

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE UNITED STATES

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In 1897, a newspaper reporter in Cincinnati interviewed Salvador Camacho Roldán, a Colombian intellectual visiting the city, about his impressions. Camacho Roldán expressed admiration for everything he saw in the United States except racial segregation, which he considered immoral. His account otherwise emphasized the admirable model the United States provided other countries:

I have seen that indeed the prosperity of the United States is due to its liberal institutions; to the division of undeveloped land into small farms, accessible to practically everyone; to the many products made for export; to immigration from around the world; to public schools; to the absence of a permanent standing army; to a system for rapid communication between towns that has made transportation inexpensive and opened up the interior of the country to commerce; to the years of peace that you have enjoyed.

(Quoted in Camacho Roldán 1898: 598–99)

The greatest failing of the United States, he reiterated, was racial separation in the southern states and the vicious treatment of Chinese immigrants in the West. Camacho Roldán had fought to end slavery in his own country, and he believed that in Colombia, each individual was treated according to his personal abilities without respect to race. The Colombian attitude was more sensible—recognize individuals for their contributions, encourage everyone to do better. The U.S. obsession with humiliating non-whites contradicted the principles underlying the country's extraordinary accomplishments.

Camacho Roldán was one of thousands of Latin American and European liberals in the nineteenth century who traveled to the United States to see the wonders of a better world to come. Other visitors saw a future they did not want. Paul Groussac, the dean of Argentinean letters at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote after traveling through the United States that North Americans were “impermeable” to anything civilized or refined (1894). Newspapers, theater, conversation, clothing, jewelry, parades, food—all were “mammoth” and in bad taste. The famous elevated trains in Chicago blocked out the sunlight and were so loud that friendly conversation

was impossible in the city's commercial center. But Chicagoans' busy schedules left them no time for either quiet or reflective exchange. As he moved from city to city, Groussac reported his deepening physical and emotional distress. Groussac wrote for the land-owning oligarchy that dominated Argentinean society, and among the horrors in his account of the United States was observing ignorant working men having a say in government because of voting rights and political organization, in the economy because land ownership was widespread, and in culture because commercial media pandered to popular taste. It was a world turned upside down, though in fact Groussac's language was similar to Julián Martel's description of modernizing, commercializing Buenos Aires in his famous novel from 1891 *La Bolsa (The Stock Exchange)*. Groussac identified the United States with the character Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, precisely because brutish working men were in charge. The French philosopher Ernest Renan had already identified the modern, liberal era as the age of Caliban, and Groussac's extension of the idea to the United States was reasonable to the degree that the country exemplified the logic of modern, liberal life, a proposition that progressives like Camacho Roldán and reactionaries like Groussac both accepted as self-evident.

Books and magazine articles generally expressed the perspectives of educated elites, but in 1902, journalist Hamilton Holt decided to find out how immigrants saw the United States. The interviews he published in *The Independent* became a national sensation, and thousands of "humbler" Americans sent Holt their stories for a series that continued for four years. Holt selected sixteen of the accounts for a book, *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told by Themselves* (1906). A Lithuanian working in Chicago's stockyards told of escaping the Russian Empire, whose leaders were "man-wolves" impressing young men into their army to fight Muslims in the Caucasus. He soon learned that business leaders and politicians in the United States were also "man-wolves," addicted to graft and money. The major difference, he asserted, was that workers could form unions and fight back. "You must get money to live well" in the United States, "and to get money you must combine" (Holt 1906: 33). A seventeen-year-old Jewish girl who emigrated from Poland to work in New York City's garment sweatshops gaily talked of breaking with old country customs. She had learned how to read and write at night school, despite older women at work and in the neighborhood insisting education was a waste of time for a woman. She spent some of her hard-earned money on nice clothes, and she went out dancing with other young women at ballrooms, which her family thought was too fancy for humble workers. She was meeting young men, but to have a good time, not to find a husband. She wanted to marry eventually and have children, but life in America had taught her that to be a good wife and mother, she must develop her own interests. A French dressmaker spoke of coming to the United States because American women craved French fashion and paid generously for her services. The dressmaker had done very well in New York, but the selfishness of U.S. society dismayed her. Speaking of the independent American women who were her customers, she had said, "All that is given to them they take as their due . . . They love, but it is only themselves" (Holt 1906: 133). She planned to return to France once she had saved enough money to retire comfortably. For a young German woman who worked as a nursery maid, there was no question of ever returning home. The United States was too exciting. Coney Island was the most wonderful



Figure 12.1 Woman kneeling on her bed to turn out the light of a gas lamp, her clothes on a chair, from the “New York City Life” series, 1905. Courtesy of Kraushaar Galleries, New York/Image © Trustees of the British Museum

place in the world, she continued, “it is just like what I see when I dream of heaven” (Holt 1906: 140).

