Immigration in the Gilded Age

In the years following the Civil War, The United States changed dramatically. At the outbreak of the war, the country had been mostly agricultural, although the North was already well on the way toward industrialization. By the early years of the twentieth century, however, America had been transformed from a mainly agricultural society to the world's leading industrial nation. Unskilled labor, entrepreneurial energy, and technological talent were necessary to bring about this change. Immigrants from northern Europe and their children helped to provide all three.

Northern European immigrants became more accepted in American society in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This change in American attitudes came about not so much because nativists had a change of heart, but because they feared another kind of immigrant. Between 1820 and 1930 over 37.5 million immigrants came to America in ever-increasing waves:
Between 1820 and 1860, 5 million came; between 1860 and 1890, 13.5 million arrived; and between 1890 and 1930, the total was almost 19 million. The first two waves came primarily from the British Isles and the northern European countries. The last wave was made up mostly of people from southern and eastern European countries—Italians, Slavs, Russian Jews, and others. This latter wave seemed so foreign, not only to native-born Americans but also to northern Europeans, that much of the hatred that was formerly reserved for northern European immigrants was aimed at these groups.

By the 1870s the northern Europeans of the first wave of immigration had become integrated into American society. Some became captains of industry in an era when industrialists, unfettered by any sort of controls, wielded enormous power: Henry C. Frick became a force in steel manufacturing, and Frederick Weyerhaeuser carved out a lumber and timber empire; George Westinghouse and Charles P. Steinmetz were instrumental in the development of the electrical industry; H. J. Heinz and Carl A. Swanson became bywords in prepared foods; Bausch and Lomb in optics; Charles Pfizer in pharmaceuticals; and Claus Spreckels in sugar refining.

Most northern Europeans in the United States, however, were working people, and they paid a heavy price for America's industrial growth. Prior to the Civil War, most working people had special talents that made it possible for them to bargain with their employers for adequate wages and working conditions. A craftsman who was unhappy with his or her employer could leave that job behind knowing that it was an easy matter to find another. Skilled workers were always in demand.

All of this changed with the coming of machine production. A skilled worker was no longer needed to manufacture a product. Instead, almost anybody could be taught to operate a machine within a few days. And if a worker did not like the wages and working conditions, his employer did not much care if he left. Someone else was always willing to take his place.

As a result, America in the last decades of the nineteenth century was periodically convulsed by labor unrest and violent strikes. The first of these was a series of incidents in 1877 that ended
in a nationwide railroad strike. Since the railroads were the main arteries of industry, production nearly came to a halt and troops were called out to restore order. Afterward *The North American Review* published an article by "a striker" in which a Scandinavian worker said:

Forty years ago my father came over to this country from Sweden. He had a small business and a large family. In Europe business does not grow as fast as children come, and poverty over there is an inheritance. He heard that North America was peopled and governed by working men, and the care of the states was mainly engaged in the welfare and prosperity of labor. That moved him, and so I came to be born here. He, and millions like him, made this country their home, and their homes have mainly made this country what it is. ...

So it was before the war, but since then, it seems to me, the power has got fixed so long in one set of hands [the industrialists'] that things are settling down into a condition like what my father left behind him in Europe forty years ago, and what stands there still. I mean the slavery of labor.'

The striker then set out a brief list of what working people wanted. Today these demands seem only what a working person might reasonably expect in exchange for his labor. But in the nineteenth century, such lists struck fear among the industrial barons of the Gilded Age.

Our claim is simple. We demand *fair wages.*

We say that the man able and willing to work, and for whom there is work to do, is entitled to wages sufficient to provide him with enough food, shelter, and clothing to sustain and preserve his health and strength. We contend that the employer has no right to speculate on starvation when he reduces wages below a living figure, saying, if we refuse that remuneration, there are plenty of starving men out of work that will gladly accept half a loaf instead of no bread.

We contend that to regard the laboring class in this manner is to consider them as the captain of a slave-ship regards his cargo, who throws overboard those unable to stand their sufferings. Let those who knew the South before the war go now amongst the mining districts of Pennsylvania, and compare the home of the white laborer with the quarters of the slave; let them compare the fruits of freedom with the produce of slavery.²

Working people began to organize labor unions. The best-known were the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor—but opposition to trade unionism was intense. Businessmen, who were committed to the unregulated economic system of the time, vehemently denounced unions. They claimed that unions would disrupt the economic system and threaten the rights of property owners. Farmers, professionals, the press, and the clergy agreed.

Nonetheless, working people continued to organize trade unions. It was clear that something had to be done to improve conditions. Until World War I, for example, the typical workweek lasted six days, and in some industries seven. The workday ranged from ten to fourteen hours despite efforts to reduce it to eight. Wages were low, and in times of economic recession, employers did not hesitate to cut wages even further. Since businesses were free to run their affairs without regulation, industrial accidents were common. A study estimated that in 1913, there were 25,000 workers killed and approximately 700,000 hurt or disabled on the job.

Most American workers who joined unions or went out on strike were not challenging the
American system itself—they merely wanted to share in the profits of industry by receiving a living wage. A small minority of workers, however, wanted to dismantle the capitalist system completely, and replace it with a socialist or communist structure. Since Karl Marx, the founder of communism, was German, it is not surprising that many of these labor radicals were German-Americans who had become adherents of Marx's doctrines while still in Germany. Another radical doctrine that attracted some German-Americans was anarchy. Where the Marxists believed that capitalism should be replaced by a socialist form of government, the anarchists believed that all government was repressive and should be destroyed.

