Civic Virtue in America During the Gilded Age

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For Amy

Abstract

This study will seek to reevaluate the era which historians have traditionally labeled as the Gilded Age. It will do this through an examination of the state of civic virtue in the United States during this period. This will be accomplished through an interdisciplinary foray into America's past. From it, hopefully some fresh understandings of what America is, and where it is going, can become apparent. This project falls within the broader exploration of the relationship between the citizen and society and will thus hopefully contribute to that set of literature. This project will be a convergence of several subdisciplines within the field of historical inquiry. These subdisciplines being social history, cultural history, political history, and intellectual history. Therefore, the goal of this study is to provide the fullest possible picture of American civic virtue during this period.

Chapter 1: Introduction

It is substantially true that virtue…is a necessary spring of popular government.
-George Washington[1]

History can be thought of as an arena for the complex and nuanced interplay between the ideal and the real, theory and action. Furthermore, there is an intricate connection between ideas and their historical locales. These claims carry with them some major philosophical baggage which has been discussed *ad nauseum* throughout much of the course of Western thought. These problems can be summarized in two basic questions. First, can a causal order be determined between ideas and material forces, as in which is a product of which? Secondly, can abstract ideas become instantiated, and thus in a sense, affect, or even steer, reality? As to the first question, ideas, can, and most often do, seep out of their more closed or academic contexts into the general consciousness, with profound and often immeasurable consequences.[2] Yet conversely, ideas themselves can be, and many times are, products of, or reactions to, historical circumstances or various other social forces which shape one's very perception of reality. In the example of Darwinism, the historian Oswald Spengler, as well as the thinker Friedrich Nietzsche, suggested that as opposed to being a product of dispassionate reason, "…the genesis of *Origin* might be traced to Darwin's own knowledge of the rigors of British industrialism."[3] Thus, at this point, it seems like the only option is to straddle the fence on this very well-tired philosophical debate, as one can positively say that the relationship between ideas, historical

[1] "Founders Online: Farewell Address, 19 September 1796." n.d. Founders.archives.gov. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-20-02-0440-0002.

[2] Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas have Consequences.* (paperback, 1984 ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948,).

[3] Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Darwin in America: The Intellectual Response, 1865-1912*. (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976,) 93.

events, and social forces is extremely intricate, and thus each respectively affect each other in a myriad of ways.

As for this second problem, in the entire course of history there has been only one true example of the ideal perfectly becoming manifested in the material realm, and that was when the Word became flesh. Yet humans throughout history, at various levels of fervency, have attempted to make physical reality correspond to something that is considered ideal. This is primarily done in the political sphere. On one hand, this can be rather positive, as when the intrinsically interconnected members of a society come together, albeit imperfectly, and pursue a common good. Yet negatively, it can morph into the worst forms of totalitarianism, where an attempt is made to forcibly squeeze all of life into a box constructed by the capricious whims, or worse the misguided ideas, of those in positions of power.

The question that arises from these previous questions, and that is one of the major questions of this study, is whether society should be organized towards some end of achieving, even if imperfectly, an ideal or various ideals, or rather if it should it be organized purely in accordance to perceivable reality. The question of what constitutes civic virtue, and what that looks like, is a subsidiary of these larger questions. In the American Gilded Age such questions were at the forefront, and there was considerable back and forth and confusion as to how to go forward.

Before this study commences there are several preliminary concerns which must be addressed. First, the concept of civic virtue needs to be historically introduced and defined. Next, there needs to be a historical introduction to the Gilded Age itself, establishing the boundaries and purview of this study. Next there needs to be a brief overview of the historical literature which discusses American civic virtue, or closely-related subjects, in the Gilded Age.

Lastly, there must be some philosophical grounding before proceeding to assist in further clarifying the direction, aims, and scope of this project.

What is civic virtue exactly? This is a term that is relatively foreign to the rhetoric proceeding from both sides of the present day political binary of left and right. One reason for this is the ambiguity concerning this concept of civic virtue itself. There is a panoply of definitions for the civic virtue, as the term is very historically specific. Yet this historical complexity does not prevent there from being a general definition which serves the purposes of this work. This definition comes by way of scholar Joyce Appleby, where civic virtue is *"...the quality that enabled men to rise above private interests in order to act for the good of the whole."*[4] This definition encapsulates much the core of the concept of civic virtue, yet some additional details must be provided to gain a fuller understanding of this concept and how it has been understood in American history.

Civic virtue is closely tied to the concept of virtue, a term not without its own conceptual difficulties. A good place to begin in order to see the connection between both concepts is through a definition of virtue as: one delaying gratification and denying base appetites by means of carefully cultivated moral habits. For Aristotle, one of the progenitors of the western conception of virtue ethics, being virtuous is an inner state brought about through such habits. In this virtuous state, the human being lives on the "...mean between excess and deficiency" and thus achieves excellence and felicity.[5] Civic virtue consists of importing this inner condition to the public sphere, but it is also more than that. In classical republican theory, also beginning with

[4]Joyce Oldham Appleby. *Capitalism and a New Social Order : The Republican Vision of the 1790s.* (New York ; London, New York University Press, 1993.) 14.

[5] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. (London: Penguin, 2004,) 39.

Aristotle, the citizen is a necessary component of the *polis.* The *polis* is a "community of citizens," and therefore the citizen's needs are intricately tied together with the needs of the common good. In Aristotelian terms, man cannot achieve *eudaimonia,* or "the good life," unless he participates in the *polis*, since he is by nature "a political animal." Therefore a more complete definition of civic virtue would be: specific qualities, habits, or dispositions which citizens must imbibe, possess, and through which act, in order to be involved in their own self rule and therefore become more human.

What was the role and position of civic virtue in the American founding and in early American life? A mostly ubiquitous position among the founders during the Constitutional process was that the inchoate nation was to be some type of republic. Civic virtue is a necessary component to the classical republicanism that many of the founders knew well. This is the historic republicanism that found its roots in Greek thinkers like the aforementioned Aristotle, and in Roman politicians and historians like Cicero and Tacitus. Republican theory would be revived during the Italian Renaissance and was popularized in Great Britain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such ideas had great influence on the founding. Lockean liberalism was also present during the founding, and it was generally understood among the framers that republics were rare and a short-lived enterprise. Hence there was a tension between liberalism and republicanism and in many ways the United States was birthed as a product of this tension between political ideologies. While Liberalism and Republicanism are indeed similar in certain respects, one of their major differences is on the concept of civic virtue. In fact, these ideologies are in opposition when it comes to the nature of the citizen and the nature of freedom. Regarding the nature of freedom, in republicanism, "…freedom is related to participation in self-

government and concern for the common good."[6] In liberalism, on the other hand, the mechanisms of government are in place to maximize individual liberty and personal autonomy. Thus in Republicanism, the citizen completes his being through participating in his own governance. Conversely in Liberalism, the citizen works towards his individual highest goods without infringing on the rights of others to do the same. Obviously, these two ideologies were not the only ones present during the founding, and were not the only influences on it. In reality, the American system was a complex fusion of many elements from several ideologies and traditions.[7] Thus although republicanism was not the only influence on the founding, it was still a major concern of the founders. Littered throughout their writings and speeches are references to civic virtue and the necessity of a virtuous populace represented by virtuous leaders. [8] For example, the Virginia Declaration of Rights, a source from which Jefferson drew inspiration in drafting the Declaration of Independence, declared "That no free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles."[9] Yet such concerns for civic virtue were tempered with pessimistic views of human nature, as many of the institutional mechanisms of the American system were put in place to check and even "channel" man's natural proclivity towards self-interest into more collective ends.[10] In a system which is driven by directing man's self interest, true civic virtue can be seen as superfluous. Such

[6] Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism*, (London : Routledge, 2002.) 1.

[7] Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.) 3.

[8] Michael J. Sandal, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy.* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.) 126.

[9] National Archives. 2016. "The Virginia Declaration of Rights." National Archives. September 29, 2016. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/virginia-declaration-of-rights.

[10] Christopher Lasch. *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (New York: Norton, 1991). 198.

internal contradictions would become manifest much later in American history. Despite such contradictions, republican civic virtue did exist in early American life.

This civic virtue that did exist in the United States was most prevalent prior to the Civil War, and had a very unique character. This visible form of civic virtue was observed by French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville and addressed in his tome *Democracy in America*. American civic virtue during this period was closely tied to Tocqueville's observation of the paradoxical nature of American individualism, what he labeled as "self-interest rightly understood."[11] Vestiges of this American character would remain during the period of the Gilded Age, yet there was quite a bit of distortion to it.

It is imperative to address another meaning of civic virtue which is broader and less conceptionally rigid and more conducive to the Liberal ideology. Civic virtue, by this understanding, are external actions through which societal members participate in their community and their government. The primary difference between this more broadly construed definition of civic virtue and the narrower classical republican one is a matter of action versus disposition. This can be explained through a comparison of ethical theories, which importantly are also closely tied to the concept of civic virtue. The broader definition of civic virtue is focused on action, much like in deontological ethics, wherein all that matters is that a morally right action is done, regardless of how an individual feels or understands that action. In this sense, the act of voting itself would be considered civically virtuous. The narrower conception of civic virtue is similar, unsurprisingly, to virtue ethics. In virtue ethics, as previously discussed, the focus is less on actions themselves but rather on the cultivation of right habits and dispositions which contribute to the holistic development of the human being. Similarly,

[11] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. (1st Perennial Classics ed. New York: Perennial Classics, 2000,)

republican civic virtue focuses less on civic actions themselves but rather on the complete development of the citizen in proper relation to his political community, as a prerequisite to human flourishing.

Lastly, these ways of understanding civic virtue can be synthesized through a very abstract understanding civic virtue, that is more a sentiment than anything else. In this understanding, civic virtue is an external manifestation of the impulse towards self-governance properly that is ordered within genuine community. Furthermore, in an Aristotelian sense, civic virtue is a result of the deep-seated understanding that political participation is necessary for a full life. This is a sensibility that is the complex result of inherited ideas, historical position, and psychological predispositions. It is at once individualistic and collectivist, a paradox begat of America's dual liberal and republican impulses. These descriptors are by no means absolute, and there are many different forms of this sentiment. There are those in US history who have, at least at times, demonstrated this impulse. John Winthrop, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln to name just a few.

Ultimately, for the purpose of this study, Appleby's definition of civic virtue as overcoming private interest for public good will be the primary metric of analyzing civic virtue during the Gilded Age. Yet these other ways of understanding civic virtue are extremely important to keep in mind as the study progresses.