The stories Holt selected for his book conveyed his view that Americans, native-born and immigrants, were energetic workers. Poverty was a problem in the cities, but for most people it was a temporary condition that ended when they found work. The problems the country faced came from too much concentrated wealth. The moral standards of the country’s leaders were lax. While the well-to-do and their middle-class sympathizers complained about having to control the lower orders, the independence of American working people put a needed check on the greed of the wealthy, a position underscored in the stories of racial minorities he included. They were as hardworking as other Americans, but lack of civil rights made it difficult to defend themselves. An African American farmer in Alabama was trapped in peonage, working for subsistence as a contract laborer to pay off debts he owed a local merchant who was also the county sheriff. Using his legal authority, the sheriff arrested men that owed him or other community leaders money for vagrancy or another trumped-up charge and had the judge sentence them to unpaid hard labor on the sheriff’s farm. A young man from the Mohawk nation in upstate New York had gone to school to learn a skilled trade, doing what white people recommended for Indians to advance, but when he finished, the jobs he wanted were always for “whites only.” He survived as a manual laborer, returning to the reservation whenever he grew weary of working at a job far below his skill level. A Japanese

immigrant spoke of coming to California to attend an American university. The school promised a scholarship, which proved to be working without wages as a houseboy for a family of wealthy donors. Through these stories, Holt's readers could see that if American men of property succeeded in destroying trades unions or disenfranchising working-class voters, they would quickly turn the United States into a nation of slaves.

Instead, persistent labor shortages left industrialists dependent on their workers and kept wages in the United States the highest in the world. The demand for skilled, professional, and white-collar positions expanded at a faster rate even than the ferocious demand for unskilled labor. The middle class saw their disposable incomes triple between 1880 and 1910, while skilled workers' income doubled. Wages rose for unskilled laborers at slower rates, but increased in most industries and trades. For most corporate employers, high wages were a fact of life, and investing in new technologies that lowered the unit cost of goods was the best strategy for reducing the cost of labor per product. From this practical dilemma came the vaunted technological superiority of the United States and a flood of new inventions. Smaller business owners and industrialists working in areas such as textiles, where technological innovation did not make them more competitive, ruthlessly lowered labor costs by relying on child labor or hiring migrant workers of color that trade unions refused to represent. Most Americans understood that these areas of the economy were backwaters that did not represent the genius of the country for revolutionizing work and leisure (Bensel 2000; Montgomery 1987).

Given the demand for skilled labor and for white-collar employees, men who wanted better-paying, more prestigious jobs could realistically hope to advance, provided they stayed in school longer. White-collar opportunities increased for women as well, though social custom continued to dictate that women leave the paid labor force with their first pregnancy. Some women continued to work because they enjoyed their jobs or their families could use the money, but there remained the suspicion that her husband was not much of a provider. The close of the nineteenth century saw a continuous, often steep decline in prices, particularly for goods important in everyday life such as food and clothing. Most Americans could afford to buy more goods, even products that might not be necessary, but, like the Jewish garment worker's nice dresses, the modest "luxuries" that American workers increasingly enjoyed were evidence that hard work did lead to a better, more enjoyable life.

The presidential election of 1896 developed as a contest between the new corporate-dominated economy, personified in Ohio governor William McKinley, candidate of the Republican Party, and an older agrarian ideal espoused by William Jennings Bryan, the candidate of the Democratic Party. McKinley stood for high protective tariffs to keep out foreign goods, as well as a conservative fiscal policy based on maintaining the gold standard. The powerful National Farmers Alliance had swept Bryan, a thirty-six-year-old congressman from Nebraska, into the nomination of his party. He argued for ending the gold standard and letting the value of the dollar inflate, which could benefit many farmers by devaluing debt. He stood for low tariffs, and heavier regulation of banks, railroads, and commodities merchants. Standard Oil and the railroads financed McKinley's campaign. Republican supporters distributed 200 million pamphlets in fourteen languages to the country's

