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CHAPTER 23

Lessons of History: The Gilded Age and the Progressive Era

OVER THE LAST THREE DECADES a variety of social, economic, and technological changes have rendered obsolete a significant stock of America's social capital. Television, two-career families, suburban sprawl, generational changes in values—these and other changes in American society have meant that fewer and fewer of us find that the League of Women Voters, or the United Way, or the Shriners, or the monthly bridge club, or even a Sunday picnic with friends fits the way we have come to live. Our growing social-capital deficit threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty, and even our health and happiness.

Is erosion of social capital an ineluctable consequence of modernity, or can we do something about it? Sometimes, in the face of fundamental questions like this one, history instructs. In this case, some unexpectedly relevant—and in many respects optimistic—lessons can be found in a period uncannily like our own—the decades at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century that American historians have dubbed the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era.* In a number of deep respects the challenges facing American society at the end of the nineteenth century foreshadowed those that we face in our own time.

Almost exactly a century ago America had also just experienced a period

* Neither term is used with great precision, but roughly speaking, "Gilded Age" refers to the period 1870–1900 and "Progressive Era" to 1900–1915. Like any historical demarcation, this division is not strict, since developments associated with the Progressive movement had clear antecedents during the earlier period, and developments associated with the Gilded Age persisted into the later period.

of dramatic technological, economic, and social change that rendered obsolete a significant stock of social capital. In the three or four decades after the Civil War the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and massive waves of immigration transformed American communities. Millions of Americans left family and friends behind on the farm when they moved to Chicago or Milwaukee or Pittsburgh, and millions more left community institutions behind in a Polish shtetl or an Italian village when they moved to the Lower East Side or the North End. America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century suffered from classic symptoms of a social-capital deficit—crime waves, degradation in the cities, inadequate education, a widening gap between rich and poor, what one contemporary called a “Saturnalia” of political corruption.

But even as these problems were erupting, Americans were beginning to fix them. Within a few decades around the turn of the century, a quickening sense of crisis, coupled with inspired grassroots and national leadership, produced an extraordinary burst of social inventiveness and political reform. In fact, most of the major community institutions in American life today were invented or refurbished in that most fecund period of civic innovation in American history. The Progressive Era was not the only example of practical civic enthusiasm in American history, and it was surely not flawless, but (partly for that reason) it contains many instructive parallels to our own era. This chapter tells the story of that exceptional epoch, offering inspiration, enlightenment, and a few cautionary tales that may illumine our own.¹

DURING THE LAST THIRD of the nineteenth century technological, economic, and social changes transformed American life. Between roughly 1870 and 1900 America evolved rapidly from a rural, localized, traditional society to a modern, industrialized, urban nation. At the end of the Civil War, America remained, as it had been at the time of Tocqueville’s visit in the 1830s, predominantly a land of small farms, small towns, and small businesses. By the turn of the century America was rapidly becoming a nation of cities, teeming with immigrants born in villages in Europe or America but now toiling in factories operated by massive industrial combines.

Technological change was one key to this transformation. In the eight decades up to 1870, the U.S. Patent Office had recognized 118,000 inventions. In the next four decades patents were generated at nearly twenty times this rate. Some of the new inventions (like the reaper) revolutionized agricultural productivity. Some (like the sewing machine and canned food) transformed the home. But most momentous of all were the inventions that underlay the American industrial, transportation, and urban revolutions—the steam boiler, steel, electricity, the telegraph and telephone, the elevator, the air brake, and many more. Steel production, for instance, mushroomed from 77,000 tons in 1870 to 11.2 million tons in 1900. The number of factories in America nearly

quadrupled from 140,000 in 1865 to 512,000 in 1900, and their size grew even faster. In 1865 the typical New England mill employed only 200 to 300 people. In 1915 the first Ford Motor plant employed no fewer than 15,000.²

Just as the sinews of the nation were now made of steel, electricity was transforming its synapses. At the turn of the century, wrote journalist Mark Sullivan,

electricity was streaking up and down the country, literally like lightning—wires to provide it with a pathway were everywhere being extended, like long nerves of new growth, from central power houses, from the city to the suburb, longer and longer capacity for transmission carrying it to distant villages, from the villages to the farm—everywhere ending in a switch, by the turning of which man could tap for himself a practically limitless reservoir of physical power.³

Railroad and telegraph transformed America from small, isolated “island communities” scattered across 3 million square miles to an integrated national economic unit. Between 1870 and 1900 the nationwide rail network grew from 53,000 to 193,000 miles. “A transcontinental railroad network brought farm and factory, country and town, closer together,” concludes historian Sean Dennis Cashman. “Telegraph and telephone, electricity and press increased public knowledge, business efficiency, and political debate.”⁴

Along with these technological revolutions came a revolution in the scale of enterprise, for this was also the seed time of the modern corporation. Corporate organization decimated many occupations, such as small merchant and independent artisan, while creating new ones, such as company administrator and unskilled industrial worker. Between 1897 and 1904 the first great merger wave in American history swept over Wall Street, leaving in its wake massive new corporations—Standard Oil, General Electric, Du Pont, U.S. Steel, American Tobacco, Nabisco, and many others. In fact, in relationship to the size of the total economy, the merger wave at the end of the nineteenth century was not rivaled until the megamergers of the 1990s.⁵

Economic historian Glenn Porter summarizes the dramatic changes in the structure and scale of the American economy:

For the first time, whole industries came to be identified with the names of the powerful individuals who dominated them—Cornelius Vanderbilt, E. H. Harriman, and James J. Hill in railroads; Cyrus McCormick in reapers; John D. Rockefeller in oil; J. P. Morgan in finance; James B. Duke in tobacco; Gustavus Swift and Philip Armour in meatpacking; Andrew Carnegie in steel. . . . Similarly, the improvements in transportation and communications and the growth of cities opened opportunities for mass merchandising in the new fields of department stores, mail-order houses, and chain stores. Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roc-

buck & Company led the way among the mail-order firms, while distributors such as A&P and Woolworth's set new patterns in chain store retailing.⁶

Measured materially, the standard of living in the United States improved substantially during the half century after the close of the Civil War. Per capita wealth increased by some 60 percent, and real per capita GNP rose 133 percent, even as the population swelled with an influx of poor immigrants. From 1871 to 1913 the expansion of the American economy averaged 4.3 percent annually.⁷

These gains were not spread evenly, either across social classes or across time. The gap between rich and poor, and even the gap between skilled and unskilled laborers, widened, in the words of historian Mark Wahlgren Summers, "in work experience, in their satisfaction with American society, in pay scales and control of their own lives." In 1896 Charles B. Spaur estimated that 1 percent of the population owned more than half of all national wealth, while the 44 percent of families at the bottom owned only 1.2 percent. Contemporary economic historians Jeffrey Williamson and Peter Lindert report that economic inequality had increased rapidly during the years of early industrialization prior to the Civil War and continued to rise irregularly to very high levels, probably peaking just before World War I. Not until the final decades of the twentieth century would economic inequality widen as it did during the nineteenth century. Despite the growing maldistribution of well-being, however, the real income and standard of living of American workers did rise significantly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸

Several severe recessions (or "panics," as they were termed) interrupted the economic progression. Unemployment surpassed 16 percent in the depressions of 1873-77 and 1893-97. No period of economic distress in American history had been as deep and traumatic as the years from 1893 to 1897. On the other hand, that depression was followed by almost two decades of nearly uninterrupted growth.⁹ The prosperity of these two decades would produce a society confident and efficient enough to contemplate large-scale innovation to address the problems of the day—crime, violence, disease, urban squalor, political corruption, even the growing inequalities of wealth and power. It also gave birth to a broad and internally diverse Progressive coalition united in the optimistic assumption that society was capable of improvement via intentional reform.

The decades between the Civil War and World War I were also an epoch of rapid population growth and urbanization. Between 1870 and 1900 national population nearly doubled from 40 million to 76 million, while the population of cities tripled from 10 million to 30 million. Large cities grew faster still, and new ones were added to the roles almost yearly. The number of cities with over 50,000 in population tripled from 25 to 78 in this period. In merely twenty

years between 1870 and 1890, Boston's population rose by 79 percent to nearly 450,000, San Francisco's doubled to nearly 300,000, Milwaukee's tripled to more than 200,000, and Denver's multiplied twentyfold to 107,000. Chicago, barely a village in 1860, had a population of 2.2 million by 1910. Year after year an endless stream of hopeful emigrants from American farms and European villages poured into the anonymous tenning cities of tenements and skyscrapers.¹⁰ These migrants were living now not merely in a new community, but in a setting so unfamiliar and disoriented that many doubted it deserved the term *community* at all.

