"The Faulted Core" (1965)[1]

Ray Ginger

THE UPSURGE IN the productive capacity of the American economy from 1877 to 1914 was awe-inspiring, and it contributed to a standard of physical comfort that might serve as the basis for the most deeply human society in world history. But the price paid for material progress was great.

The Theory of Business Enterprise, with its coiled prose and its ironic wit which cut deeper into the period than any other book, made predictions that came true. The American economy was tied to government outlays for nonproductive purposes, especially to military expenditures. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that for a century we have enjoyed sustained prosperity only in times of war, preparation for war, or recovery from war. The spread of depression in the United States in 1914 was halted by war in Europe, and the next year the House of Morgan and other bankers began selling war bonds for Allied governments. Money borrowed here by England and France was spent here for munitions——and on an unprecedented scale. In October 1914, DuPont had the capacity to produce 8,400,000 pounds of smokeless gunpowder a year. By April 1918 its capacity was 455,000,000 pounds a year. The firm in four years supplied the Allies with 1,500,000,000 pounds of military explosives, and at its peak it had more than 100,000 employees. Of its wartime profits it spent $3,350,000 on research and chemical control, resulting in new civilian products that further enhanced its size and profits after the war. Another piece of the Du Pont earnings went to acquire control of General Motors.

Everywhere the old society of independent men, which still had existed in great degree in 1877, was being transmuted into a world of bureaucracy. As the president of the N.A.M. told its convention in 1911: "We are living in an age of organization; an age when but little can be accomplished except through organization; an age when organization must cope with organization...." Power was being gathered into fewer hands, and fewer persons had scope to exercise their personal preferences or private judgment in economic affairs. To some extent of course the new corporate bureaucracies were essential to economic efficiency; they were needed to make use of the possibilities of modern technology. But it was no contribution to the public welfare for a handful of men to direct such a huge portion of the total resources of America. The Du Ponts had a congeries of empires. So did the House of Morgan. So did Henry Ford. The earnings of Standard Oil moved hither and yon. This centralization of control was not needed for efficiency; it came about because wealth meant power, and thereby gave men of wealth the chance to get more power, and they did.

Wealth gave political influence to the barons of business, including the barons of publishing such as Hearst and Pulitzer and Frank Munsey. By the early 20th century the process had carried so far that Lincoln Steffens could observe in his autobiography: "What Boston suggested to me was the idea that business and politics must be one; that it was natural, inevitable, and——possibly——right that business should——by bribery, corruption, or——some-

[1] Ray Ginger, "The Faulted Core" Ch. 15 from *Age of Excess: The United States From 1877 to 1914* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 319-328.

how get and be the government." The most important question about a government, he insisted, was not whether it was corrupt, or whether it held elections regularly, but what social and economic groups did it represent. His indictment of political bosses was directed against their disloyalty to the people:

> Natural leaders were born to lead the people, who really need loyal leaders. They could not solve their own problems; they wanted their leaders to represent them and take care of their social interests. They gave those leaders their faith and their votes, all they had....So the business men who wanted to get from the people part of their common wealth had to deal with the people's leaders, and the people's leaders sold out the people, betrayed the pitiful faith of the masses in their weakness, and——hence our American government is no longer a democracy, but a plutocracy.

The problem went deeper than just a few evil men; the problem was that the typical American had no far-reaching vision of what kind of society he wanted: "It was vision that made men honest, devoted (to a cause), courageous——heroes; like the early Christians, when Christianity was a vision of world salvation."

The ideal of abiding by the rules of the game was weakened. Only success counted, and the game had no rules. To contend for fair play was to expose yourself as weak and effeminate. In 22 years up to 1907, more persons were lynched in the United States than were legally executed. But the general exemption from morality was never granted to Jews. If a Jewish businessman relied on the practices of his gentile competitors, he inevitably reinforced the notion that all Jews were grasping and not to be trusted. Anglo-Saxons were allowed to behave like mere Christians, but every Jew was obligated to behave like Christ.

A book steeped in anti-Semitism, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1904), made the ultimate charge against Americans by asserting that they did not worship anything, not even money. Europeans and Asians worshipped money, as they worshipped God or any other concrete form of power. But the American spent more money "to less purpose than any extravagant court aristocracy; he had no sense of relative values, and knew not what to do with his money when he got it, except use it to make more, or throw it away." For Americans the problem was that they had been absorbed in the pursuit of wealth for so long that they could not abandon themselves to any other values. They were more ignorant of history than any people had ever been. Ideals moved them to distrust and dislike. The mind of the time is revealed in the remark of writer Hamlin Garland after he met Henry Ford: "He is a colossal genius, I am merely an industrious writer of obscure books; and yet he did not appear to despise me for my failure to make money."