15 million eligible voters with the simple message that McKinley was the agent of prosperity. Support for industry and corporate growth was presented to the working classes and to the unemployed as the best path to “a full dinner pail,” McKinley’s chief slogan in the election. Bryan’s message was simple: the corporate economy the Republicans promoted was unstable and unfair. Bryan promised government policies focusing on the needs of working people and helping them become independent producers, or independent, self-employed tradesmen. No white American man should be dependent on another for employment or for the ability to get the products of his labor to market. Bryan’s campaign stressed the importance of every American who could becoming a freehold farmer. His acceptance speech was considered a masterpiece of American oratory and its most famous lines were widely quoted for many decades:

You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country . . . We answer the demand for a gold standard by saying: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

(Bryan 1896)

McKinley won in a landslide, securing the first decisive electoral victory of a presidential candidate since Ulysses Grant’s reelection in 1872. The Northeast, the Midwest, and the Pacific West Coast voted solidly for McKinley. Bryan carried the South, inevitable given the region’s enmity to the party of Lincoln and the Democratic Party’s support for Jim Crow. Bryan also carried the sparsely populated Great Plains and Mountain states, where farmers and miners formed an uneasy alliance against “eastern capital.” McKinley succeeded in assembling a broader political coalition. Industrialists were for him, but so was the American Federation of Labor, which wanted high tariffs that protected American industry from goods produced by more poorly paid European workers. Union members liked anti-inflationary monetary policies that protected workers’ earning power. Responding negatively to nativist undertones in Bryan’s rhetoric, urban immigrants voted heavily for McKinley, including Catholic and Jewish workers who normally voted Democratic but were uncomfortable with Bryan’s evangelical Protestant fervor. Already well integrated into global markets, prosperous farmers in the Great Lakes and Pacific Coast states also voted Republican. They were less concerned about how railroads, commodity merchants, and banks took advantage of farmers than in protecting their ability to sell their goods abroad at the advantageous prices that conservative monetary policy allowed. Bad wheat harvests in India, Australia, and Argentina also hurt Bryan’s chances. Grain prices rose, and 1896 turned out a spectacularly good year for American farmers. Those who had invested in farm technology, irrigation, and scientific agricultural practices were able to produce a good crop despite facing the problems that had ruined harvests in other countries. The American agricultural commodities market, already the largest in the world, proved as well to be the most stable and predictable.

From McKinley's election to the crisis of 1929, with three relatively minor downturns, the economy continued expanding, the real wages of the majority of Americans improved, prices declined, and the work week fell from sixty to forty-five hours. Health statistics indicate that during this period there were significant increases in the height and weight of children, as well as an increasingly younger age for the onset of menstruation. People married at a younger age, evidence that young men and women had greater confidence in their ability to become self-supporting (Modell 1991). There were still many problems, including persistent poverty and high levels of violence permeating labor, race, and interethnic relations. The United States had the highest industrial accident rate in the world, and there was no social safety net. Workers who lost their jobs, were injured, or fell ill, had no one to turn to other than extended family, church, or an ethnically based mutual aid society, a reality that reinforced the racial and ethnic divisions permeating every aspect of U.S. society.

Deep poverty shadowed prosperity, and commentators insisted that, except for the South where poverty was a legacy of slavery, the development was new. Was poverty a by-product of economic development or imported into the nation by backward foreigners? One of the most widely read books of the period, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1889), argued that the nation's problems grew from the selfishness driving entrepreneurs and working men alike. The excessive individualism of business life in the United States undermined republican self-government. New national leadership had to emerge, and Bellamy looked to the middle class being formed in colleges and universities, principally but not exclusively composed of members of older North American families like his own. Bellamy argued that the dependence of U.S. enterprise on technological innovation proved that knowledge was the foundation of progress, not capital, nor labor. Bellamy understood that an economy based on small family businesses was incompatible with industrial progress. "The restoration of the old system," he wrote, "were it possible, might indeed bring back a greater equality of conditions, with more individual dignity and freedom, but it would be at the price of general poverty and the arrest of material progress" (Bellamy 1889: 76). Bellamy's book offered an alternative path for social development, based in the professional, educated middle class, trained in rational problem solving.