Most of the new urban dwellers were also living in a new country. In the thirty years between 1870 and 1900, nearly 12 million persons immigrated to the United States, more than had come to our shores in the previous two and a half centuries. In the following fourteen years nearly another 13 million would arrive. In 1870 one-third of all industrial workers in America were foreign born. By 1900 more than half were. In 1890 immigrant adults actually outnumbered native adults in eighteen of the twenty cities with a population over 100,000.¹¹

The immigrants came from a wide variety of European countries as well as Canada and East Asia. Germans, Irish, French Canadians, British, and Scandinavians were most numerous up to 1890, but during the following two decades, as historian Steven Diner points out,

immigrants, mostly Catholics and Jews from the unfamiliar countries of Southern and Eastern Europe, poured into America in record numbers to work in its expanding industrial economy. Often living in dense urban neighborhoods where foreign tongues predominated, they created their own churches, synagogues, and communal institutions.¹²

By 1890 the cacophony of strange tongues and strange customs of the newcomers had triggered a national debate about "Americanization" and ethnic identity, similar in many respects to the debate about "multiculturalism" and "English only" today. Historian Sean Dennis Cashman reminds us, for example, that "when in 1889 and 1890 the states of Illinois and Wisconsin decided that English was to be the medium of instruction in schools, there was a great outcry from Germans and Scandinavians."¹³

Whether his journey had begun in rural Iowa or rural Slovakia, the new Chicagoan was living a life and facing risks quite different from those that he had been raised to expect. He had come in search of economic opportunity, and often found it, but he also encountered profound insecurity. Urban workers were frequently unemployed. Older systems of "outdoor relief"—local, temporary public assistance programs—were swamped by new demands, as was the newer system of "indoor relief"—the poorhouse. Traditional social safety nets of family, friends, and community institutions no longer fit the way new urban workers had come to live.¹⁴

On the other hand, the ever-mounting waves of immigrants would have been stilled but for the realistic prospect of better-paying work. New affluence, however unequally distributed, gradually combined with ingenuity to produce a new culture of leisure and materialism. The invention of the phonograph and movies between 1896 and 1902 portended a radical transformation in the nature of mass leisure in the new century. As early as 1908 New York City alone had more than six hundred five-cent storefront movie theaters, or “nickelodeons.” In 1914 half a million records were produced annually, and by 1921 this figure would balloon to over one hundred million.¹⁵ As early as 1897 Mr. Doolley (Finley Peter Dunne’s fictional Irish American barman) derided the new emphasis on material consumption:

I have seen America spread out from th’ Atlantic to th’ Pacific with a branch office iv th’ Standard lle Compny in ivry hamlet. I’ve seen th’ shackles dropped fr’in th’ slave, so’s he cud by lynched in Ohio. . . . An’ th’ inventions . . . th’ cottongin an’ th’ gin sour an’ th’ bicycle an’ th’ flyin’-machine an’ th’ nickel-in-th’-slot machine an’ th’ Croker machine an’ th’ soddy fountain an’ — crownin’ wurruk iv our civilization — th’ cash register.¹⁶

A decade later Harvard philosopher William James would express the same disdain in the elevated language of Yankee reformers, as he bemoaned “the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That — with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word ‘success’ — is our national disease.”¹⁷

On the other hand, other cultural changes during the Gilded Age were more progressive. As the Industrial Revolution advanced, middle-class male and female spheres became less rigidly delimited. Women assumed new public roles, demanded the vote, got advanced education, and increasingly worked and played alongside men. Perhaps the critical ingredients in this change were advances in the education of women and (for middle-class women, able to enjoy the fruits of new timesaving domestic appliances) new leisure. During the Gilded Age women began to break out of their traditional “proper sphere,” many joining local reform efforts under the banner of “municipal housekeeping” and a few entering the professions, including law and medicine, thus laying the groundwork for the “new woman” of the Progressive Era.¹⁸

To those who lived through this epoch, what was most striking was simply the overwhelmingly accelerated pace of change itself. We often speak easily about the rapid pace of change in our own time. However, nothing in the experience of the average American at the end of the twentieth century matches the wrenching transformation experienced at the beginning of the century by an immigrant raised as a peasant in a Polish village little changed from the sixteenth century who within a few years was helping to construct the avant-garde

skyscrapers of Louis Sullivan in the city of “big shoulders” beside Lake Michigan. Even for native-born Americans, the pace of change in the last decades of the nineteenth century was extraordinary. As Bostonian Henry Adams later wrote of his own boyhood: “The American boy of 1854 stood nearer the year 1 than to the year 1900.”¹⁹

Much of the change was for the better, but much of it was not. Begin — as muckrakers like Lincoln Steffens and Jacob Riis did — with urban degradation. The bursting cities of the Gilded Age were industrial wastelands; centers of vice, poverty, and rampant disease; full of dank, crowded slums; corruptly administered. Infant mortality increased by two-thirds between 1810 and 1870. As early as the late 1860s, New York crusader Charles Loring Brace had warned of children he termed “street Arabs” forming gangs and creating a “dangerous class.” Child labor burgeoned: “In 1900 nearly one-fifth of the children under fifteen earned wages in nonagricultural work, and uncounted millions of others worked on farms.” Crime surged in turn-of-the-century American cities, just as it did in a number of other Western countries in the throes of industrialization and urbanization. “Some parts of Chicago had three times as many people as the most crowded parts of Tokyo and Calcutta,” writes historian Cashman. “Whole neighborhoods were congested, filthy, and foul. Offal and manure littered the street along with trash and garbage. It was hardly surprising that, in the large cities, consumption, pneumonia, bronchitis, and diarrhea were endemic. . . . [For example,] Pittsburgh had the highest mortality rate for typhoid in the world, 1.3 per 1,000.”²⁰

The most vivid portrayal of American cities in the late nineteenth century remains Danish-born journalist Jacob Riis’s 1890 work, *How the Other Half Lives*.

In the tenements all the influences make for evil; because they are the hotbeds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike; are the nurseries of pauperism and crime that fill our jails and police courts; that throw off a scum of forty thousand human wrecks to the island asylums and workhouses year by year; that turned out in the last eight years a round half million beggars to prey upon our charities; that maintain a standing army of ten thousand tramps with all that that implies; because, above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion.²¹

Jane Addams, founder of Hull House, decried the lack of public services:

The streets are inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools inadequate, sanitary legislation unenforced, the street lighting bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in the alleys and smaller streets, and the stables foul beyond description. Hundreds of houses are unconnected with the street sewer.²²

Less sympathetic observers cheered evangelist Josiah Strong's antiurban philippic: "The first city was built by the first murderer, and crime and vice and wretchedness have festered in it ever since."²³

Developments in the teeming metropolis were especially unsettling to new middle-class professionals. "In their eyes," writes historian Don Kirschner, "the cities were esthetically repulsive, commercially spastic, culturally balkanized, morally depraved, medically lethal, socially oppressive, and politically explosive." To be sure, recent historians have suggested that Progressive Era critics exaggerated the depravity of Gilded Age cities. Jon Tiefert, for example, argues that experts in city governments of the nineteenth century had many practical achievements to their credit—clean water, efficient transportation, extensive libraries. Even machine politics had beneficial effects, especially in providing political access for urban immigrants, although as urban historian Robert Barrows notes, "the fact that charitable activity was sometimes a by-product does not excuse the bribery, graft, and general malfeasance associated with late-nineteenth-century urban politics." As the most renowned civic critic, Lincoln Steffens, pointed out, the ultimate responsibility lay not with the politicians, but with the voters themselves. "The misgovernment of the American people is misgovernment by the American people."²⁴

City machines offered patronage to the urban, immigrant poor, contracts and licenses to legitimate business, and protection to illegitimate business. Meanwhile, rake-offs and corruption were rampant—under Boss Tweed, for example, New York City paid \$179,729,60, a colossal sum at the time, for three tables and forty chairs. Historian Steven Diner summarizes the political effects in terms not entirely dissimilar to middle-American political alienation a century later:

Middle-class Americans . . . watched as the trusts manipulated members of Congress and used the courts and federal power to suppress dissent from farmers and workers. Government, which according to American ideals should represent the will of the people, appeared a captive of special interests.²⁵

Gazing enviously upward, the average American saw the almost unimaginable new wealth of the robber barons—Rockefeller, Morgan, Carnegie, and their ilk. Farmers—and into the twentieth century most Americans still lived on the land—had little protection against railroad exploitation, expensive credit, and price deflation. The new industrial trusts stifled competition and transformed economic power into political power. Unorganized, workers were dependent on wages set by massive corporations. They responded with repeated efforts to build unions, but until the turn of the century these efforts were rebuffed with violence and squelched by recurrent depressions that un-

determined labor's market power. Nevertheless, waves of strikes gave evidence of their discontent.²⁶

Peering fearfully downward, many white, native-born Americans were deeply concerned about immigrants and African Americans. As in contemporary America, ethnic cleavages tended to reinforce class lines. As historian Nell Irvin Painter observes, "Whereas the middle and upper classes were largely Protestant, native-born, of British descent, the working classes, particularly the industrial working classes, consisted of many peoples who were foreign, Catholic, or, in the South, black." The last years of the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of a defensive nativism, a heterogeneous alliance of convenience among unions (fearful of low-wage competition from immigrants), Protestant conservatives (hostile toward the rising influx of Jews and "Papists" from southern and Eastern Europe), and even some social reformers (worried that unchecked immigration exacerbated the problems of the cities). By 1894 the nativist American Protective Association, founded in Clinton, Iowa, in 1887, claimed an astonishing 2.5 million members (or roughly 7 percent of all American adults), although it declined rapidly thereafter. Distress about foreign "depravity" helped to fuel the "just say no" temperance movement, which appealed to native-born Protestants fighting against "vices" they saw most clearly in immigrant cultural traditions.²⁷

As always in our history, the most virulent ethnocentrism was reserved for race. With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, control by local whites over emancipated blacks became more violent. For southern blacks, historian Richard McCormick reports, "the early 1900s brought nearly complete exclusion from politics, legal segregation of virtually all public and private facilities, and a sickening explosion of race riots and lynchings." On May 18, 1896, in the notorious *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the Supreme Court endorsed "separate, but equal" Jim Crow laws. The stain of segregation spread steadily after the turn of the century—from railcars to streetcars, ferryboats to chain gangs, zoos to theaters, hospitals to jails. White racist vigilantism spread from the South to the Midwest and West. By the 1880s lynchings had become common and peaked between 1889 and 1898. During that decade there was an average of one lynching every other day somewhere in America. Meanwhile, between 1890 and 1908 virtually all southern states disenfranchised African Americans, using new race-based suffrage restrictions—the poll tax, the literacy test, the grandfather clause, and other devices. Throughout the South electoral participation by African Americans fell by an average of 62 percent—by as much as 100 percent in North Carolina, 99 percent in Louisiana, 98 percent in Alabama, and 83 percent in Florida.²⁸

