

Political Science 268 - American Political Thought Since the Civil War
Professor W. Carey McWilliams
Haverford College
January 19th, 2005
(Unpolished lecture notes by Andrew L. Yeats)

Last time: the transformation essential to post-civil-war America. As opposed to an enlightenment vision of ideas and persuasion directing the fate of human beings (nature is an orderly mechanism which humans can tinker with) we get a new view that nature is shaped by titanic sub-rational forces, some of them human: unreasonability, passion, sentiment. Many others non-human: biology, geology. With that there's a corresponding change in what humans can do with history. No longer a matter of individuals, it's a matter of moving masses.

The sense of what "progress" means begins to change. Framers begin powerfully in human progress. Character of this view of progress begins to change. Used to be that we can more and more make nature do what we want - we can defy the "little arts of little politicians" - use science to realize the highest hopes of the natural.

When we get to the 19th century, it's not a matter of our science being the tool by which we make history go where we want, science is now the tool which tells us where history is going. It tells us how to avoid being defeated or crushed by it. Writings of Karl Marx: pages and pages trying to persuade you that a certain course of history is *inevitable*. Maybe 4 pages to convince you that this is desirable. Human choice comes down to this: you either go where history is going, or you get crushed by it.

Darwinists do the same thing: we can show you where history is going, and since it's going there, science can show you how to adapt yourself so that you come out on the winning side. Increasingly this is the intellectual mode dominating post civil-war thought.

"The steamroller of history" (communist phrase)

The civil war has to have meant something - some kind of moral transformation of the union. On the other side the argument is that we ought to get the war behind us and forget about it - get back to some kind of national reconciliation. The centerpiece of this debate is the African American. If you want reconciliation, you have to get the African American off the stage. We can find kind words for General Lee if we can ignore the African American - and then we can reconcile the nation.

One other aspect that comes out of the war: war itself, great wars particularly (the ones you believe in), have a way of inculcating the ethic of success. War is the ultimate argument for pragmatism. General McArthur says during the Korean War "In war, there is no substitute for victory" and he was right (at least for Americans). Americans don't have a notion of noble failure in war (except maybe the Alamo - but we won in the end). War says to you: this is a cause worth fighting, and consequently, whatever you do in order to win is justified.

Civil War: we are fighting to restore the union and maybe to eliminate slavery. To do that, it's justified for us to treat escaped slaves as confiscated property because it'll weaken the south. In order to win, we're willing to suspend the right of property. (Woodrow Wilson is convinced of women's suffrage by WWI - it elevates the ethic of success)

Chivalric ideals suddenly stop making sense. "Glory is out of date" The war brings to people a sense of elaborate quasi-Machiavellian pragmatism: what matters is what gets results, what works. That that ethic carried into peace-time is very defining of the next era.

One of the great political consequences: back in the 50's we used to love to quote Justice David Davis in the case of "Ex parte Milligan" Milligan was a confederate guerilla, was captured, tried by an ad-hoc military tribunal and sentenced to death. The problem is that Milligan is an American citizen tried without due

process. Justice Davis (1866) writes the Constitution applies in war and peace, in all circumstances. Court ordered Gov't to pay restitution, Gov't didn't, and people didn't care much.

IF freeing the slaves took a suspension of ordinary ethical standards (if beating the Nazis took such a suspension) isn't that the proper standard to follow? Most Americans think it does post-civil-war.

We also get a new kind of inequality: one of the things that happen in the course of a war is a gigantic increase in the industrial capacity of the country. The industrial base of the country expands in extraordinary ways. One thing is that lots of people move to cities to work in factories. More urbanization, centralization, and with that all the local traditional resistance to inequality, to expansions of wealth, tend to get eroded. Part of the case for war is "whatever helps you win" - you can't criticize inequality if it helps you win. (*Ex: During WWII Gov't was issuing "Cost Plus Contracts": they paid for costs +6%. Thus, the more you spend the more you make. He was turning out 500 ships/year, and doing lots of other stuff, and making lots of money, but it worked.*) Whenever you talk about defense budgets, you need to realize that military people want to get the best military results and don't care if it costs a fortune. All this opens the door to extraordinary inequality of private fortune. This is accentuated by things like the increasing necessity to finance the war. The New York and London exchanges take on a new role: they create money.

Erie Railroad (run by J. Gould and Daniel Drew) they sold shares of the Erie railroad and then by carefully manipulating things they'd drive the stock up, then sell more shares and cause it to crash, and then do it again. (Adams talks about this in Chap 18)

When de Tocqueville talks about the politicization of Americans, he's talking about the local. This becomes less and less important. No American now thinks that state governments are more than a mild diversion, but for people then it was a real adjustment.

Gov't is suddenly doing things: in the business of creating trans-continental railroads for instance. Railroads become promoters of settlements. The Gov't is now promoting the settlement of the west. Eliminate the frontier, put people across the country (in many cases on land that never should have been settled ==> Dust bowl).