In historical study, there are certain metrics which can be used to determine the character of a certain society at a certain historical period. One lesser used metric is a given society's treatment and output of civic virtue. For reasons like the aforementioned definitional ambiguity and also the difficultly at quantifying it, many social scientists and historians shy away from

examining any given society's output of civic virtue.[12] Since at least the turn of the twentieth century, many scholars, particularly in the Anglo-American world, have predicated their research upon an unquestioned assumption that all of life is in some degree quantifiable. A study of civic virtue necessarily must reject this presupposition. While exact statistical information may be lacking, there is still a wealth of resources which provide a rich understanding of what a specific society's civic virtue indeed looked like. If one is to not merely examine a certain society through the reductive lens of quantification and examine it more through a broader scope, it is an enriching experience, and one can glean much about the nature of American life. The examination of a society's civic virtue also assists in elucidating how the relationship between citizen and state is manifested in a given society. The period in the United States where this relationship underwent incommensurable change and transformation was the Gilded Age. Thus, one of the main arguments of this thesis is that the relationship between the American citizen and the American state was fundamentally altered during the Gilded Age.

Now there needs to be a historical introduction to the era which historians, not without controversy, have labeled the Gilded Age.[13] For this study, the Gilded Age is understood as the period from the end of the Civil War to the end of the nineteenth century, which is approximately from 1865 to 1900. During this time America was fundamentally transformed in nearly every area of life. The rumblings of change that had begun in the pre-Civil War era fully manifested during this time. The nation went from primarily an agricultural economy into one completely marked and characterized by industry and technological innovation.

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[12] Amitai Etzioni, *The Monochrome Society*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001,) xiii.

[13] Christopher M. Nichols and Nancy C. Unger, *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2017,) 1.

The label "Gilded Age" famously came from a Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner novel which satirized the excesses of America's affluent class. "Gilded" is this idea of putting gold on top of gold as a symbol of the unashamed opulence of many of the wealthy during this period.[14] During this Gilded Age, due to a variety of factors that will be examined, the American citizen slowly started to become more bewildered and lost in a world that was almost wholly unlike anything he had previously known. The realities of this era would ultimately deeply hamper the potential for the cultivation of the "habits of the heart" which would have helped any American practice civic virtue, and thus in essence, self-govern. [15] Yet paradoxically, calls for external moral behavior as well as the statistical number of civic organizations and external civic output somewhat increased during this time.[16] These tensions – the growth of external opportunities for political engagement accompanied by the concurrent declension of actual citizenly power; and the rise of external morality accompanied with a decline in civic virtue – are the driving impetuses of this project.

It is important to note prior to going forward that there is a tendency for scholarship that focuses on this era to be what Howard Mumford Jones has labeled as "moralistic."[17] Admittedly, when examining a historical age such as this one, especially through the lens of something like civic virtue, it is quite easy to engage primarily in critique, especially given the apparent corruption and excess which characterized much of the period. Jones succinctly encapsulates this

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[14] Ibid., 1

[15] Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985,)

[16] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000,) 379.

[17] Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915*. (New York: Viking Press, 1971.) 9.

idea with a rhetorical question, "Who can applaud the Gilded Age?"[18] Therefore, while there are undoubtably critiques to be made, it is imperative to be discerning and look for explanations which do not merely confirm such preconceived biases.

One of the primary reasons that this topic was chosen was due to the absence of a historical monograph on the subject on civic virtue in America during the Gilded Age. Yet, there is still a considerable amount of scholarship which references civic virtue during this period, and historians and academics have understood and treated it in disparate ways. This will be a brief overview of the presence of the concept of civic virtue in the historiographical schools which could be essentially labeled as the "big players" and therefore is by no means comprehensive, as many other works will be explored throughout the rest of this thesis.

The main school of thought to be addressed, which primarily reflected the feeling of unity America experienced in the wake of the Second World War, was the Consensus school. A well-known article by a Progressive historian, John Higham argued that this school presented an America much like Tocqueville did in the 1830's, one wherein the US generally has been "…a happy land, adventurous in manner but conservative in substance, and—above all—remarkably homogeneous."[19] Consensus historians downplayed conflict in American life for what paradoxically was a more nuanced account of the American past. The primary consensus historian from the left – although being a member of this school is a notion that many scholars and he himself have sometimes challenged – was Richard Hofstadter. Hofstadter, had several tremendously influential works could be described as primarily on a "…lifelong quest to

[18] Ibid., 9.

[19] John Higham, "The Cult of the American Consensus." *Commentary (New York)* 28, (1959): 93.

comprehend the relationship between politics and ideas in America."[20] Hofstadter arguably did not focus on the development of citizenly virtue and civic obligation in his analyses of what he called American "political culture."[21] Yet highly related to the subject of civic virtue, especially in *The American Political Tradition* (1948), Hofstadter explored the many discontinuities between American political thought and practice. In this seminal work Hofstadter also challenging the oversimplified Progressive accounts of American history being characterized by binary conflict.[22] Hofstadter did considerable work on certain aspects of the Gilded Age, namely what he called *The Age of Reform* (1955), and discussed civic virtue in the context of the "Agrarian myth."[23] On the other side of the political spectrum, yet while still being a Consensus historian, Daniel Boorstin argued, in the first line of a later work of his on the history of American political theory, *The Genius of American Politics*, "The genius of American democracy comes not from any special virtue of the American people."[24] Boorstin did not see America as have a shared political ideology besides one that was primarily pragmatic in nature.

The next major school would be that of the New Left. In the 1960s and beyond, as the American sociocultural milieu experienced titanic disruptions which essentially ripped to shreds the social fabric which had previously been stitched together in the wake of the second World War, historical scholarship went in interesting directions. The New Left, inspired by many of the older Progressive school narratives, focused primarily on conflict. The more contemporary

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[20] Daniel Joseph Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography.", *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (1984): 976–1004. 978.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Christopher Lasch, 1973. Foreword. In: Hofstadter, Richard. *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It.* (Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989,) XIII.

[23] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R,* ([First]. ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1955,) 23.

[24] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953)

schools of thought, finding their origin in certain New Left histories, turned historical focus towards groups which had previously been marginalized i.e. African Americans, women, and Native Americans. New Left historians reframed much of the narrative concerning reforms during the latter Gilded Age and then during the Progressive Era. Instead of viewing these reforms as anti-capitalist, many of these New Left historians, like Gabriel Kolko, viewed such reforms as actually being championed by big business advocates in a marriage with centrists in the government in order "…to stabilize the economy and suppress a radical leftist alternative."[25] Ultimately, how these various historiographical schools shaped Gilded Age narratives is imperative to this study.

One cannot embark on a historical inquiry such as this and not address the purpose of the history itself, or at least the purpose of this specific historical work. Far too often history, specifically the academic study of history, is treated as merely detached observation of times past. There is such a limited sense of historical continuity – the notion that the past informs the present as well as the future – and it seems that much of the use for history is either found in limited academic circles, as something that is almost a novelty which primarily services the needs and wants of popular culture. Simply put, and without exaggeration, history is so much more than this.

Much of the inspiration for this work comes from the late historian and social critic Christopher Lasch. Lasch, whose writings serve the dual purpose in this work as both rich scholarly sources and as more general sources of inspiration, saw history differently than these aforementioned approaches. Lasch decried the widespread loss of this "… sense of historical

[25] Rich Yeselson, "What New Left History Gave Us." *Democracy (Washington, D.C.)* no. 35 (2015): 24

continuity."[26] To Lasch, this sense quickly degraded into "…the erosion of any strong concern for posterity."[27] Such concerns shaped Lasch's broader views on historical study, which are best described in his own words from the preface of *The Culture of Narcissism.* Lasch writes that "Far from regarding it as a useless encumbrance, I see the past as a political and psychological treasury…that we need to cope with the future.[28]

Now this idea of using history to face the problems of the present must be made distinct from the tendency to use history as a emotional tool in order to evoke nostalgia for some idealized version of the past.[29] The formula for such a historical project is rather straightforward: decry aspects of the present-day US, juxtapose the present with a certain "idyllic" era from the past, and then call for a return to "those days." This whitewashing of the past for purely ideological motives is not the goal or outlook of this historical project. This work, in contrast to that approach, is attempting to study the past to not only to understand why things are the way they are now, but also to use its lessons to face the battles of the present. This is not the absolutizing or idolatrizing the past as which is so often done.[30]

Another important idea from Lasch concerning the purpose of history is that there is an intricate connection between the development of well-rounded citizens, teeming to the brim with virtue, and the study of history.[31] Again, active historical study does not merely serve the

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[26] Christopher Lasch, T*he Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations.* (1st ed. New York: Norton, 1978. 6.) 13.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid. 6

[29]. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (First edition. New York: Norton, 1991,) 82.

[30] Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture,* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1990,) 29.

[31] Kevin Mattson, "The Historian as a Social Critic: Christopher Lasch and the Uses of History." *The History Teacher* 36, no. 3 (2003): 375–96. https://doi.org/10.2307/1555694. 375.

purpose of providing the student with virtually useless information of a petrified past. Rather it "…can encourage people to think about broader moral and political questions and to think more critically about the present."[32]

Now a brief preview and guide for this thesis. The question of civic virtue and the Gilded Age will be analyzed in two primary parts. Chapter 2 will provide an overview of American society, culture, and general intellectual milieu during the period with an emphasis on how the changes and shifts in all these areas deeply affected the potential for civic virtue amongst American citizens. Chapter 3 will examine American political life during the period, with a focus on the presence, or lack of presence of civic virtue. The final chapter, Chapter 4, will conclude the thesis through a broad overview of reform movements, with analysis and conclusions extending into present, along with some thoughts on how the research can move forward.

[32] Ibid.

Chapter 2: Civic Virtue in American Society and Culture During the Gilded Age

Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is my portion,
That I not be full and deny You and say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or that I not be in want and steal,
And profane the name of my God.- Proverbs 30:8b-9 (NASB)

America during the Gilded Age experienced various convulsions that altered its society and culture in ways previously unseen. The main purpose of this chapter will be to discuss the general state of American civic virtue approximately between the years of 1865 and 1900 in light of these seismic societal, cultural, and intellectual shifts. It seemed proper to first do an overview of civic virtue from this broader standpoint of American society and culture and then delve into a more specific examination of the arena which is downstream of society and culture, politics. Alongside this discussion of American society and culture will also be an exploration of American intellectual life during this period, as all these factors mutually affect each other. There are several questions which will be tackled in this chapter that will be expanded upon throughout the rest of this thesis. First, what were the causes of such change in American society and culture? Next, how exactly did they alter American society and culture? Lastly, how did this changing milieu affect American civic virtue?

In the wake of four years of fratricide, at many times during the Gilded Age there was "…a real possibility that full scale social chaos was at hand."[33] Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, some have argued, America was actually the most unified it had ever been.[34] This seems

[33] Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans have Lost the Sense of Evil*. (First Noonday ed. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996,) 142.

