Polish department. And it was a beautiful thing in a way.” Such specialization of work by ethnic origin was quite common throughout America’s industrial communities.
The low-paid, backbreaking work in basic industry became nearly the exclusive preserve of the new immigrants. In 1907, of the 14,359 common laborers employed at Pittsburgh’s U.S. Steel mills, 11,694 were eastern Europeans. For twelve-hour days and seven-day weeks, two-thirds of these workers made less than $12.50 a week, one-third less than $10.00. This was far less than the $15.00 that the Pittsburgh Associated Charities had estimated as the minimum for providing necessities for a family of five. Small wonder that the new immigration was disproportionately male. One-third of the immigrant steelworkers were single, and among married men who had been in the country less than five years, about two-thirds reported that their wives were still in Europe. Workers with families generally supplemented their incomes by taking in single men as boarders.

Not all of the new immigrants came from Europe, as hemispheric migration increased sharply as well. Over 300,000 French Canadians arrived in the United States between 1900 and 1930, settling mostly in New England. But the maturing continental railroad system had widened the choice of destinations to communities in upstate New York and Detroit, which had the largest number of French Canadian migrants outside of New England. The pull of jobs in New England’s textile industry, along with its physical proximity, attracted male farmers and laborers unable to make a living in the rural districts of Quebec. Roughly one-third of female migrants were domestic servants looking for the higher pay and greater independence associated with factory labor. The significant French Canadian presence in communities such as Lowell, Holyoke, Manchester, Nashua, and Waterville often made them the largest single ethnic group. By 1918, for example, one-quarter of the Fall River, Massachusetts, population of 28,000 was French Canadian. French language churches, newspapers, private schools, and mutual benefit societies reinforced the distinctive cultural milieu, and the presence of

![Newly landed European immigrant families on the dock at Ellis Island in New York harbor, 1900. Originally a black and white photograph, this image was later color tinted for reproduction as a postcard or book illustration. The Granger Collection, New York.](image-url)
URBAN AMERICA AND THE PROGRESSIVE ERA, 1900–1917

CHAPTER 21

739

kin or fellow villagers facilitated the arrival of largely rural migrants into these new, highly industrialized, and urbanized settings.

Mexican immigration also grew in these years, providing a critical source of labor for the West’s farms, railroads, and mines. Between 1900 and 1914, the number of people of Mexican descent living and working in the United States tripled, from roughly 100,000 to 300,000. Economic and political crises spurred tens of thousands of Mexico’s rural and urban poor to emigrate north. Large numbers of seasonal agricultural workers regularly came up from Mexico to work in the expanding sugar beet industry, and then returned. But a number of substantial resident Mexican communities also emerged in the early twentieth century.

Throughout Texas, California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado, Western cities developed barrios, distinct communities of Mexicans. Mexican immigrants attracted by jobs in the smelting industry made El Paso the most thoroughly Mexican city in the United States. In San Antonio, Mexicans worked at shelling pecans, becoming perhaps the most underpaid and exploited group of workers in the country. By 1910, San Antonio contained the largest number of Mexican immigrants of any city. In southern California, labor agents for railroads recruited Mexicans to work on building new interurban lines around Los Angeles.

Between 1898 and 1907, more than 80,000 Japanese entered the United States. The vast majority were young men working as contract laborers in the West, mainly in California. American law prevented Japanese immigrants (the Issei) from obtaining American citizenship, because they were not white. This legal discrimination, along with informal exclusion from many occupations, forced the Japanese to create niches for themselves within local economies. Most Japanese settled near Los Angeles, where they established small communities centered around fishing, truck farming, and the flower and nursery business. In 1920, Japanese farmers produced 10 percent of the dollar volume of California agriculture on 1 percent of the farm acreage. By 1930, over 35,000 Issei and their children (the Nisei) lived in Los Angeles.

Urban Ghettos

In large cities, new immigrant communities took the form of densely packed ghettos. By 1920, immigrants and their children constituted almost 60 percent of the population of cities over 100,000. They were an even larger percentage in major industrial centers such as Chicago, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and New York. The sheer size and dynamism of these cities made the immigrant experience more complex there than in smaller cities and more isolated communities. Workers in the urban garment trades toiled for low wages and suffered layoffs, unemployment, and poor health. But conditions in the small, labor-intensive shops of the clothing industry differed significantly from those in the large-scale, capital-intensive industries like steel.

New York City had become the center of both Jewish immigration and America’s huge ready-to-wear clothing industry. The city’s Jewish population was 1.4 million in 1915, almost 30 percent of its inhabitants. In small factories, lofts, and tenement apartments some 200,000 people, most of them Jews, some of them Italians, worked in the clothing trades. Most of the industry operated on the grueling piece-rate, or task, system, in which manufacturers and subcontractors paid individuals or teams of workers to complete a certain quota of labor within a specific time.

The garment industry was highly seasonal. A typical work week was sixty hours, with seventy common during busy season. But there were long stretches of unemployment in slack times. Often forced to work in
cramped, dirty, and badly lit rooms, garment workers strained under a system in which time equaled money. Morris Rosenfeld, a presser of men’s clothing who wrote Yiddish poetry, captured the feeling:

*The tick of the clock is the boss in his anger*
*The face of the clock has the eye of a foe*
*The clock—I shudder—Dost hear how it draws me?*
*It calls me “Machine” and it cries to me “Sew!”*

In November 1909, two New York garment manufacturers responded to strikes by unskilled women workers by hiring thugs and prostitutes to beat up pickets. The strikers won the support of the Women’s Trade Union League, a group of sympathetic female reformers that included Lillian Wald, Mary Dreier, and prominent society figures. The Uprising of the 20,000, as it became known, swept through the city’s garment district. The strikers demanded union recognition, better wages, and safer and more sanitary conditions. They drew support from thousands of suffragists, trade unionists, and sympathetic middle-class women as well. Hundreds of strikers were arrested, and many were beaten by police. After three cold months on the picket line, the strikers returned to work without union recognition. But the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), founded in 1900, did gain strength and negotiated contracts with some of the city’s shirtwaist makers. The strike was an important breakthrough in the drive to organize unskilled workers into industrial unions. It opened the doors to women’s involvement in the labor movement and created new leaders, such as Clara Lemlich, Pauline Newman, and Rose Schneiderman.

On March 25, 1911, the issues raised by the strike took on new urgency when a fire raced through three floors of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. As the flames spread, workers found themselves trapped by exit doors that had been locked from the outside. Fire escapes were nonexistent. Within half an hour, 146 people, mostly young Jewish women, had been killed by smoke or had leaped to their death. In the bitter aftermath, women progressives led by Florence Kelley and Frances Perkins of the National Consumers’ League joined with Tammany Hall leaders Al Smith, Robert Wagner, and Big Tim Sullivan to create a New York State Factory Investigation Commission. Under Perkins’s vigorous leadership, the commission conducted an unprecedented round of public hearings and on-site inspections, leading to a series of state laws that dramatically improved safety conditions and limited the hours for working women and children.

