

Robber Barons, Revolution, and Social Control

The Century of Social Engineering, Part 1

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Introduction

In Part 1 of this series, "The Century of Social Engineering," I briefly document the economic, political and social background to the 20th century in America, by taking a brief look at the major social upheavals of the 19th century. For an excellent and detailed examination of this history, Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States (which provided much of the research for this article) is perhaps the most expansive and detailed examination. I am not attempting to serve it justice here, as there is much left out of this historically examination than there is included. The purpose of this essay is to examine first of all the rise of class and labour struggle throughout the United States in the 19th century, the rise and dominance of the 'Robber Baron' industrialists like J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller, their convergence of interests with the state, and finally to examine the radical new philosophies and theories that arose within the radicalized and activated populations, such as Marxism and Anarchism. I do not attempt to provide exhaustive or comprehensive analyses of these theoretical and philosophical movements, but rather provide a brief glimpse to some of the ideas (particularly those of anarchism), and place them in the historical context of the mass struggles of the 19th century.

America's Class Struggle

Unbeknownst to most Americans – and for that matter, most people in general – the United States in the 19th century was in enormous upheaval, following on the footsteps of the American Revolution, a revolution which was directed by the landed elite in the American colonies, a new revolutionary spirit arose in the working class populace. The 19th century, from roughly the 1830s onwards, was one great long labour struggle in America.

In the early decades of the 19th century, Eastern capitalists in America began to expand to the West, "and it became important to keep that new West, tumultuous and unpredictable, under control." [1] The new capitalists favoured monopolization over competition as a method of achieving 'stability' and "security to your own property." The state played its traditional role in securing business interests, as state legislatures gave charters to corporations, granting them legal charters, and "between 1790 and 1860, 2,300 corporations were chartered." [2] However, as Howard Zinn wrote in A People's History of the United States:

The attempts at political stability, at economic control, did not quite work. The new industrialism, the crowded cities, the long hours in the factories, the sudden economic crises leading to high prices and lost jobs, the lack of food and water, the freezing winters, the hot tenements in the summer, the epidemics of disease, the deaths of children – these led to

sporadic reactions from the poor. Sometimes there were spontaneous, unorganized uprisings against the rich. Sometimes the anger was deflected into racial hatred for blacks, religious warfare against Catholics, nativist fury against immigrants. Sometimes it was organized into demonstrations and strikes.[3]

In the 1830s, “episodes of insurrection” were taking place amid the emergence of unions. Throughout the century, it was with each economic crisis that labour movements and rebellious sentiments would develop and accelerate. Such was the case with the 1837 economic crisis, caused by the banks and leading to rising prices. Rallies and meetings started taking place in several cities, with one rally numbering 20,000 people in Philadelphia. That same year, New York experienced the Flour Riot. With a third of the working class – 50,000 people – out of work in New York alone, and nearly half of New York’s 500,000 people living “in utter and hopeless distress,” thousands of protesters rioted, ultimately leading to police and troops being sent in to crush the protesters.[4]

In 1835 there had been a successful general strike in Philadelphia, where fifty trade unions had organized in favour of a ten-hour work day. In this context, political parties began creating divides between workers and lower class people, as antagonisms developed between many Protestants and Catholics. Thus, middle class politicians “led each group into a different political party (the nativists into the American Republican party, the Irish into the Democratic party), party politics and religion now substituting for class conflict.”[5]

Another economic crisis took place in 1857, and in 1860, a Mechanics Association was formed, demanding higher wages, and called for a strike. Within a week, strikes spread from Lynn, Massachusetts, to towns across the state and into New Hampshire and Maine, “with Mechanics Associations in twenty-five towns and twenty thousand shoe-workers on strike,” marking the largest strike prior to the Civil War.[6] Yet, “electoral politics drained the energies of the resisters into the channels of the system.” While European workers were struggling for economic justice and political democracy, American workers had already achieved political democracy, thus, “their economic battles could be taken over by political parties that blurred class lines.”[7]

The Civil War (1861-1865) served several purposes. First of all, the immediate economic considerations: the Civil War sought to create a single economic system for America, driven by the Eastern capitalists in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, uniting with the West against the slave-labour South. The aim was not freedom for black slaves, but rather to end a system which had become antiquated and unprofitable. With the Industrial Revolution driving people into cities and mechanizing production, the notion of slavery lost its appeal: it was simply too expensive and time consuming to raise, feed, house, clothe and maintain slaves; it was thought more logical and profitable (in an era obsessed with efficiency) to simply pay people for the time they engage in labour. The Industrial Revolution brought with it the clock, and thus time itself became a commodity. As slavery was indicative of human beings being treated as commodities to be bought and sold, owned and used, the Industrial Revolution did not liberate people from servitude and slavery, it simply updated the notions and made more efficient the system of slavery: instead of purchasing people, they would lease them for the time they can be ‘productive’.