The more vicious forms of segregation were concentrated in the South, but in the North many civic institutions explicitly excluded working-class people, as well as African Americans, Jews, and Catholics, from membership. Pro-

gressives in the South were intent on excluding blacks from politics, and those in the West were hostile to Asians. At the same time, across the nation racist doctrines gained intellectual credibility. Professor Nathaniel Shaler of Harvard argued that emancipated blacks were reverting to the savages they had once been. "The administrations of T.R. [Teddy Roosevelt] and Woodrow Wilson coincided with what has been, since the abolition of slavery, the nadir of race relations in America," observes political historian Wilson Carey McWilliams. In short, the Progressive Era was intimately associated with exclusion.²⁹

Americans at the end of the nineteenth century were divided by class, ethnicity, and race, much as we are today, although today's dividing lines differ in detail from those of a century ago (as Asians and Hispanics, for example, have replaced Jews and Italians as targets of discrimination). Equally evocative of our own social dilemmas were debates about the effects of the transportation and communications revolutions on traditional community bonds. The railroad and rural free delivery, mail-order firms and (somewhat later) chain stores, and the automobile disrupted local commerce and threatened place-based social connections. Sears, Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, the A&P, and Woolworth's were the counterparts to today's Wal-Mart and Amazon.com. Thundered William Allen White, the influential Progressive Kansas journalist,

The mail order house unrestricted will kill our smaller towns, creating great cities with their . . . inevitable caste feeling that comes from the presence of strangers who are rich and poor living side by side. Friendship, neighborliness, fraternity, or whatever you may call that spirit of comradeship that comes when men know one another well, is the cement that holds together this union of states.³⁰

Editorialized one newspaper in neighboring Iowa, "When your loved one was buried, was it Marshall Field and Co. who dropped a tear of sympathy and uttered the cheering words, or was it your hometown merchant?"³¹

The new communications technology triggered a lively debate among turn-of-the-century social philosophers that prefigured with remarkable fidelity the quickening controversy in contemporary America about the effects of the Internet. On the one hand, optimists enthused that the new technologies of communication would allow human sympathy wider scope. Altruism would expand in a society newly unified by rail, power line, and telegraph.³² In William Allen White's Utopian vision, the new technological advances in the communications field harbored the possibility of making the

nation a neighborhood. . . . The electric wire, the iron pipe, the street railroad, the daily newspaper, the telephone . . . have made us all one body. . . . There are no outlanders. It is possible for all men to understand one another. . . . Indeed it is but the dawn of a spiritual awaken-
ing.³³

Philosopher Herbert Croly argued that the new communications media would allow an active citizenry to "meet" despite distance and thus would reduce or eliminate the need for representation. Replace electricity and the telephone with the Internet in these arguments, and the thesis sounds exceptionally timely at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, more cautious social observers like John Dewey and Mary Parker Follett were concerned with how to intertwine the new technology with face-to-face ties. Although they recognized and honored the larger new society, they also cherished the smaller, older social networks of neighborhoods.

The Great Society created by steam and electricity may be a society [wrote Dewey], but it is no community. The invasion of the community by the new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior is the outstanding fact of modern life. . . . The machine age in developing the Great Society has invaded and partially disintegrated the small communities of former times without generating a Great Community.³⁴

Real solidarity [added Follett] will never be accomplished except by beginning somewhere the joining of one small group with another. . . . Only by actual union, not by appeals to the imagination, can the . . . varied neighborhood groups be made the constituents of a sound, normal, unpartisan city life. Then being a member of a neighborhood group will mean at the same time being a member and a responsible member of the state.³⁵

Working in Roxbury, a then new streetcar suburb of Boston, Follett observed that "a free, full community life lived within the sustaining and nourishing power of the community bond . . . is almost unknown now." Seeking to re-create face-to-face neighborhood bonds, historian Jean Quandt reports, Follett

sought to make [community] centers into institutions for overcoming civic apathy, furthering mutual understanding among groups, and creating a local framework for the integration of churches, trade associations, lodges, and youth groups. . . . [T]he face-to-face communication which started at the level of the community center would remain the surest way of creating solidarity.³⁶

Progressives also worried about professionalization and about ordinary men and women forsaking participation for spectatorship and leisure. Sociologist Robert Park wrote: "In politics, religion, art and sport we are represented now by proxies where formerly we participated in person. All the forms of communal and cultural activity in which we . . . formerly shared have been taken over by professionals and the great mass of men are no longer actors, but spec-

tators." A few years later John Dewey, a younger member of the Progressive intellectuals, blamed cheap entertainment for the decline of civic involvement: "The increase in the number, variety, and cheapness of amusements represents a powerful diversion from political concern. The members of an inchoate public have too many ways of enjoyment, as well as of work, to give much thought to organization into an effective public. . . . What is significant is that access to means of amusement has been rendered easy and cheap beyond anything known in the past."³⁷

Social reformers in the Progressive Era (as in our own era) were caught on the horns of a dilemma. In social service, in public health, in urban design, in education, in neighborhood organization, in cultural philanthropy, even in lobbying, professional staff could often do a more effective, more efficient job in the task at hand than "well-meaning" volunteers. However, disempowering ordinary members of voluntary associations could easily diminish grassroots civic engagement and foster oligarchy. Progressives struggled with themselves over the choice between professionalism and grassroots democracy, though in the end professionalism would win out.³⁸

Beyond these portentous debates about technology and professionalism, many Americans at the close of the nineteenth century felt morality eroding and community fracturing. The dominant public ideology of the Gilded Age had been social Darwinism. Its advocates had argued that social progress required the survival of the fittest—with little or no interference by government with the "natural laws of the marketplace." In a society so organized, the ablest would succeed, the feckless would fail, and the unhindered process of elimination would ensure social progress. In important respects this philosophy foreshadowed the libertarian worship of the unconstrained market that has once again become popular in contemporary America. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, critics of social Darwinism gradually gained the upper hand both intellectually and (increasingly) politically.³⁹ "At the turn of the century," reports historian Painter, "Americans came increasingly to feel that society needed to be democratized to ensure everyone a decent chance for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."³⁹

This philosophical U-turn was triggered in part by the revelations of muckraking journalists—Jacob Riis, whose *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) portrayed the tragic conditions in slum tenements; Lincoln Steffens, whose *Shame of the Cities* (1904) censured urban squalor and government corruption; Ida Tarbell, whose exposés in *McClure's* magazine (1904) attacked the depredations of the Standard Oil trust; Upton Sinclair, whose *The Jungle* (1905) decried abuses of immigrant laborers; and others.⁴⁰ Quite apart from such specific abuses, however, Progressive intellectuals articulated a broader yearning for the community values of small-town life, nostalgia provoked by the materialism, individualism, and "bigness" of the new America.

The pace and degree of the social change through which Americans had

just lived a century ago were profoundly disorienting. The transformation of their society affected virtually everyone and tore asunder traditional relationships. They expressed their feelings about the social disjunctions in their lives in remarkably contemporary terms. "We are unsettled to the very roots of our being," wrote Walter Lippmann in 1914.

There isn't a human relation, whether of parent and child, husband and wife, worker and employer, that doesn't move in strange situation. We are not used to a complicated civilization, we don't know how to behave when personal contact and eternal authority have disappeared. There are no precedents to guide us, no wisdom that wasn't made for a simpler age. *We have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves.*⁴¹

A year later Booth Tarkington, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Hoosier novelist, reflected on the social changes that had accompanied late-nineteenth-century urbanization in his native Indianapolis.

Not quite so long ago as a generation, there was no panting giant here, no heaving, grimy city; there was but a pleasant big town of neighborly people who had understanding of one another, being on the whole, much of the same type. It was a leisurely and kindly place—"homelike," it was called. . . . The good burghers were given to jogging comfortably about in phaetons or in surreys for a family drive on Sunday. No one was very rich, few were very poor; the air was clean, and there was time to live.⁴²

Urban historian Robert Barrows notes the nostalgic oversimplification in these lines but adds that "Tarkington's lament for a simpler time also reflected a reality that readers of his generation would have accepted without hesitation." Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, a firsthand witness to the changes, observed in 1912 that "in our own life the intimacy of the neighborhood has been broken up by the growth of an intricate mesh of wider contacts which leaves us strangers to people who live in the same house. . . . diminishing our economic and spiritual community with our neighbors."⁴³ Urbanization, industrialization, and immigration had undermined neighborhoodness.

Progressive thinkers came mostly from small towns, and they recognized the oppressive features of small-town life—"the small-town herd," as one of them put it. But they also recalled the virtues of a community rooted in interpersonal ties. "Reading of a wedding or the birth of a child," William Allen White noted, "we have that neighborly feeling that breeds the real democracy." Such neighborhoodness constituted an informal network of mutual aid, social capital in a particularly pure form. In small towns, historian Quantz observes,

[w]ith everyone minding everyone else's business, illness or distress was quickly known and called forth a quick response. Jane Addams remembered the uses of village gossip: it kept men informed about who needed help and enabled them to do "the good lying next at hand." . . . Along with a feeling of intimacy and a sense of classlessness, the small-town ethos which shaped the values of these intellectuals emphasized widespread participation in the public affairs of the community. . . . The result was a political democracy based on an egalitarian rather than a paternalistic sense of community.⁴⁴

The communitarian Progressives decried the erosion of such close-knit ties in urbanizing, industrializing America. The impersonal and attenuated ties of the market replaced the sturdier bonds of family, friendship, and small-town solidarity. Their theories echoed distinctions articulated by contemporaneous social theorists from Europe—Sir Henry Maine's status versus contract, Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*, Emile Durkheim's mechanical versus organic solidarity, and Georg Simmel's comparison of town and metropolis, all expounded between 1860 and 1902. Britain, as the first industrializing country, first encountered the modern clash of self-seeking and solidarity. As early as 1845 Benjamin Disraeli, later to become a Victorian reformer, wrote:

In great cities men are brought together by the desire of gain. They are not in a state of co-operation, but of isolation, as to the making of fortunes; and for all the rest they are careless of neighbours. Christianity teaches us to love our neighbour as ourself; modern society acknowledges no neighbour.