From the 1860s through the 1880s, Chicago was the center of left-wing labor activity. German, Austrian, and French radicals attempted to develop a revolutionary spirit among the workers of Chicago, at least half of whom were immigrants. They had little influence, actually, but their fiery words, which emphasized force, frightened many Americans. The platform of the International Working People's Association was often a call to revolt:

This system capitalism is unjust, insane, and murderous. Therefore those who suffer under it, and do not wish to be responsible for its continuance, ought to strive for its destruction by all means and with their utmost energy. . . . It is therefore self-evident that the fight of proletarianism against the bourgeoisie must have a violent revolutionary character. . . . There is only one remedy left—force. . . . Agitation to organize, organizations for the purpose of rebellion, this is the course if the workingmen would rid themselves of their chains.3

Radicals like these attracted only small followings and, if ignored, probably would have had very little effect on immigrant working people. However, an incident occurred in 1886 which left the impression in the public's mind that every German-American was a bomb-throwing anarchist out to destroy American society. That incident was the Haymarket Square bombing in Chicago.

The Haymarket Square affair had its roots in the movement among labor groups to win the right to an eight-hour workday. In the early part of 1886, thousands of workers were on strike over this issue around the country. In late April workers at the McCormick Harvester Works in Chicago went on strike for an eight-hour day. At a strike demonstration in front of the factory a few days later, police opened fire on the strikers, killing four of them and wounding many more. August Spies, a German anarchist who was addressing the crowd when the shooting occurred, was quick to call a protest meeting in Haymarket Square. In a circular Spies hastily drew up, he wrote:

WORKINGMEN, TO ARMS!! The masters sent out their bloodhounds—the police; they killed six of your brothers at McCormicks this afternoon. They killed the poor wretches because they, like you, had the courage to disobey the supreme will of your bosses. They killed them because they dared ask for the shortening of the hours of toil. They killed them to show you, "Free American Citizens" that you must be satisfied and contented with whatever your bosses condescend to allow you, or you will get killed.4

Many workers came to the meeting at Haymarket Square, and the police came too—hundreds of them. When the police attempted to break up the meeting, someone—no one knows who—threw a bomb into the middle of the police ranks, killing seven policemen and wounding sixty more. Many Americans were convinced that the bomb was the work of the German anarchists.
Six of the eight men arrested for the Haymarket bombing—on very flimsy evidence—had German surnames. To some, that alone was proof that they had been behind the bombing. A popular cartoon figure of the era portrayed a longhaired, wild-eyed German anarchist bomb-thrower, and this caricature came to be a symbol for all German immigrants. Of the men arrested for the Haymarket bombing, four were executed, but three others were pardoned by the Governor of Illinois, John Peter Altgeld, who was an immigrant himself.

The Haymarket affair resulted in a backlash against German immigrants. The American Protective Association was founded in 1887 in Iowa, dedicated to "protecting" Americans from the foreign-born. In 1894 five wealthy Bostonians founded the Immigration Restriction League, aimed at enacting legislation that would shut America's doors to foreign immigration. Headed by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the league became influential, and eventually it succeeded in enacting the quota system for immigrants that it sought, although it took twenty-five years.

Typical of the antiforeign feeling that the Haymarket affair generated was this article in the influential *North American Review*:

Mr. Seward [U.S. senator from New York] once declared that of all the elements which entered into our national composition the German was the element which he most feared. The discontented and revolutionary spirit which characterizes the German mind, coupled with the little learning which every citizen of the Fatherland brings with him, and the clannishness of his race, seemed to Mr. Seward a danger menacing to the existing order of things. It is indeed true that the German combines in his nature traits dangerous to the fundamental principles of the present system of our society....

Mr. Seward's fears apply pertinently to a large part of the 6,000,000 Germans who now form a portion of the American Union. Of these the Socialists justly claim large numbers, and, if we examine the first acts and constitution of the Socialistic Labor Party, it will appear that from its very foundation the chief officials and ringleaders of the organization were and still are Germans, not a few of whom have been expelled or have fled from their native country because of conspiracy against society. Nevertheless, these men have become the leaders of a great national and American movement....

Nativist outbursts like this were not successful in stopping the labor movement. In 1886 two cigar makers, Samuel Gompers and Adolph Strasser—the latter of German origin—founded the American Federation of Labor. Unlike the anarchists, the AFL concentrated on "bread-and-butter issues" like wages, hours, and working conditions. It was an effective labor organization, one that found—for the first time—a permanent niche for organized labor in the nation.

Other labor organizations remained active as well. In 1894 workers at the Pullman factory in Chicago went on strike over a series of wage cuts, some of them as much as fifty percent. Most of the workers lived in company-owned houses. When the wage cut went into effect, the Pullman Company, which made railroad cars, refused to reduce rents proportionately—and the workers walked out. Some of the Pullman workers belonged to the American Railway Union, which claimed 150,000 members, and they appealed to it for support. Eugene V. Debs, head of the union, told his members not to handle trains that carried Pullman cars. As a result, national railroad traffic was disrupted, and troops were called into Chicago by President Grover
Cleveland to end the strike and get the trains moving again.

Despite setbacks, trade unionism continued to grow, and northern European immigrants supplied much of its membership and leadership. But northern Europeans no longer made up the bulk of newcomers seeking to find a new life in America. In 1882, for example, 788,000 immigrants entered the United States, 350,000 of who came from Great Britain and northern Europe. That year, only 32,000 immigrants came from Italy and 17,000 from Russia. By 1907, when 1,285,000 immigrants entered the country, only 116,000 of them were from the British Isles and northern Europe; 258,000 Russians entered the country in 1907, along with 285,000 Italians.

But the decline in the volume of northern European immigration did not mean that its presence was no longer felt. Every immigrant who entered New York Harbor after 1886 was greeted by the Statue of Liberty, a gift to the American people from the French. On it was inscribed the words of a poet of German-Jewish descent, Emma Lazarus:

Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!