[34] Paul Herman Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900.* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937,) 298; & Henry Farnham May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of our Own Time, 1912-1917,* (1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1959,) 9.

to be a dubious claim. If this unity did truly exist, it was more than likely a tenuously composed synthesis that was a product of various competing and contradictory impulses in American society which defined latter half of the nineteenth century.[35] The more nuanced truth points to a reality that resides at the most subterranean depths of the human experience. Hence, another way of viewing this era would claim that beneath the false unity engendered by a burgeoning mass culture, American society post-Civil War started to completely fracture, a fracture that would only continue to fissure with time. These fractures were not merely binary oppositions along the lines of class, race, or sex as Progressive historians of various eras would claim, but something far more complex and variegated. The fracturing was within American citizens themselves, many living with a heart divided, stretched across competing commitments and contradictory impulses. Furthermore, one could argue that this fracturing of America was in some sense even more acute than it was during the Civil War. Therefore, if this claim is leaning towards reality it would render the idea of there being some level of genuine national unity superficial at best, and propagandistic at worst. Thus, the question is, does this claim hold any evidential weight, and if so, what was the effect of this condition on civic virtue in American life?

During the Gilded Age, cultural and religious homogeneity, which had been, at least in principle, main adhesive elements in the ordering of America life, began to dissolve. During his second inaugural address, Lincoln declared that those on both sides, despite being locked in mortal conflict, "… read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other."[36] Yet by the turn of the century, Americans were in a much more confusing

[35] Susan Curtis, "Overview: 1878-1912." In *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, edited by Mary Kupiec Cayton, and Peter W. Williams. (Gale, 2001.)

[36] Abraham Lincoln, "Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address." *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, https://www.nps.gov/linc/learn/historyculture/lincoln-second-inaugural.htm.

place. Undoubtably, the Civil War played a major role in this undoing, yet it was absolutely compounded during the Gilded Age due to a considerable array of diverse factors. This combination of factors would severely attenuate the American citizen's potential for the possession and proper exercise of civic virtue. The first of these factors is the general concept of modernization.

"Modernization" has become a rather slippery term in academic circles, but it is fairly clear when referring to what happened in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. [37] In the United States modernization was primarily the economic transition from agrarian to industrial, yet there was much more also occurring to mark this transition.[38] Thus during this period, the United States effectively entered modernity, if not having played a major role in its creation.[39] This period of modernization was as frenzied as it was rapid, producing various consequences which, characteristic of the American innovative spirit, were not usually taken into account by those heavily involved in the process while it was being undergone. On some levels, the fruits of modernization were more ripe than rotten, as in the benefits outweighed the costs. This is supported by easily quantifiable metrics such as overall mortality rate and overall wealth level. By this latter metric of total wealth aggregation, the period was the most prosperous hitherto in American history.[40] Yet statistics do not necessarily provide a full impression of the less savory elements to the modernization process; and they also do not

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[37] Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination.* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992,) 90.

[38] Howe, Daniel Walker. "American Victorianism as a Culture." American Quarterly 27, no. 5 (1975): 507–32. 515.

[39] Jean Baudrillard, *America.* (New York, NY; London;: Verso, 1989,) 82.

[40] "Chapter A. Wealth and Income (Series a 1-207) National Wealth: Series a 1-100 EARLY ESTIMATES of NATIONAL WEALTH (a 1-2)." n.d. https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1949/compendia/hist_stats_1789-1945/hist_stats_1789-1945-chA.pdf.

provide a complete picture of the effects of the process, as some are less apparent than others. The more apparent of these consequences, those which reformers and muckrakers tackled with the most ferocity, were the plentitude of social ills which especially plagued the American cities. The less apparent consequences were much more difficult to confront – if they could even be discerned at all. These consequences were much more spiritual in nature, and would often not become manifest till years later. Specifically, one of these consequences was the altering of the average American's potential for civic virtue. The next factor of change to be explored is that of immigration and its effects on American society and culture during this time.

There are two forms of immigration that will be discussed. The first is the immigration of ideas. The second is the more commonly understood form of immigration, that of people.

Many have observed that there is almost a natural migration of ideas from Europe to the United States. Yet, these ideas do not make their nest in the American mind in pure form. The American spirit makes an indelible impression on everything and everyone that it encounters. On ideas this impression is particularly strong. European ideas become Americanized as they are unconsciously either integrated or rejected with the moralistic, practical idealism that is fundamental to the American mind.[41] Yet there is a deeply ironic inversion of this, as the more intellectually potent aspects of ideas have tended to percolate into the general American Geist without serious opposition, as a major component of this American Spirit which developed during this period was a tendency to be uncritical about basic life assumptions. The American worldview would thus slowly become an assorted amalgam of various and often contradictory

[41] Henry Farnham May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of our Own Time, 1912-1917,* (1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1959,) 9.

ideas about the fundamentals of life itself. The true consequences of such a shift would only become apparent much later.

The promise of America, arguably one of its deepest ideals, is the possibility for not only new creation but also for the "…realization of everything the others [those in Europe] have dreamt of – justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom."[42] This hope, that dreams which seemingly never could be fully realized in the old country could now potentially be realized, was undoubtedly in the hearts of those who made the excruciating decision to sever themselves from tradition, family, and history, and make their way to what was still the "New World." Therefore, a major development during this period which realtered much of the American demographic landscape was mass immigration. There had been steady foreign immigration in the era prior to the Civil War – this fact being most exemplified by the considerable amount of first-generation immigrant soldiers who fought for the Union – from primarily Northern and Western Europe.[43] Yet in the post-Civil War era, the majority of immigrants came from Eastern and Southern Europe. This change would prove to a dramatic element in the American story, and one that would be transformative to the trajectory of the American citizen. The effects of this mass immigration on American civic virtue are closely tied to the concept of "Americanization."

What did it mean to become an American? During this period and in the early twentieth century, being at least personally virtuous was something that was presented as fundamental to the American identity, something that was especially evident in the speeches of Theodore

[42] Jean Baudrillard, *America.* (New York, NY; London;: Verso, 1989,) 83

[43] Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921.* (Arlington Heights, Ill: Harlan Davidson, 1982.) 2.

Roosevelt.[44] Yet, such personal virtue did not necessarily translate into political currency. As such rhetoric about what truly makes an American citizen increased as a result of the immigration debate, the actual concentration of political power in the hands of the average American continued to decline. This was a trend that would continue well beyond the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Hence, the primary governmental response to immigration essentially sought to "patriotize" and assimilate immigrants. [45] From a more skeptical perspective, such rhetoric which flowed from this time could be seen as primarily efforts to condition immigrants into unquestioning producers and consumers, working under the hope of one day gaining individual riches and accompanying personal assent into a higher stratum of society or, as popular rags-to-riches novelist Horatio Alger and others like circus magnate P.T. Barnum would say, the attainment of "fame and fortune."[46] Yet conversely, it is important to note that Alger-esqe attributes, which were a descendant of the self-made man philosophy of Benjamin Franklin, itself a combination of Christian ethics and good business acumen, are arguably necessary prerequisites to true civic virtue. From this perspective, the incessant encouragement to practice such personal virtues like diligence, perseverance, respect, self-discipline and delayed gratification could be seen as those in power pushing citizens to complete these first necessary step towards the practice of civic virtue. In other words, practicing such virtues meant a cleansing of the "…inside of the cup…so that the outside of it may also become clean."[47]

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[44] "The Man in the Arena: Citizenship in a Republic Theodore Roosevelt Association." 1910. Theodoreroosevelt.org. https://theodoreroosevelt.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=991271&module_id=339364.

[45] United States Immigration Commission (1907-1910), William Paul Dillingham, and Harvard University. 1911. *Reports of the Immigration Commission*. Washington.

[46] Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick* (Project Gutenberg.)

[47] Matthew 23:26 (NASB)

For some scholars, the primary metric for seeing when various immigrant groups became more identifiably "American" was through their consumption habits, not their output of civic virtue.[48] While using only such an approach is loaded with assumptions that reduce human behavior down to economic exchange, there is some considerable merit to this idea. The acquisition of certain possessions, and therefore having more "disposable income" did generally demarcate one's socioeconomic position.[49] For example, in the case of many, "The most popular mark of middle-class attainment was the piano in the parlor."[50] Thus, the value-determiner of citizens was more and more becoming their material status.

The next factor to discuss is massive changes in American religious belief that occurred during this time, as well the changes in what has always been intrinsically tied to religious belief in America – the life of the mind. Hence, it is imperative to give an overview of the main intellectual currents which pulsed through the United States throughout this period and their effect on American civic virtue. There is a distinct nexus between one's religious disposition and one's position towards civic virtue. That is to say that one's religious beliefs will play in heavily on how one views civic life.

The history of ideas in the United States is best understood as a series of binary conflicts. The first, and most fundamental of these conflicts, as described by intellectual historian Morton White, is "its [the American intellectual tradition] oscillation between doctrines that are essentially religious, idealistic, or supernatural, on one hand, and the scientific, secular, or

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[48] Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921.* (Arlington Heights, Ill: Harlan Davidson, 1982.) 143.

[49] Ibid.; 137.

[50] Ibid.

naturalistic on the other."[51] At its most fundamental it was the conflict of faith versus reason. Yet there is considerable nuance to this conflict, and therefore it is not so easily clearly distinguished as one side versus the other, many arguing that the conflict itself is a false dichotomy. Specifically when looking at this conflict in early American intellectual life, it is important to not to view it as something where each side was clearly delineated. Furthermore, one cannot treat that the majority of "…seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European philosophers as if they were secular philosophers", as in their historical context, religious questions were intrinsic to their overall thought.[52] Thus faith and reason paradoxically worked both in tandem and in contrast. Carl Becker argued that up through the Enlightenment the understanding was that "…reason may be employed to support faith as well as to destroy it."[53] This back-and-forth relationship between faith and reason would eventually start to shift into something where the cleavage between the two was clearer, and reason slowly took precedence. In the incipient United States, particularly among intellectuals, a more "reasonable" faith was what many strove towards, with obviously some exceptions. For example, In the case of Jonathan Edwards, many of his contemporaries "…professed and defended Christianity; yet virtually all like [John] Locke endorsed a broader, more tolerant, and more 'reasonable' religion."[54]

Yet this shift was not something clear cut, and it never really would be. The complex reality of this conflict is revealed through the writings of many US intellectuals and prominent thinkers: this was a conflict that was one waged within man himself, no matter what their public

[51] Morton White, *The Age of Analysis: Twentieth Century Philosophers.* (New York: G. Braziller, 1957,) 144.

[52] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion." In *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, edited by Vere Chappell, 172-98. (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994,) 174

[53] Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932,) 8.

[54] George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003,) 63.

positions on such issues were. Therefore, much of American intellectual history can be viewed as a consistent groping for a rapprochement to this conflict. For many though who were not necessarily intellectuals, this conflict was resolved rather easily through a reliance on Scottish Common sense philosophy and the absolute final authority of Scripture.[55] Yet as the nineteenth century wore on, even the strongest of faiths would be challenged.