**Company Towns**

Immigrant industrial workers and their families often established their communities in a company town, where a single large corporation was dominant. Cities such as Lawrence, Massachusetts; Gary, Indiana; and Butte, Montana, revolved around the industrial enterprises of Pacific Woolen, U.S. Steel, and Anaconda Copper. Workers had little or no influence over the economic and political institutions of these cities. In the more isolated company towns, residents often had no alternative but to buy their food, clothing, and supplies at company stores, usually for exorbitantly high prices. But they did maintain some community control in other ways. Family and kin networks, ethnic lodges, saloons, benefit societies, churches and synagogues, and musical groups affirmed traditional forms of community in a setting governed by individualism and private capital.

On the job, modern machinery and industrial discipline meant high rates of injury and death. In Gary, non-English speaking immigrant steelworkers suffered
twice the accident rate of English-speaking employees, who could better understand safety instructions and warnings. A 1910 study of work accidents revealed that nearly a fourth of all new steelworkers were killed or injured each year. Mutual aid associations, organized around ethnic groups, offered some protection through cheap insurance and death benefits.

In steel and coal towns, women not only maintained the household and raised the children, they also boosted the family income by taking in boarders, sewing, and laundry. Many women also tended gardens and raised chickens, rabbits, and goats. Their produce and income helped reduce dependence on the company store. Working-class women felt the burdens of housework more heavily than their middle-class sisters. Pump water, indoor plumbing, and sewage disposal were often available only on a pay-as-you-go basis. The daily drudgery endured by working-class women far outlasted the “man-killing” shift worked by the husband. Many women struggled with the effects of their husbands’ excessive drinking and faced early widowhood.

The adjustment for immigrant workers was not so much a process of assimilation as adaptation and resistance. Work habits and Old World cultural traditions did not always mesh with factory discipline or Taylor’s “scientific management.” A Polish wedding celebration might last three or four days. A drinking bout following a Sunday funeral might cause workers to celebrate “St. Monday” and not show up for work. Employers made much of the few Slavs who were allowed to work their way up into the ranks of skilled workers and foremen. But most immigrants were far more concerned with job security than with upward mobility. As new immigrants became less transient and more permanently settled in company towns, they increased their involvement in local politics and union activity.

The power of large corporations in the life of company towns was most evident among the mining communities of the West, as was violent labor conflict. The Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CFI) employed roughly half of the 8,000 coal miners who labored in that state’s mines. In mining towns such as Ludlow and Trinidad, the CFI thoroughly dominated the lives of miners and their families. “The miner,” one union official observed, “is in this land owned by the corporation that owns the homes, that owns the boarding houses, that owns every single thing that is there . . . not only the mines, but all the grounds, all the buildings, all the places of recreation, as well as the school and church buildings.” By the early twentieth century, new immigrants, such as Italians, Greeks, Slavs, and Mexicans, composed a majority of the population in these Western mining communities.

In September 1913, the United Mine Workers led a strike in the Colorado coalfields, calling for improved safety, higher wages, and recognition of the union. Thousands of miners’ families moved out of company housing and into makeshift tent colonies provided by the union. In October, Governor Elias Ammons ordered the Colorado National Guard into the tense strike region to keep order. The troops, supposedly neutral, proceeded to ally themselves with the mine operators. By spring, the strike had bankrupted the state, forcing the governor to remove most of the troops. The coal companies then brought in large numbers of private mine guards who were extremely hostile toward the strikers. On April 20, 1914, a combination of guardsmen and private guards surrounded the largest of the tent colonies at Ludlow, where more than a thousand mine families lived. A shot rang out (each side accused the other of firing), and a pitched battle ensued that lasted until the poorly armed miners ran out of ammunition. At dusk, the troops burned the tent village to the ground, routing the families and killing fourteen, eleven of them children. Enraged strikers attacked mines throughout southern Colorado in an armed rebellion that lasted ten days, until President Woodrow Wilson ordered the U.S. Army into the
region. News of the Ludlow Massacre shocked millions, and aroused widespread protests and demonstrations against the policies of Colorado Fuel and Iron and its owner, John D. Rockefeller Jr.

**The AFL: “Unions, Pure and Simple”**

Following the depression of the 1890s, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) emerged as the strongest and most stable organization of workers. Samuel Gompers’s strategy of recruiting skilled labor into unions organized by craft had paid off. Union membership climbed from under 500,000 in 1897 to 1.7 million by 1904. Most of this growth took place in AFL affiliates in coal mining, the building trades, transportation, and machine shops. The national unions—the United Mine Workers of America, the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, the International Association of Machinists—represented workers of specific occupations in collective bargaining. Trade autonomy and exclusive jurisdiction were the ruling principles within the AFL.

But the strength of craft organization also gave rise to weakness. In 1905, Gompers told a union gathering in Minneapolis that “caucasians” would not “let their standard of living be destroyed by negroes, Chinamen, Japs, or any others.” Those “others” included the new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, men and women, who labored in the steel mills and garment trades. Each trade looked mainly to the welfare of its own. Many explicitly barred women and African Americans from membership. There were some important exceptions. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) followed a more inclusive policy, recruiting both skilled underground pitmen and the unskilled aboveground workers. The UMWA even tried to recruit strikebreakers brought in by coal operators. With 260,000 members in 1904, the UMWA became the largest AFL affiliate.

AFL unions had a difficult time holding on to their gains. Economic slumps, technological changes, and aggressive counterattacks by employer organizations could be devastating. Trade associations using management-controlled efficiency drives fought union efforts to regulate output and shop practices. The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), a group of smaller industrialists founded in 1903, launched an “open shop” campaign to eradicate unions altogether. “Open shop” was simply a new name for a workplace where unions were not allowed. Unfriendly judicial decisions also hurt organizing efforts.

In 1906, a federal judge issued a permanent injunction against an iron molders strike at the Allis Chalmers Company of Milwaukee. In the so-called Danbury Hatters’ Case (*Loewe v. Lawler*, 1908), a federal court ruled that secondary boycotts, aimed by strikers at other companies doing business with their employer, such as suppliers of materials, were illegal under the Sherman Antitrust Act. Long an effective labor tactic, secondary boycotts were now declared a conspiracy in restraint of trade. Not until the 1930s would unions be able to count on legal support for collective bargaining and the right to strike.

**The IWW: “One Big Union”**

Some workers developed more radical visions of labor organizing. In the harsh and isolated company towns of Idaho, Montana, and Colorado, miners suffered from low wages, poor food, and primitive sanitation, as well as injuries and death from frequent cave-ins and explosions. The Western Federation of Miners (WFM) had gained strength in the metal mining regions of the West by leading several strikes marred by violence. In 1899, during a strike in the silver mining district of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, the Bunker Hill and Sullivan Mining Company had enraged the miners by hiring armed detectives and firing all union members. Desperate miners retaliated by
destroying a company mill with dynamite. Idaho’s governor declared martial law and obtained federal troops to enforce it. In a pattern that would become familiar in western labor relations, the soldiers served as strikebreakers, rounding up hundreds of miners and imprisoning them for months in makeshift bullpens.

