



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Review: A Book Critique

Reviewed Work(s): THE BIG CHANGE: AMERICA TRANSFORMS ITSELF 1900-1950 by Frederick Lewis Allen

Review by: Sidney I. Roberts

Source: *The Historian*, Autumn, 1953, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Autumn, 1953), pp. 78-85

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24436204>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Historian*

JSTOR

A Book Critique



SIDNEY I. ROBERTS *

THE BIG CHANGE: AMERICA TRANSFORMS ITSELF 1900-1950.

By Frederick Lewis Allen. (New York: Harper & Bros. 1952. Pp. xl, 308).

I

I can remember quite vividly the embarrassment and chagrin which I experienced as a child when a relative whom I had not seen for several years would exclaim, "My! How you have grown, I knew you when you were only . . ." This pronouncement, more often than not, was followed by a tap on the head or a pat on the back. At first, these remarks were very flattering and eagerly sought for. Soon, however, they became meaningless formalities for I realized that while parents and relatives were aware of a big change they still thought of me as an infant and treated me that way. They did not understand me.

Frederick Lewis Allen, author of *Only Yesterday* and *Since Yesterday* as well as editor-in-chief of *Harper's Magazine* for the past twelve years, has attempted in his latest book, *The Big Change*, to describe the transformation in the character and quality of American life since the horse-and-buggy days of 1900. At first glance the subway reader is entertained and somewhat amused by the congenial descriptions of this transformation. Like so many other folksy narratives of the past American scene, Allen traces the fluctuating length of women's skirts, the liberation of their persons from the formidable prison of the corset, the decreasing number of horse-drawn vehicles, the changing standards in social relationships between the sexes, and the growth of cities from gas-lit cross roads to neon-bathed metropoli. However, a closer examination of *The Big Change* discloses that the author presents a definite and thought provoking point of view.

Allen is firmly convinced that the changes which have taken place in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century are not "as yet very widely understood." According to Allen, the Russian spokesmen who speak derisively about the United States are delivering invectives formed by a mental picture which is two generations out of date. "The mental picture that the average European carries about with him

* Mr. Roberts (M.A., Columbia University) was a history fellow last year at the College of the City of New York, and president in 1952 of the Alpha Mu chapter of Phi Alpha Theta.

A Book Critique

is lamentably irrelevant to the real United States of today." And, what is of equal importance, the American way of life and its implications are not fully understood even at home.

The central thesis of *The Big Change* is that the transformation which Allen describes (political, social, cultural, physical, religious, artistic and intellectual) is directly related to, and dependent upon, the great change which has taken place in the capitalist system. By dividing his presentation into three broad areas—the "Old Order" an analysis of life at the turn of the century, the "Momentum of Change" which is a chronological presentation of the many and varied events of the past fifty years and, the final section, "The New America" a portrayal of a better society than most of us realize—Allen tries to show that we have moved "not toward but past socialism." Our shift from the days of the omnipotent Horatio Alger to the public-conscious business manager has brought about a beneficent capitalist order which, despite a few dark clouds in the sky, holds a promise of clear sailing and fair weather.

II

It is no easy task for a writer to present a study of the past fifty years in a manner which will be acceptable to both the layman and the specialist. This is particularly true of *The Big Change* which is, according to Allen's own statement in his "Sources and Obligations," primarily a summary, analysis, arrangement and interpretation of "reasonably familiar data rather than a journey of historical exploration." Thus, while the author has rarely documented his sources, he has relied on generally accepted secondary source material without finding it necessary to do any original research.

Given this limitation, Frederick Lewis Allen has dealt with a series of problems whose solution he could only present in what may be called rather generalized terms. As a consequence one might seriously take to task various parts of his panoramic views. For example, the world of the early nineteen-hundreds is presented as far more understandable and less terrifying to its contemporaries than the world of today is to us. It is possible to assert with a great deal of justification that the above is an example of present-mindedness which oversimplifies the problems that preceding generations have had to face. Their insecurity, while perhaps of a different kind, was as much a plague to them as ours is to us.

Like most nonprofessional historians Allen speaks of *laissez-faire* as a dominant philosophy and practice in the business community at the turn of the century. This indicates, as Oscar and Mary Handlin's thesis in *Commonwealth* and Louis Hartz's study in *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought* illustrate for an earlier period, that Allen fails to distinguish between an operating philosophy and merely a catch-phrase

The Historian

shibboleth. Consequently Allen has minimized the role of state governments in their influence upon the business and social community not only in 1900 but in 1950 as well.

