A POST ENERGY HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES
AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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After the energy crisis of the mid-1970s the papers were full of America's loss of confidence. Editorials predicted the end of the American way of life as we knew it, a dark and cold future. The great industrial cities of the snow belt would close down, and all the people would move to Dallas. After the oil crisis, journalists cried that this was the first time that Americans had so doubted themselves and their prospects. The march of progress seemed to have halted.

At that time I was plodding my way down the nineteenth century into the twentieth, reading Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Ignatius Donnelly, and Jack London. The doomsday cries sounded familiar. The turn of the century is full of utopian and anti-utopian literature. Given the bloody strikes and depressions of that time, pessimism made a lot of sense. And given the 1970s and 1980s, it is beginning to make sense again. I used to say confidently that if we made it through the 1890s, we could make it through the 1970s. But I am not so sure about the 1980s. Not surprisingly, the insecurity of these times has had an influence on my writing about the past.

One great difference between my history and the standard works comes from mine having taken shape after the energy crisis and the near depression. I am writing in a period of doubt about a time of fear. Nearly every Sunday I read predictions of disaster in the Washington Post that might have been written in 1894.

The 1950s and 1960s, when the well-known books on the turn of the century were written, were a different era. The books of Richard Hofstadter, George Mowry, Samuel P. Hays, William Leuchtenburg,
principles of supply side economics with ease. They would see these principles as a relation of the protective tariff, and they would be able to call the opposing sides by name. As in the 1890s, conservative Republicans would be the great advocates, Democrats and Populists the great opponents. They would see campaign contributions in much the same way as we do now. We are still discussing the attractiveness of a progressive income tax and whether to tamper with excise taxes. These are among the more enduring and basic issues of the period, but there are others that we still debate: preparedness (defense spending), farm debt, the high cost of living (inflation), and organized labor. Although social questions that influence private lives have changed greatly, the basics of political and economic discussion have not, particularly if they are viewed in the terms of their times.

My own book, Standing at Armageddon, begins in 1886, with labor's great upheaval—that inspired Edward Bellamy and frightened respectable people—and ends in 1919, another inspiring and frightening year of strikes. Both years saw unionization at all-time high levels that gave labor strength and confidence. In both years, great numbers of Americans inside and outside the unions predicted that the organization of working people would affect politics and democratize American life.

The great difference between my book and those of the 1950s and 1960s does not lie in subject matter. They are all narrative political histories. But where the earlier books give the most attention to events in Washington, keeping a close eye on the presidents, I seek the impetus for political change in the needs and demands of ordinary people, especially farmers and workers. Farmers are important, but for this period of massive industrialization, they have put more emphasis on labor. While unions did not organize anywhere near a majority of workers and did not speak for most people, they do provide accessible source material that articulates the public concerns of ordinary people. I watch the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor for the inspiration of much that happened in Congress. Now labor historians, who concentrate on culture rather than politics and unions, will forgive me this, I hope, in a political rather than a social history. But they will agree with my fundamental refocusing of
attention from the middle class to working people in a book that seeks to understand political changes in the society as a whole.

By shifting from a concentration on how to define "progressives" to an examination of what the respectable classes were worried about, I have found the links of that time with our own as well as a dark strand—very much part of the turn of the twentieth century—that is familiar in our own and in human history as a whole: a fear of the lower orders.

REFERENCES