Living conditions for the workers and the vast majority, however, were not very different from the conditions of slavery itself. Thus, as the Civil War was sold to the public on the notion of liberating the slaves in the South, the workers of the North felt betrayed and hateful that they must be drafted and killed for a war to liberate others when they

themselves were struggling for liberation. Here, we see the social control methods and reorganizing of society that can take place through war, a fact that has always existed and remains today, made to be even more prescient with the advances in technology. During the Civil War, the class conflict among the working people of the United States transformed into a system where they were divided against each other, as religious and racial divisions increasingly erupted in violence. With the Conscription Act of 1863, draft riots erupted in several Northern U.S. cities, the most infamous of which was the New York draft riots, when for three days mobs of rioters attacked recruiting stations, wealthy homes, destroying buildings and killing blacks. Roughly four hundred people were killed after Union troops were called into the city to repress the riots.[8] In the South, where the vast majority of people were not slave owners, but in fact poor white farmers “living in shacks or abandoned outhouses, cultivating land so bad the plantation owners had abandoned it,” making little more than blacks for the same work (30 cents a day for whites as opposed to 20 cents a day for blacks). When the Southern Confederate Conscription Law was implemented in 1863, anti-draft riots erupted in several Southern cities as well.[9]

When the Civil War ended in 1865, hundreds of thousands of soldiers returned to squalor conditions in the major cities of America. In New York alone, 100,000 people lived in slums. These conditions brought a surge in labour unrest and struggle, as 100,000 went on strike in New York, unions were formed, with blacks forming their own unions. However, the National Labour Union itself suppressed the struggle for rights as it focused on ‘reforming’ economic conditions (such as promoting the issuance of paper money), “it became less an organizer of labor struggles and more a lobbyist with Congress, concerned with voting, it lost its vitality.”[10]

The Robber Barons Against Americans

In 1873, another major economic crisis took place, setting off a great depression. Yet, economic crises, while being harmful to the vast majority of people, increasing prices and decreasing jobs and wages, had the effect of being very beneficial to the new industrialists and financiers, who use crisis as an opportunity to wipe out competition and consolidate their power. Howard Zinn elaborated:

The crisis was built into a system which was chaotic in its nature, in which only the very rich were secure. It was a system of periodic crisis – 1837, 1857, 1873 (and later: 1893, 1907, 1919, 1929) – that wiped out small businesses and brought cold, hunger, and death to working people while the fortunes of the Astors, Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Morgans, kept growing through war and peace, crisis and recovery. During the 1873 crisis, Carnegie was capturing the steel market, Rockefeller was wiping out his competitors in oil.[11]

In 1877, a nation-wide railroad strike took place, infuriating the major railroad barons, particularly J.P. Morgan, offered to lend money to pay army officers to go in and crush the strikes and get the trains moving, which they managed to accomplish fairly well. Strikes took place and soldiers were sent in to Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Indiana, with the whole city of Philadelphia in uproar, with a general strike emerging in Pittsburgh, leading to the deployment of the National Guard, who often shot and killed strikers. When all was said and done, a hundred people were dead, a thousand people had gone to jail, 100,000 workers had gone on strike, and the strikes had roused into action countless unemployed in the cities.[12] Following this period, America underwent its greatest spur of economic growth in its history, with elites from both North and South working together against workers and blacks and the majority of people:

They would do it with the aid of, and at the expense of, black labor, white labor, Chinese labor, European immigrant labor, female labor, rewarding them differently by race, sex, national origin, and social class, in such a way as to create separate levels of oppression – a skillful terracing to stabilize the pyramid of wealth.[13]

The bankers and industrialists, particularly Morgan, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Mellon and Harriman, saw enormous increases in wealth and power. At the turn of the century, as Rockefeller moved from exclusively interested in oil, and into iron, copper, coal, shipping, and banking (with Chase Manhattan Bank, now J.P. Morgan Chase), his fortune would equal \$2 billion. The Morgan Group also had billions in assets.[14] In 1900, Andrew Carnegie agreed to sell his steel company to J.P. Morgan for \$492 million.[15]

Public sentiment at this time, however, had never been so anti-Capitalist and spiteful of the great wealth amassed at the expense of all others. The major industrialists and bankers firmly established their control over the political system, firmly entrenching the two party system through which they would control both parties. Thus, “whether Democrats or Republicans won, national policy would not change in any important way.”[16] Labour struggles had continued and exacerbated throughout the decades following the Civil War. In 1893, another economic depression took place, and the country was again plunged into social upheaval.