Henry May summarizes how an extension of this more general intellectual conflict would synthesize into the underlying ideology of the American founding. May argues that this ideology was a compromise between dueling beliefs in "moral certainties" on one hand, and the "desirability of change and progress" on the other.[56]

During the Founding, in the view of scholars like Robert Bellah, American religious life was thought to exist in two separate spheres.[57] The first being one's public religion, the other being one's private religion. Hence, Robert Bellah's famous concept of the "American civil religion" is, in this view, was seen as the acceptable form of religion in the public sphere.[58] This American "civil religion" was in a sense acceptable to even the most skeptical, as it was not explicitly doctrinal or denominationally specific. Its main tenets were a belief in, "…the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance. Therefore, this "civil religion" was consistent with the American conception of religious pluralism, as "…all other religious opinions are outside the

[55] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.)

[56] Henry Farnham May, *The Enlightenment in America.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976,) xi.

[57] Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991,) 172.

[58] Ibid., 172.

cognizance of the state and may be freely held by citizens."[59] Within this structure, the very general and widespread belief was "…that Christianity [or at least its moral traditions] was the only basis for a healthy civilization…"[60] Hence it was also the natural assumption of many that being morally upstanding and at least nominally being Christian, was necessary prior to being a good citizen.[61] While this latter idea did remain during the Gilded Age, it became evermore superficial, essentially a box to be checked for someone's personal well-being. Furthermore, the challenges of the nineteenth century – a lethal compound of potent ideas and tumultuous historical circumstances – would cause this American civil religion to become even more amorphous, eventually degrading it into a set of empty signifiers.

While conflicts of faith were somewhat evident in the years up until the Civil War, they were overshadowed by the critical importance of the slavery issue. Although, various forms of conflict did at times boil and spill out in certain religious circles, generally, as in pre-revolutionary Europe, Christian belief, at least in the form of "Civil religion" was still "…something like the sky, from which no man can escape and which contains all that is above the earth…"[62] Yet in the era beyond the Civil War, just as what had happened in Europe in the prior part of the century, Christianity and religious sentiment as a whole "… became something like a bank of clouds, a large but limited and changing feature of the human firmament."[63] In other words, the natural assumption of the existence of a Monotheistic transcendent power and

[59] Ibid.

[60] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.) 12.

[61] Ibid., 12.

[62] E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848*. (First ed. Cleveland: World Pub. Co, 1962,) 259.

[63] Ibid., 259.

an accompanying created order was no longer a given. One of the primary intellectual causes of this reality was the widespread influence of Darwinian evolution.

The widespread effects of Darwin's theories on not only the American mind but that of the entire globe are truly incalculable. Charles Taylor writes that in the present "secular" age, "Humans are no longer charter members of the cosmos, but occupy merely a narrow band of recent time."[64] Darwin's ideas were not necessarily novel, and had been, pardon the wordplay, evolving for quite some time. Therefore, Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 served as the "final terminus" for the "…transformation in outlook from a limited, fixed cosmos to a vast, evolving universe…"[65] Darwin's theories provided an immense amount of additional theoretical justification for a position which arguably many in the American intellectual tradition had long begun to suspect or even rather long begun to feel: that human beings were a product of chance and completely alone within a vast, cold, and unforgiving universe.

While philosophical naturalism is not automatically a result of belief in Darwinian evolution, certainly many naturalists now had their Genesis. While intellectual movements like pragmatism attempted to reorient meaning within a new framework, the damage, so to speak, had been done. There are two specific impacts of Darwinism which will be touched upon herein.

The first impact is the fact that Darwin's ideas unsurprisingly were extrapolated to spheres beyond mere biology. Ideas, which can be summarized by phrases which are essentially colloquialisms today: "survival of the fittest"; "simple to complex"; and "adaption to

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[64] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. (Harvard University Press, 2007.) 327.

[65] Ibid., 327.

environment" become ways of viewing social and political reality. Collectively, the application of these Darwinian concepts to social reality became known as Social Darwinism. Belief in certain forms of Social Darwinism would lead to a more pernicious position that was rather popular amongst many intellectuals, the belief in selective human breeding, otherwise known as eugenics. The American eugenics movement did not pick up steam until the 1920's, but it is imperative to note how the movement was a consequence of Social Darwinist thought.

The second other impact of Darwinism is less apparent, as it is something which men felt only in the recesses of their being. This was a burgeoning existential self-awareness which only confirmed the suspicion that one was cosmically alone, and when he cried out to anyone there was "…no answer but an echo."[66]

Besides Darwinian thought, this reality was also the result of several other factors. The experience of the Civil War being the most salient of these. The inane carnage of the war, for many involved in it, defanged earlier religious symbols which had been so securely nestled in the American mind.[67] This would lead to a sentiment that scholar Andrew Delbanco characterizes as "a stark sense that the world was run by chance."[68] This feeling of intense uncertainty about the ordering of the universe, and a thus a general unease about one's fate, had considerable effects on American mind during this time, and would deeply affect the ordering of American political life. Hence, Darwinism provided an intellectual structure for this sentiment of complete existential and cosmic uncertainty. Cynthia Eagle Russett summarizes this new framework,

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[66] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus,* as quoted in Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (First edition. New York: Norton, 1991,) 229.

[67] Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans have Lost the Sense of Evil*. (First Noonday ed. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996,) 136.

[68] Ibid., 143.

arguing that “The serene cosmic pattern was replaced by the blind movement of mindless forces eternally sifting and shaping all living things, men as well as the lowliest mollusk towards ends unperceived and perhaps nonexistent."[69]

The ramifications of such a change in attitude can only be described as spiritually transformative. Delbanco continues, “The emergence of chance and luck as the chief explanations and desiderata of life is perhaps the central story of modern American history…”[70] Now, in a complete reversal of Puritan Calvinism, chance ruled. In the long run, this sentiment stifled motivation to engage in what potentially could be generations-long “life projects.”[71] This phenomenon had a deep effect on American civic life. Intellectuals did attempt to counter this nascent nihilism, yet at many times they attempted to do so without a fixed, transcendent reference point. The primary philosophy which was a product of such a project was American pragmatism.

As previously discussed, much of American intellectual life of this era was one of finding the “*via media”* between the dueling philosophical positions which defined the American philosophical mind.[72] Pragmatism was also arguably a product of many of these previously discussed intellectual conflicts, which again had been further heightened in Darwin’s wake. Pragmatism was a key component of “the American philosophy” which was developed “between 1880 and1920.”[73] The major American pragmatist thinkers were Charles Sanders Peirce, John

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[69] Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Darwin in America: The Intellectual Response, 1865-1912*. (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976,) 3.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., 150.

[72] James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.) 4.

[73] Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism' (In: Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Taylor and Francis,) 1998.

Dewey, William James. Each one of these thinkers could arguably be labeled as the greatest American philosopher. Their pragmatism, as described by the more recent American pragmatist Richard Rorty, was a philosophical project which "…hoped to save philosophy from metaphysical idealism, but also to save moral and religious ideals from empiricist or positivist skepticism."[74] Hence, Pragmatism came about as need for an alternative to what William James had labeled as the oppositional temperaments of sides of "tough" and "tender" in American philosophy.[75] Those thinkers of a "tender" temperament were more religious and usually were governed by a belief in an ordered cosmic structure. Those with the "tough" temperament, on the other hand, were irreligious and governed by "fact."[76] Pragmatism was born as an attempt to "satisfy both demands."[77]

In pragmatism, especially among these three thinkers, there was limited agreement as to how exactly this goal was to be completed. Despite differences in the much of the substance of their thought, pragmatism very broadly can be defined as a philosophy that does what works. In other words, Pragmatism grounded itself by measuring practical results, as opposed to groundign reality in correspondence to a theoretical ideal separate from immediate human perception. A less academic version of pragmatism essentially became the default operating system for many in American politics and economic life. All activity in these spheres was to be measured by their practical results. Yet unfortunately, many did not have an adequate lens to interpret these results through, and thus the "tough" in James's conception became the more prevailing sentiment as

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[74] Ibid.,

[75] Morton White, *The Age of Analysis: Twentieth Century Philosophers.* (New York: G. Braziller, 1957) 144.

[76] William James, *Pragmatism and Four Essays from the Meaning of Truth*. (New York, Meridian Books, 1955.) 25.

[77] Morton White, *The Age of Analysis: Twentieth Century Philosophers.* (New York: G. Braziller, 1957) 144.

there became a manic focus on the proliferation of interpretation-free "facts" a trend that increased during the Progressive era and has only increased from there.

The emergence of this previously discussed sentiment coincided with the previously unseen availability of goods once thought to be items of luxury, there now being time specifically set apart for leisure, and also completely novel forms of entertainment. Therefore, one of the apparently positive aspects of the explosion of industry in the United States was the this relatively novel possibility of leisure, or "free time" for at least some in the laboring classes. Yet it is imperative to note that this was not something necessarily conducive to building an environment which provides for the possibility of genuine civic virtue. This is not to claim that any and all forms of leisure are inimical to civic virtue, rather it is an argument that a life composed only of hard labor and passive entertainment is one that is roughly akin to Jose Ortega y Gasset's "Mass Man" or Friedrich Nietzsche's "Last Man." This person simply is bereft of any real sense of purpose, and hence is unable to engage in civic life. One could go further and argue that the practice of civic virtue is a less a guard from dangers posed by a tyranny from without, but rather a guard from what the novelist Aldous Huxley would refer to as "…man's almost infinite appetite for distractions", which therefore is more a tyranny from within.[78] The danger which comes from being fully immersed in all things trivial is a danger that the social critic and media ecologist Neil Postman warned about most presciently in his classic work *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Yet that is not to say that all of the options for leisure time during this time were completely vacuous and trivial. The emergence of "Chautauqua" camps presented a

[78] Aldous Huxley, Brave New World Revisited quoted in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.* (20th anniversary ed. New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books, 2006.,)

competition to Vaudeville, with the former encouraging recreation and family activity, and the latter being primarily base entertainment.

As the century neared a close, the sentiments felt deeply by many of those in both Europe and the United States at the turn of the century, were that of discontent and ennui. The period wherein these were strongest-felt and most widespread has been labeled by scholars as the *fin de siècle,* which just is simply French for "end of century." Once industrialism became more refined and its fruits were starting to become more physically evident, those especially in middle or upper class positions were utterly beset by the banality of their lives which begat boredom. Life solely directed towards the pursuit and attainment of material prosperity failed to squelch the human gnawing for a meaningful existence. Monetary pursuits, which had in many ways become a substitute for the role of traditional religion, and the extreme insecurity caused by an unforgiving, impersonal market, yielded despair. This was something that frightened various intellectuals and political leaders. Victorian culture in its attempts to "…humanize the emergent industrial-capitalist order by infusing it with a measure of social responsibility, strict personal morality, and respect for cultural standards" unfortunately could only ameliorate mostly just the symptoms of this deeper spiritual malaise.[79] Something had to invigorate this stolid Victorian conception of life which could not fully satisfy man's natural "..urge to heroism."[80] Christopher Lasch argues that, "By the end of the nineteenth century, the decline of heroism had become a common relent."[81] Society was increasingly becoming filled by "Men without chests," or essentially those who were virtually incapable of true "virtue and enterprise" since all that really

[79] Howe, Daniel Walker. "American Victorianism as a Culture." *American Quarterly 27, no. 5* (1975): 507–32. 515.