In response to the brutal realities of labor organizing in the West, most WFM leaders embraced socialism and industrial unionism. In 1905, leaders of the WFM, the Socialist Party, and various radical groups gathered in Chicago to found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW charter proclaimed bluntly, “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. . . . Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world unite as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system.”

William D. “Big Bill” Haywood, an imposing, one-eyed, hard-rock miner, emerged as the most influential and flamboyant spokesman for the IWW, or Wobblies, as they were called. Haywood, a charismatic speaker and effective organizer, regularly denounced the AFL for its conservative emphasis on organizing skilled workers by trade. He insisted that the IWW would exclude no one from its ranks. The Wobblies concentrated their efforts on miners, lumberjacks, sailors, “harvest stiffs,” and other casual laborers.

The IWW briefly became a force among eastern industrial workers, tapping the rage and growing militance of the immigrants and unskilled. In 1909, an IWW-led steel strike at McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, challenged the power of U.S. Steel. In the 1912 “Bread and Roses” strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, IWW organizers turned a spontaneous walkout of textile workers into a successful struggle for union recognition. Wobbly leaders such as Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Joseph Ettor used class-conscious rhetoric and multilingual appeals to forge unity among the ethnically diverse Lawrence workforce of 25,000.

The IWW failed to establish permanent organizations in the Eastern cities, but it remained a force in the lumber camps, mines, and wheat fields of the West. In spite of its militant rhetoric, the IWW concerned itself with practical gains. “The final aim is revolution,” said one Wobbly organizer, “but for the present let’s see if we can get a bed to sleep in, water enough to take a bath in and decent food to eat.” But when the United States entered World War I, the Justice Department used the IWW’s anticapitalist rhetoric and antiwar stance to crush it.

**REBELS IN BOHEMIA**

During the 1910s, a small but influential community of painters, journalists, poets, social workers, lawyers, and political activists coalesced in the New York City neighborhood of Greenwich Village. These cultural radicals, nearly all of middle-class background and hailing from provincial American towns, shared a deep sympathy toward the struggles of labor, a passion for modern art, and an openness to socialism and anarchism. “Village bohemians,” especially the women among them, challenged the double standard of Victorian sexual morality, rejected traditional marriage and sex roles, advocated birth control, and experimented with homosexual relations. They became a powerful national symbol for rebellion and the merger of political and cultural radicalism.

The term “bohemian” referred to anyone who had artistic or intellectual aspirations and who lived with disregard for conventional rules of behavior. Other American cities, notably Chicago at the turn of the
century, had supported bohemian communities. But the Village scene was unique, if fleeting. The neighborhood offered cheap rents, studio space, and good ethnic restaurants, and it was close to the exciting political and labor activism of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The worldview of the Village’s bohemian community found expression in *The Masses*, a monthly magazine founded in 1911 by socialist critic Max Eastman, who was also its editor. “The broad purpose of *The Masses*,” wrote John Reed, one of its leading writers, “is a social one—to everlastingly attack old systems, old morals, old prejudices—the whole weight of outworn thought that dead men have saddled upon us.” Regular contributors included radical labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse, artists John Sloan and George Bellows, and writers Floyd Dell and Sherwood Anderson.

For some, Greenwich Village offered a chance to experiment with sexual relationships or work arrangements. For others, it was an escape from small-town conformity, or a haven for like-minded artists and activists. Yet the Village bohemians were united in their search for a new sense of community. Intellectuals and artists, as well as workers, feeling alienated from the rest of society, sought shelter in the collective life and close-knit social relations of the Village community.

The Paterson, New Jersey, silk workers’ strike of 1913 provided the most memorable fusion of bohemian sensibility and radical activism. After hearing Haywood speak about the strike at Mabel Dodge’s apartment, John Reed offered to organize a pageant on the strikers’ behalf at Madison Square Garden. The idea was to publicize the strike to the world and also raise money. The Villagers helped write a script, designed sets and scenery, and took care of publicity. A huge crowd watched more than a thousand workers reenact the silk workers’ strike, complete with picket line songs, a funeral, and speeches by IWW organizers. The spectacular production was an artistic triumph but a financial disaster. The Village bohemia lasted only a few years, a flame snuffed out by the chill political winds accompanying America’s entry into World War I. Yet for decades, Greenwich Village remained a mecca for young men and women searching for alternatives to conventional ways of living.

Women’s Movements and Black Awakening

Progressive era women were at the forefront of several reform campaigns, such as the settlement house movement, prohibition, suffrage, and birth control. Millions of others took an active role in new women’s associations that combined self-help and social mission. These organizations gave women a place in public life, increased their influence in civic affairs, and nurtured a new generation of female leaders.

In fighting racial discrimination, African Americans had a more difficult task. As racism gained ground in the political and cultural spheres, black progressives fought defensively to prevent the rights they had secured during Reconstruction from being further undermined. Still, they managed to produce leaders, ideas, and organizations that would have a long-range impact on American race relations.

The New Woman

The settlement house movement discussed in the opening of this chapter was just one of the new avenues of opportunity that opened to progressive-era women. A steady proliferation of women’s organizations attracted growing numbers of educated, middle-class women in the early twentieth century. With more men working in offices, more children attending school, and family size declining, the middle-class home was emptier. At the same time, more middle-class women were graduating from high
school and college. In 1870, only 1 percent of college-age Americans had attended college, about 20 percent of them women; by 1910, about 5 percent of college-age Americans attended college, but the proportion of women among them had doubled to 40 percent.

Single-sex clubs brought middle-class women into the public sphere by celebrating the distinctive strengths associated with women’s culture: cooperation, uplift, service. The formation of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs in 1890, brought together 200 local clubs representing 20,000 women. By 1900, the federation boasted 150,000 members, and by World War I, it claimed to represent over a million women. The women’s club movement combined an earlier focus on self-improvement and intellectual pursuits with newer benevolent efforts on behalf of working women and children. The Buffalo Union, for example, sponsored art lectures for housewives, and classes in typing, stenography, and bookkeeping for young working women. It also maintained a library, set up a “noon rest” downtown where women could eat lunch, and ran a school for training domestics.

For many middle-class women, the club movement provided a new kind of female-centered community. Club activity often led members to participate in other civic ventures, particularly “child-saving” reforms, such as child labor laws and mothers’ pensions. Some took up the cause of working-class women, fighting for protective legislation and offering aid to trade unions. As wives and daughters of influential and well-off men in their communities, clubwomen had access to funds and could generate support for projects they undertook.

Other women’s associations made even more explicit efforts to bridge class lines between middle-class homemakers and working-class women. The National Consumers’ League (NCL), started in 1898 by Maud Nathan and Josephine Lowell, sponsored a “white label” campaign in which manufacturers who met safety and sanitary standards could put NCL labels on their food and clothing. Under the dynamic leadership of Florence Kelley, the NCL took an even more aggressive stance, by publicizing labor abuses in department stores and lobbying for maximum-hour and minimum-wage laws in state legislatures. In its efforts to protect home and housewife, worker and consumer, the NCL embodied the ideal of “social housekeeping.”

