Chapter 20: Gilded Age Politics, 1877–1900
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• Twain’s term reflect era’s corruption as powerful special interests pursue profit
• Despite venality, states & US Gov’t pass reforms
• Basis for more active government in 1900s
• Political exclusion for majority of Americans
• Women, people of color, poor, recent immigrants lack vote/access
• 1890s: political turmoil & dissent explode
I. Nature of Party Politics

- Extensive public interest/participation
- 80% of those eligible vote in elections
- Many communal aspects (parades, picnics)
- Politics reflect pluralism; different groups compete for power & form fragile coalitions
- Native-born Protestants (Republican) advocate government-enforced morality (Sabbath laws)
- Immigrants (Democrat) oppose
II. Party Factions

- Even when corrupt, politicians (Blaine) evoke strong supporter loyalty
- Equilibrium till 1890s
- Neither party dominate US Gov’t
- Factions divide both parties
- All pursue spoils of office and use vote fraud
- At state level, one party usually dominate
- Dictatorial boss, often a senator, run state party
III. Sectional Controversy; Civil Service Reform

- Both parties exploit memories of Civil War
- Union vets lobby successfully for pensions
- Spoils system accelerate (award government jobs on political connections, not merit)
- Grant’s scandals & Garfield’s assassination produce Pendleton Civil Service Act, 1883
- Civil Service Commission oversee 10% of US Gov’t jobs with competitive exams
IV. Railroad Regulation

- Railroads alienate many
- Charge high rates on short hauls to compensate for lower rates on more competitive long hauls
- Farmers lobby for regulation
- States pass some, but Supreme Court void them
- Interstate Commerce Act (1887) establish ICC to ban long haul/short haul rate discrimination
- Courts later weaken ICC
V. Tariff Policy

• Goal = to protect US industries
• Become tool of private interests for high profit
• Republicans advocate high tariffs
• Democrats want lower tariffs because high tariffs raise prices for consumers & hurt farmers
• Manufacturers win high tariffs
• McKinley Tariff, 1890; Dingley Tariff, 1897
• Critics see tariffs as tool of privileged business
VI. Monetary Policy

- Debtor v. creditor debate over money supply
- Farmers & sm. businesses argue larger supply with silver will help them with high-interest debts
- Creditors/investors profit from limited supply (backed solely by gold)
- US Gov’t stop minting silver coins (1873)
- Creditors block widespread US Gov’t purchase of silver (late 1800s); anger debtors
- Debate = class & sectional
VII. Tentative Presidents

- Presidents try to restore office weakened by Johnson’s impeachment & Grant’s scandals
- Initiate some reform laws and use veto
- Disputes within their parties weaken them
- Close elections force presidents to respond to supporter demands for spoils
- Hayes, Garfield, & Arthur try to limit abuses
VIII. Cleveland (1885–89, 1893–97) Harrison (1889–93)

- Both support civil service reform, but to win their parties engage in vote fraud (1888)
- Both also need business support to win
- Prevent them from lowering tariffs
- Like most members of Congress & state gov’ts, presidents try to address problems
- Special interests restrict reform, late 1800s
- After 1900, new reforms build on this base
IX. Discrimination; Violence Against African Americans

- Wealthy white landowners exploit racism to divide poor whites & poor blacks
- Poor whites fear competition from blacks
- Most African Americans live in South
- 1880: 90% of southern blacks work in agriculture/domestic service (same as slavery)
- 1889–1909: whites lynch > 1700 blacks
- Ida Wells protest in *A Red Record* (1895)
X. Disenfranchisement

• After end of Reconstruction, white leaders undermine black-male voting with restrictions
• Poll taxes of $1–$2
• Supreme Court uphold restrictions if not explicitly racist (property requirement)
• Mississippi Plan (1890) use subjective literacy test on state constitution and poll tax
• Measures also prevent poor whites from voting
XI. Legal Segregation

- Supreme Court void civil rights laws (1883) and uphold segregation (Plessy, 1896)
- State & local Jim Crow laws multiply
- Provide daily signs of inferiority to blacks
- Separate hospitals, cemeteries, Bibles, etc.
- Some blacks protest; others respond by seeking education in all-black coeducational colleges
- Black women (Wells) lobby for reform laws
XII. Woman Suffrage