[80] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death.* (New York: Free Press, 1973,) 3.

[81] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (First edition. New York: Norton, 1991,) 296.

was left to justify existence in liberal, industrialized society was the basic utilitarian principle of pleasure maximization and pain minimization.[82] Yet the opportunity to counter this malady was found in the pursuit of the martial virtues which had essentially laid dormant since the Civil War. Lasch continues, "Cut loose from religious moorings, however, the defense of the strenuous life degenerated into a cult of sheer strength." This conception of virtue would fit aptly with the previously discussed concept of Social Darwinism. Many co-opted "…the heroic ideal into the service of militarism, jingoism, imperialism, and racial purification."[83] Such calls helped to turn American attention outward, beyond the American continent.

Even William James, a major progenitor of another attempted panacea for this crisis, the one that would eventually triumph[84] – the therapeutic conception of life – also joined the called for the revival of the martial virtues such as "…order and discipline, the tradition of service and devotion, of physical fitness, unstinted exertion, and universal responsibility."[85] Yet James put an interesting spin on this idea in his influential 1906 essay, *The Moral Equivalent of War.* James was in agreement concerning the nation's lapse in such virtues, which he believed were "…absolute and permanent human goods."[86] Yet for James, who was a pacifist, rather than the pursuing kinetic wars he argued that societies must pursue projects that, while not necessarily war, maintain these indispensable virtues. James declared that the "Martial virtues must be the enduring cement" which prevents nations from becoming merely playgrounds wherein pleasure

[82] Lewis, C.S. *The Abolition of Man*, (Samizdat, 2014) 12.

[83] Ibid., 296.

[84] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

[85] "William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War." (1906,) https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/moral.html.

[86] Ibid.,

and comfort are the highest good, something which no civilization can long endure. [87] This was a fascinating take on civic virtue, and one to keep in mind as this study continues.

Lastly, there will be a brief discussion the nature of familial life during this period; more specifically the changes wrought in family life due to industrialization. This is imperative to address as proper and harmonious familial relations are a prerequisite to a flourishing civic life. What were the effects of industrialism on the family? Lasch argues that a major result of industrialism, with the natural accompaniment of the "…decline of house-hold production and the rise of wage labor…" led to relatively novel conception of "…the family as a private retreat from a public world increasingly dominated by the impersonal mechanism of the market."[88] Lasch continues, arguing that this state of affairs produced "ambivalent emotions."[89] "On the one hand, they wanted the comforts and conveniences furnished by industrial progress; on the other hand, the agency of progress – the capitalist market – appeared to foster a type of acquisitive individualism that left no room for the finer things in life: loving-kindness, spontaneous affection."[90] This was reflective of some of the larger themes that have been discussed thus far. For many the changes of this era fostered a condition of deep ambiguity concerning numerous issues, establishing many conflicting visions towards what the "good life" meant. Unable to find answers, many subconsciously retreated and burrowed themselves into triviality.

The primary result of all these discussed factors was a growing mass of citizens whose sense of civic duty was becoming quite diluted. In this confusion, citizens were becoming further

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[87] Ibid.,

[88] Christopher Lasch and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Women and the Common Life : Love, Marriage and Feminism.* (New York: W.W. Norton. 1998,) 94, 95.

[89] Ibid., 94, 95

[90] Ibid.

detached from the centers of American power. Ironically though, it has been fairly well documented that civic participation, especially at the turn of the century and beyond, had actually increased in major respects.[91] It is important to note that these forms of civic participation are more an example of the second definition of civic virtue which was introduced in Chapter One. This type of civic virtue had a seismic increase during this era. Clubs and social organizations of all types cultivated a high degree of "civic life" which had been conspicuously absent from the lives of many in the era after the Civil War.[92] These were organizations, similar to the previously discussed "Chautauqua" camps, sought to recoup the communalness which had been an unfortunate victim of American modernization.

The question to be answered in later chapters is, did such organizations inculcate the habits, dispositions, and character needed for self-governance? In other words, did such organizations foster true civic virtue? Also additionally did they recuperate any of the political power which the common man had been progressively losing? There is not a simple answer in regard to the question of if such organizations fostered true civic virtue. On one hand it is undeniable that there was a positive communal affect from such organizations,[93] yet on the other hand, perhaps besides organizations created by the American farmers who would become the Populists as what will be seen in Chapter 3, these organizations did not necessary empower the citizen in the grander sense specifically in his relationship to political power

[91] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000,)

[92] Ibid., 369.

[93] Ibid.,

Chapter 3: Civic Virtue in American Politics During the Gilded Age

The average citizen must be a good citizen if our republics are to succeed.
-Teddy Roosevelt[94]

A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere. In the present age a rebellion is, of all things, the most unthinkable. Such an expression of strength would seem ridiculous to the calculating intelligence of our time –

– Søren Kierkegaard from *The Present Age: On the Death of Rebellion*

The effects of the American Civil War, industrialism, and the general political happenings of the Gilded Age would eventually bring about new and centralized mechanisms of control that were seemingly necessarily to bring order to the chaos which modernity had wrought. Civic virtue, seen as the means for citizens to properly govern themselves, would unfortunately absent from this arrangement. Furthermore, during this period, the ordinary man would begin to lose his proximity to the engines of political power in the United States.

The advent of untrammeled industry did not merely deepen class division in the United States, as one could argue it actually introduced the concept of "class" itself into the American consciousness.[95] There had always been some level of material inequality in the United States, yet, prior to this era, as historians and political philosophers like Christopher Lasch and Michael Sandel would come to argue, class distinction were not so clearly demarcated as there are the present, with the obvious exception of chattel slavery.[96]

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[94] The Man in the Arena: Citizenship in a Republic Theodore Roosevelt Association." n.d. Theodoreroosevelt.org. https://theodoreroosevelt.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=991271&module_id=339364.

[95] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy.* (1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton,) 1995.

[96] Ibid.,

One of the main American ideals was that of a relatively egalitarian society, that stood in stark contrast to the ancient class structures of Europe. Such structures had been a cause of strife and disunity within these nations throughout the eighteenth century, culminating in the French Revolution. This egalitarianism though was not, as scholars like Lasch would argue, a complete social leveling process, and thus contained two crucial elements. [97] First, a somewhat equal distribution of property, as property ownership is an essential to a free society; and second, the democratization of the intellectual life.[98] Hence both of these elements helped to establish conditions for the flourishment of civic virtue. During the time of the Gilded Age and beyond, these ideals were beset with considerable challenges.

During the period the US was flooded with those who were endowed with exorbitant amounts of "new money." Wealth for wealth's sake had been anathema for many of the Founders, and for good reason. Those who had "new money" lacked civic virtue as they were able to abscond from reality and "the other half,"[99] and disconnect themselves from older and more traditional forms of civic obligation. Lasch argues that those who had belonged to the class of "old money" generally had realized the civic and communal responsibilities that necessarily came with having any level of fortune.[100] Many of the "new money" elites had no such conception. Mark Twain's description of this period as gilded – gold upon gold – did therefore live up to its name in many ways. The infamous Vanderbilt Gala was a major example of this, as in America prior to this time, such brazen displays of opulence were almost unheard of.

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[97] Ibid.,

[98] Ibid.,

[99] Jacob August Riis, *How the Other Half Lives, Studies among the Tenements of New York.* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1890.)

[100] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy.* (1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton,) 1995.

The nation's elite class, which again in previous times in the nation's history had been more inclined to pursue virtue in the service of the common good, became tragically derelict of their civic duty. The new elite class, Thorstein Veblen's "leisure class", became rather unconsciously disjointed from older forms of civic duty and preferred life in insular worlds of luxury, comfort, and immediate self-gratification.[101] Yet this reality does not in any way exalt the poor as a virtuous, under-trodden class, in fact, many of those in poverty would have done no differently had their fortune been reversed. A primary example of this was Andrew Carnegie. The problem therefore was not necessarily the extreme wealth inequality, but the fact that attainment of wealth itself had become the prime metric for success and prosperity in life in the United States.[102] Now some historical interpretations of the period do portray figures like Andrew Carnegie and Standard Oil's uberwealthy John D. Rockefeller as messianic figures who lavishly spent the majority of their fortunes on a cornucopia of philanthropic endeavors. Carnegie himself, presaging a belief that would much later be espoused by influential thinkers like Ayn Rand, famously argued that, "Not evil, but good, has come to the race from the accumulation of wealth by those who have the ability and energy that produce it."[103] From his individualist calculation, within the framework of belief in ironclad economic natural laws, Carnegie propagated a specific, yet warped conception of civic virtue.

In Carnegie's view, the one who has gratuitous wealth should divvy it out to whichever project he deems would be beneficial to his larger brotherhood of mankind.[104] While ostensibly

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[101] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1998.)

[102] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (First edition. New York: Norton, 1991) & Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy.* (1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton,) 1995.

[103] Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth, (*Bedford, Mass: Applewood Books, 1998.)

[104] Ibid.

this seems like the natural thing for the affluent, who is also virtuous, to engage in, it is not the same republican civic virtue. Carnegie's system is one which excuses the man of wealth from civic obligation, rather leaving it up to his own capricious will to decide what to do with his fortune. Hence, it relieves him from have to engage in more difficult forms of civic participation that require more than capital investment. Rockefeller held similar convictions and did even more philanthropy than Carnegie, but similarly it was not civic virtue per se, as arguably it was completely on Rockefeller's terms. Therefore, while certainly both figures, as well as several others, did certainly engage in various levels of philanthropy, it was still far from historical versions of civic virtue.[105]

Industrialism led by these "Captains of Industry" urbanized the United States. Cities were the center of these new living patterns. These cities, as exposed by many muckrakers, were not close to anything utopic, as was the original promise of industrialism. Lewis Mumford argued that, "Industrialism, the main creative force of the nineteenth century, produced the most degraded urban environment the world had yet seen; for even the quarters of the ruling class were befouled and overcrowded."[106] He furthermore argued that "…the bankers, industrialists, and the mechanical inventors…were responsible for most of what was good and almost all that was bad" in the creation of this "..new type of city…"[107] The picture one can paint of such cities during this period is rather bleak. One can envision the striking juxtaposition of the modern and the premodern tenuously coexisting during this period. Towers of black smoke billowing over primitive landscapes, horses carrying wealthy industrialists, and skyscrapers built on dirt roads.