It was Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917) which found words for a crucial and often misunderstood characteristic of American life. His father, selling a farm in western Wisconsin in 1868 to move to Iowa, predicted that soon his brothers-in-law would follow him. The father-in-law exclaimed: "I hope ye're wrong. I'd like to spend me last days here with me sons and daughters around me, sich as are left to me. It's the curse of our country——this constant moving, moving. I'd have been better off had I stayed in Ohio, though this valley seemed beautiful to me the first time I saw it." The Garland family, having started in New England, moved on from Iowa to Dakota. In a society where clergymen thought that progress

meant more parishioners and a new and larger building, the Garland children as they grew up could not even worship in a church that reminded them of their parents. When Hamlin Garland returned to the Midwest after six years in Boston, "I clearly perceived that our Song of Emigration had been, in effect, the hymn of fugitives!"

Even dead Americans had to keep moving. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells wrote of an old German in Indiana who became wealthy when natural gas was discovered on his farm. Moving to New York, he invests in a new magazine. On a trip back West he authorizes the sinking of gas wells in the woods pasture on the old farm, even though it will require moving the graves of his two children who died young. His wife wails: "It does seem too hard that they can't be let to rest in peace, pore little things. I wanted you and me to lay there too, when our time comes, Jacob....Jacob, I wonder you could sell it!" He consoles her by saying that he will buy a cemetery lot for the children——and a monument with two lambs on it.

We may doubt that the bribe assuaged her grief. Surely it would have been rejected by Wellamotkin, head of a band of Nez Percé Indians who had lived peacefully for generations in a valley in Oregon. Just before he died in 1871 he told his son, soon to be Chief Joseph: "A few years more, and the white man will be all around you. They have their eyes on this land. My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and mother." Few whites felt any attachment to a given spot of land. They moved repeatedly, gleefully. Rising land values prompted farmers to clear a strip, sell at a profit, and move on, to repeat the process elsewhere. The typical philosophy was "Settle and sell, settle and sell." The moving van became a great American symbol. Neighborhoods were incredibly fluid. A study of Rochester suggests that fewer than 6o per cent of its residents in 1894 were still there five years later. In one of Boston's streetcar suburbs the Baptists built a huge church. It soon became a Jewish temple. Later it was used by a Negro congregation.

For progress, a heavy price. The United States surely was, in many ways, the Land of Progress. But to that image we should counterpose another-America as the Land of Flight. Millions of persons did not know where they wanted to get to; they only knew that they wanted to escape from their origins. Names were abandoned in favor of more "American" ones. As Jewish immigrants in New York sought to follow the advice imbibed from *Di yuden in America*, it was reported: "Names are changed as easily as shirts"; a writer in 1913 even said it was "a matter of common knowledge" that "a majority of the prize-fighters in New York are really Jews who operate under Irish names," and Republican ward captain "Stitch" McCarthy had been born Sam Rothberg. The consequences could be shattering: "psychical instability, even liquidity of character among the Jews."

The craving to "get ahead" was manifest in geographical mobility and in lust for wealth as the tool of social mobility. Men who prospered changed their religions: Episcopalianism was the creed of the wealthy. City-dwellers scorned their ancestors still on the farm. Second-generation Americans felt contempt and shame for the outlandish ways of their parents. The United States became a country of men in flight, running over unmarked fields without traditions to guide them or visions to serve as beacons, with no havens for rest and no end but the grave, with no goal but wealth, and of wealth there is never enough.

In a nation on the run, Negroes ran too. In 1900 in Dougherty County, Georgia, where Negroes outnumbered whites by five to one, only 10 per cent of all adults had been born in the

county. Of 10 million Negroes in the United States in 1910, 1,600,000 did not live in the state of their birth. W.E.B. DuBois pointed to the steady drift from farms into Southern towns. Booker T. Washington called on his fellows: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” In 1879, at the time of the Great Exodus from Louisiana, Frederick Douglass warned:

> Three moves from house to house are said to be worse than a fire. That a rolling stone gathers no moss has passed into the in pursuit of better conditions of existence is by no means a good one. A man should never leave his home for a new one till he has earnestly endeavored to make his immediate surroundings accord with his wishes....No people ever did much for themselves or for the world, without the sense and inspiration of native land; of a fixed home; of familiar neighborhood, and common associations....It is a more cheerful thing to be able to say, ‘I was born here and know all the people,’ than to say, ‘I am a stranger here and know none of the people.’ world’s wisdom....The habit of roaming from place to place