**Birth Control**

The phrase “birth control,” coined by Margaret Sanger around 1913, described her campaign to provide contraceptive information and devices for women. Sanger had seen her own mother die at age forty-nine after bearing eleven children. In 1910, Sanger was a thirty-year-old nurse and housewife living with her husband and three children in a New York City suburb. Excited by a socialist lecture she had attended, she convinced her husband to move to the city, where she threw herself into the bohemian milieu. She became an organizer for the IWW, and in 1912, she wrote a series of articles on female sexuality for a socialist newspaper.

When postal officials confiscated the paper for violating obscenity laws, Sanger left for Europe to learn more about contraception. She returned to New York determined to challenge the obscenity statutes with her own magazine, the *Woman Rebel*. Sanger’s journal celebrated
female autonomy, including the right to sexual expression and control over one’s body. When she distributed her pamphlet *Family Limitation*, postal inspectors confiscated copies and she found herself facing forty-five years in prison. In October 1914, she fled to Europe again. In her absence, anarchist agitator Emma Goldman and many women in the Socialist Party took up the cause.

An older generation of feminists had advocated “voluntary motherhood,” or the right to say no to a husband’s sexual demands. The new birth control advocates embraced contraception as a way of advancing sexual freedom for middle-class women, as well as responding to the misery of those working-class women who bore numerous children while living in poverty. Sanger returned to the United States in October 1915. After the government dropped the obscenity charges, she embarked on a national speaking tour. In 1916, she again defied the law by opening a birth control clinic in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn and offering birth control information without a physician present. Arrested and jailed, she gained more publicity for her crusade. Within a few years, birth control leagues and clinics could be found in every major city and most large towns in the country.

### Racism and Accommodation

At the turn of the century, four-fifths of the nation’s 10 million African Americans still lived in the South, where most eked out a living working in agriculture. In the cities, most blacks were relegated to menial jobs, but a small African American middle class of entrepreneurs and professionals gained a foothold by selling services and products to the black community. They all confronted a racism that was growing in both intensity and influence in American politics and culture. White racism came in many variants and had evolved significantly since slavery days. The more virulent strains, influenced by Darwin’s evolutionary theory, held that blacks were a “degenerate” race, genetically predisposed to vice, crime, and disease and destined to lose the struggle for existence with whites. By portraying blacks as incapable of improvement, racial Darwinism justified a policy of repression and neglect toward African Americans.

African Americans also endured a deeply racist popular culture that made hateful stereotypes of black people a normal feature of political debate and everyday life. Benjamin Tillman, a U.S. senator from South Carolina, denounced the African American as “a fiend, a wild beast, seeking whom he may devour.” Thomas Dixon’s popular novel *The Clansman* (1905) described the typical African American as “half child, half animal, the sport of impulse, whim, and conceit . . . a being who, left to his will, roams at night and sleeps in the day, whose speech knows no word of love, whose passions, once aroused, are as the fury of a tiger.” In northern cities “coon songs,” based on gross caricatures of black life, were extremely popular in theaters and as sheet music. As in the antebellum minstrel shows, these songs reduced African Americans to creatures of pure appetite—for food, sex, alcohol, and violence.

Southern progressives articulated a more moderate racial philosophy. They also assumed the innate inferiority of blacks, but they believed that black progress was necessary to achieve the economic and political progress associated with a vision of the New South. Their solution to the “race problem” stressed paternalist uplift. Edgar Gardner Murphy, an Episcopal clergyman and leading Alabama progressive, held that African Americans need not be terrorized. The black man, Murphy asserted, “will accept in the white man’s country the place assigned him by the white man, will do his work, not by stress of rivalry, but by genial cooperation with the white man’s interests.”

Amid this political and cultural climate, Booker T. Washington won recognition as the most influential black leader of the day. Born a slave in 1856, Washington was
educated at Hampton Institute in Virginia, one of the first freedmen’s schools devoted to industrial education. In 1881, he founded Tuskegee Institute, a black school in Alabama devoted to industrial and moral education. He became the leading spokesman for racial accommodation, urging blacks to focus on economic improvement and self-reliance, as opposed to political and civil rights. In an 1895 speech delivered at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Washington outlined the key themes of accommodationist philosophy. “Cast down your buckets where you are,” Washington told black people, meaning they should focus on improving their vocational skills as industrial workers and farmers. “In all things that are purely social,” he told attentive whites, “we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”

Washington’s message won him the financial backing of leading white philanthropists and the respect of progressive whites. His widely read autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (1901), stands as a classic narrative of an American self-made man. Written with a shrewd eye toward cementing his support among white Americans, it stressed the importance of learning values such as frugality, cleanliness, and personal morality. But Washington also gained a large following among African Americans, especially those who aspired to business success. With the help of Andrew Carnegie, he founded the National Negro Business League to preach the virtue of black business development in black communities.

Washington also had a decisive influence on the flow of private funds to black schools in the South. Publicly he insisted that “agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly.” But privately, Washington also spent money and worked behind the scenes trying to halt disfranchisement and segregation. He offered secret financial support, for example, for court cases that challenged Louisiana’s grandfather clause, the exclusion of blacks from Alabama juries, and railroad segregation in Tennessee and Georgia.

**Racial Justice, the NAACP, Black Women’s Activism**

Washington’s focus on economic self-help remained deeply influential in African American communities long after his death in 1915. But alternative black voices challenged his racial philosophy while he lived. In the early 1900s, scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois created a significant alternative to Washington’s leadership. A product of the black middle class, Du Bois had been educated at Fisk University and Harvard, where in 1895, he became the first African American to receive a Ph.D. His book *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) was a pioneering work of social science that refuted racist stereotypes by, for example, discussing black contributions to that city’s political life and describing the wide range of black business activity. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois declared prophetically that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Through essays on black history, culture, education, and politics, Du Bois explored the concept of “double consciousness.” Black people, he argued, would always feel the tension between an African heritage and their desire to assimilate as Americans. *Souls* represented the first effort to embrace African American culture as a source of collective black strength and something worth preserving.

Du Bois criticized Booker T. Washington’s philosophy for its acceptance of “the alleged inferiority of the Negro.” The black community, he argued, must fight for the right to vote, for civic equality, and for higher
education for the “talented tenth” of their youth. In 1905, Du Bois and editor William Monroe Trotter brought together a group of educated black men to oppose Washington’s conciliatory views. Discrimination they encountered in Buffalo, New York, prompted the men to move their meeting to Niagara Falls, Ontario. “Any discrimination based simply on race or color is barbarous,” they declared. “Persistent manly agitation is the way to liberty.” The Niagara movement protested legal segregation, the exclusion of blacks from labor unions, and the curtailment of voting and other civil rights.

The Niagara movement failed to generate much change. But in 1909, many of its members, led by Du Bois, attended a National Negro Conference held at the Henry Street Settlement in New York. The group included a number of white progressives sympathetic to the idea of challenging Washington’s philosophy. A new, interracial organization emerged from this conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Du Bois, the only black officer of the original NAACP, founded and edited the Crisis, the influential NAACP monthly journal. For the next several decades, the NAACP would lead struggles to overturn legal and economic barriers to equal opportunity.