The Supreme Court itself was firmly overtaken by the interests of the new elite. Shortly after the Fourteenth Amendment was added to the Constitution to protect newly freed blacks, the Supreme Court began “to develop it as a protection for corporations,” as corporate lawyers argued that corporations were defined as legal ‘persons’, and therefore they could not have their rights infringed upon as stipulated in the Fourteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court went along with this reasoning, and even intervened in state legislative decisions which instead promoted the rights of workers and farmers. Ultimately, “of the Fourteenth Amendment cases brought before the Supreme Court between 1890 and 1910, nineteen dealt with the Negro, 288 dealt with corporations.”[17]

It was in this context that increasing social unrest was taking place, and thus that new methods of social control were becoming increasingly necessary. Among the restless and disgruntled masses, were radical new social theories that had emerged to fill a void – a void which was created by the inherent injustice of living in a human social system in which there is a dehumanizing power structure.

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Philosophies of Liberation and Social Dislocation

It was in this context that new theories and philosophies emerged to fill the void created by

the hegemonic ideologies and the institutions which propagate them. While these various critical philosophies expanded human kind's understanding of the world around them, they did not emerge in a vacuum – that is, separate from various hegemonic ideas, but rather, they were themselves products of and to varying degrees espoused certain biases inherent in the hegemonic ideologies. This arose in the context of increasing class conflict in both the United States and Europe, brought about as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Two of the pre-eminent ideologies and philosophies that emerged were Marxism and Anarchism.

Marxist theory, originating with German philosopher Karl Marx, expanded human kind's understanding of the nature of capitalism and human society as a constant class struggle, in which the dominant class (the bourgeoisie), who own the means of production (industry) exploit the lower labour class (proletariat) for their own gain. Within Marxist theory, the state itself was seen as a conduit through which economic powers would protect their own interests. Marxist theory espoused the idea of a "proletarian revolution" in which the "workers of the world unite" and overthrow the bourgeoisie, creating a Communist system in which class is eliminated. However, Karl Marx articulated a concept of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" in which upon seizing power, the proletariat would become the new ruling class, and serve its own interests through the state to effect a transition to a Communist society and simultaneously prevent a counterrevolution from the bourgeoisie. Karl Marx wrote in the Communist Manifesto (1848) also on the need for a central bank to manage the monetary system. These concepts led to significant conflict between Marxist and Anarchist theorists.

Anarchism is one of the most misunderstood philosophies in modern historical thought, and with good reason: it's revolutionary potential was boundless, as it was an area of thought that was not as rigid, doctrinaire or divisive as other theories, both hegemonic and critical. No other philosophy or political theory had the potential to unite both socialists and libertarians, two seemingly opposed concepts that found a home within the wide spectrum of anarchist thought, leading to a situation in which many anarchists refer to themselves as 'libertarian socialists.' As Nathan Jun has pointed out:

[A]narchism has never been and has never aspired to be a fixed, comprehensive, self-contained, and internally consistent system of ideas, set of doctrines, or body of theory. On the contrary, anarchism from its earliest days has been an evolving set of attitudes and ideas that can apply to a wide range of social, economic, and political theories, practices, movements, and traditions.[18]

Susan Brown noted that within Anarchist philosophy, "there are mutualists, collectivists, communists, federalists, individualists, socialists, syndicalists, [and] feminists," and thus, "Anarchist political philosophy is by no means a unified movement." [19] The word "anarchy" is derived from the Greek word anarkhos, which means "without authority." Thus, anarchy "is committed first and foremost to the universal rejection of coercive authority," and that:

[C]oercive authority includes all centralized and hierarchical forms of government (e.g., monarchy, representative democracy, state socialism, etc.), economic class systems (e.g., capitalism, Bolshevism, feudalism, slavery, etc.), autocratic religions (e.g., fundamentalist Islam, Roman Catholicism, etc.), patriarchy, heterosexism, white supremacy, and imperialism.[20]

The first theorist to describe himself as anarchist was Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a French

philosopher and socialist who understood “equality not just as an abstract feature of human nature but as an ideal state of affairs that is both desirable and realizable.”[21] While this was a common concept among socialists, anarchist conceptions of equality emphasized that, “true anarchist equality implies freedom, not quantity. It does not mean that every one must eat, drink, or wear the same things, do the same work, or live in the same manner. Far from it: the very reverse in fact,” as “individual needs and tastes differ, as appetites differ. It is equal opportunity to satisfy them that constitutes true equality.”[22]