In the newer social order, his American successors concurred, "relations tended to be superficial, the restraints imposed by public opinion weak, and common cause with one's neighbor lacking."⁴⁵

Yet these thinkers remained hopeful that social bonds of different form but similar value could be reconstructed even in the arm's-length society that they saw arising around them. Their diagnosis of social change led to prescription, not despair. As historian Quandt describes the optimistic outlook of these reformers, "The easy sense of belonging, the similarity of experience, and the ethic of participation might be more easily maintained in the small locality than anywhere else, but this did not preclude their cultivation in different soil."⁴⁶ Finding or shaping new tools for cultivating community in the alien soil of industrial society was, thus, a central task for the Progressives.

Social reformers of the Progressive Era began to see society's ills, poverty and the rest, as reflecting societal and economic causes, not individual moral failings. Rugged individualism seemed increasingly unrealistic in the new, more complex and interdependent circumstances and was gradually sup-

planted by a more organic conception of society. Progressives did not deny the importance of self-interest but added that men and women were also moved by nonmaterial values—affection, reputation, even altruism.

During the Gilded Age "charity" and "Americanization" had seemed to the comfortable middle classes an adequate response to social ills. "In these decades," writes social historian Paul Boyer, "the middle class was in fact abandoning the immigrant cities and their complex problems—fleeing to the suburbs, retreating into tight neighborhood enclaves, dismissing municipal politics with ridicule, and allowing the industrial capitalism that was shaping the city to proceed unchecked and uncontrolled." But, adds historian Jeffrey A. Charles, "by the turn of the century . . . sociability alone appeared to be an inadequate response to the feeling of crisis that gripped the middle class. . . . [S]ocial redemption required a new type of cooperative activism . . . serving the community."⁴⁷

Campaigning for president in 1912, Woodrow Wilson spoke of the transformation that had overtaken America in the preceding four decades in terms he knew voters would understand.

We have come upon a very different age from any that preceded us. . . . Yesterday, and ever since history began, men were related to one another as individuals. . . . All over the Union, people are coming to feel they have no control over the course of their affairs. To-day, the everyday relationships of men are largely with great impersonal concerns, with organizations, not with other individual men. Now this is nothing short of a new social age, a new era of human relationships, a new stage-setting for the drama of life.⁴⁸

IT WAS, IN SHORT, A TIME very like our own, brimming with promise of technological advance and unparalleled prosperity, but nostalgic for a more integrated sense of connectedness. Then, as now, new modes of communication seemed to promise new forms of community, but thoughtful men and women wondered whether those new forms would be fool's gold. Then, as now, optimism nurtured by recent economic advances battled pessimism grounded in the hard realities of seemingly intractable social ills.

Then, as now, new concentrations of wealth and corporate power raised questions about the real meaning of democracy. Then, as now, massive urban concentrations of impoverished ethnic minorities posed basic questions of social justice and social stability. Then, as now, the comfortable middle class was torn between the seductive attractions of escape and the deeper demands of redemptive social solidarity.

Then, as now, new forms of commerce, a restructured workplace, and a new spatial organization of human settlement threatened older forms of soli-

darity. Then, as now, waves of immigration changed the complexion of America and seemed to imperil the *unum* in our *pluribus*. Then, as now, materialism, political cynicism, and a penchant for spectatorship rather than action seemed to thwart idealistic reformism.

Above all, then, as now, older strands of social connection were being abraded—even destroyed—by technological and economic and social change. Serious observers understood that the path from the past could not be retraced, but few saw clearly the path to a better future.

By the turn of the century, complacency bred of technological prowess was succeeded by dissatisfaction, civic inventiveness, and organized reform efforts fueled by a blend of discontent and hopefulness. Over the succeeding decade this flourishing, multifaceted movement—sprouting from seeds sown in the Gilded Age and dependent on new tendrils of social connectedness—would produce the most powerful era of reform in American history.

While reactionary romantics mused about a return to a smaller, simpler, pastoral age, Progressives were too practical to be attracted by that appeal. They admired the virtues of the past but understood that we could not go back. The Industrial Age, despite its defects, had made possible a material prosperity that was an essential precondition for civic progress. The issue was not “modernity, yes or no?” but rather how to reform our institutions and adapt our habits in this new world to secure the enduring values of our tradition.

Their outlook was activist and optimistic, not fatalist and despondent. The distinctive characteristic of the Progressives was their conviction that social evils would not remedy themselves and that it was foolhardy to wait passively for time’s cure. As Herbert Croly put it, they did not believe that the future would take care of itself.⁴⁹ Neither should we.

Historian Richard McCormick, writing about the final years of the nineteenth century, might have been charting a course for Americans entering the twenty-first century:

Amid hard times, many Americans questioned the adequacy of their institutions and wondered whether democracy and economic equality were possible in an industrial society. Answering these questions with hope and hard work, some men and women began to experiment with new methods for solving the problems at hand. Hundreds poured their energies into settlement houses where they lived and worked among the urban poor. From their pulpits a new generation of ministers sought to make Christianity relevant to this world, not only the next, by aligning their churches actively on the side of the disadvantaged. Across the country the movement for municipal reform entered a new phase as businessmen and professionals tried to reach beyond their own ranks and enlist broad support for varied programs of urban improvement. Women’s clubs increasingly turned their attention from discussing litera-

ture to addressing social problems. Although these middle- and upper-class endeavors would not reach a peak of strength for another decade, the seeds of Progressivism were planted during the depression of the 1890s.⁵⁰

One striking feature of the revitalization of civic life in America in the last decades of the nineteenth century was a veritable “boom” in association building. The American penchant for clubs dated to the earliest years of the Republic.⁵¹ Some Progressive Era associations (like the Independent Order of Odd Fellows) dated from the first third of the nineteenth century, and many others dated from the Civil War and its aftermath. As we noted in chapter 14, the Knights of Pythias, the Grange, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the Ancient Order of United Workmen, and the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) all had been founded between 1864 and 1868. The nineteenth-century equivalent of the American Legion, the GAR, had well over three hundred thousand members by 1885.⁵²

Historians agree, however, that on these earlier foundations was built a massive new structure of civic associations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵³ Social clubs were not new to American life, but community histories regularly note their proliferation in this period. A so-called club movement swept across the land in the late nineteenth century, emphasizing self-help and amateurism. In 1876 Henry Martyn Robert published *Robert’s Rules of Order* to bring order to the mushrooming anarchy of club and committee meetings. Handbooks appeared on how to establish a boys’ club or a women’s club. College fraternities and sororities expanded rapidly in the 1880s and 1890s.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century Americans created and joined an unprecedented number of voluntary associations. Beginning in the 1870s and extending into the 1910s, new types of association multiplied, chapters of preexisting associations proliferated, and associations increasingly federated into state and national organizations. In Peoria and St. Louis, Boston and Boise and Bath and Bowling Green, Americans organized clubs and churches and lodges and veterans groups. Everywhere, from the great entrepôt metropolises to small towns in the heartland, the number of voluntary associations grew even faster than the rapidly growing population. Thus the per capita density of associations—fraternal, religious, ethnic, labor, professional, civic, and so on—rose sharply through the second half of the nineteenth century. Then, shortly after the turn of the century, the density of associations began to stagnate. (Figure 94 shows the growth in the number of local organizations per capita in a sample of twenty-six diverse communities across the country.)⁵⁴

Standing at the verge of another century, we can see that the foundation stone of twentieth-century civil society was set in place by the generation of