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[105] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy.* (1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton,) 1995.

[106] Lewis Mumford. *The City in History : Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects, by Lewis Mumford.* (New York: Harcourt, Brace And World. 1961.) 441.

[107] Ibid., 447.

No doubt the American citizen was in a brave new world. How did American politics fit within this brave new world, what was the place of citizen, and was there any semblance of civic virtue?

An apt definition of the word "politics" during this period came from Ambrose Bierce, a popular journalist and Civil War veteran, in his satirical lexicon, *The Devil's Dictionary*: "A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage."[108] As this definition implies, during this time, politics became more associated with corruption, and in a general sense it was developing into just another opportunity for self-aggrandizement and monetary enrichment. Lincoln Steffens, in his famous muckraking indictment of American politics argued that in this period "…politics is business. That's the matter with it."[109] This was a change from earlier forms of American political life, or at least how it was understood. John Patrick Diggins argues, "Politics itself, the traditional domain of virtuous citizenship, had become almost a commercial activity in which votes are bought and sold."[110] Thus during the Gilded Age, political participation could not be considered as practicing civic virtue. Often, involvement in politics was merely an expression of partisan loyalty, akin to a form of tribalism.

The politics of the Gilded Age were thus heavily party centric, but it was not necessarily heavily ideological, as division came primarily from geographical position, not abstract ideals.[111] This was generally the case except for the constant proclivity of politicians to capitalize on sentiment from the Civil War, a phenomenon known as "waving the bloody shirt."[112] Thus, each

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[108] Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (Project Gutenberg,)

[109] Steffens, Lincoln. *The Shame of Cities.* (New York: McClure, Philips, and Co.1904,)

[110] John Patrick Diggins, "Republicanism and Progressivism." *American Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1985): 572-598. 573.

[111] Goodwyn, Lawrence. *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. 8.

[112] Ibid.

party firmly ensconced themselves on either side of fairly straightforward issues where difference had more do to sectionalist concerns more than anything else.[113] One could go further and argue that the politics of this age were more an exercise of disparate interests maintaining their own microcosmic fiefdoms while jostling for more influence in the higher echelons of American power. The party bosses themselves "…rarely held public office," an indication of the abundancy of corruption. [114] There were many layers to this corruption.

At the more municipal and regional level, magnates, or "party bosses," such as the infamous "Boss Tweed" ran well-oiled machines like Tammany Hall which were primarily mechanisms for personal gain. Yet ironically, these organizations offered the American citizen, who now was most likely much more diverse in his ethnicity, cultural background, and beliefs, an opportunity to be closer to the levers of power, albeit through all sorts of unscrupulous political chicanery. Hence, "The immigrants brought from their peasant villages the conception that politics was a personal affair; government was vested in the power local ruler who could help or hurt you. In the district Tammany chieftain, the newcomers found a replica of the kind of authority they had respected in Europe."[115]

This was the complexity of such corruption, as true civic virtue became less possible and national politics became more and more defined by spectacle, local politics, in New York City for example, was "…to most New Yorkers…[about what a] leader could do for you, not his party's stand on some 'fool' issue."[116] As many political issues were becoming more and more

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Robert W. Cherny *American Politics in the Gilded Age, 1868-1900,* (Malden, Ma.: Wiley-Blackwell.) 8

[115] William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of very Plain Talks on very Practical Politics.* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948.) xvi

[116] Ibid.,

disconnected from the harsh realities faced by ordinary citizens, especially in urban centers like New York City, Tammany seemed to offer the best practical solutions. The Tammany solvent for such issues was a mixture of American common-sense philosophy and European village "quid pro quo" politics, combined with the unabashed pursuit of self-interest. This was an odd inversion of Tocqueville's famous concept of Americans living by "…self-interest rightly understood."[117] Thus, while there is no doubt that those in Tammany engaged in copious amounts of corruption, their political workings almost represented a new form of civic virtue.

A primary example of a practitioner of this skewed form of civic virtue was George Washington Plunkitt, the purely political man. "Politics was a way of life for him. In books he had no interest, and it is doubtful if he ever read one in his long life."[118] Overall, in politics, civic virtue was becoming indistinguishable from civic vice.

It is imperative to ask if overall, national politics during this period was active or inactive. The more popular view among historians is the latter, but there is some evidence which gives heavy weight to the former. It truly depends on one's definition of active, or inactive, regarding the US federal government. On one hand, during this period the US federal government actively suppressed labor uprisings with a level of violence towards US citizens almost unseen both previously and thereafter.[119] On the other hand, relative to the later Progressive Era legislation and the legislation of the New Deal the federal government really did not do that much. That word "relative" is important. In comparison to their successors, Teddy

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[117] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. (1st Perennial Classics ed. New York: Perennial Classics, 2000,)

[118] William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of very Plain Talks on very Practical Politics.* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948.) vii.

[119] Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, *American Violence: A Documentary History*. ([First]. ed. New York: Knopf, 1970.)

Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, presidents during the period hardly wielded executive power, as many political historians argue that Congress was the more powerful of the branches during this period.[120] Yet this did not mean that the executive branch did nothing, as there was also a level of corruption in these higher levels of American power, especially during the Grant Administration.

While Ulysses S. Grant did have his share of scandals famously revealed in detail by the likes of Henry Adams, the more important part of the Grant Administration for this study is the disposition of Grant himself, which is a better reflection of the state of civic virtue during this period than the more obvious examples of political corruption.[121] Andrew Delbanco argues that Grant embodied the "organizational" man, completely a product of modernity. During the Civil War, Grant had found his place in the machine, as since he previously had "…no ground for faith in himself or in anything beyond himself, he was entirely at home in the modern mechanized world of war where he found a comforting anonymity."[122] Grant is an excellent example of the effects of the Civil War on the American spirit and way of life. [123] The war had wrought "modern" American attitudes.[124] Everything, including human relationships, became much more mechanistic as, "Postwar life continued to honor the military mode."[125] Thus, in a larger sense,

[120] Robert W. Cherny *American Politics in the Gilded Age, 1868-1900,* (Malden, Ma.: Wiley-Blackwell.) 50.

[121] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961)

[122] Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans have Lost the Sense of Evil*. (First Noonday ed. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996,) 140.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

as politics followed this mode and became increasing mechanistic, issues like corruption were only viewed as serious issues if they interfered with the efficiency of the governmental machine.

Congress, which again was arguably the more powerful institution during this time, also saw its share of scandal and corruption. While that is not to say that the entire enterprise was a den of deceit and vice, during this time, the "common" interest was further being replaced by "special" interests. One of the main causes of this would be the reality of corporate industry becoming increasingly entangled with the US federal government, arguably a relationship that, as will be seen in later chapters, has only progressed.[126]

There was no shortage of suspicious economic dealings, the total effects of which being unknowable, that occurred during the period. Many social critics and eventual reformers saw this as a serious malady to the health of American society. One example of an economic practice rife with moral haze was the practice of speculation. Land speculation had always been a major part of American economic life, a trend that continued during the Gilded Age, with varied results. Henry Adams, in describing some members of the increasing speculator class, of which one of the more unsavory characters in American history, Jay Gould, belonged, argued that they, "…understood no distinction between right and wrong in matters of speculation, so long as the daily settlements were punctually effected."[127] The wealth inequality created by rapacious forms of speculation engendered one of the most influential books of the Gilded Age, Henry George's *Progress and Poverty.*[128] George saw that eliminating poverty would be impossible in the present system of private property that was continually abused by speculators and unjust landlords. He

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[126] Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Re-Interpretation of American History, 1900-1916*. (New York: Free Press, 1977.)

[127] Henry Adams, *Historical Essays.* (Google Books. C. Scribner's Sons, 1891,) 318

[128] Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*. (First ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.)

believed that "The right of ownership that springs from labor excludes the possibility of any other right of ownership."[129] In other words, George's main argument was that speculative property ownership was not only unjust, but unnatural.[130] Yet for George, reform would have to be done within the capitalist system, as any suggestion of overthrowing capitalism itself and replacing it, immediately associated would make with socialists or worse, the anarchists. George's solution was a tax on "unearned wealth" – privately owned land that serves no other purpose other than speculative value.[131] While this work had considerable effects on later reformers, its ideas did not gain mainstream political support.

One potential contrary fact to this narrative of political corruption thus far was the passing of the Pendleton Act, a major piece of civil service reform legislation. In an attempt to counter patronage, known more popularly as "The Spoils System," this act was passed in order to have many of the positions in the federal government filled on the basis of merit as opposed to party loyalty. The Spoils System had initially been hailed as something democratic, yet in a country lacking civic virtue it was destined for corruption. Unfortunately, its replacement, a professional civil service, would not necessarily be an improvement, and would establish a separate class of disinterested bureaucrats, thereby assisting in further separating Americans from their government.

The corruption of this era, which again was witnessed at nearly every political level, did engender responses and some initial reform. Initial exposure of such corruption was through both

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[129] Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth.* (Fiftieth anniversary ed. New York: Robert Schalkenbach foundation, 1940,)

[130] Ibid.

[131] Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*. (First ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.) 83

print and cartoon, especially from *Harper's Weekly*'s famous Thomas Nast.[132] While in one sense such exposure caused the downfall of characters like the ignominious Tweed, and also brought to the light the sins of those in the Grant administration, these exposers also contributed to a parallel development in American political life: the transformation of American politics from something more grounded in everyday reality to something that could only be characterized as sensationalized spectacle. Such growing obsession with spectacle is also demonstrated by attempted reforms in general public morality by the likes of Anthony Comstock. While ostensibly contributing to the increase of public virtue, and thus civic virtue, the unintended effect of Comstock's dogged attacks on immorality in American society was that they "…sold newspapers."[133] Salacity was a hot commodity, as were tales of political vice and corruption. The glut of media produced on such subjects would cause Americans to grow numb to injustice, and in some sense it would stilt them from real action as it became nearly impossible to distinguish "…pseudo-events for real events."[134]

As exemplified by Edward Bellamy's best-selling novel *Looking Backward,* many reformers of the age were enraptured by the thought of utopia, or that the present economic and social conditions were only temporary, and therefore could be overcame and replaced with something far grander. This would prove to be rather difficult to accomplish in practice. This first series of reformers presaged the later Progressive Era reformers.

Prior to discussing such reforms, it is first important to discuss two political movements which sprung up partially in direct reaction to the period's political landscape. These movements

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[132] Robert W. Cherny *American Politics in the Gilded Age, 1868-1900,* (Malden, Ma.: Wiley-Blackwell.) 55.

[133] Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock*. (Columbia University Press, 2018,) 3.