Cooperation was the key word in Bellamy's conception of a renewed national life. Bellamy's work was readable to his contemporaries because they agreed that cooperation was at the heart of church life and Christian spirit. Cooperation was also associated with family life, and the congregation was the family of Christ assembled under one roof. Bellamy's leap was to think of the nation itself as potentially a family that could operate as a household. Publication of *Looking Backward* came as middle-class reformers shifted their focus from individual moral renewal to goals such as Prohibition achievable only through government action. The book was widely read, perhaps by one in three Americans, in part because, across the country, women's clubs, temperance societies, farm groups, trade unions, and other reform movements distributed *Looking Backward* free to their members. Bellamy's ideas, stripped of the controversial proposition that the government, as representative of the national family, should own all property other than items for personal use, inspired reformers in both major parties to make rational planning directed by educated professionals integral to all aspects of U.S. life (Thomas 1983).

Demands to deploy managerial expertise to curtail the negative consequences of economic success increasingly characterized the United States at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries (Wiebe 1966). Pure food and drug legislation spread across the country before Congress passed national legislation mandating food inspection in 1906. The “City Beautiful” movement succeeded in convincing many cities to adopt uniform standards for municipal services, so that working-class neighborhoods gained the same lighting, water, and sewer service as middle-class districts. Zoning-law advocates worked to separate the toxic industrial environments from residential districts, while conservation of natural resources developed into a patriotic cause (Wilson 1994).

Alongside reform activity, however, was a dramatic quickening in efforts to deprive racial minorities of their citizenship rights, epitomized in the Jim Crow laws of the South. In 1889, Tennessee became the first state to disenfranchise its black citizens. By 1915, every southern state had passed legislation mandating racial separation and stripping African Americans of their voting rights. The lynching epidemic that swept the South became an international scandal. Over 1400 men were hanged or burned alive in the 1890s, the majority killed for “not knowing their place,” testifying in court against whites, or having a “bad reputation.” Black organizations appealed to the federal government for assistance, but southern senators filibustered every bill introduced to address the reign of terror African Americans confronted.

In 1898, a particularly grizzly series of lynching episodes turned into a campaign against the black middle class. In Wilmington, North Carolina, a mob murdered a black postmaster, part of concerted efforts to terrorize black federal employees throughout the South. Southern senators had been chastising President McKinley for violating the social norms of the South by continuing to appoint blacks to positions that southern whites wanted for themselves. White mobs in Palmetto, Georgia, tortured and killed a successful black farmer. After roasting the farmer’s body, 2000 men, women, and children fought over pieces of his flesh as souvenirs. Violence against African Americans with good jobs, education, and property continued over the next decade. In 1906, a mob of 10,000 white men in Atlanta pillaged the post office, the train station, and any white-owned business that employed blacks in any capacity other than menial labor. Black employees were pulled from their hiding places and beaten. Gunfights broke out as mobs invaded black middle-class neighborhoods. Twenty-six African Americans and six whites died in the rampage. A few weeks later, voters in Georgia overwhelmingly elected a new governor who promised to disenfranchise Georgia’s black voters. In Mississippi, politicians, responding to mobs that had gathered in front of several prominent black-owned businesses, pledged to shut down black storekeepers, businessmen, and land-owning farmers so that no white man ever need be ashamed that a colored man had done better in life than he (Brundage 1993).

Congressional gridlock prevented the federal government from addressing the campaign against black civil rights. Defenders of citizenship rights faced strong feelings in the North that the nation could not exercise the global leadership it deserved until whites put aside their regional differences.

The Republican Party advocated that the country develop military capabilities commensurate with its global economic power. In particular, Republicans wanted to increase U.S. influence over Latin America and the Pacific. Expansionist policies led

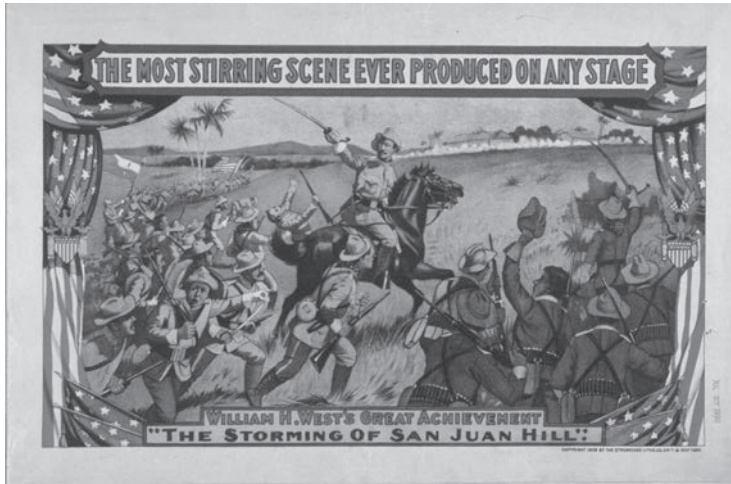


Figure 12.2 “The Storming of San Juan Hill,” poster for William H. West’s Big Minstrel Jubilee, circa 1898. Courtesy of The Library of Congress