The disfranchisement of black voters in the South severely curtailed African American political influence. In response, African American women created new strategies to challenge white supremacy and improve life in their communities. As Sallie Mial, a North Carolina Baptist home missionary told her male brethren, “We have a peculiar work to do. We can go where you cannot afford to go.” Founded in 1900, the Women’s Convention of the National Baptist Convention, the largest black denomination in the United States, offered African American women a new public space to pursue reform work and “racial uplift.” They organized settlement houses and built playgrounds; they created day-care facilities and kindergartens; they campaigned for women’s suffrage, temperance, and advances in public health. In effect, they transformed church missionary societies into quasi social service agencies. Using the motto “Lifting as We Climb,” the National Association of Colored Women Clubs by 1914 boasted 50,000 members in 1,000 clubs nationwide.

**NATIONAL PROGRESSIVISM**

The progressive impulse had begun at local levels and percolated up. Progressive forces in both major political parties pushed older, entrenched elements to take a more aggressive stance on the reform issues of the day. Both Republican Theodore Roosevelt and Democrat Woodrow Wilson laid claim to the progressive mantle during their presidencies—a good example of how on the national level, progressivism animated many perspectives. In their pursuit of reform agendas, both significantly reshaped the office of the president. As progressivism moved to Washington, nationally organized interest groups and public opinion began to rival the influence of the old political parties in shaping the political landscape.

**THEODORE ROOSEVELT AND PRESIDENTIAL ACTIVISM**

The assassination of William McKinley in 1901 made forty-two-year-old Theodore Roosevelt the youngest man to ever hold the office of president. Born to a wealthy New York family in 1858, Roosevelt overcame a sickly childhood through strenuous physical exercise and rugged outdoor living. After graduating from Harvard, he immediately threw himself into a career in the rough and tumble of New York politics. He won election to the state assembly, ran an unsuccessful campaign for mayor of New York, served as president of the New York City Board of Police Commissioners,
and went to Washington as assistant secretary of the navy. During the Spanish-American War, he won national fame as leader of the Rough Rider regiment in Cuba. Upon his return, he was elected governor of New York, and then in 1900, vice president. Roosevelt viewed the presidency as a “bully pulpit”—a platform from which he could exhort Americans to reform their society—and he aimed to make the most of it.

Roosevelt was a uniquely colorful figure, a shrewd publicist, and a creative politician. His three-year stint as a rancher in the Dakota Territory; his fondness for hunting and nature study; his passion for scholarship, which resulted in ten books before he became president—all these set “T. R.” apart from most of his upper-class peers. Roosevelt preached the virtues of “the strenuous life,” and he believed that educated and wealthy Americans had a special responsibility to serve, guide, and inspire those less fortunate.

In style, Roosevelt made key contributions to national progressivism. He knew how to inspire and guide public opinion. He stimulated discussion and aroused curiosity like no one before him. In 1902, Roosevelt demonstrated his unique style of activism when he personally intervened in a bitter strike by anthracite coal miners. Using public calls for conciliation, a series of White House bargaining sessions, and private pressure on the mine owners, Roosevelt secured a settlement that won better pay and working conditions for the miners, but without recognition of their union. Roosevelt also pushed for efficient government as the solution to social problems. Unlike most nineteenth-century Republicans, who had largely ignored economic and social inequalities, Roosevelt frankly acknowledged them. Administrative agencies run by experts, he believed, could find rational solutions that could satisfy everyone.

**Trustbusting and Regulation**

One of the first issues Roosevelt faced was growing public concern with the rapid business consolidations taking place in the American economy. In 1902, he directed the Justice Department to begin a series of prosecutions under the **Sherman Antitrust Act**. The first target was the Northern Securities Company, a huge merger of transcontinental railroads brought about by financier J. P. Morgan. The deal would have created a giant holding company controlling nearly all the long-distance rail lines from Chicago to California. The Justice Department fought the case all the way through a hearing before the Supreme Court. In *Northern Securities v. United States* (1904), the Court held that the stock transactions constituted an illegal combination in restraint of interstate commerce.

This case established Roosevelt’s reputation as a “trustbuster.” During his two terms, the Justice Department filed forty-three cases under the Sherman Antitrust Act to restrain or dissolve business monopolies. These included actions against the so-called tobacco and beef trusts and the Standard Oil Company. Roosevelt viewed these suits as necessary to publicize the issue and assert the federal government’s ultimate authority over big business. But he did not really believe in the need to break up large corporations. Unlike many progressives, who were nostalgic for smaller companies and freer competition, Roosevelt accepted centralization as a fact of modern economic life and considered government regulation the best way to deal with big business.

After easily defeating Democrat Alton B. Parker in the 1904 election, Roosevelt felt more secure in pushing for regulatory legislation. In 1906, Roosevelt responded to public pressure for greater government intervention and, overcoming objections from a conservative Congress, signed three important measures into law. The **Hepburn Act** strengthened the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), established in 1887 as the first independent regulatory agency, by authorizing it to set maximum railroad rates and inspect financial records.

In this excerpt, President Theodore Roosevelt speaks for social and municipal reform, a major issue of the Progressive movement.

*Practical equality of opportunity for all citizens, when we achieve it, will have two great results. First, every man will have a fair chance to make of himself all that in him lies . . . Second, equality of opportunity means that the commonwealth will get from every citizen the highest service of which he is capable. No man who carries the burden of special privileges of another can give to the commonwealth that service to which it is fairly entitled . . .*

**Sherman Antitrust Act** The first federal antitrust measure, passed in 1890; sought to promote economic competition by prohibiting business combinations in restraint of trade or commerce.

**Hepburn Act** Act that strengthened the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) by authorizing it to set maximum railroad rates and inspect financial records.
Two other laws passed in 1906 also expanded the regulatory power of the federal government. The battles surrounding these reforms demonstrate how progressive measures often attracted supporters with competing motives. The Pure Food and Drug Act established the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which tested and approved drugs before they went on the market. The Meat Inspection Act (passed with help from the shocking publicity surrounding Upton Sinclair’s muckraking novel, *The Jungle*) empowered the Department of Agriculture to inspect and label meat products. In both cases, supporters hailed the new laws as providing consumer protection against adulterated or fraudulently labeled food and drugs.

But regulatory legislation found advocates among American big business as well. Large meatpackers such as Swift and Armour strongly supported stricter federal regulation as a way to drive out smaller companies that could not meet tougher standards. The new laws also helped American packers compete more profitably in the European export market by giving their meat the official seal of federal inspectors. Large pharmaceutical manufacturers similarly supported new regulations that would eliminate competitors and patent medicine suppliers. Thus these reforms won support from large corporate interests that viewed stronger federal regulation as a strategy for consolidating their economic power. Progressive-era expansion of the nation-state had its champions among—and benefits for—big business as well as American consumers.