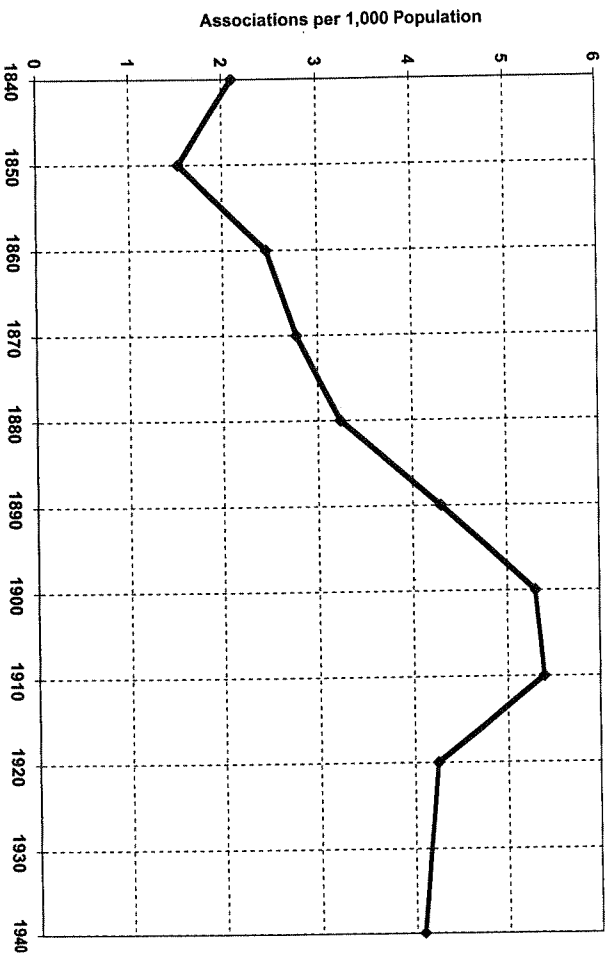
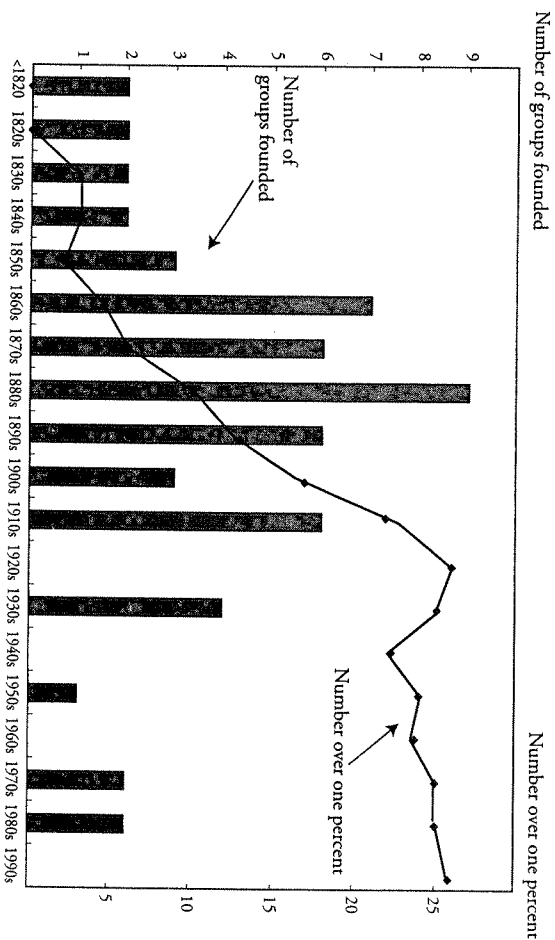


Figure 94: Associational Density in Twenty-six American Communities, 1840-1940

1870-1900. This period of institutional ferment ended in the early twentieth century, but then (as we have seen earlier in this book) a long period of infilling followed, as the organizations founded in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era added to their membership ranks. That figure 94 traces not merely an arc of association building, but an arc of civic creativity and entrepreneurship is suggested by the fact that it mirrors perfectly an explosive growth in U.S. local newspapers from 1880 to 1910, followed by a period of some stagnation between 1920 and 1940.⁵⁵

During the years from 1870 to 1920 civic inventiveness reached a crescendo unmatched in American history, not merely in terms of numbers of clubs, but in the range and durability of the newly founded organizations. Political scientist Theda Skocpol and her colleagues have shown that half of *all* the largest mass membership organizations in two centuries of American history—associations that ever enrolled at least 1 percent of the adult male or female population—were founded in the decades between 1870 and 1920.⁵⁶ As figure 95 shows, the number of such large membership associations grew dramatically in the late nineteenth century, reaching a plateau in the 1920s from which it hardly budged during the rest of the twentieth century.

Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that most major, broad-gauged civic institutions of American life today were founded in several decades of ex-



Source: Civic Engagement Project, Harvard University; data as of July 1999.

Figure 95: Founding and Cumulative Incidence of Large Membership Associations

ceptional social creativity around the turn of the twentieth century. Table 9 displays evidence for this generalization. From the Red Cross to the NAACP, from the Knights of Columbus to Hadassah, from Boy Scouts to the Rotary club, from the PTA to the Sierra Club, from the Gideon Society to the Audubon Society, from the American Bar Association to the Farm Bureau Federation, from Big Brothers to the League of Women Voters, from the Teamsters Union to the Campfire Girls, it is hard to name a major mainline civic institution in American life today that was *not* invented in these few decades.

Furthermore, organizations founded in that fecund period at the turn of the twentieth century have been unusually long-lived. For example, of all 506 contemporary national “societies and associations” listed in the *Encarta 2000 World Almanac*—large and small, with chapters and without; religious, professional, social, political, and so on—almost twice as many were founded in the thirty years between 1890 and 1920 as in the thirty years between 1960 and 1990. Figure 96, which shows the distribution of founding dates for all 506 associations, reveals that to a remarkable extent American civil society at the close of the twentieth century still rested on organizational foundations laid at the beginning of the century.⁵⁷ An age distribution of this sort—where the elderly outnumber the youthful—implies that the birth rate has declined, or that the infant mortality rate has risen, or both. In other words, compared with or-

Table 9: Social Capital Innovations, 1870–1920

Organization	Founding date
National Rifle Association	1871
Shriners	1872
Chautauqua Institute	1874
American Bar Association	1878
Salvation Army (U.S.)	1880
American Red Cross	1881
American Association of University Women	1881
Knights of Columbus	1882
American Federation of Labor	1886
International Association of Machinists [and later Aerospace Workers]	1888
Loyal Order of Moose	1888
Women's Missionary Union (Southern Baptist)	1888
Hull House (other settlement houses founded within a few years)	1889
General Federation of Women's Clubs	1890
United Mine Workers	1890
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers	1891
International Longshoremen's Association	1892
Sierra Club	1892
National Council of Jewish Women	1893
National Civic League	1894
American Bowling Congress	1895
Sons of Norway	1895
American Nurses Association	1896
Volunteers of America	1896
Irish-American Historical Society	1897
Parent-Teacher Association (originally National Congress of Mothers)	1897
Fraternal Order of Eagles	1898
Gideon Society	1899
Veterans of Foreign Wars	1899
National Consumers League	1899
International Ladies Garment Workers Union	1900
4-H	1901
Aid Association of Lutherans	1902

Goodwill Industries	1902
National Farmers Union	1902
Big Brothers	1903
International Brotherhood of Teamsters	1903
Sons of Poland	1903
National Audubon Society	1905
Rotary	1905
Sons of Italy	1905
Boys Clubs of America	1906
YWCA	1906
Big Sisters	1908
NAACP	1909
American Camping Association	1910
Boy Scouts	1910
Campfire Girls	1910
Urban League	1910
Girl Scouts	1912
Hadassah	1912
Community Chest (later United Way)	1913
Community foundations (Cleveland, Boston, Los Angeles, etc.)	1914–15
American Association of University Professors	1915
Junior Chamber of Commerce (Jaycees)	1915
Kiwanis	1915
Ku Klux Klan (second)	1915
Women's International Bowling Congress	1916
Civitan	1917
Lions Club	1917
American Legion	1919
Optimists	1919
Business and Professional Women (BPW)	1919
American Civil Liberties Union	1920
American Farm Bureau Federation	1920
League of Women Voters	1920

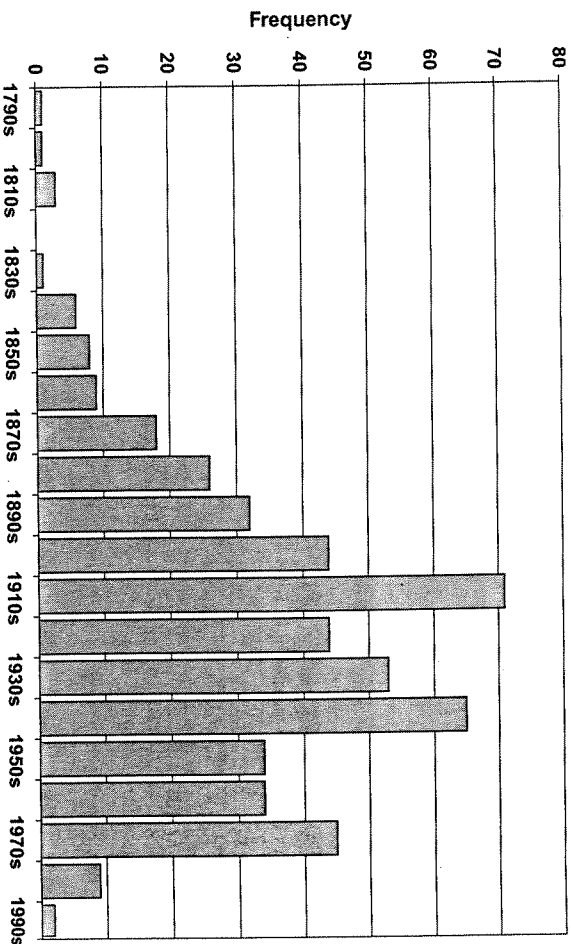


Figure 96: Founding Dates of Contemporary U.S. Associations

organizational entrepreneurs in our own time, organization builders at the turn of the century were more prolific or more successful or both.

Moreover, the newer groups listed in recent almanacs, however worthy, are either mailing list groups, like *People for the American Way*, or narrowly defined and evanescent, like the Association for Investment Management and Research, the International Society of Sand Castle Builders, *New Age Walkers*, or the Group Against Smokers' Pollution (GASP). The groups founded between 1890 and 1920—which, after all, have endured for roughly a century by now—are more likely to be broad-based professional, civic, or service organizations, like the Boy Scouts, the National Association of Grocers, the Red Cross, or the Lions Club. (Is it really plausible to think that *New Age Walkers* or even GASP will still be around in 2099?)

To spot lessons in the burst of social-capital investment at the turn of the twentieth century, note first the wide variety of guises in which it appeared. America a century ago was a more gendered place than our own, and most of the organizations founded in that period were segregated by sex. It is thus not surprising that the most prominent example of organizational proliferation in that era were fraternal groups. Although Freemasonry had much earlier origins, the Gilded Age ushered in a period of massive expansion of fraternal groups. "Every fifth, or possibly every eighth, man you meet is identified with some fraternal organization," W. S. Harwood wrote in 1897. By 1910, historian

David Beito calculates, "a conservative estimate would be that one third of all adult males over age nineteen were members."