In any small Midwestern town an “old family” was one that had lived there for a generation, and in cities men felt even more isolated and exposed. In Chicago in 1905 five bachelors got together to found Rotary, the first modern “service organization” for men, which tried to make the idiotic practice of calling strangers by their first names into an adequate substitute for a feeling of community. Thus the American habit of being always on the move reinforced the changes that were being wrought by technology and urbanization. “All of us are immigrants spiritually,” proclaimed *Drift and Mastery*:

> We are all of us immigrants in the industrial world, and we have no authority to lean upon. We are an uprooted people, newly arrived, and nouveau riche. As a nation we have all the vulgarity that goes with that, all the scattering of soul....We make love to ragtime and we die to it. We are blown hither and thither like litter before the wind. Our days are lumps of undigested experience. You have only to study what newspapers regard as news to see how we are torn and twisted by the irrelevant: in frenzy about issues that do not concern us, bored with those that do. Is it a wild mistake to say that the absence of central authority has disorganized our souls, that our souls are like Peer Gynt’s onion, in that they lack a kernel?

Even the relations between the sexes were different. Henry Adams tried to puzzle out the changes, saying that without such an effort the study of history was “mere pedantry.” The American woman was obviously a failure. She had not even held her traditional place in church or at court. She could not keep her children about her, and the family was “extinct like chivalry.” The traditional tasks of women had been undermined by modern technology. Woman was free, and knew not how to use her freedom. With sparkling wit and glittering jewels, she found no men fit to admire her and had “no place but the theatre or streets to decorate.” Like American men, she had married machinery. She was surprised when anybody regarded her as sexual.

In place of sexuality, by the evidence of popular songs, came a harsh sexiness. Up to 1890 song hits in this country were marked by pre-Raphaelite sentimentality and reflected male

dominance and female chastity. Then came a timid hedonism, showing women as frail rather than sinful: “She is More to be Pitied Than Censured (a Man was the cause of it all).” But by 1910, as woman in the new image became predatory, standards of attitude and behavior were not so different for men and women: My Gal Sal was simultaneously pictured as wild and “an all ‘round good fellow.”

The pretended sexual morality was strict, but newspapers gloried in prurience, stories of white slavery were spread across front pages, and the press in Washington daily carried such advertisements as these: “WANTED——A FURNISHED ROOM in a quiet family, for gentleman and lady; board for lady only; no questions.” Or: “PERSONAL——a widow lady desires a gentleman to assist her financially.” Marriage ties were slipping, and divorce in some states was perhaps easier than anywhere else in the Western world. Although Indiana supposedly stopped being a divorce mill in 1873, a joke popular a decade later makes one wonder. Before a train stopped at a depot in Indiana, so the story ran, the porter always came through calling: “Ten minutes for refreshment and five for divorces.” Advertisements in the Legal Notices columns of New York newspapers regularly read: “ABSOLUTE DIVORCES, QUIETLY, WITHIN A MONTH: Incompatibility, all causes; legal everywhere; no money required until granted.” A society hostess in *The House of Mirth* remarks: “Some one said the other day that there was a divorce and a case of appendicitis in every family one knows.”

American women were failures, said Henry Adams, because American men were failures. In many of the best novels of the time, the women are strong, the men are ineffectual. Edith Wharton pictured an immensely wealthy man who nonetheless “was a mere supernumerary in the costly show for which his money paid”; another male character is “almost bridal in his own aspect. . . .” Madeleine Lee in *Democracy* “regarded men as creatures made for women to dispose of, and capable of being transferred like checks, or baggage-labels, from one woman to another, as desired.” Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground* is a successful farmer; her lover is a drunken weakling. Theron Ware under provocation cannot muster “any manly anger.” Willa Cather built her novel *0 Pioneers!* (1913) around the stalwart nature of Alexandra Bergson: “In his own daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the simple, direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days. He would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons, but it was not a question of choice.” We can assume that Basil Ransom in *The Bostonians* is speaking to some extent for his creator when he exclaims: “The whole generation is womanised; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it’s a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don’t soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been.”