- Women debate how to attain vote
- American Woman Suffrage Association focus on suffrage efforts in states
- National Woman Suffrage Association lobby US Gov’t for suffrage and other rights
- Merge into NAWSA (1890); by 1910, 11 states (most in West) allow female suffrage
- Early training for women in political activity
XIII. Agrarian Unrest & Populism

- Economic distress spark mass rural revolt
- Many whites & blacks in South suffer debt as tenants or sharecroppers with crop liens
- Furnishing merchants inflate prices/interest
- White yeomen try commercial agriculture
- Drop in cotton prices put them in debt
- Western farmers face price declines (from overproduction) and high railroad rates
XIV. Grange Movement; The White Hats

- Voluntary organizations, 1860s–1870s
- First social; then move into economics with cooperatives, but falter because of lack of capital
- Lobby for railroad regulation
- Business interests oppose Granger laws
- Courts side with business & void laws
- In Southwest, Mexican farmers try to resist white encroachment on their lands, but fail
XV. Farmers’ Alliances (late 1880s)

- Form first in TX among farmers in debt
- Spread to Great Plains as well as South
- Subtreasury Plan call for US Gov’t loans & warehouses to help with credit & low prices
- Hurt by racism (whites refuse to join blacks)
- Also sectional tensions over tariff
- North accept high tariffs; South oppose
- Groundwork for Populist party
XVI. Rise of Populism

• Alliance in KS form People’s Party, 1890
• National convention in Omaha, NE, 1892
• Flawed on race & ethnicity, Populists hope US Gov’t will fix inequality/abuses of elite
• Gov’t ownership of railroads, farm loans, silver coinage, income tax, election of senators
• In 1892 election, Populists successful in West
• Weak in vote-rich Northeast
XVII. The Depression of the 1890s

- Overproduction and debt by factories create chain reaction of business & bank defaults
- 1893–97 depression cause mass suffering
- Unemployment = 20%; homelessness increase
- Currency crisis dwindle gold reserves
- Panic further threaten economy
- Cleveland deal with Morgan to stop gold drain
- Public angry at Morgan’s profit
XVIII. Consequences of the Depression

• Economy slowly recover, esp. with AK gold
• Depression show dangers of consolidation
• Debts/defaults by huge businesses & by consumers affect everyone
• Foreign economies also affect USA
• Overseas competition worsen US depression
• New national & global economy
XIX. Depression-Era Protests

- Worker protests against exploitation accelerate
- Building since 1877 rail strike
- Some accept socialism
- Worker control of factories will solve problems by removing capital’s fixation on profits
- Early socialists attract few workers
- Splinter into small debating societies
- Debs unite socialists and spur greater activity
XX. Coxey’s Army (1894)

• To relieve unemployment, call for public works program (roads) with funds from US Gov’t
• Organize 1st march on capital
• Distressed families march non-violently to DC
• DC police crush march with violence
• Coxey not socialist
• Political/business leaders see any dissent as threat
XXI. Populists

- Hurt by lack of funding & organization
- Voters hesitate to leave two major parties
- Racism stifle attempts by southern Populists (Watson) to unite poor whites & blacks
- Debate whether to ally with Democrats or remain independent third party
- National debate over free coinage of silver cause divisions within two major parties
XXII. Election of 1896

- McKinley = Republican nominee
- Bryan = Democrat nominee
- Populists also nominate Bryan for his free silver stance & anti-privilege rhetoric
- Republicans win major victory
- McKinley convince many workers that pro-business policies (tariffs) will create jobs
- Bryan’s fixation on free silver prevent formation of rural-urban coalition
XXIII. The McKinley Presidency (1897–1901)

- His election also reflect importance of organization and advertising (Hanna)
- Populists collapse after 1896 loss
- Business interests remain ascendant in politics
- Gold Standard Act (1900): back all paper money by gold
- McKinley raise tariff rates further
- Economic recovery help with re-election, 1900
Summary: Discuss Links to the World & Legacy

- Compare/contrast Russian & American Populism?
- How & why both fail?
- Long-term influence of both?
- How might the original *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) reflect tensions of era?
- The powerful deceive/manipulate ordinary people
- Legacy of debate over meaning of popular culture?