In part, fraternalism represented a reaction against the individualism and anomie of this era of rapid social change, asylum from a disordered and uncertain world. Fraternal groups provided both material benefits (for example, life and health insurance) and social solidarity and ritual. Mutual aid, resting on the principle of reciprocity—today's recipient, tomorrow's donor—was a core feature of the groups. Historian Beito observes, "They successfully created vast social and mutual aid networks among the poor." The nation's largest fraternal organizations—the Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Ancient Order of United Workmen, Modern Woodmen of America—each reported hundreds of thousands of members in local chapters across the land. Notes Beito, this "geographically extended structure . . . facilitated a kind of coinsurance to mitigate local crises such as natural disasters or epidemics." Finally, Beito adds,

By joining a lodge, an initiate adopted, at least implicitly, a set of values. Societies dedicated themselves to the advancement of mutualism, self-reliance, business training, thrift, leadership skills, self-government, self-control, and good moral character. These values reflected a fraternal consensus that cut across such seemingly intractable divisions as race, gender, and income.

Men of all social ranks joined these societies. Fraternal organizations encompassed both middle-class and working-class members. They were typically segregated by race and gender. On the other hand, as Beito has shown, there were many comparable organizations for African Americans and women that served the same functions of mutual aid and moral uplift. The segregation may be repugnant to our values, but as an ascendant form of social capital, fraternal organization was definitely not limited to middle-class white males. As illustrated by the Knights of Columbus, B'nai B'rith, and Prince Hall Freemasonry (an organization for black Masons), various ethnic groups tended to spawn their own fraternal organizations. By the early twentieth century fraternal organizations were challenged by new service clubs (Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, the Jaycees, and the like) and by professional associations. These newer groups offered business contacts, a more modern face, and more outward civic zeal, though this came at the expense of the "brotherhood" of fraternalism.⁵⁸

Among women, a more or less spontaneous grassroots crusade of 1873–74 across the Midwest reinvigorated the temperance movement and resulted in the formation of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which quickly expanded as a vehicle for broader moral and social reform. Frances Willard, its activist leader, adopted a national policy of "Do Everything," and WCTU women did—advocating prison reform, forming youth groups, estab-

ishing kindergartens, even endorsing labor reform. In the 1890s the WCTU began to decline, and with Willard's death in 1898, it narrowed its focus to temperance and prohibition. Meanwhile, however, new women's groups began to appear, emerging in part from the many independent reading and study groups described in chapter 9. In 1890 this translocal network of women's organizations was linked together to form the General Federation of Women's Clubs. During this period women's associations turned toward explicit involvement in public affairs, campaigning on issues like child labor, women's employment, kindergartens, and myriad other social reforms including women's suffrage.⁵⁹

Immigrant and ethnic associations illustrate other aspects of social capital building at the end of the last century. Generally speaking, emigration devalues one's social capital, for most of one's social connections must be left behind. Thus immigrants rationally strive to conserve social capital. So-called chain migration, whereby immigrants from a given locale in the "old country" settle near one another in their new homeland, was and remains one common coping strategy. In addition, the benevolent society for mutual aid was the bedrock of many immigrant communities, providing financial security, camaraderie, and even political representation. A member of a Chinese tong expressed the essential value of social capital for immigrants in a remark in the early twentieth century: "We are strangers in a strange country. We must have an organization (tong) to control our country fellows and develop our friendship."⁶⁰

According to historian Rowland Berthoff, "The immigrants, who had been accustomed to a more tightly knit communal life than almost any American could now recall, were quick to adopt the fraternal form of the American voluntary association in order to bind together their local ethnic communities against the unpredictable looseness of life in America." Germans, who constituted the largest ethnic minority throughout this era, were especially associational. When Italians, Jews, Poles, and others from southern and Eastern Europe arrived around the turn of the century, they too quickly organized mutual aid societies, free loan societies, burial societies, social, sports, and recreational clubs, foreign-language newspapers, churches, and synagogues. By 1910 two-thirds of all Poles in America were said to belong to at least one of the approximately seven thousand Polish associations, and there were similar figures for Jews, Slovaks, Croats, and so on. In addition, national fraternal organizations, like B'nai B'rith, Hadassah, and the Knights of Columbus, attracted large numbers after the turn of the century.⁶¹

The building of associations among freed blacks followed much the same pattern, including mutual aid, burial, and social associations and black fraternal and women's groups. Released from bondage, exercising newly acquired civic freedoms, and facing profound social dislocation, blacks founded and joined associations in great numbers in both North and South between 1870 and 1900. In his classic study of *The Philadelphia Negro* at the turn of the cen-

tury, W. E. B. Du Bois emphasized the importance of black secret societies, such as the Odd Fellows and Freemasons, in furnishing "pastime from the monotony of work, a field for ambition and intrigue, a chance for parade, and insurance against misfortune"—virtually the same boons that attracted millions of whites into such organizations in these years. As we discussed in earlier chapters, the church played a role of unique importance in social-capital formation within the African American community. At the same time, associations arose that linked blacks and whites together in support of social reform—above all, the NAACP and the Urban League.⁶²

Although the culture of industrial America was becoming in some respects more secular, religion played a substantial role in the civic revitalization of the period quite apart from the devotional activities of local parishes and congregations. The Salvation Army, an evangelical Protestant movement ministering to the unchurched urban poor with missionary zeal and unorthodox mass marketing—marches, brass bands, and "Hallelujah lassies"—spread from Britain to America in 1880. This was the epoch of the "Social Gospel" and "muscular Christianity." The Social Gospel movement embodied a turn-of-the-century effort by liberal Protestant theologians and ministers to bring pressing social problems such as urban poverty to the attention of their middle-class parishioners. The Social Gospel represented a reaction against individualism, *laissez-faire*, and inequality, and an attempt to make religion relevant to new social and intellectual circumstances.

It was in this period that many churches took on the character of what religious historian E. Brooks Holifield terms "the social congregation."

In the late nineteenth century, thousands of congregations transformed themselves into centers that not only were open for worship but also were available for Sunday school, concerts, church socials, women's meetings, youth groups, girls' guilds, boys' brigades, sewing circles, benevolent societies, day schools, temperance societies, athletic clubs, scout troops, and nameless other activities. . . . Henry Ward Beecher advised the seminarians at Yale to "multiply picnics" in their parishes, and many congregations of every variety proceeded beyond picnics to gymnasiums, parish houses, camps, baseball teams, and military drill groups. . . . They also gave increasing amounts of money for purposes other than their own maintenance: both in the cities and in the country churches, Protestant congregations by 1923 gave 25 to 35 percent of their offerings to missions and benevolent causes, up from 14 to 18 percent at the turn of the century.⁶³

Religious inspiration, self-improvement, and civic engagement were closely intertwined in this period. The Chautauquá movement, founded in upstate New York in 1874 as a summer institute for Methodist Sunday school teachers, spawned a nationwide series of extension schools, study groups, and

tent lecture circuits, on which speakers ranging from Eugene Debs to Warren Harding regularly traveled. By 1919 one commentator estimated that "one out of every eleven persons in the country, man, woman, or child, attended a lyceum or Chautauqua program every year." Radio (and later television) would provide more alluring entertainment, though less opportunity for grassroots, cross-class civic deliberation.

Catholics tended to be even more sympathetic to the plight of the poor than did Protestants, not least because more Catholics belonged to the laboring classes. As always, the church played a special role in the black community. Evelyn Higginbotham, a leading historian of the black church, observes that "it housed a diversity of programs including schools, circulating libraries, concerts, restaurants, insurance companies, vocational training, athletic clubs—all catering to a population much broader than the membership of individual churches. The church . . . held political rallies, clubwomen's conferences, and school graduations." In short, a socially reformist Christianity was a central inspiration for much of the social activism of the period. On the verge of nominating Theodore Roosevelt as a full-throated reform candidate for president in 1912, delegates to the Progressive convention broke spontaneously into an emotional chorus of "Onward, Christian Soldiers!"⁶⁴

This was also the era in which the organized labor movement became a serious force in American life. The Knights of Labor, based on the premise that workers of all types should be enrolled in "one big union," had boomed from 28,100 members in 1880 to 729,000 six years later, but then fell back to 100,000 in 1890 and collapsed in 1894 in the face of internal conflicts between the skilled and unskilled, as well as between blacks and whites. Its leading role was soon taken over by the American Federation of Labor, along with a series of unions organized along craft and industrial lines—mine workers (founded in 1890), electrical workers (1891), longshoremen (1892), garment workers (1900), teamsters (1903), and so on. In barely seven years (1897–1904) nationwide union membership almost quadrupled from 3.5 percent of the nonagricultural workforce to 12.3 percent. This time union efforts proved more durable, and union membership would not fall below the new plateau for the rest of the century.⁶⁵

Historians Thomas Cochran and William Miller make clear that unions were a part of their members' social lives, not merely a means to gain material improvements:

Collective action by labor had roots far more complex than simple questions of wages and hours. . . . Labor unions were but a part of the mass movement into clubs, lodges and fraternal orders. Working for the union and empowering the delegates to do battle with the boss was a reassertion of the individual's power over his environment. Mutual benefit policies

gave a feeling of security in the face of industrial accidents and seasonal unemployment, while union socials, dances, picnics and lectures offered stimulating leisure-time activity.⁶⁶

Because Progressive Era reformers were especially aware of the importance of youth development, that was a special focus of their organizational energies. In an extraordinary burst of creativity, in less than a decade (1901–10) most of the nationwide youth organizations that were to dominate the twentieth century were founded—the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, the 4-H, Boys Clubs and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and the American Camping Association, the organizational crystallization of the movement for summer camps that had rapidly developed in the previous two decades.

