

17.037/17.038 American Political Thought  
Spring 2004

4/13/04 Student Lecture Notes

The New Inegalitarians, or the Descent of Man

- 1870s-1900s
  - Mark Twain called it the “Gilded Age.”
  - Shift from a country of small farmers to large corporations and masses of workers.
  - Characterized by a strengthened faith in science, inequality of income, unruliness of cities.
  - Immigration seen as a threat to civic homogeneity; republicanism, and Protestantism.
  
- Darwin’s theory of evolution:
  - Survival of the fittest
  - Effects: notions of natural rights given by God became a fairy tale for many.
  - Standards of conduct became relative.
  
- Politics of the time:
  - Democrats: against civil service reforms, favored states’ rights, trumpeted White Protestantism.
  - Republicans: emphasized strong economic growth, against regulation, split on race matters.
  - Growth of third parties: Populists, Socialists/Workers’ Union, beginning of Progressives – combat corruption of established political parties and large corporations.
  
- No new civic ideologies emerged, but leading thinkers began to accept evolution, which reshaped their thinking on many issues.
  
- Student presentations.
  
- Sumner:
  - Advocated free market using evolutionary argument
  - Similar to Locke’s view of property rights (idea of mixing labor), but expands to view labor as a brutal necessity; even if inequalities result, fittest succeed in market.
  - Exception regarding women, who he believed needed to be protected due to their special (and fragile) status.
  
- Strong:
  - Sympathetic to some more moderate forms of socialism.

- Concerned about growing income inequalities.
  - Competing views (with Sumner) on proper role of state.
- Facts about immigration at the time:
    - Adoption of more strict federal laws – had been a state issue.
    - Supreme Court adopted new understanding of federal capacity to limit immigration.
    - Judges deferred to administrative/executive decisions on immigration policy.
    - Immigration not restricted until 1882, and even then people continued to come.
    - Absolute numbers of immigrants did increase significantly, but the proportion of the population that was foreign-born did not change much.
- Chinese exclusion:
    - 1882 law banned new Chinese laborers for 10 years, law was reauthorized for another 10 years.
    - Law also prevented Chinese from becoming naturalized citizens.
    - Licensing requirements for labors already in country.
    - Even though a defeat for states' rights (since federal government making the policy), states supported outcome.
    - Some liberal arguments (Massachusetts Senator Hoar) made to debate restrictions without relying on racism: economic arguments, concern for native workers.
    - Many exclusionists blended racial and economic arguments, but economic arguments carried more weight – concerns about impacts of immigration for American low-wage laborers.
    - Led to more general restrictions on immigration in 1891 – that is, beyond Chinese.
    - In the end, despite all of the restrictions, immigration not really slowed.