Problems in Search of Solutions: Science, Religion, and Education in the Progressive Era

The Forces of Industrialization, Urbanization and Immigration

The period, from roughly the 1890s until World War I, is labeled by historians as the Progressive Era. It was an era characterized by rapid social change defined and driven by social and economic forces, particularly industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. In fact, the fin de siècle in the United States can be summed up in these heretofore unequalled and intermeshed social forces but must be understood also as a reaction to an earlier “Gilded Age” (McGerr 2003, Trachtenberg 2007). Between the Civil War and the Progressive Era, industry grew, businesses expanded into corporations, and wealth became concentrated in the hands of a few families, leaving behind a working class defined by poverty. By 1890, fewer than ten percent of the families in America—a group referred to as the “upper ten”—owned 71 percent of the wealth (Hayes 1957:136, McGerr 2003:5–7). Such wealth was often built on the backs of laborers threatening the ideal of American democracy. Statisticians estimated that a family of four needed about $750–880 a year for mere subsistence. Few, however, earned this much. For example, in New York State, the average factory worker earned $416 per year, assuming no layoffs; dock workers averaged $520–624 per year (Ehrenreich 1985:23–24). The United States was in transition from a rural agrarian society to a complex urban-industrial society where cities rapidly outgrew their immature infrastructures or lacked infrastructures altogether. Waves of European immigrants, in search of jobs and the “American dream”—a promise of mobility and prosperity for those willing to work for it—were part of the urban-industrial growth. However, social problems no more defined the turn of the century than the reform movements that arose to counter the problems. Settlement houses, a new social Christianity, and a new social science worked, sometimes in disparate paths, sometimes together, to alleviate problems of this new urban-industrial United States. The clergy, long deferred to for their authority and leadership, were challenged by the would-be social scientists of the day and by the newly emerging academic men of authority. Settlement workers challenged charity workers and politicians by living among the poor as neighbors. The turn of the century brought new problems and a search for answers mandating changes in social thought, in leadership, and in authority.
From 1860 to 1920, “unskilled immigrant laborers were the dominant factory manufacturing labor force” in the US (Kim 2007:4–5, 22). The captains of industry bent on profit-making and growth turned a blind eye to the needs of workers. Ten to twelve hour days were the norm as were low pay, abysmal working conditions, and no benefits, setting the stage for labor unrest, strikes, and riots to follow (see for example Nicholson 2004). Poor working conditions were exacerbated by equally poor living conditions and sometimes—as in the case of tenement manufacturing (known as the sweating system)—the two were combined (Kelley [1895] 2004). Cities were inadequate in streets, public water supplies, sewage systems, garbage disposal, police and fire protection, parks, playgrounds and recreational facilities as well as public education and housing. “In the 1890s in America not a single one of the major municipalities had adequate traffic facilities. The majority of streets were ill paved, turning into seas of mud during rains, or paved with cobblestones or granite blocks” (Martindale 1958:13). Yet, the masses came in search of work and in pursuit of the dream of prosperity. Lacking transportation, if they found work, they had to live nearby, but not only did industry attract workers, workers attracted industry. “The problem of housing mass populations was met by a building of shanties, rooming houses, hotels of many kinds and inventions such as the tenement house which rapidly formed the slum sections of the cities” (Martindale 1958:15). Urban growth patterns and density in the United States made it necessary, as some proclaimed, to “make a great city in a few years out of nothing” (Hofstadter 1955:176). Business expansion in the nation’s cities brought jobs, but often at less than livable wages. Affordable housing was at a premium and was frequently hazardous to the health of its occupants. Immigrants tended to cluster in select city neighborhoods because of ethnic networks that facilitated housing, the transmission of information about the labor market and a support system to help negotiate a new and unknown environment. These networks contributed to the growth of overcrowded neighborhoods and to a division of labor in some markets. By 1890, almost 15 percent of the US population was foreign born, up from 10 percent in 1850 (Gibson and Jung 2006:26). In cities such as Boston, Chicago, and New York natives were outnumbered by foreign-born and their first-generation children (Hofstadter 1955:177–178).

The role of immigration in the building of urban, industrial America cannot be overstated. From 1820 to 1880, over 10 million immigrants came, most from Northern and Western Europe (Bailey 1961:324). They were English, Irish, Scandinavians, and Germans. With the exception of the Irish, these groups were welcomed and accepted into US life because they were of the Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic heritage and culture and not very different in appearance from the nation’s founders. Over time, the new arrivals became part of the