Another big case: the Moral Act: government gets into education. They didn't have enough officers in the war, and they want more trained officers, so the Feds give \$\$ to the state for education with two provisos: you have to have courses in scientific agriculture, and in military tactics (basically early ROTC programs). In NJ, Rutgers is the Moral Act school. Lots of \$\$\$ out there all of a sudden because of direct Federal involvement in economic and social life. Not even including the Federal program to reconstruct the South (which we now deprecate for not having been enough). Finally, an increasing involvement of Government as a protector of property rights as against the states. States are frequently taken over by radical groups that want to try some social experiment: increasingly the Federal constitutional authority is used to strike down state and local regulation as unconstitutional using the Due Process clause of the 14th amendment: no person shall be deprived of life liberty or property without due process of the law. (*Sta. Clara County v. Southern Pacific Rail Road defines a corporation as a person in the eyes of the 14th amendment.*) ==> Question of whether a regulation is merely a regulation, or is it merely confiscation, which is illegal. Given that we have an increasingly conservative judiciary, we may see the same kind of process over the next few decades.

The great Railroad strike of 1890 in Chicago was broken by Federal authority because they said they had to make sure the mail wouldn't be delayed.

Pre-civil-war a large part of the agricultural economy is subsistence, post-civil-war, more and more is for the money economy: for shipment. Along with that, more and more people move into cities and worked in factories. Previously we have a society which consisted of two great classes: the independent proprietor and people who are servants. Relatively few people in the middle who are wage-earners. The image of the American pre-civil-war is an independent proprietor. Post-civil-war we're increasingly thinking about people who have jobs and who are dependent on "the wages system." (The system of working for money)

This entails a new kind of difficulty. If you're an independent proprietor (particularly if you're a farmer) and the market goes into the tank, you work harder, you produce more, and you effectively pay yourself a smaller wage in order to balance out total profit. When you get larger scale industrial enterprises, you've got high fixed costs: to put together a steel mill or a railroad you have to borrow a lot of money, and interest on that money has to be paid. You have to contract for raw materials up-front. These contracts were likely to have been written in good times. When bad times come along you can't reduce that cost because you promised to pay it. In bad times, what can you do to reduce your cost? Real simple: you fire workers. (Sound familiar?)

One thing Americans are suddenly exposed to is new: unemployment. If you're a farmer, bad times means you work harder. Wage earners now get the incredible indignity of being unemployed. "We don't need you" says the society. "You're just sucking air" This is a problem for society people hadn't confronted much before the civil war. All of this - the state, the market - are outside the grasp of local public opinion. The political agencies that people have been involved with can't control these things. These are national institutions.

At this point, businessmen don't have much tact. "Well, the public be damned, ain't I got the power" (Vanderbilt) and "Nothing is lost save honor" (Jim Fiske). The only thing that matters is money.

Great novel of the time: Frank Norris' "The Octopus" about farmers who find themselves dependent on the Southern Pacific Railroad. The Farmers rise in rebellion and you get a sense of these terrible, wicked people in the Southern Pacific railroad. The protagonist is a reporter and ends up finally at the head of the Southern Pacific railroad, who says "I just charge what the market tells me to – it's the wheat, it decides!" and in a sense that's true! The market becomes this force that we can't control.

On Monday we'll talk about Chapter 18 of Adams "Free Fight" and Sumner p159-192, p201-226.

Now let's talk about how American theory takes place in this context:

American theory is special almost from the beginning because for the first time you have a mass public that is also endowed with legal political power. Most countries don't have any idea what it's like to live in a society where, at bottom, what matters is public opinion. Thus for the theorist it's not enough to speak to the intellectual classes. You've got to be an academic or a clergyman to make it through one of Hobbes' tomes. Now we need to appeal to a broader audience: and so we get a different kind of writing. You have to talk to the sensibilities of the ordinary people if you want to have an impact on politics.

One thing you notice in a campaign like 2004 is that Bush gets high marks for being able to frame an argument that people can relate to.

Theorists have to at least start out at a level that the people will understand. They have to write to educate. (Henry George's "Progress and Poverty" has a very gripping first chapter, which is written to educate the masses.) But theorists also want to communicate with other theorists. So most 19th century writing is encoded: particularly in relation to things like sexuality which you can't talk about directly, but you can still theorize about it in code.

Henry Adams doesn't want you to know what he means - he wants you to *figure out* what he means.

This is partially because people don't want to be taught things. How do you then persuade someone to do what you want? You don't tell them. You give them a set of rules or puzzles and then they set out to solve the puzzles, and end up doing what you want.

Henry Adams was at the center of American life. Afterwards he says that his life was in some crucial sense a failure, which is such a puzzle.

Great American theorists try to prompt their readers to a kind of reflection: appearances are likely deceptive. What's the philosophical status of convention? Part of what de Tocqueville tells you is that there's this enormous weight of popular opinion - Tyranny of the Majority. (Think Family Feud: guessing how other people think, regardless of whether it makes any sense) In such a culture it's very hard to get free from convention: even rejecting majority opinion is still to be defined by its categories. Many theorists want you to say "maybe convention has it wrong, maybe the categories in which convention thinks is wrong, maybe the very terms we use to define the issues are wrong"

If you look at any critic of Twain's Huck Finn, you'll see that they think it's about slavery. But when we get to the crucial moment when Huck confronts the question of whether he will turn Jim in (because it would be wrong not to do that) and eventually he says "alright, then, I'll go to Hell" - he thinks he's going to hell. He hasn't figured out that it would be *right* not to turn Jim in; he thinks that it's wrong *not* to turn Jim in. If we come to the conclusion at the end that it would be right not to turn Jim in, then the issue for Huck is not slavery, but rather if it's right for him to collude in the theft of the widow's property. Recall this was written in the 1880's and most of the readers already would agree with freeing Jim. So really what this says is "if in this case human rights trump property rights, maybe human rights always trump property rights."