Mikhail Bakunin, one of the most prominent anarchist theorists in history, who was also Karl Marx’s greatest intellectual challenger and opposition, explained that individual freedom depends upon not only recognizing, but “cooperating in [the] realization of others’ freedom,” as, he wrote:

My freedom... is the freedom of all since I am not truly free in thought and in fact, except when my freedom and my rights are confirmed and approved in the freedom and rights of all men and women who are my equals.[23]

Anarchists view representative forms of government, such as Parliamentary democracies, with the same disdain as they view overtly totalitarian structures of government. The reasoning is that:

In the political realm, representation involves divesting individuals and groups of their vitality—their power to create, transform, and change themselves. To be sure, domination often involves the literal destruction of vitality through violence and other forms of physical coercion. As a social-physical phenomenon, however, domination is not reducible to aggression of this sort. On the contrary, domination operates chiefly by “speaking for others” or “representing others to themselves”—that is, by manufacturing images of, or constructing identities for, individuals and groups.[24]

Mikhail Bakunin wrote that, “Only individuals, united through mutual aid and voluntary association, are entitled to decide who they are, what they shall be, how they shall live.” Thus, with any hierarchical or coercive institutions, the natural result is oppression and domination, or in other words, spiritual death.[25]

Anarchism emerged indigenously and organically in America, separate from its European counterparts. The first anarchists in America could be said to be “the Antinomians, Quakers, and other left-wing religious groups who found the authority, dogma, and formalism of the conventional churches intolerable.” These various religious groups came to develop “a political outlook which emphasized the anti-libertarian nature of the state and government.” One of the leaders of these religious groups, Adin Ballou, declared that “the essence of Christian morality is the rejection of force, compromise, and the very institution of government itself.” Thus, a Christian “is not merely to refrain from committing personal acts of violence but is to take positive steps to prevent the state from carrying out its warlike ambitions.”[26] This development occurred within the first decades of the 19th century in America.

In the next phase of American philosophical anarchism, inspiration was drawn from the idea of individualism. Josiah Warren, known as the “first American anarchist,” had published the first anarchist periodical in 1833, the *Peaceful Revolutionist*. Many others joined Warren in identifying the state as “the enemy” and “maintaining that the only legitimate form of social control is self-discipline which the individual must impose upon himself without the aid of

government.” Philosophical anarchism grew in popularity, and in the 1860s, two loose federations of anarchists were formed in the New England Labor Reform League and the American Labor Reform League, which “were the source of radical vitality in America for several decades.” American anarchists were simultaneously developing similar outlooks and ideas as Proudhon was developing in Europe. One of the most prominent American anarchists, Benjamin Tucker, translated Proudhon’s work in 1875, and started his own anarchist journals and publications, becoming “the chief political theorist of philosophical anarchism in America.”[27]

Tucker viewed anarchism as “a rejection of all formalism, authority, and force in the interest of liberating the creative capacities of the individual,” and that, “the anarchist must remove himself from the arena of politics, refusing to implicate himself in groups or associations which have as their end the control or manipulation of political power.” Thus, Tucker, like other anarchists, “ruled out the concepts of parliamentary and constitutional government and in general placed himself and the anarchist movement outside the tradition of democracy as it had developed in America.” Anarchism has widely been viewed as a violent philosophy, and while that may be the case for some theorists and adherents, many anarchist theorists and philosophies rejected the notion of violence altogether. After all, its first adherents in America were driven to anarchist theory simply as a result of their uncompromising pacifism. For the likes of Tucker and other influential anarchist theorists, “the state, rather than being a real structure or entity, is nothing more than a conception. To destroy the state then, is to remove this conception from the mind of the individual.” Thus, the act of revolution “has nothing whatever to do with the actual overthrow of the existing governmental machinery,” and Proudhon opined that, “a true revolution can only take place as mankind becomes enlightened.” Revolution, to anarchists, was not an imminent reality, even though it may be an inevitable outcome:

The one thing that is certain is that revolution takes place not by a concerted uprising of the masses but through a process of individual social reformation or awakening. Proudhon, like Tucker and the native American anarchists, believed that the function of anarchism is essentially educational... The state will be abolished at the point at which people in general have become convinced of its un-social nature... When enough people resist it to the point of ignoring it altogether, the state will have been destroyed as completely as a scrap of paper is when it is tossed into a roaring fire.[28]