to the declaration of war against Spain in 1898. McKinley justified the war as a humanitarian intervention to protect the Cuban people fighting for their country’s independence from Spain since 1895. At first American troops performed poorly. Spanish soldiers were more disciplined and battle-hardened, while their Yankee opponents sweltered in tropical heat wearing woolen uniforms the war department issued them because woolens manufacturers had been important contributors to President William McKinley’s election campaign. Relations with Cuban insurgents were confused, often hostile, largely because U.S. military leaders dismissed the humble, mostly black independence fighters as undisciplined rabble (Smith 1999).

Despite heroic moments such as the charge of Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders up San Juan Hill, U.S. naval superiority, based in the country’s industrial and technological power, proved the decisive factor in the war. At the beginning of the war, Admiral George Dewey’s flotilla destroyed Spain’s Pacific fleet stationed in Manila. Two months later, U.S. ships annihilated Spain’s Atlantic fleet off Cuba. The U.S. navy lost one sailor, while over 300 Spaniards perished. The survivors, including the commanding admiral, were taken prisoner. The Spanish government, unable to reinforce or resupply its forces in Cuba, agreed to end the war on U.S. terms. The United States acquired the Spanish colonies of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam, while simultaneously annexing Hawaii and the eastern half of Samoa. Cuba became a protectorate governed by the U.S. military from 1898 until 1902, when it became a formally independent republic, though still subject to U.S. oversight.

Within the United States, the outcome of the war with Spain vindicated proponents of an aggressive foreign policy based on naval force. U.S. industrial prowess provided the U.S. navy with boats and guns of significantly greater range and power than those of a more experienced but less technologically developed enemy. The leaders of Great Britain took note as well. Given growing competition from Germany in Africa and Asia, an alliance with the United States could strengthen the international

system Britain had constructed (Lake 1988: 77–79). With the occupation of Manila, the United States was positioned to become an Asian power that British officials thought would share many of their interests. British diplomats urged McKinley to annex the Philippines as an American colony. Filipinos had other ideas, and the war with Spain, brief and victorious with modest casualties, was followed in 1899 by a war with Filipino nationalists lasting into the next decade. The U.S. press initially did not report the brutal details of the Philippines war, preferring to celebrate the accomplishments of American teachers in developing a new educational system reaching into every community (Kramer 2006).

Teachers, however, wrote home to their families that massacres and brutal torture were everyday occurrences in the U.S. occupied Philippines. One teacher, who left the University of Michigan to open an elementary school in a town close to the war zone, wrote her mother, “If Filipinos were to judge the American people as a race from the soldiers, they must surely think we are their inferiors.” Another teacher complained, “You think I must be mistaken concerning the orders for killing everything in Samar. It is true that I am mistaken if you take reports that reach the US, but nobody in the US knows what is going on here” (Alidio, 2001). As newspapers and magazines picked up the story, calls for the court-martial of General Jacob Smith, the commander of U.S. forces, grew into a public storm about the war and the U.S. place in the world. In 1902, the Senate held hearings about military tactics used in the Philippines. Soldiers who had practiced torture testified, often in tears. Smith survived a court martial but was forced into early retirement. The U.S. government declared hostilities over, and Congress, eager to reduce taxes, voted to shrink the army. The United States emerged from the Philippines war with the smallest military force of any industrial power. A new approach to empire developed: forget the bad experiences of colonial wars; shift focus onto the technological marvel of the Panama Canal, where U.S. engineers were reshaping the terrain of an entire country and U.S. doctors were vanquishing yellow fever, all to make it easier for ships to connect the East Coast and the West Coast. The Rough Riders’ charge up San Juan Hill remained a staple of popular entertainment as an example of American manly virtue in the face of battle, but the United States was not yet politically ready to establish a large standing army and become a global military power. At the same time, the U.S. economy was growing so quickly that increasingly resources and attention were overwhelmingly dedicated to the nation’s internal development.