American boys and young men were, reported upper-class English observers, much better mannered than their own compatriots. “But,” continued an Englishman who taught modern history at Cornell, “they have not the same sense of honour as English boys; they make excuses; you can’t trust them; they are always adapting themselves to you, instead of letting you get some real influence over them. All comes from being brought up by women; living at home with their mothers and sisters; being taught by women teachers, and sitting next little girls at schools. It improves their morals and manners and lowers their sense of honour and public spirit.” Beatrice

Webb, while agreeing that American men were deficient in civic spirit, added another note: "And these good manners do not mean effeminacy. No race exceeds the American in physical courage. If nervous will-power and sheer delight in using it, if love of risks——at any rate physical and financial risks, are the test of virility, the American has no peer." But Henry James insisted on a quite different test of "the masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality...."

It was to an extent the new bureaucracies that promoted timidity and self-delusion; a man becomes courageous and forceful only if his world encourages him to pursue his own aims and to wrestle out decisions with his own mind. But also women had a vastly enlarged scope for imposing their standards on growing boys. A farm boy in i880 spent most of his time with his father in the fields, doing man's work, or in the livery stable, with its earthy concerns; during his brief tenure in school his teacher might well be a man. But whereas 43 per cent of the teachers in the United States in 1880 were men, only 20 per cent were men in 1914. A much larger proportion of boys were growing up in cities, where they spent more time in school, and in their remaining hours they were seldom far from some censorious female witness.

The new position of women was having great influence on public affairs, and in *Sin and Society* (1907) Edward Alsworth Ross suggested that some of the effects were baneful. Men, he wrote, are touched when they see injustice; women, when they see suffering. Therefore men bridle at sin; that is, at behavior that injures somebody else. But women are stirred by actions that harm the actor, by vice. "Now, the rise of great organizations for focusing the sentiments of millions of women has lately brought about a certain effemination of opinion." Most church-goers were women, and ministers framed their arguments chiefly for women. Therefore the clergy had lost moral influence with "the virile, who see in graft and monopoly and foul politics worse enemies than beer, Sunday baseball, and the army canteen....Our moral pace-setters strike at bad personal habits, but act as if there were something sacred about money-making; and, *seeing that the master iniquities of our time are connected with moneymaking*, they do not get into the big fight at all." Thus the church made its contribution to self-deception.

If we seek to grasp why the American voter gave his support to political preachers like Roosevelt and Wilson, we should recall Thomas Beer's characterization of Roosevelt as a "figure in warm clay, with its female tact and childish tempers and its sense for crowds..." And we can perhaps find enlightenment in an entry on "The Mentality of Woodrow Wilson" in the diary of his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing:

> In fact arguments, however soundly reasoned, did not appeal to him if they were opposed to his feeling of what was the right thing to do. Even established facts were ignored if they did not fit in with this intuitive sense, this semi-divine power to select the right. Such an attitude of mind is essentially feminine.

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Men tried to cleave to the old moral creeds and the shibboleths of individualism even when they were beaten upon by the ongoing Industrial Revolution and its consequences. Our grandfathers lived amid changes so swift and so basic that nobody could grasp more than a fraction of what was happening. Their problems were so urgent and complicated as often to overwhelm them. However forceful and intelligent a man might be, he frequently could not foresee the implications of his own behavior. Thus Andrew Carnegie might seem to be a prototype of the clearminded and determined man, but his career brims over with contradictions. Himself benefiting greatly from the tariff, he called it “trifling.” From his company emerged the biggest oligopoly of all, but he called the trust problem a “bugaboo” on the ground that no firm could long shield itself from competition. A professed sympathizer with workingmen, he sanctioned union-smashing of the most calculated and ruthless sort at Homestead. He was prominent in the And-Imperialist League in 1898; two years later he supported the imperialist McKinley because Bryan was even more dangerous. Having tried to use the Venezuela crisis to get orders from the United States navy, he put up $10 million in 1910 to establish the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He gave funds to erect thousands of buildings for public libraries, but in such a way——making the recipient provide the real estate, all equipment, and maintenance——that New York City rejected part of his gift rather than accept the financial burden. While Carnegie was truly modest about his important achievements, reported Mark Twain, he constantly displayed a “juvenile delight in trivialities that feed his vanity.” The former messenger boy and self-proclaimed democrat dilated no end about his acquaintances with royalty, owned a Scottish castle, and liked to be called “the Laird.”

Did the individual and his personal qualities matter? By 1900 even a Carnegie needed to be reassured that he amounted to something, that he was “independent.” The typical American had trouble now regarding himself as “a definite, coherent...whole....”