In the 1880s, anarchism was taken up by many of the radical immigrants coming into America from Europe, such as Johann Most and Emma Goldman, a Jewish Russian feminist anarchist. The press portrayed Goldman “as a vile and unsavory devotee of revolutionary violence.” Goldman partook in an attempted assassination of Henry C. Frick, an American industrialist and financier, historically known as one of the most ruthless businessmen and referred to as “the most hated man in America.” This was saying something in the era of J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. Emma Goldman later regretted the attempted assassination and denounced violence as an anarchist methodology. However, she came to acknowledge a view similar to Kropotkin’s (another principle anarchist philosopher), “that violence is the natural consequence of repression and force”:

The state, in her opinion, sows the seeds of violence when it lends it authority and force to the retardation of social change, thereby creating deep-seated feelings of injustice and desperation in the collective unconscious. “I do not advocate violence, government does this, and force begets force.”[29]

The general belief was that “social violence is never arbitrary and meaningless. There is always a deep-seated cause standing behind every deed.” Thus:

Social violence, she argued, will naturally disappear at the point at which men have learned to understand and accommodate themselves to one another within a dynamic society which truly values human freedom. Until then we can expect to see pent up hostility and frustration of certain individuals and groups explode from time to time with the spontaneity and violence of a volcano.[30]

Thus we have come to take a brief glimpse of the social upheaval and philosophies gripping and spreading across the American (and indeed the European) landscape in the 19th century. As a radical reaction to the revolutionizing changes brought by the Industrial Revolution, class struggle, labor unrest, Marxism and Anarchism arose within a populace deeply unsatisfied, horrifically exploited, living in desperation and squalor, and lighting within them a spark – a desire – for freedom and equality. They were not ideologically or methodologically unified, specifically in terms of the objectives and ends; yet, their enemies were the same. It was a struggle among the people against the prevailing and growing sources of power: the state and Capitalist industrialization. The emergence of corporations in America after the Civil War (themselves a creation of the state), created new manifestations of exploitation, greed and power. The Robber Barons were the personification of ‘evil’ and in fact were quite openly and brazenly ruthless. The notion of ‘public relations’ had not yet been invented, and so the industrialists would openly and violently repress and crush struggles, strikes and protests. The state was, after all, firmly within their grip.

It was this revolutionary fervour that permeated the conniving minds of the rich and powerful within America, that stimulated the concepts of social control, and laid the foundations for the emergence of the 20th century as the ‘century of social engineering.’

In Part 2 of “The Century of Social Engineering,” I will identify new ideas of domination, oppression and social control that arose in response to the rise of new ideas of liberation and resistance in the 19th century. This process will take us through the emergence of the major universities and a new educational system, structure and curriculum, the rise of the major philanthropic foundations, and the emergence of public relations. The combination of these three major areas: education, philanthropy, and public relations (all of which interact and are heavily interdependent), merged and implemented powerful systems of social control, repressing the revolutionary upheaval of the 19th century and creating the conditions to transform American, and in fact, global society in the 20th century.

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Notes

[1] Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (Harper Perennial: New York, 2003), page 219

[2] *Ibid*, pages 219-220.

- [3] Ibid, page 221.
- [4] Ibid, pages 224-225.
- [5] Ibid, pages 225-226.
- [6] Ibid, page 231.
- [7] Ibid, page 232.
- [8] Ibid, pages 235-236.
- [9] Ibid, pages 236-237.
- [10] Ibid, pages 241-242.
- [11] Ibid, page 242.
- [12] Ibid, pages 245-251.
- [13] Ibid, page 253.
- [14] Ibid, pages 256-257.
- [15] Ibid, page 257.
- [16] Ibid, page 258.
- [17] Ibid, pages 260-261.
- [18] Nathan Jun, "Anarchist Philosophy and Working Class Struggle: A Brief History and Commentary," *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* (Vol. 12, September 2009), page 505
- [19] Ibid, page 506.
- [20] Ibid, pages 507-508.
- [21] Ibid, page 509.
- [22] Ibid, page 510.
- [23] Ibid, pages 510-511.
- [24] Ibid, page 512.
- [25] Ibid, page 512.
- [26] William O. Reichert, "Toward a New Understanding of Anarchism," *The Western Political Quarterly* (Vol. 20, No. 4, December 1967), page 857.
- [27] Ibid, page 858.
- [28] Ibid, pages 858-860.

[29] Ibid, pages 860-861.

[30] Ibid, page 862.

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