Corporate business gained and preserved its dominance in part because it was effective in transforming how people lived. The inconvenience and expense of travel had impeded integrating regional markets into a single national economy until the 1870s when George Westinghouse developed the first working air brakes, one of several innovations that allowed railroads to increase their speeds significantly beyond thirty miles per hour (Klein 2007: 93–99). As fast train traffic became safer, travel times between communities shrank and the cost of transportation declined steeply. Railroads reached into every part of the country, including locations that were barely inhabited but would be once it became possible to get people, farm products, farm machinery, and consumer goods in and out easily (White 2012). As a result in 1892, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that the sections of the country with less than 2 persons per square mile had shrunk to isolated pockets mostly west of the Mississippi River. Several “pockets” extended hundreds of miles in every



Figure 12.3 “Lagoon at Night, Luna Park, Coney Island,” 1905 © New York Public Library, USA/The Bridgeman Art Library

direction, but the census finding formed the basis for historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s declaration in 1893 that the “frontier” had closed.

Many cities across the country grew rapidly almost solely because of rail expansion. Los Angeles turned from a small village into a major city after it became an easily reachable vacation spot for easterners escaping winter weather (Fogelson 1993). On the Great Plains, once ranchers began driving their cattle to Kansas City for shipping to consumers of meat and leather around the world, the city population jumped from 30,000 to over 180,000 between 1875 and 1890 (Shorridge 2012: 29–60). Chicago was the hub for train traffic linking the eastern and western sections of the country, and the city also connected northern markets to ports on the Gulf of Mexico. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, no other city in the United States benefitted as much from the new railroad-centered economy. Its commodity exchanges determined the market prices of most agricultural products the country produced. The city attracted factories producing farm machinery, railroad cars, and processed food. Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, the world’s two largest mail-order catalog companies, located their headquarters and warehouses in Chicago, while more factories opened to satisfy the demand for consumer goods the mail-order business stimulated (Cronon 1992).

Thomas Alva Edison’s company developed by building the telegraph lines railroads needed to manage their trains. Edison’s firm, exploring the commercial possibilities of electric power, developed the first working electric light bulb in 1879, followed by an electrical generating system. In 1882, Edison opened the world’s first electric power plant in lower Manhattan, offering service to property owners in the nearby banking and stock market district. Edison banked on direct current as the

safest, most economical method for introducing electrical energy into everyday life. Direct current involved limited amounts of energy, making it a reasonably safe system that was less susceptible to power variations or outages. Edison's generating plants, however, could supply sites only up to a distance of a mile or so. He believed that electrification would not become part of everyday domestic life but offered excellent value added to office buildings, department stores, and amusement parks. The technical limitations of the system as well as the high cost of Edison light bulbs limited the market, at least the market as Edison conceived it. Taking advantage of these limitations, George Westinghouse developed a competing system based on alternating current. Large-scale turbine generators could produce vast amounts of energy concentrated into high-tension currents that could be transmitted for hundreds of miles and then distributed to homes and businesses from local transformer stations. Westinghouse's system addressed the seemingly endless energy demands of the emerging industrial sector, but the infrastructure required was expensive.

Through the 1880s, Westinghouse and Edison engaged in a high-visibility battle to sell their competing systems. Edison could afford to wire one building at a time, while Westinghouse required full electrification of communities, including the introduction of electrical wiring into virtually every residence and business, for his system to be economically viable. The contest revealed with clarity that the freedom individual customers had to electrify their property or not might well be an obstacle to the development of a modern power system. For the modern industrial system to continue expanding, government decision-making might well have to guide rather than simply respond to consumer choice.

Westinghouse gained a major victory in 1888, when he convinced the municipal government of Kansas City to install an AC system to electrify its street lighting and local streetcar systems. Westinghouse offered incentives to property owners to connect their homes and businesses to adjacent power lines that their tax dollars had funded. City boosters declared that Kansas City, as a "city of light," had become "the Paris of the Great Plains." Edison's publicists responded by publicizing the dangers of the AC system. His laboratory developed the electric chair to dramatize that alternating current electricity was lethal. If high-tension wires were to fall on city streets during a storm, hundreds could die and fires might devastate a city. In a country inured to high levels of industrial accidents, consumers could not assume that electric companies would install or maintain wiring responsibly. The so-called "war of currents" remained in stalemate until the World's Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago in 1893. Edison's bid for providing the fair with electricity was more than twice what Westinghouse proposed. When fair organizers awarded the contract to Westinghouse's firm, Edison's General Electric Company refused to allow its competitor to use Edison light bulbs. The Westinghouse Corporation came up with an alternative light bulb that lasted much longer yet was cheaper to manufacture.