[134] Christopher Lasch, T*he Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations.* (1st ed. New York: Norton, 1978. 6.) 97.

were the Labor Movement and the Populist Movement. For the purpose of this study both of these movements will be examined with civic virtue in mind. In other words, a few questions naturally arise given the nature of this study. First, could these movements be labeled as genuine attempts to resuscitate American civic virtue? Prior to answering this question there must be some additional context to provide a fuller picture of the American political and economic landscape during the period.

The labor movement began almost immediately with the start of the industrial revolution in the United States. Prior to the Civil War, the core of their argument was that wage labor, or "wage slavery" was actually more unjust than chattel slavery, and additionally that it utterly prevented true civic virtue. In fact, during the pre-Civil War debates over the slavery issue, "Central to the proslavery was an attack on Capitalist labor relations."[135] Thus the wage question must be thrust to the forefront when examining the American labor movement's effect on civic virtue.

As more labor unions began to form in Post-Civil War America, the early rhetoric of those that would become its more radical leaders seemed to point towards pursuing the end of being self-sufficient virtuous citizen. Both Sandel and Lasch argue that initially the labor movement saw freedom as being financially independent, yet eventually, and not without considerable controversy, labor freedom became defined as the freedom to enter into a fair agreement with an employer.[136]

[135] Michael J. Sandal, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy.* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.)

[136] Ibid.

Hence, earlier labor rhetoric resembled that of classic republicanism. For example, in 1884, Eugene V. Debs who would later become the most famous socialist in American history, at the time a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, wrote that the primary reason for attaining any monetary success was only if it could help "…sharpen…his intellect, broaden… his powers, and develop… him into a self-reliant, powerful member of society for its good."[137] It is interesting to track the ideological movement of Eugene Debs. As with many others during the period he heavily criticized the wage system, yet this would be position which would eventually lead him to socialism. Debs would eventually frame the labor struggle between laborer and capitalist as a battle for the soul of the nation, he argued that,

> The conflict is not between capital and labor, between money and misery, cash and credit, it is between man and man, the man who works and the man who pays, the man who employs and the man employed. It is between the man who holds the office and the man who holds the ballot. It is a conflict between right and wrong, truth and error, justice and injustice, a conflict between citizens who make everything, build everything and the men who simply supervise and manage."[138]

Eventually, radical positions on the wage system took a backseat in mainstream American labor rhetoric, and thus the wage question faded in importance to those in the labor movement, and by the turn of the century the wage system was almost universally accepted.[139] The labor movement thus thrust its attention and energies towards the improvement of wages and of working conditions, versus previously having concentrated opposition to the abolition of the

[137] Debs, Eugene. 1884. "What Is Success?" Locomotive Firemen's Magazine 8 (10): 615–16. https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1884/841000-debs-whatissuccess.pdf.

[138] Eugene Debs, 1887. "Abolitionists" 11 (2): 67–68. https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1887/870200-debs-abolitionists.pdf.

[139] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (First edition. New York: Norton, 1991,)

wage system carte blanche.[140] The more radical portion did still exist but it was turning towards international socialism.

In some manner, the Populist movement took over where aspects of the labor movement had left off. In fact, Christopher Lasch drew a link between the earlier discussed labor movement and the Populist movement in that he regarded the agrarian version of populism as part of a broader movement that appealed to small producers of all kinds."[141]

Some historians have argued that the Populist movement was the last true instance in American history of a unique, grassroots movement which actually threatened the established political order.[142] Yet there is not full consensus on this claim, as there is considerable historical debate surrounding the nature of Populist Movement and of those who were involved in it. Much of this debate stems from Richard Hofstadter's seminal work *The Age of Reform.* On one side, there are those who argue that the Populist movement was a reactionary movement, an especially popular claim in the wake of the Trump movement, as many like to point out the parallels between the two movements. Historians who argue this side claim that Populism was primarily a nativist reaction towards the influx of immigrants which seemingly threatened not only the livelihood of many poor whites, but also posed a threat to their religious beliefs and racial homogeneity. Furthermore, such historians in this camp claim that there was also a virulent antisemitic and conspiratorial, or "paranoid," streak amongst the Populists which tainted their ostensibly noble goal of economic freedom.[143] On the other side of this debate, historians argue

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[140] Michael J. Sandal, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy.* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.)

[141] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (First edition. New York: Norton, 1991,) 217.

[142] Goodwyn, Lawrence. *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

[143] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: And Other Essays*. ([First]. ed. New York: Knopf, 1965.)

that the Populists were actually the progenitors of the Progressive movement, and thus were not reactionary, but rather possessed "forward-thinking" positions on various issues such as women's rights and racial justice.[144] There is some level of truth to both of these viewpoints, but neither tell the full picture, and each is tainted by present day political rhetoric.

As previously mentioned, one could argue that all the works on American Populism have by some degree been in response, either positive or negative, to Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform*. One cannot underexaggerate the groundbreaking nature and the profound influence of this work.[145]

Before moving on to Hofstadter's views on the Populists themselves, it imperative to discuss Hofstadter's overall position towards the "Agrarian vision" in American life, as one it provides excellent context to the Populist movement. Hofstadter attributes the American idealized vision of Agrarian life being the only true source of civic virtue as a result of several trends. He argues that "The more commercial this society became…the more reason it [Americans in rural areas] found to cling in imagination to the noncommercial American values."[146]

For this study a major question arises, were the Populists correct in claiming that civic virtue was truly only possible in an Agrarian context? In other words, was true American-style self government only possible if the citizens were yeoman farmers? Even if this not fully the case, there is an extremely potent sentimental quality to this argument, especially for anyone who

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[144] Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision.* (New York;Oxford;: Oxford University Press, 2007,)

[145] David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter an Intellectual Biography,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006,) 99

[146] Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* [First]. ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1955. 24.

has truly experienced the dehumanizing effects of participation in the "rat race." Yet as with most idealized, nostalgic, and utopic visions, there is a more complex side to story.

Hofstadter attributes the origins of the Agrarian myth not to agrarians themselves but actually to "…the upper classes of those who enjoyed a classical education, read pastoral poetry, experimented with breeding stock, and owned plantations or country estates."[147] Hofstadter argues that the more real elements of this Agrarian myth began to fade as the independent, yeoman farmer slowly became the commercial farmer, arguing that: "What developed in America was an agricultural society whose real attachment was not to the land but to land values."[148] The act of speculation, which arguably is something more abstract, became entangled with farming, which by all accounts is one of the most material activities man can engage in, an intense physical back and forth with God's earth. Hofstadter argued that "Cheap land invited extensive and careless cultivation. Rising land values in areas of new settlement tempted early liquidation and frequent moves."[149] The mindset change imbued many American farmers with a nomadic spirit that "…too often…[gave the farmers]…little chance to get to know the quality of their land."[150] There were more far reaching consequences of this phenomenon where farmers now "…neglected [crop] diversification for the one-crop system and ready cash."[151] These developments leads Hofstadter to claim that overall, "The United States failed to develop…a distinctive rural culture."[152] While in some sense this claim could be viewed as overblown given

[147] Ibid., 25

[148] Ibid., 40.

[149] Ibid., 40.

[150] Ibid.,

[151] Ibid., 42.

[152] Ibid., 43

the latter popularity of civic organizations like the Grange or the popularity of Chautauqua, one could also go as far to say that such organizations would not have been necessary if American rural culture had been established more organically. While Hofstadter's generally negative view of American agrarian life is exaggerated in some sense, it is important to keep in mind in the broader picture of this study.

This leads to Hofstadter's overall critiques of the Populist movement itself. Hofstadter challenged the narrative of there being a seamless causal link between Populism and Progressivism. Hofstadter also deviated from previous historical interpretations of Populism in that he did he did not just blithely portray the Populists as "…as victims of industrialization, the human casualties of an inhumane process," but rather he attempted to examine them in a more nuanced manner.[153] He did though concede that the Populists "… experienced real economic reverses, but the essence of their protest lay in the quiet but constant recession of public affection and respect."[154] Hofstadter also harbored a deep distrust of what Tocqueville had labeled, "majority tyranny," which was the proclivity of unruly anti-intellectual masses, blinded by pure sentiment, to corruptly wield absolute power. Two of his most famous concepts, anti-intellectualism and the paranoid style, were in part extensions of this core idea.

The latter of these concepts, "The paranoid style in American politics" was charge that Hofstadter leveled against many of the Populists given their acerbic criticism of financial elites.[155] This "paranoid style" was the perpetual belief that America is constantly under threat by "…the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial

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[153] David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter an Intellectual Biography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006,) 99

[154] Ibid., 103.

[155] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: And Other Essays*. ([First]. ed. New York: Knopf, 1965.)

network designed to perpetuate acts of the most fiendish character."[156] While the Populists did display some signs of this, there was actually a high level of truth in their accusations, and their criticism was not as conspiratorial as Hofstadter depicted it.[157]

Ultimately, some scholars depart from Hofstadter's charges of anti-intellectualism and paranoia on the Populists, rather claiming that they "…embodied a remarkable intellectual enterprise."[158] This view, which is arguably much more popular, aligns the Populists with progressivism.

Therefore, the interpretive confusion and disagreement over the Populist movement makes it difficult to see their affect on American civic virtue. Did, on one hand, the Populists either consciously or unconsciously presage the Progressive movement, or were they something altogether different? Hence it is imperative to examine the rhetoric of the movement but also the reactions to the movement during the period itself, specifically the more conservative response.

The best example of this more-conservative reaction against the Populists is usually given to an 1896 editorial written in *The Emporia Gazette* by its owner William Allen White. Entitled "What's Wrong with Kansas", White compares the eponymous state to other more prosperous, and well-to-do states, ridiculing the Populists as backward-thinking "gibbering idiots" who "hate prosperity."[159] In his rhetoric one can see a common theme which ran through many similar critiques of Populism: the idea that those who were not materially successful were themselves the authors of their condition through laziness or other forms of vice. More recently, scholar

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[156] Ibid.

[157] Samuel DeCanio, "Populism, Paranoia, and the Politics of Free Silver." Studies in American Political Development 25, no. 1 (2011): 1-26

[158] Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision.* (New York;Oxford;: Oxford University Press, 2007,) 4.

[159] "What's the Matter with Kansas? - Kansas Memory." n.d.

Richard Hughes argues that this was a thought consistent in the American mythos, as, "If America offered everyone an equal opportunity… and if capitalism was ordained of God and rooted in nature, then those who failed to excel in this system had only themselves to blame.[160] This still arguably a rather common assumption in the United States especially on the Christian right, and it can be easily justified with the tactical use of usually context-less Scriptures like Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for prosperity and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." Yet the irony of this development, specifically in regards to the Populist movement is that many of the Populists were far-more theologically conservative than their Eastern coastal counterparts. Many of them, in fact, could be labeled as Fundamentalists who denied these ideas which would later be labeled as the "prosperity gospel."[161]

Ultimately, the legacy of the Populists is still ambiguous, but after traversing through this interpretative jungle, it seems like Laurence Goodwyn's and more later, Christopher Lasch's positions on the Populists, are the closest to reality, as they suggest, along with many Populist writings themselves, that civic virtue through "popular self-education" was a primary concern of the movement.[162] Thus, certain versions of the Populist movement did represent, in some sense, a genuine challenge to the American political system. The Populists radical conception was "…the idea that workable small-unit democracy is possible within large-unit systems of economic production."[163] This was made even more radical by Lasch's claim that the views of the

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[160] Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives by: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning.* (Second ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019.) 142.