In these years, too, the kindergarten and the high school became recognizable elements in American public schooling and the playground a commonplace of American towns and cities. Beginning with the creation of sand gardens in Boston in 1885, organized playgrounds spread rapidly to New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and beyond, and by 1906 the Playground Association of America had been founded. Through the creation of such public recreation centers, reformers hoped to involve the entire family in wholesome leisure, rather than leaving kids unsupervised in dangerous streets. In the face of newly recognized child abuse, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, founded in 1874 after the model of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, was followed by similar organizations elsewhere, and by 1908 there were fifty-five local societies for the prevention of cruelty to children. In short, Americans of that era did not simply bemoan "the way kids are today," or long nostalgically for the lost social control of the village. Rather, the Progressives devoted their intellectual, organizational, and financial energies to blazing constructive new paths for youth. In a stroke of marketing genius, the new organizations combined enduring social values—"A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous . . ."—with the pure fun of camping, sports, and play.⁶⁷

One of the most notable social inventions of the Progressive Era were settlement houses, an idea imported from mid-Victorian England. Settlement houses hosted idealistic young middle-class men and women who lived for several years in urban slums seeking to bring education and "moral uplift" to the immigrant poor. Hull House, founded by Jane Addams in Chicago in 1889, was quickly followed by a proliferation of similar experiments in other cities—six by 1891, seventy-four by 1897, and approximately four hundred by 1910. Initially, the primary purpose of the settlers was to teach English and the civic knowledge necessary for citizenship, but their activities broadened rapidly, as historian Mark Wahlgren Summers describes:

Settlement house workers set up debate societies and lecture series, taught slum mothers the importance of bathing and sanitation, trained them in manual skills to compete in the job market, and ran kindergartens and daycare centers for the children of working parents. Soon an art gallery joined Hull House's main dormitory, then a coffeehouse, a gymnasium, and a nursery.⁶⁸

Settlement houses made valuable contributions to the lives of the urban poor. Settlements like Pittsburgh's Kingsley House ran summer "fresh air" programs for thousands of children and their parents. A Hull House club gave Benny Goodman his first clarinet. Ironically, however, the most significant long-term effect of the settlement house movement was not on the recipients of service, but on the service givers. Jane Addams had hoped that firsthand contact with the harsher realities of life would give meaning to the lives of young college graduates. The range of leaders who came out of the experience of the settlement houses was extraordinary—not merely scores of social reformers like Florence Kelley and Eleanor Roosevelt, but also future public-spirited business magnates like Gerard Swope (president of General Electric, 1922–1944) and Walter Sherman Gifford (president of AT&T, 1925–1948). Historian Richard McCormick summarizes the settlements' longer-term impact:

For men and women alike, the settlements served as training grounds. From them, residents moved into every conceivable Progressive social reform: the improvement of tenement houses, the public playground movement, the crusade to abolish child labor, the demand for better hours and wages for working women, and many more. . . . Often their values and activities must have seemed alien to the immigrant working people whom they sought to assist. But no other Americans in the early 1900s tried so hard or so successfully to devise solutions for urban, industrial problems as did the women and men of the settlement movement.⁶⁹

As a social movement, Progressivism was broad and variegated. As political philosopher Peter Levine has observed, "Any movement that attracted Upton Sinclair and J. Edgar Hoover, W. E. B. Du Bois and Robert Taft, Herbert Hoover and the young Franklin D. Roosevelt can hardly be called a movement at all."⁷⁰ Any simple interpretation thus risks being misleading and incomplete. From our point of view, however, the Progressive Era represented a civic communitarian reaction to the ideological individualism of the Gilded Age. Although it culminated in a specifically political movement, it began with social goals that were both broader and more immediate. In the successful efforts to establish playgrounds, civic museums, kindergartens, public parks, and

the like, an important part of the rationale was to strengthen habits of cooperation, while not stifling individualism. Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York's Central Park (opened in 1876) and first commissioner of Yosemite National Park (1890), crusaded for parks and recreation areas as a means to overcome isolation and suspicion. Similarly, one enthusiastic supporter of the playground movement exclaimed that playgrounds

are actually coming in considerable numbers and in all parts of the country, and everywhere they produce the same social results. That is, they bring about fine community spirit, awaken civic consciousness and co-operation, and make for a whole-souled companionship instead of individualism and isolation. If we could see the playground idea prevail . . . the gain to the nation through the ever increasing number of cheerful, contented, industrious, patriotic citizens will be far greater than if mines of fabulous wealth were uncovered or all the commerce of the world were brought under our flag.⁷¹

In short, though they did not generally use this terminology, an important goal of Progressives was to strengthen social capital.⁷² Recall that the term *social capital* was itself invented by a Progressive Era educator, L. J. Hanifan, expounding the value of community centers.

The impulse to educate and assimilate may have reached its greatest flowering in the kindergarten movement. Borrowed from an institution invented by German progressive educators, the first American kindergarten was launched by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, a "lady bountiful" in Boston. By the late 1870s this kindergarten movement was spreading rapidly across the country, and by 1908 more than four hundred kindergartens were run by women's clubs, temperance groups, churches, and other organizations. In their early years kindergartens were inspired by an innovative educational philosophy that encouraged childhood creativity. Their volunteer organizers sought both to provide a wholesome educational environment for immigrant children and to influence the child-rearing techniques of their parents. Around the kindergartens grew up an array of new forms of adult connectedness—mothers' clubs, sewing clubs, and so on. Some of the most innovative features of the movement, including its legion of volunteers and its emphasis on childhood creativity, rather than just school readiness, fell away as kindergartens were increasingly incorporated into the public school system and kindergarten teachers strove for professional recognition; but an important residue remained. The National Congress of Mothers, formed in part from the kindergarten movement in 1897, went on to organize local school groups of parents and teachers. In 1924 the Congress of Mothers was formally renamed the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (later the PTA).⁷³

As McCormick reveals, civic engagement was at the heart of the Progressives' approach:

Progressivism owed much of its success to a distinctive method of reform, variations of which were adopted by the leaders of nearly every cause. They typically began by organizing a voluntary association, investigating a problem, gathering relevant facts, and analyzing them according to the precepts of one of the newer social sciences. From such an analysis a proposed solution would emerge, be popularized through campaigns of education and moral suasion, and—as often as not, if it seemed to work—be taken over by some level of government as a public function.⁷⁴

Social entrepreneurs, both at the grass roots and nationally, built new organizations, often initially for nonpolitical purposes. An early example was the temperance movement, which aimed in part to create “a cohesive structure of reciprocal responsibility” in the face of industrialization and urbanization. Often too the new organizations were built on preexisting social networks, especially religious ones. In turn local and national reform movements were built on the foundations of the informal or nonpolitical groups.

A far from unique example: the transformation of women's reading groups into first a civic movement and then a political force. During the depression of the 1890s, women's reading groups expanded their agenda to include social service and advocacy. The General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), founded in 1890, campaigned for government food inspection, stricter housing codes, safer drinking water, workplace protection for women, and services for the poor, sick, disabled, and children. The National Congress of Mothers, established to educate mothers about child rearing, then sought public support for infant health clinics, juvenile courts, probation homes for children awaiting trial, kindergartens, and playgrounds. Barred by segregation from joining the GFWC, African Americans formed the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs of America in 1896, campaigned against alcoholic consumption, and supported nurseries, kindergartens, and homes for unwed mothers. “Woman's place is in the Home,” wrote suffragist Rheta Childe Dorr in 1910, “but Home is not contained within the four walls of an individual home. Home is the community.”⁷⁵ The suffrage movement, reaching across class lines (though generally not race lines), was merely the most visible culmination of feminist organizing at the turn of the century.

The successive waves of labor mobilization provide another illustration of the interweaving of movements for social solidarity and movements for political reform. The efforts to organize labor in the closing decades of the nineteenth century were hardly tea parties, for this was the most vivid period of class conflict in American history. “The eighties dripped with blood,” recalled Ida Tarbell in her memoirs. Despite recurrent efforts to broaden labor's agenda

to encompass social reform and class struggle, the most durable nineteenth-century unions had aimed primarily at improved conditions of employment. The burst of unionization at the turn of the century, however, culminated in the election of fifteen unionists to Congress in 1910, and with the threat of “socialism” hanging in the air, the political establishment moved to encompass labor reform among their objectives. Here too alliances across class lines were important. The National Consumers League, founded in 1899 by Florence Kelley, a Hull House settler, aimed to enable middle-class women shoppers to boycott firms that failed to provide decent working conditions for women employees.⁷⁶

As a social movement, Progressivism evades any simple classification as “top down” or “bottom up.” Many of the new fraternal, civic, and reform organizations represented the recruiting efforts of national headquarters and national leaders, while others sprang up in response to local initiatives. Some, like the 4-H and the Grange, were actually the creation of the federal government. More important still was the lateral diffusion of initiatives from one community to another. As political scientist Theda Skocpol notes, “This method of organizational expansion was very reminiscent of the techniques used by Methodist and Baptist circuit-riding clergy to disseminate new congregations, like wildfire, across the pre-Civil War United States.”⁷⁷

Lateral learning was common in the diffusion of the Progressives' ideas for increasing civic engagement. Initiatives born in one part of the country were picked up and developed in other communities from whence they spread further. We can see this process in action by tracing the evolution of a single civic innovation. In the 1890s, modeled in part on the lectures of scholars like John Dewey at Hull House, the Universities of Wisconsin and Chicago developed university extension schools to deepen ties between the university and adult citizens. In the first decade of the new century Tom Johnson, the renowned Progressive mayor of Cleveland, conceived the idea of periodic tent meetings to draw citizens and political leaders into informal give-and-take on public issues. By 1907, building on these initiatives, civic organizations in Rochester, New York, had established “social centers” in the public schools for regular, publicly funded popular debate about local issues.