**Conservation, Preservation, and the Environment**

As a naturalist and outdoorsman, Theodore Roosevelt also believed in the need for government regulation of the natural environment. He worried about the destruction of forests, prairies, streams, and the wilderness. The conservation of forest and water resources, he argued, was a national problem of vital import. In 1905, he created the U.S. Forest Service and named conservationist Gifford Pinchot to head it. Pinchot recruited a force of forest rangers to manage the reserves. By 1909, total timber and forest reserves had increased from 45 to 195 million acres, and more than 80 million acres of mineral lands had been withdrawn from public sale.

On the broad issue of managing America’s natural resources, the Roosevelt administration took the middle ground between preservation and unrestricted commercial development. “Wilderness is waste,” Pinchot was fond of saying, reflecting an essentially utilitarian vision that balanced the demands of business with wilderness conservation. But other voices championed a more radical vision of conservation, emphasizing the preservation of wilderness lands against the encroachment of commercial exploitation. The most influential and committed of these was John Muir, an essayist and founder of the modern environmentalist movement. Muir made a passionate and spiritual defense of the inherent value of the American wilderness. Wild country, he argued, had a mystical power to inspire and refresh. “Climb the mountains and get their good tidings,” he advised. “Nature’s peace will flow into you as the sunshine into the trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.” Muir served as first president of the Sierra Club, founded in 1892 to preserve and protect the mountain regions of the west coast as well as Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho.
A bitter, drawn-out struggle over new water sources for San Francisco revealed the deep conflicts between conservationists, represented by Pinchot, and preservationists, represented by Muir. After a devastating earthquake in 1906, San Francisco sought federal approval to dam and flood the spectacular Hetch Hetchy Valley, located 150 miles from the city in Yosemite National Park. The project promised to ease the city’s chronic freshwater shortage and to generate hydroelectric power. Conservationists and their urban progressive allies argued that developing Hetch Hetchy would be a victory for the public good over greedy private developers, since the plan called for municipal control of the water supply. To John Muir and the Sierra Club, Hetch Hetchy was a “temple” threatened with destruction by the “devotees of ravaging commercialism.” Both sides lobbied furiously in Congress and wrote scores of articles in newspapers and magazines. Congress finally approved the reservoir plan in 1913; utility and public development triumphed over the preservation of nature. Although they lost the battle for Hetch Hetchy, the preservationists gained much ground in the larger campaign of alerting the nation to the dangers of a vanishing wilderness. They began to use their own utilitarian rationales, arguing that national parks would encourage economic growth through tourism and provide Americans with a healthy escape from urban and industrial areas. In 1916, the preservationists obtained their own bureaucracy in Washington with the creation of the National Park Service.

The Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902 represented another important victory for the conservation strategy of Roosevelt and Pinchot. With the goal of turning arid land into productive family farms through irrigation, the act established the Reclamation Bureau within the Department of the Interior and provided federal funding for dam and canal projects. But in practice, the bureau did more to encourage the growth of large-scale agribusiness and Western cities than small farming. The Roosevelt Dam on Arizona’s Salt River, along with the forty-mile Arizona Canal, helped develop the Phoenix area. The Imperial Dam on the Colorado River diverted water to California’s Imperial and Coachella Valleys. The Newlands Act thus established a growing federal presence in managing water resources, the critical issue in twentieth-century Western development.

Republican Split

By the end of his second term, Roosevelt had moved beyond the idea of regulation, to push for the most far-reaching federal economic and social programs ever proposed. He saw the central problem as “how to exercise . . . responsible control over the business use of vast wealth.” To that end, he proposed restrictions on the use of court injunctions against labor strikes, as well as an eight-hour day for federal employees, a worker compensation law, and federal income and inheritance taxes.

In 1908, Roosevelt kept his promise to retire after a second term. He chose Secretary of War William Howard Taft as his successor. Taft easily defeated Democrat William Jennings Bryan in the 1908 election. During Taft’s presidency, the gulf between
opportunities for individual achievement. and protective tariffs, thereby providing curtailing the restrictive influences of trusts in the economy to restore competition by gram for limited government intervention New Freedom

The split within the Republican Party allowed The Election of 1912

MAP 21-2

The Election of 1912: A Four-Way Race

With the Republicans so badly divided, the Democrats sensed a chance for their first presidential victory in twenty years. They chose Governor Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey as their candidate. Although not nearly as well known nationally as Taft and Roosevelt, Wilson had built a strong reputation as a reformer. The son of a Virginia Presbyterian minister, Wilson spent most of his early career in academia. He studied law at the University of Virginia and then earned a Ph.D. in political science from Johns Hopkins. After teaching history and political science at several schools, he became president of Princeton University in 1902. In 1910, he won election as New Jersey’s governor, running against the state Democratic machine. He won the Democratic nomination for president with the support of many of the party’s progressives, including William Jennings Bryan (see Map 21-2).

Wilson declared himself and the Democratic Party to be the true progressives. Viewing Roosevelt rather than Taft as his main rival, Wilson contrasted his New Freedom campaign with Roosevelt’s New Nationalism. Crafted largely by progressive lawyer Louis Brandeis, Wilson’s platform was far more ambitious than Roosevelt’s. The New Freedom emphasized restoring conditions of free competition and equality of economic opportunity. Wilson did favor a variety of progressive reforms for workers, farmers, and consumers. But in sounding older, nineteenth-century Democratic themes of states’ rights and small government, Wilson argued against allowing the federal government to become as large and paternalistic as Roosevelt advocated. “What this country needs above everything else,” Wilson argued, “is a body of laws which will look after the men who are on the make rather than the men who are already made.”

Socialist party nominee Eugene V. Debs offered the fourth and most radical choice to voters. The Socialists had more than doubled their membership since 1908,
to more than 100,000. On election days, Socialist strength was far greater than that, as the party’s candidates attracted increasing numbers of voters. By 1912, more than a thousand Socialists held elective office in 33 states and 160 cities. Geographically, Socialist strength had shifted to the trans-Mississippi South and West.

An inspiring orator who drew large and sympathetic crowds wherever he spoke, Debs proved especially popular in areas with strong labor movements and populist traditions. He wrapped his socialist message in an apocalyptic vision. Socialists would “abolish this monstrous system and the misery and crime which flow from it.” Debs and the Socialists also took credit for pushing both Roosevelt and Wilson farther toward the left. Both the Democratic and Progressive Party platforms contained proposals that had been considered extremely radical only ten years earlier.

In the end, the divisions in the Republican Party gave the election to Wilson. He won easily, polling 6.3 million votes to Roosevelt’s 4.1 million. Taft came in third with 3.5 million. Eugene Debs won 900,000 votes, 6 percent of the total, for the strongest Socialist showing in American history. Even though he won with only 42 percent of the popular vote, Wilson swept the electoral college with 435 votes to Roosevelt’s 88 and Taft’s 8, giving him the largest electoral majority up to that time. In several respects, the election of 1912 was the first “modern” presidential race. It featured the first direct primaries, challenges to traditional party loyalties, an issue-oriented campaign, and a high degree of interest-group activity.

**Woodrow Wilson’s First Term**

As president, Wilson followed Roosevelt’s lead in expanding the activist dimensions of the office. He became more responsive to pressure for a greater federal role in regulating business and the economy. This increase in direct lobbying—from hundreds of local and national reform groups, Washington-based organizations, and the new Progressive Party—was itself a new and defining feature of the era’s political life. With the help of a Democratic-controlled Congress, Wilson pushed through a significant battery of reform proposals.