[161] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.)

[162] Goodwyn, Lawrence. *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. As quoted in Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (First edition. New York: Norton, 1991,) 152, 153.

[163] Ibid.

Populists were also "…alien to the shared presumptions of 'progress' that unite capitalists and communists in a religious brotherhood."[164]

Ultimately, there would be reform that would be inspired from both of these movements, yet one could argue that much of it would prove to more form than substance, a trend that would only continue throughout the course of American political history. Change itself would become institutionalized, which meant that genuine change was no longer possible.

One of the other attempt major attempts at reform and change during the Gilded Age was the Social Gospel Movement. There was definitely an intricate link between liberal Protestantism and the reform efforts of this period. One cannot deny that in some sense, the Social Gospel was a form of "civic virtue," but more of the form of civic virtue which is "actions based" and not necessarily the civic virtue which illumines the path to self-governance. Henry May argues that "No set of doctrines has ever impelled more people to help their neighbors, to clean up slums build schools and playgrounds."[165] The theoretical framework for the social gospel movement came from several sources.

Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the leaders of the movement, much like many other city reformers, was very stirred by the decrepit living conditions that many in his inner-city flock had to endure. Lincoln Steffen's and Jacob Rii's famous descriptions of Gilded Age life for the urban poor both heavily concur with Rauschenberg's experience. Gary Dorrien writes, "His [Rauschenbusch's] congregants lived in squalid five-story tenements that pressed more than twenty families into each building. His heart broke at the malnutrition and the diseases of the

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[164] Ibid.

[165] Henry Farnham May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of our Own Time, 1912-1917,* (1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1959,) 13.

children, and their funerals."[166] Rauschenbusch would come to realize the necessity of a faith that also was deeply involved in efforts for societal change. Hence, "If people suffered because of politics and economics, then authentic kingdom preaching had to deal with politics and economics."[167] Yet Rauschenbusch would eventually take this even further, and while he was in Germany in the late 1890s, the primary shift occurred in his mind which would come to be the theological foundation for the social gospel. Rauschenbusch now believed that "…the kingdom was not merely a major part of Jesus's teaching; it was the controlling center."[168] What this meant was that no longer was social action something which was an extension of the Christian Gospel, rather social action and the Gospel were now one in the same.[169] Rauschenbusch's writings, that would prove to be extremely influential, flowed from this basic assumption. In these writings, Rauschenbusch offered some cogent critiques to the United States economic system, echoing those previously discussed in the labor movement who saw the degrading effects of capitalism on older, more traditional forms of life. Rauschenbusch, partially echoing Marx and Engels, argued that with the advent of capitalism, "Thus went the old independence and the approximate equality of the old life."[170] Yet, Rauschenbusch, was no luddite, and he believed, as with Marx,[171]that the new industrial capabilities could ensure the good life, only though if they were to be cooperatively owned.[172] Furthermore Rauschenbusch would argue that

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[166] Ibid., 82

[167] Ibid.,

[168] Ibid., 89

[169] Ibid.,90

[170] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. (London;New York;: The Macmillan Company, 1907.) 216.

[171] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics.* (First edition. New York: Norton, 1991,) 152, 153.

[172] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. (London;New York;: The Macmillan Company, 1907.) 216.

capitalism only allowed the American citizen to enjoy half of his natural rights in a liberal system. "A modern American worker is a rights-bearing citizen in the political sphere…but in the economic sphere the same worker has 'only himself'."[173] Ultimately, Social gospeler's and reformers such as Rauschenbusch, rightly exhorted their fellow citizens to look "…beneath the glitter of their booming society…,"[174] yet many of their actual solutions to these deep-seated problems, would only assist in increasing material well-being, and would ultimately not recoup the lost political sovereignty of many citizens.

As the nineteenth century came to an end, there was actually quite a high level of ostensible optimism that had spread among those in the more middle to upper class sections of American society. Despite the acknowledged presence of various social issues, many espoused the general position was that these issues could and would be improved. There were also other reasons for enthusiasm towards the future. In just a few short years, communication and transportation had been revolutionized, shrinking the world, and creating numerous possibilities for increased self-liberation or national greatness. This optimism was conjoined with a sense of universal morality that had been able to remain relatively unscathed from the disruptions which had earlier occurred to traditional religious belief. The body remained, even though the soul had long departed. Henry May summarizes this general sentiment, "The progress of the world was chief proof of its underlying goodness; the eternal moral truths pointed out a direction for social

[173] Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*. (First ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.) 114

[174] Ibid., 85

change."[175] Yet, there was trouble beneath the surface, and not all was as it seemed, as *fin de siècle* sentiments were still present, especially for those in the younger generations.

As with much of current politics, one could characterize the US political system during this time as relatively uniform in foundation and structure, and only dissimilar in window dressing. In other words, both sides on the US political aisle essentially had the same underlying assumptions and beliefs despite superficial differences. Hence, where there was disagreement was in methods and application. As for the belief in universal, evolutionary progress, there was fundamental agreement between both sides.[176] Those who could be labeled as "conservative" considered a laisse faire approach was preferable as they believed that any form of market interference would be an impediment to progress.[177] For those who could be labeled as "liberal," it was believed that the process of progress itself could be in a sense "sped up" by humans wielding their agency and inserting themselves into the historical process through active reform via government intervention. [178] Thus, the status quo became engrained.

All these factors begat many consequences which can only be addressed partially herein. In politics, words in pieces of legislation and in political rhetoric, became less practically meaningful and symbolic for the average American. Politics furthermore became sectioned off into its own life-sphere, replete with its own customs, traditions, and language that was exclusive to its practitioners. The meaning of civic virtue itself was becoming more and more obfuscated, as less and less opportunities were given to the average citizen to perform his civic duties on a

[175] Henry Farnham May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of our Own Time, 1912-1917,* (1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1959,) 22.

[176] Ibid.

[177] Ibid., 21

[178] Ibid.

grander scale. By the mid-twentieth century, the American citizen was essentially powerless. C. Wright Mills opened up his classic work *The Power Elite,* by opining that for common men, "'Great changes' are beyond their control, but affect their conduct and outlook none the less."[179] Thus if civic virtue does indeed mean the character, habits, and dispositions which are necessary for self-governance, then civic virtue was becoming completing nonexistent. The United States citizen was much less a citizen and more of a subject. This was the absolute inversion of the American ideal.

[179] C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.)

Chapter 4: The Fate of American Civic Virtue

Man is constantly being assured today that he has more power than ever before in history, but his daily experience is one of powerlessness.

-Richard Weaver[180]

Because the good men of this land have largely failed to do their duty, our politics are what they are.

-*The Dawn*[181]

While this work is primarily focused on the state of civic virtue during the Gilded Age, it is important to briefly discuss some of the reforms of that period and to introduce the reforms during the Progressive Era. Evaluating the reforms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is a difficult task. On one hand, there was some level of quantifiable reform in nearly every spectrum of life. The historically muddled task is determining whether such reforms merely "looked good" on paper and in conventional history, or if they fundamentally changed American society in ways not necessarily reflected in statistical analysis.

What ultimately would plague reformers was their dual impulses to allow for as much individual freedom as possible, but on the other hand their deep distrust and distain for those perceived to be inferior or incapable. The final product of this conflict would the "culture of expertism" which has only increased in size and scope since the Progressive era. Thus, in their attempts to "clean up" the corruption and vice which America's urban centers were increasingly displaying, the reformers used methods which were at best a misguided form of paternalism, and at worst an obsessive micromanagement. To ensure that human passion did not get in the way,

[180] Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas have Consequences.* (paperback, 1984 ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948,).

[181] The Dawn. (Google Books, Society of Christian Socialists 1890,)

the Progressives attempted to reform based off scientific rigor and objective rules. In other words, scientific efficiency became the basis for reform. This rules-based approach demonstrated a "…folly of thinking that rigid rules and procedures are the best way of achieving…" reform.[182] Extreme legalism, and the codifying of every life-sphere was a poor substitute for genuine civic virtue, which had become a less and less possible reality given the prevailing social, political, intellectual, and spiritual conditions. The solution, a pragmatic and scientific approach to governance guided by dispassionate experts, would in the long run turn the United States in labyrinth of paperwork and arbitrary rules. Such an approach was rooted in a deep distrust for public opinion, which had indeed become much less informed. This general ignorance of the American public was in part a cause of this "culture of expertism", and therefore one cannot indict the Progressives without indicting the people themselves.

In popular narratives both then and now, the progressive movement has been framed as a concerted effort to wrest political and economic power from the few who held it at the time – "railroads, large corporations, and party bosses" – and return it to the common man.[183] Yet in reality, the opposite occurred. It is true that a cursory glance at the historical record would indicate that significant political reform occurred during in the early twentieth century. Yet this reform was all form and no substance, a trend that would only continue throughout the course of American political history. The eventual, long-term result of Progressive reform was more a victory for financial elites rather than downtrodden citizens. Gabriel Kolko's revisionist account of the Progressive Era argues that progressive reforms were instituted to stabilize capitalism and

[182] Philip K. Howard. "From Progressivism to Paralysis." www.yalelawjournal.org. January 6, 2021. https://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/from-progressivism-to-paralysis.

[183] Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism*. (Arlington Heights, Ill: Harlan Davidson, Inc, 1983.)

thus shield various corporations from competition, even though it was presented as the opposite.[184] Change itself had become institutionalized.

Complete and total self-liberation, the end goal of liberalism and its associate movements, is impossible. One of the many paradoxes of life under the sun is that man, overflowing with self-interest, cannot live without other men. This fact poses a challenge to the hegemonic idea of the primacy of atomistic individualism in American life. Additionally, the challenges, and responses to those challenges, of the late 2010s and early 2020s portend an upcoming postliberal order. The contradictions inherent in the liberal belief of absolute individual liberation cannot hold under the weight of these events and happenings. Such a reality necessitates those in the West to take a very hard look at their unquestioned assumptions and their own history, which, if done, will prompt many questions. The main question would be "Where do we go from here?" The truth is that the answer to this question lies not within history itself, but in the One outside of it. With this acknowledgement, then, and only then, can society be governed by a "politics of virtue."[185]

[184] Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Re-Interpretation of American History, 1900-1916*. (New York: Free Press, 1977.)

[185] John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016.)

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