Within three years hundreds of such meetings were being held annually in Rochester, as recorded in the *Democrat and Chronicle* of March 20, 1910: “This week's programs in the social centers and civic clubs is a varied one, with evenings devoted to discussions of business conditions, health, art, social organization, high prices, the liquor question and neighborhood problems.” Participation in these civic deliberations cut widely across class and educational lines: an observer in 1911 reported laconically “the topic being the commission form of government, a Polish washwoman and the president of the WCTU were opposed by a day cleaner and a college professor.” By 1916 the “social center” (or “community center”) movement had spread across the

country, reaching West Virginia, where, as we have seen, it evoked from L. J. Hanftan the first recorded reference to “social capital.”⁷⁸

As this story illustrates, although the major metropolitan and intellectual centers of New York, Boston, and their ilk were part of the process of civic renovation, much of the creative action took place in communities all across the heartland, as local activists intent on rebuilding community ties in the new century learned from one another what worked. In fact, the wave of association building of the late nineteenth century actually had begun in the small towns of the heartland, not in the cosmopolitan metropolises. The high school movement spread most rapidly in small towns in the Midwest and West. Historians Arthur Link and Richard McCormick may exaggerate slightly, but they capture the distinctiveness of the movement when they conclude, “Progressivism was the only reform movement ever experienced by the whole American nation.”⁷⁹

As a political movement, the Progressives were responsible for the most thoroughgoing renovation of public policies and institutions in American history, rivaled only by the New Deal. The secret ballot (1888, Kentucky); popular initiative and referendum (1898, South Dakota); presidential primary elections (1900, Minnesota); the city manager system (1903, Galveston, Texas); the direct election of senators (1913); women’s suffrage (1893, Colorado; 1920 in the U.S. Constitution)—in a few short decades all these fundamental features of our political process were introduced into state and local politics and then gradually diffused nationwide. Quite apart from these basic political reforms, this was also the most intense period of local administrative reform in our history.⁸⁰

Nationally, the Progressives laid the institutional cornerstones for fiscal and monetary policy with the Federal Reserve (1913), the income tax (1913), and the Bureau of the Budget (1921). The first consumer protection legislation in American history (the Food and Drug Administration and federal meat inspection in 1906, the Federal Trade Commission in 1914); the first environmental legislation (the national forest system in 1905 and the national park system in 1913); the creation of the Departments of Commerce and Labor (1913) and the General Accounting Office (1921); strengthened antitrust regulations (1903); child labor laws (1916); the eight-hour day (beginning with the railways in 1916); workmen’s compensation (1916); first federal regulation of the communications industry (1910); the U.S. Bureau of Investigation (1908; renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935); federal campaign finance regulation (1907); the biggest trade liberalization in more than half a century (1913); the foundations for federal water policy in the western states (1902); and Mother’s Day (1914)—hardly an area of public policy was left untouched by the Progressive avalanche of policy initiatives.⁸¹ Typically, innovation began with experimental reforms in states and local communities, then gathered strength as it thundered toward Washington.

Not all these reforms proved as successful as their advocates had expected, and a few in retrospect look positively pernicious. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, this package of reforms constituted an impressive achievement within a constitutional system that is built to thwart radical change. This achievement rested on a broad-based, grassroots, nationwide political movement that swept through both major political parties in the first decade of the century. In turn, that political mobilization drew on the energies and organizations created during the social capital building of the previous several decades.

Generally speaking, the wave began in the last third of the nineteenth century with organizations (like fraternal and cultural groups) focused primarily on the private concerns of their members, including leisure and self-help. In the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century these associations (and newer ones spawned in that period) gradually turned their attention to community issues and eventually to political reform. The earlier, inward-oriented phase of creating social networks paved the way for the later, outward-oriented phase of political action.⁸² Like any stylized historical generalization, this interpretation could be exaggerated, since there were public facets of the Shriners and private facets of the League of Women Voters, but the central fact is that *investment in social capital was not an alternative to, but a prerequisite for, political mobilization and reform*. That too is a crucial lesson for our own times.

WE NEED NOT WHITEWASH the Progressive Era, for debates about the legacy of this movement have preoccupied historians for nearly a century now. Its critics, in the ascendancy among professional historians for much of the last half century, note the propensity of Progressives to favor a technocratic elitism. In proposing “professional,” “expert” solutions to social problems, many Progressives adopted an antipolitical stance that had the effect, if not the intention, of demobilizing public participation. After 1896 electoral turnout began a descent from which it has yet to recover. Partisan politics, and especially the party machine, was the great enemy for Progressives, who generally preferred “boards” and “commissions” dominated de facto by middle-class professionals. Progressives were conscious of the corruption and dependency inherent in the machine, but they were blind to the role of the machine in allowing access to the public sphere for the otherwise powerless, especially the immigrant. Historian Philip Fittington has observed that “among the many ironies of the so-called Progressive Era (circa 1890s–1920s), the saddest perhaps is the deep and enduring damage done to democracy by her closest friends,” for instead of the deliberative democracy advocated by some Progressives, we ended up instead with the direct, plebiscitary democracy pushed successfully by others.⁸³

An even greater debate has raged among historians about whether the Progressive Era was about social reform or social control or social revolution.

Some scholars have argued that middle-class reformers organized voluntary associations to exert social control over rambunctious, uncouth working-class immigrants. Other researchers, while acknowledging that Progressive leadership came from the middle class, emphasize the benevolent aspect of the new institutions, aimed to strengthen immigrant and working-class communities and reduce social inequality. Still others have noted that middle-class reformers were often prodded to action by the demands of their working-class "clients," so that to reduce this dynamic to top-down social control is to ignore the intentions and agency of those whose lives were being changed. "Fear of working-class violence explains much of what has been called progressive reform," concludes historian Painter.⁸⁵

Even those who celebrated the new associationism and its political consequences often recognized the potential for excessive social control and subordination of the individual.⁸⁵ The communitarian impulses of the Progressive Era could easily go much too far: during World War I William Dudley Foulke, president of the National Municipal League, suggested that the draft should be used for public service purposes after the war:

The public welfare may require of some that they shall marry and rear children for the sake of the community. They must be ready to do it whether they so desire or not. It may require of some, that they shall give up the use of intoxicating liquor or discontinue some other habit that involves extravagance or demoralization . . . whether there is a prohibitory law or not. It may require periods of training either for military service or in organizing the industries of state or city for purposes of defense or social betterment, and those on whom the call is made must be willing to sacrifice their private interests and respond to the appeal.⁸⁶

This "big brotherism," American style, illustrates the risk of an overdone communitarianism.

Even more troubling is the fact that racial segregation and social exclusion were, as we have seen, so central to the public agenda of the Progressive Era. Jim Crow was legalized in 1896, the NAACP was founded in 1909 to attack legal race discrimination, and in 1915 the second Ku Klux Klan was founded (in part) to enforce it, by illegal means if necessary.⁸⁷ Not all the "civic innovations" of the Progressive Era were beneficent and progressive. Those of us who seek inspiration for contemporary America in that earlier epoch of reform must attend to the risk that emphasizing community exacerbates division and exclusion. Since social capital is inevitably easier to foster within homogeneous communities, emphasis on its creation may inadvertently shift the balance in society away from bringing social capital and toward bonding social capital. That is one of the most instructive lessons from that earlier era.

But there are other, more positive lessons as well. The institutions of civil society formed between roughly 1880 and 1910 have lasted for nearly a cen-

tury. In those few decades the voluntary structures of American society assumed modern form. Essentially, the trends toward civic disengagement reviewed in section II of this book register the decay of that very structure over the last third of the twentieth century. Still, in human affairs it is no small feat to create a set of institutions that can endure and serve society through a century of kaleidoscopic social and economic transformation.

For all the difficulties, errors, and misdeeds of the Progressive Era, its leaders and their immediate forebears in the late nineteenth century correctly diagnosed the problem of a social-capital or civic engagement deficit. It must have been tempting in 1890 to say, "Life was much nicer back in the village. Everybody back to the farm." They resisted that temptation to reverse the tide, choosing instead the harder but surer path of social innovation. Similarly, among those concerned about the social-capital deficit today, it would be tempting to say, "Life was much nicer back in the fifties. Would all women please report to the kitchen, and turn off the TV on the way?" Social dislocation can easily breed a reactionary form of nostalgia.

On the contrary, my message is that we desperately need an era of civic inventiveness to create a renewed set of institutions and channels for a reinvented civic life that will fit the way we have come to live. Our challenge now is to reinvent the twenty-first-century equivalent of the Boy Scouts or the settlement house or the playground or Hadassah or the United Mine Workers or the NAACP. What we create may well look nothing like the institutions Progressives invented a century ago, just as their inventions were not carbon copies of the earlier small-town folkways whose passing they mourned. We need to be as ready to experiment as the Progressives were. Willingness to err—and then correct our aim—is the price of success in social reform.

Looking back from the doorstep of the twenty-first century, it is hard to imagine a time without Boy Scouts, but a century ago it must have seemed fanciful that the twentieth-century equivalent of Tom Sawyer's antebellum gang on the Mississippi sandbar would involve beanies, merit badges, and the Scout's oath. Nevertheless, institutions like the Boy Scouts provided a new and successful forum for youthful community building. So too some solutions to today's civic deficit may seem initially preposterous, but we should be wary of straining our civic inventiveness through conventional filters. The specific reforms of the Progressive Era are no longer appropriate for our time, but the practical, enthusiastic idealism of that era—and its achievements—should inspire us.