The **Underwood-Simmons Act** of 1913 substantially reduced tariff duties on a variety of raw materials and manufactured goods, including wool, sugar, agricultural machinery, shoes, iron, and steel. Taking advantage of the newly ratified **Sixteenth Amendment**, which gave Congress the power to levy taxes on income, it also imposed the first graduated tax (up to 6 percent) on personal incomes. The **Federal Reserve Act** that same year restructured the nation’s banking and currency system. It created twelve Federal Reserve Banks, regulated by a central board in Washington. Member banks were required to keep a portion of their cash reserves in the Federal Reserve Bank of their district. By raising or lowering the percentage of reserves required, “the Fed” could either discourage or encourage credit expansion by member banks. Varying the interest rate charged on loans and advances by Federal Reserve Banks to member banks also helped regulate both the quantity and cost of money circulating in the national economy. By giving central direction to banking and monetary policy, the Federal Reserve Board diminished the power of large private banks.

Wilson also supported the **Clayton Antitrust Act** of 1914, which replaced the old Sherman Act of 1890 as the nation’s basic antitrust law. The Clayton Act reflected the growing political clout of the American Federation of Labor. It exempted unions from being construed as illegal combinations in restraint of trade, and it forbade federal courts from issuing injunctions against strikers. But Wilson adopted the view that permanent federal regulation was necessary for checking the abuses of big business. The **Federal Trade Commission (FTC)**, established in 1914, sought to give the federal government the same sort of regulatory control over corporations that the ICC had over railroads. Wilson believed a permanent federal body like the FTC would provide a

In this excerpt, Eugene V. Debs, leader of the socialist movement in the United States, states that Americans have two choices, Socialism or continued wage-earning slavery of the Progressives and Democrats.

**Needless is it for me to say to the thinking workingman that he has no choice between these two capitalist parties, that they are both pledged to the same system and that whether the one or the other succeeds, he will still remain the wage-working slave he is today. . . . It is simply a question of capitalism or socialism, of despotism or democracy, and they who are not wholly with us are wholly against us.**
method for corporate oversight superior to the erratic and time-consuming process of legal trustbusting. Wilson’s hope that the FTC would usher in an era of harmony between government and business recalled the aims of Roosevelt and his big business backers in 1912.

On social issues, Wilson proved more cautious in his first two years. His initial failure to support federal child labor legislation and rural credits to farmers angered many progressives. A southerner, Wilson also sanctioned the spread of racial segregation in federal offices. As the reelection campaign of 1916 approached, Wilson worried about defections from the labor and social justice wings of his party. He proceeded to support a rural credits act providing government capital to federal farm banks, as well as federal aid to agricultural extension programs in schools. He also came out in favor of a worker compensation bill for federal employees, and he signed the landmark Keating-Owen Act, which banned children under fourteen from working in enterprises engaged in interstate commerce. Although it covered less than 10 percent of the nation’s 2 million working children, the new law established a minimum standard of protection, and put the power of federal authority behind the principle of regulating child labor. But by 1916, the dark cloud of war in Europe had already begun to cast its long shadow over progressive reform.

**Conclusion**

The American political and social landscape was significantly altered by progressivism, but these shifts reflected the tensions and ambiguities of progressivism itself. A review of changes in election laws offers a good perspective on the inconsistencies that characterized progressivism. Nearly every new election law had the effect of excluding some people from voting, while including others. For African Americans, progressivism largely meant disfranchisement from voting altogether. Direct primary laws eliminated some of the most blatant abuses of big-city machines, but in cities and states dominated by one party, the majority party’s primary effectively decided the general election. Stricter election laws made it more difficult for third parties to get on the ballot, another instance in which progressive reform had the effect of reducing political options available to voters. Voting itself steadily declined in these years.

Overall, party voting became a less important form of political participation. Interest-group activity, congressional and statehouse lobbying, and direct appeals to public opinion gained currency as ways of influencing government. Business groups and individual trade associations were among the most active groups pressing their demands on government. Political action often shifted from legislatures to the new administrative agencies and commissions created to deal with social and economic problems. Popular magazines and journals grew significantly in both number and circulation, becoming more influential in shaping and appealing to national public opinion.

Social progressives and their allies could point to significant improvements in the everyday lives of ordinary Americans. On the state level, real advances had been made through a range of social legislation covering working conditions, child labor, minimum wages, and worker compensation. Social progressives, too, had discovered the power of organizing into extraparty lobbying groups, such as the National Consumers’ League and the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Yet the tensions between fighting for social justice and the urge toward social control remained unresolved. The emphasis on efficiency, uplift, and rational administration often collided...
Photographing Poverty in the Slums of New York

Jacob A. Riis was a twenty-year-old Danish immigrant when he arrived in New York City in 1870. After several years wandering the country as a casual laborer, he returned to New York and began a career as a reporter covering the police beat. By the early 1880s Riis found himself drawn to report on the deteriorating conditions of tenement house life. Riis’s reports on the tenement districts reflected a keen outrage and new sense of purpose. “It was upon my midnight trips with the sanitary police,” he recalled, “that the wish kept cropping up in me that there were some way of putting before the people what I saw there.”

In 1888 Riis taught himself the rudiments of photography. He shot many of these photographs in the dead of the night, taking his subjects by surprise. Other photographs were carefully staged to ensure maximum emotional impact. He spent two years touring the country, presenting an illustrated lecture called “The Other Half: How It Lives and Dies in New York.” The use of photography would become a key element for reform crusades in the progressive era and beyond.

HERE ARE two Riis photographs, “Five Cents a Spot” and “Home of an Italian Ragpicker.” What visual information does each communicate about tenement life? How do they differ in their depiction of New York City’s immigrant poor? How do you imagine Riis set up the scene for each of these photographs?
with humane impulses to aid the poor, the immigrant, the slum dweller. The large majority of African Americans, blue-collar workers, and urban poor remained untouched by federal assistance programs.

Progressives had tried to confront the new realities of urban and industrial society. What had begun as a discrete collection of local and state struggles, had by 1912 come to reshape state and national politics. Politics itself had been transformed by the calls for social justice. Federal and state power would now play a more decisive role than ever in shaping work, play, and social life in local communities.

Suggested Answer:
Successful essays should note:
• The areas of progressive interests and activities (Overview chart p. 725 and Document A)
• The changes, or lack thereof, of progressive interests within local, state, and national levels (Overview chart p. 725 and Document A)
**Document A**
Examine the chart on page 725.
- Where did the progressives focus their interests and activities?
- What groups attracted their interest and what groups did they ignore?

**Document B**
Refer to the Lewis Hine photo on page 726 of the child factory worker.
- Did Hine just happen to snap this photo, or could it have been part of an organized educational program?

**Document C**
Examine the photograph on page 739 of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire, March 25, 1911.
- Who were the victims of this tragedy?

