The United States in the Twentieth Century, 1900-1932

By the start of the twentieth century, Americans from many walks of life had lost faith in a laissez faire system that conspicuously failed to safeguard the economy from ruinous depressions and provide a decent standard of life and security for vast numbers of working Americans. Impressed by the vast resources and productive capacity of the American economy and the phenomenal inventiveness of its people, they believed, in the words of journalist-philosopher Herbert Croly, that “the promise of American life” amounted to something more than material abundance, won for some at the expense of others. Through intellectual and cultural movements such as pragmatism, the Social Gospel, New Liberalism, and historicism, they questioned earlier individualist beliefs and sought new bases for social unity. In the early decades of the century, reformers from all classes and ethnic groups stepped up to the challenge of renewing the cities, building government capacity for regulating the conditions of labor, ending racial injustice, and remaking America as a nation united around common goals. Inventing institutions for expressing a collective purpose and learning from their counterparts in other industrializing nations, progressives studied evils, debated solutions, organized, and crusaded for reforms. In time, these men and women took to calling themselves “progressives.”

Like political labels today, this one was always imprecise and fluid in meaning, and thus contemporaries and later historians have disagreed about who the progressives were and what they stood for. Even so, the term has endured, and in recent years come back into active use, adopted by shapers of community-based democratic movements who hope to distinguish themselves from the “big-government liberals” attacked since the 1980s by neo-conservatives. Today’s progressives recognize as well that many of the problems reformers crusaded against in the early twentieth century—problems of urban health and housing, family subsistence, low wages, homelessness, and great and growing inequality that were mitigated to some extent by the legal reforms of New Deal/World War II era—returned in the 1980s, along with deindustrialization, the rise of the high tech/service economy, and government policies designed to implement a “return to the market” and “the end of welfare as we know it.” Once again, as in the early 20th century, the causes and remedies for poverty, women’s and workers’ roles and rights, immigration, and the competing claims of developers and environmentalists have become controversial.

Thus we can learn something useful for today by studying carefully the social and economic processes and the reform and policy conversations of the long Progressive Era and the 1920s. Our goals in this course will be to understand the challenges faced by Americans in the era between the 1890s and the 1930s, and to compare and contrast their experiences and reform efforts with those underway today.

Required Reading:
Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*
Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* or Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (both if you can!)
Course Packet available from Associated Students

**Required Papers and Reports:**

1) **Course paper:** More optimistic and less cynical than Americans today, Progressives believed in the power of public opinion to uplift society. Seeking the causes of social and economic evils, they created powerful new social roles devoted to investigating conditions and reporting the results to an interested public. **Muckrakers** such as Ida Tarbell, **investigative journalists** such as Lincoln Stephens and Ida Wells-Barnett, classic **photographers** such as Jacob Riis, **social investigators** such as W. E. B. DuBois and Margaret Byington, **settlement house workers** such as Florence Kelley and Jane Addams, and crusading **social scientists** such as John Commons, William Leiserson, John Andrews, and John Fitch recorded, counted, analyzed, and exposed—hoping to prod public officials into action. Joining with social movements of previously unrepresented groups, these “people of word” created new publics capable of influencing policy. They expanded the political agenda to include not only traditional trust and labor issues, but also child labor, women’s rights, and family welfare—subjects previously seen as “private,” and off limits from government action. For your course paper, your job is to become a crusading journalist or social investigator devoted to the construction of social knowledge. For your main writing assignment, choose a major social, economic, or political problem of the period, and prepare a detailed investigative report on it for a newspaper or political journal. Present your report as creatively as possible; your paper or magazine must interest readers, or you will lose your job. At the same time, your story must be accurate, informative, and critical. Show clearly what the issue is, and why the public must know about it. Dramatize it with appropriate facts or anecdotes (as Upton Sinclair did when he described the awful living and working conditions in Chicago meat packing in his 1905 novel *The Jungle*). Discuss causes and possible remedies. If there is disagreement, lay out the various sides of the argument, and identify who takes each position. If you are a news reporter, you should not take a personal position; but in an article for a political journal, you may make your own case for what seems to you to be the best solution. Like any good journalist, you should strive for a report that forces your readers to think. At all times, remember that you have an editor or agency head to satisfy. Set your paper up in the form of a newspaper or magazine article or a government or foundation report. Set it up in columns if you like, and use illustrations to enhance the effect. **You must refer to at least two primary sources and one secondary source.** Make use of assigned course readings as well. **PAPERS MAY NOT EXCEED 6 PAGES IN LENGTH.** They must be typed, double-spaced, with adequate margins. Use standard form for footnotes of endnotes and bibliography. Turn in an abstract including a clear statement of your subject and the sources you will use not later than October 30. Papers are due November 27.