The Chicago world's fair resolved the war of currents in favor of alternating current. The same year, Westinghouse built the world's first hydroelectric power-generating plant along the Niagara Falls to provide electricity to nearby Buffalo. Over the next decade, electricity became commonplace in industry and in the nation's cities, transforming how people lived and worked, while dramatically increasing the ability of manufacturers to expand their productive capacity, as well as introduce new products such as refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines that no

one had previously imagined could exist (Klein 2008). Electric lighting applied to advertising offered another way to remind the nation's busy workers of a fairy-tale world they could enter by spending their hard-earned money. In 1905 and 1906, the first electric light signs appeared on Broadway in New York City, advertising wine, clothing, soap, and other items for personal consumption. *Printers' Ink* wrote of the new phenomenon changing the New York skyline after dark:

Flowers in natural colors stand out against the night sky. Garlands and drapery are traced in many-tinted fires. Delicate jewels of ruby, gold, and turquoise, are suspended over dingy buildings in the sight of thousands of the hurrying ants called men.

(Quoted in Lears 1995: 196)

Note the distinction made between the beauty of the imagery and the “dingy buildings” and the “hurrying ants” condemned to bland everyday lives if deprived of the magic that consumer culture offered. The desire to escape into a world of consumer-driven spectacle fulfilled sociologist E. A. Ross's observation that modern society needed plenty of “social illusion” to contain the tensions of a society with intense divisions and social differentiation (Ross 1901: 314).

The rapid spread of automobiles in the first two decades of the twentieth century followed the model of railroads and electricity in revolutionizing everyday life, while simultaneously demanding that Americans accept more regulation as a condition of material progress. A short motion picture shot in San Francisco in 1905 reveals how profoundly the introduction of automobiles changed everyday habits of perception and interaction (*Trip Down Market Street*, 1905). The filmmaker rigged a camera on the front of a streetcar as it rode down the city's main commercial street. On first viewing, the film suggests that traffic in 1905 followed few rules. While most vehicles drove on the right, enough were on the left going against the majority of traffic to indicate that keeping to the right was not obligatory and the degree to which drivers did so sprang from common habits rather than enforceable legal codes. Traffic involved a mixture of automobiles, horse-drawn buggies, horse-drawn wagons and trucks, bicycles, cable cars, horse-drawn streetcars, and electric streetcars. Streetcars fixed on tracks provided a practical core structure to traffic flow that other vehicles had to respect. Otherwise, drivers switched lanes and pulled in front of each other without prior indication. Both right and left turns could be initiated from any place in the street. Drivers went where they wanted, and they assumed that others would keep out of their way. There were no observable cross walks at intersections requiring drivers to stop for pedestrians, no lanes dividing the street into orderly columns, no traffic signals halting movement on one street so drivers on crossing streets could proceed without hazard, no police directing traffic at any point. Pedestrians dart across the street whenever they spot an opening in the traffic. No one on foot moves slowly, no one seems to assume that drivers will stop.

Of course, the street was not actually a chaotic free-for-all. The rules and practices relied on common sense, self-restraint, and tacit understandings that can be arrived at through the exchange of glances, practical, if not foolproof, guides in an age when 10 miles per hour was very fast. The catalyst of what was coming is seen in the automobiles that weave freely through the traffic, often making dramatically

abrupt turns that cut across several lanes. The automobiles add a distinctively cinematic element to the production. They are the fastest and most erratic vehicles on the street, shifting lanes and cutting in front of the slower horse-drawn vehicles with dashing bravado. Newsboys running after the cars in the middle of the street add humor to the scene as well, and at one point three adolescent boys jump onto the rear bumper of a car and hang on while the automobile speeds ahead.