**Document D**
Look at the IWW poster on page 743 for the 1913 dramatic pageant of the Paterson Strike.
- How did progressives respond to groups like the Industrial Workers of the World?

**Document E**
Examine the photo on page 747 of the leaders of the Niagara Movement. They met on the Canadian side of the Niagara River because under segregation, white hotels on the American side would not provide them with accommodations. The members of the Niagara Movement would eventually found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP]. Note the reference on page 748 to the Henry Street Settlement.
- Did the progressive movement attempt to serve the needs of African Americans? Were they successful?

**Document F**
We welcome the German or the Irishman who becomes an American. We have no use for the German or the Irishman who remains such. We do not wish German-Americans or Irish-Americans who figure as such in our social and political life; we want only Americans, and, provided they are such, we do not care whether they are of native or of Irish or of Germany ancestry. We have no room in any healthy American community for a German-American vote or an Irish-American vote, and it is contemptible demagoguery to put planks into any party platform with the purpose of catching such a vote. We have no room for any people who do not act and vote simply as Americans, and as nothing else.

---Theodore Roosevelt, *Forum Magazine*, April 1894
- Theodore Roosevelt was a recognized leader of the progressive movement. What kind of attitude does his statement reflect toward immigrant populations?
- What would he have the immigrant do concerning his old beliefs and culture?
- How would Roosevelt define an “American”?

**Document G**
Demanding that the federal government grant women the right to vote, suffragettes picketed the White House in 1918.
- The groups that progressives were attracted to and the groups they ignored (Overview chart p. 725 and Document A)
- Hine's efforts, in her social documentary, to publicize the violations of child labor laws (Image p. 726 and Document B)
- What the National Child Labor Committee was and what the organization attempted to accomplish (Image p. 726 and Document B)
- Who the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire were (Image p. 739 and Document C)
- The progressive response to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire, the groups they were serving, and the success of their response (Image p. 739 and Document C)
- The progressive response to groups like the IWW (Image p. 743 and Document D)
- The common goals between the IWW and the progressives and the groups they attempted to serve in common (Image p. 743 and Document D)
- The make-up of the Niagara Movement membership and progressive support (Image p. 747, p. 748, and Document E)
- Progressive interests and involvement, or lack thereof, to serve the needs of African Americans (Image p. 747, p. 748, and Document E)
- Theodore Roosevelt's attitude toward immigrant populations (based on his 1894 speech, Document F)
- Roosevelt's request regarding immigrant beliefs and cultures (Document F)
- How Roosevelt would define “American” (Document F)
- Why Wilson changed his position on women voting rights during World War I and what women did to change his attitude (Document G)
- Why Wilson saw women voting as “vital to the winning of the war” (Document G)
758  CHAPTER 21  URBAN AMERICA AND THE PROGRESSIVE ERA, 1900–1917

Select the response that best answers each question or best completes each sentence.

1. Fundamental to the progressive movement was the:
   a. conviction that capitalism was outdated.
   b. belief that citizens could improve society.
   c. faith in the role of the individual in society.
   d. commitment to the ideals of social Darwinism.
   e. understanding that government only can foster change.

2. Leaders of the settlement house movement:
   a. believed that all government was corrupt and could not be reformed.
   b. concentrated their efforts on bringing social reform to small-town America.
   c. understood the need to use politics in order to bring about effective reform.
   d. wanted to provide economic assistance but had little interest in social reform.
   e. distrusted individuals and sought reform only through social agencies.

3. Galveston, Texas, introduced a progressive form of urban government based on:
   a. city commissioners.
   b. city managers.
   c. powerful mayors.
   d. council members.
   e. voter referendum.

4. Initiative, referendum, and recall:
   a. became federal laws with the ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment.
   b. gave political parties more power than they had ever had in the United States.
   c. changed the nature of urban government but did not influence state-level activity.
   d. were political reforms designed to give the people a greater voice in government.
   e. gave more constitutional rights to state and local governments.

5. The progressive movement:
   a. did not appeal to American intellectuals because they did not believe society could reform.
   b. led to changes in intellectual concepts as well as in social ideals and political practices.
   c. introduced the idea of survival of the fittest into American society, economics, and politics.
   d. strengthened traditional ways of thinking because intellectuals had always been innovative.
   e. denounced intellectuals as elitists and morally unethically anti-Christian.

• Wilson had originally opposed granting voting rights to women. Why did he change his position during World War I?

Answer Key
1-B 2-C 3-A 4-D 5-B 6-E 7-E 8-B 9-C 10-B 11-A 12-E 13-A 14-C
6. After 1908, the judicial model for defending progressive reforms was based on:
   a. due process of law.
   b. states' rights.
   c. the Miranda law.
   d. legal activism.
   e. the Brandeis Brief.

7. An important element in progressivism was:
   a. the opening of America to immigration to expand its cultural outlook.
   b. the sense that individuals should make decisions about personal behavior.
   c. an appreciation for the importance of a multicultural society in the United States.
   d. a commitment to limiting the role that government played in cultural matters.
   e. the willingness to impose various forms of social control to improve America.

8. Between 1900 and 1917:
   a. reformers paid little attention to education because the United States had the best schools in the world.
   b. numerous changes occurred in attitudes toward and the implementation of public education in America.
   c. progressives created a federal department of education to oversee school reforms throughout the country.
   d. most Americans recognized for the first time the importance of establishing a free public school system.
   e. no major changes were made in regards to educational reform in the United States.

9. Early in the 1900s, the American Federation of Labor:
   a. merged with other unions to form the International Workers of the World.
   b. lost members because of the prosperity that followed the Depression of 1893.
   c. became the largest and most influential labor union in the United States.
   d. increasingly advocated radical reforms such as ending the wage system.
   e. slowly declined in its membership due to fears of a communist influence.

10. During the progressive era:
    a. American women for the first time gained political and social equality with men.
    b. many women found themselves assuming a new, more active, role in public life.
    c. feminists realized that there was no real hope for improving the place of women.
    d. men dominated the movement and women did very little to bring about reforms.
    e. women, for the first time, earned the same wages as their male counterparts.

11. The African-American leader who opposed accommodationism and helped create the Niagara Movement was:
    b. George Washington Carver.
    e. Frederick Douglass.

12. The administration of President Theodore Roosevelt:
    a. marked the final end of the progressive movement.
    b. was the first expression of progressivism in the country.
    c. did very little to change the nature of presidential leadership.
    d. saw a decline in the role and leadership power in the executive branch.
    e. was a period of unprecedented presidential activism.

13. Woodrow Wilson:
    a. was a progressive who expressed concern over the growing role of government.
    b. as a Democrat rejected progressivism as being simply a Republican program.
    c. believed that progressivism threatened the traditional values of American society.
    d. did everything he could to undo all of the progressive reforms that had been enacted.
    e. believed that progressivism was too closely tied to the growing socialist movement.

14. As the progressive era came to an end:
    a. the United States had fixed all of its social problems.
    b. most Americans had lost all interest in improving society.
    c. many social tensions and concerns remained unresolved.
    d. the United States had established racial equality and harmony.
    e. the United States saw no improvements to their social problems.

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