2) **Oral presentation:** Each student must make one oral presentation, selected from opportunities provided from time to time in class. I may ask for a brief paper in connection with oral reports.

**Grades:** midterm exam (1/3); papers, reports and discussion (1/3); final exam (1/3).
Syllabus: (Do the assigned reading prior to class so you can participate in discussion.)

September 25  Introduction:  The Crisis of Laissez Faire

September 27  American Capitalism in Transition
   Cashman, “Inventing America,” America in the Age of Titans
   Ginger, “Success,” Age of Excess
   Marchand, “AT&T: Vision of a Loved Monopoly,” Collosus
   Dreiser, Sister Carrie, Chs. 1-7

October 2  Making and Managing: Transformation of Work and Control
   Dreiser, Sister Carrie, Chs. 8-14

October 4  Women’s Work; Women’s Sphere
   Leach, “Interiors” and “Sell Them Their Dreams,” Land of Desire
   Benson, “Shopgirl to Saleswoman,” Counter Cultures
   Dreiser, Sister Carrie, Chs. 15-21

October 9  Living On the Edge: Urban Poverty, Housing, Sanitation, and the Sources of Progressive Reform
   Riis, “The Sweaters of Jewtown,” How the Other Half Lives
   Addams, “Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements”
   Dreiser, Sister Carrie, Chs. 22-28

October 11  Progressivism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere
   Croly, Promise of American Life, pp. 1-26
   Ryan, A Living Wage pp. 67-74
   Diner, “Progressive Discourse,” A Very Different Age
   Dreiser, Sister Carrie, Chs. 29-35

October 16  Women’s Bodies, Women’s Rights
   Byington, Homestead: Households of a Mill Town, pp. 145-57
   Rosen, “Causes of Prostitution,” Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918
   Boris, “‘Women who work’ and ‘women who spend’: The family economy vs. the family wage,” Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the U. S.
   Dreiser, Sister Carrie, Chs. 35-41
October 18  \textit{Struggling for Equality: Washington, DuBois, Wells, and Garvey},

Washington, Atlanta Exposition Address, September 1895
DuBois, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others”
Giddings, “Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, and the Crusade Against Lynching”
Dreiser, \textit{Sister Carrie}, Chs. 42-48

October 23  \textit{Laboratories for Democracy? Progressive Governors Reform the States}

Thelen, \textit{LaFollette and the Insurgent Spirit}, pp. 32-51
Hemingway, \textit{A Farewell to Arms}, Chs. 1-10
\textit{Sister Carrie} Reports and Discussions

October 25  \textit{Taming the Tiger: Roosevelt, the Public Interest, and the Trusts}

Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism,” \textit{The New Nationalism}
Hemingway, \textit{A Farewell to Arms}, Chs. 11-20

\textit{Sister Carrie} Reports and Discussions, cont.

October 30  \textit{Woodrow Wilson and Modern U. S. Liberalism}

Wilson, “Benevolence or Justice,” \textit{The New Freedom}
Wilson, “Restoration of Competition, not Regulation of Monopolies,”
Cronon, ed., \textit{Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson}

November 1  Midterm Exam

November 6  \textit{War Statism, Anti-Radicalism, and the Loss of American Innocence}
Fink, ed., America and the Great War
Wilson’s War Message
LaFollette dissent
Creel on the Selling of the War, 1920
The Espionage Act
Vigilante Attack on Wobblies
Debs’ Canton, Ohio Speech
Hemingway, \textit{A Farewell to Arms}, Chs. 21-30

November 13  \textit{Making the Old World Over: Treaty Making and the Tragedy of Versailles}

Wilson, “Fourteen Points”
Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, Chs. 31-41

November 15  *The Great Migration, Racism, and Black Culture in the 1920s*

Grossman, “Bound for the Promised Land,” *American Crucible*

Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, Reports and Discussion

November 20  *Resisting Modernity: Prohibition, Americanization, and Fundamentalism*

Jeansonne, “Age of Fear,” *Transformation and Reaction*, Ch. 3., pp. 33-53
Gerstle, “Hardening the Boundaries of the Nation, 1917-1929,” *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*
Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Preface, Chs. 1-4

November 22  Thanksgiving vacation

November 27  *What Happened to Progressivism? Herbert Hoover’s Vision of a Corporate Commonwealth*

Berle & Means, *The Modern Corporation & Private Property*, pp. 270-78
Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Chs. 5-9

November 29  *Stirrings Against the Tide: Progressive Party and the Labor Movement*

Progressive Party Platform of 1924

*Great Gatsby* Reports and Discussion

December 4  *The Great Depression and the Failure of Voluntarism*

Nash, “American Society in Crisis,” *The Crucial Era, 1929-45*

December 6  *Election in 1932: the Dawning of a New Deal*

FDR Inaugural

December 12  Final Exam   12:00-3:00