The boys wave at the camera, possibly indicating that they were asked to perform for the film. If the filmmakers staged one element of their production, possibly other elements of the film involved directed performance rather than pure cinema verité. Could a well-dressed woman standing to the side a block ahead who suddenly dashes into the street, quivers in the middle as traffic passes her in both directions, and then runs with long strides to get to the other side also have been an exaggerated dramatization of the perils confronting pedestrians? Even if that were the case, the resources available to filmmakers to create total environments were limited in 1905. This is not a Harold Lloyd production like *Get Out and Get Under* (1920) or *Girl Shy* (1924) where Hollywood crews took over entire blocks of Los Angeles to orchestrate elaborate moving-vehicle stunts on location. An assumption of traffic laws waiting to be broken is fundamental to the comedy in Lloyd's films, as is the prominent role of traffic police in overseeing public behavior, underscoring how quickly new rules of the road requiring frequent government surveillance of public behavior emerged and took hold. In the film of a cable car trip down Market Street in 1905, on the other hand, automobile stunts were low-key but they do indicate that producers were already thinking about how breaking the conventions of the street could enhance a film's entertainment value.

In the 1920s, Hollywood was the flamboyant symbol of the new mass culture already well underway in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, but Hollywood's heyday did not come until World War I closed down most European motion picture productions. Films were only one and a somewhat late component of a new communications system that developed between 1880 and 1920 as manufacturers sought to expand the consumer pool for their products. Advertising agencies were key players in the development of every aspect of modern mass culture, including Hollywood. The first modern advertising agencies emerged in the 1870s as faster, more frequent railroad service made shipping consumer goods across the country cheaper and more efficient (Chandler 1977; Lears 1995). In the 1880s, advertising agencies invested in middle-class journals in order to find better ways for their clients to reach potential customers. The *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies' Home Journal* were the first journals to reach over 100,000 subscribers and develop truly national distribution, establishing a pattern for what became the dominant reading matter in the United States. These new journals were called "slicks" because they were published on expensive treated paper ideal for quality graphic design. Advertising filled over half of each issue in the most popular magazines. As advertising agencies discovered the advantages of interspersing ads with editorial content, advertising had to become more spectacular and emotional if it were to compete with a magazine's editorial content for reader attention. The slicks could never repay their production costs through sales or subscriptions, but advertising revenues earned publishers larger, more stable income, provided the magazines could attract hundreds of thousands of readers per issue, who bought a magazine for a fraction of what it cost to

produce (Lears 1995). Advertising agencies promoted the construction of national newspaper chains. With detailed information on local markets that the research departments of advertising agencies accumulated, media magnates like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer bought up local periodicals in every part of the country. Chain newspapers continued their local coverage, but shared national and international stories, as well as editorial content and opinion pieces. Most importantly from the business point of view, chains could tap into national advertisers willing to pay top dollar to reach into many local markets simultaneously.

Advertising agency staff were typically university-educated middle-class Americans from native Protestant families. Their core customers were middle-class Americans largely though not exclusively from Protestant backgrounds. But the development of national markets encouraged all Americans regardless of class, race, religion, or region, to become consumers. The corporate economy involved many people shifting their personal aspirations away from the search for independence and autonomy, an ideal long personified in the figure of the yeoman American farmer. An economy was emerging in which the interconnection of people was more clearly visible as the foundation of wealth than self-sufficiency. To be a success meant to work toward satisfying the needs of others through effective management of resources and skills. The middle-class professional stepped forward as the ideal figure for American progress, competing with the American farmer as the symbol of personal success and national strength. The corporate revolution was the foundation of the middle-class revolution, which encouraged millions of Americans to seek higher education, develop their skills, and enter into business or the professions—and increasingly after 1900 to enter reform movements working to limit corporate power, racial discrimination, or government violations of basic civil rights. Farm population declined rapidly after 1900, when a third of the nation still lived in farming counties. By 1930, only a tenth of the nation worked the land, though they produced more food with greater efficiency at lower costs. Racial barriers blocked access to most professions to people of color, but all communities in all parts of the country shared these new ideals, and education levels rose everywhere, while every community saw an increase in professionals and businessmen.

The world of the corporate revolution was based on the premise that abundance was the natural condition of human life, but required discipline and efficiency to achieve. Advertising did more than simply stimulate demand for goods that one may or may not “truly” need. The multiplication of wants led to most Americans, even the poor, developing new expectations for what they deserved from life and what they expected from themselves. As the Jewish garment worker told Hamilton Holt, “A girl must have clothes if she is to go into good society . . . a girl who does not dress well is stuck in a corner, even if she is pretty. Aunt Fanny says that I do just right to put on plenty of style” (Holt 1906: 46).

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