The use of other clichés, equally nebulous, emphasizes the author's oversimplifications. What, for example, is the meaning of such terms as "age of individualists," "closing of the frontier," "social classes are no longer structured," "democratic ends," and "reluctant world power"?

This tendency of oversimplification often brings the reader to a sudden realization of what appears to be the author's naïveté. In discussing wartime production and the producer's ability to respond with speed and volume, Allen ludicrously concludes:

The American manufacturer responds to the challenge with zest. For it appealed to that peculiar enthusiasm for record breaking which seems to blossom in the air of a land where radio listeners to ball games are informed by record conscious broadcasters that so-and-so's triple with the bases full is the first triple made in the first game of a World Series since 1927, and where schoolboy runners dream dreams of being the first man in history to achieve a four minute mile.

The author's optimism, while being very healthy and refreshing in many instances, sometimes leads to the portrayal of conditions which, although desired, do not at present exist. As an illustration of this, one could cite Allen's statement that the old stereotype of the Negro as a comic or menial has been largely eliminated from the radio, magazines and newspapers. The popularity of Amos and Andy, Rochester, Beullah, and Sambo of comic book infamy has not, it appears, influenced the thinking of our author.

While professional sociologists and historians may reveal innumerable points on which to challenge Allen's *The Big Change*, they would have to admit that these minutiae do not seriously weaken his synthesis or conclusions which are the most important part of the book.

III

Like so many other books which seem to be gaining in popularity today, *The Big Change* is an attempt to defend the American system, both at home and abroad, against those who feel it is better to abandon the old system and start afresh rather than improve the existing system with minor repairs as we go along. If we agree with Allen's interpretation, we could say that thus far we have found out that when confronted with a problem "we change things, not by revolution but by a series of experimental revisions." By this method of sober and persevering changes our author concluded that however rocky the path we trod may have been, it is a triumphant path which leads forward to a good future.

A Book Critique

America has transformed itself. This transformation was brought about, we are told, not by any utopian schemers but by practical men who had their eyes on proximate and immediate goals; by trial and error and by balancing the powers within society we have arrived at an economic system which still keeps ownership of industry in private hands and yet permits everyone to share in the fruits of the economy—a prolific tree.

Allen is absolutely correct when he emphasizes the fact that our system does function and that during the past five decades many blatant inequities have been removed, but he fails to recognize that the trial and error method of evolution, which is credited with bringing us to our present state, has raised many significant issues, which are not treated with Allen's optimism. A closer examination of some of the supposed benefits of our transformed capitalist society may bring seriously in question not only the direction of our evolution but also this minimization of some of the difficulties which still lie ahead of us.

One of the major disclosures of this book is that in 1900 there was a wide disparity between the income of an employer and an employee. In 1900, Andrew Carnegie was "making an annual income twenty thousand times that of a steel worker." During the past fifty years there has taken place "a great social revolution" whereby millions of families in our country have been lifted from "poverty or near poverty to a status where they can enjoy what has been traditionally considered a middle class way of life." On the top of the income distribution scale there has also been an important change. "The enormous lead of the well-to-do in the economic race has been considerably reduced." This reduction is fundamentally due to the graduated income tax which takes away a large percentage of the income from salaried people and the excess profits tax which diminishes corporate income. These statistics which Allen presents signify that more people have bath tubs, automobiles and other social amenities of living and that we have fewer millionaires, but they also signify that we now have several more problems.

A condition which exists in England and to a lesser extent here in the United States is that the leveling off of the upper income groups has brought about a deficiency in investment capital incentive. If the government is going to take away a bigger piece of one's income, that individual will think twice before investing in a speculative enterprise. The money incentive will depreciate in direct proportion to the government's taxation. How many persons are there in the United States who carefully limit their incomes for fear that they might find themselves in the next higher tax bracket? Thus, who is going to have the desire to build a better mousetrap?

While pointing out that many industrial workers have gained in

The Historian

terms of income, Allen has had to admit that "intellectual workers" have not been among those who have benefited. C. Wright Mills in his recent study of the white-collar group in our society (*White Collar*) has shown that the white-collar workers' income margin over industrial wage earners' has not only decreased but will continue to decrease in the decades to come. This tends to wipe out the advantageous status position of the white collar group which previously set them apart from wage workers. It is not mere coincidence that we hear more and more frequently the question, "Why do you want to become a teacher when you can live better as a plumber?" This poses a serious problem not only for the editor who quit his job to become a typesetter for the same magazine and thereby gained in security and income but also for the nation as a whole.

Throughout *The Big Change* and particularly in the last two chapters we find the belief that in a healthy democratic economy no one group is given so much power that it can function without concern about its influence on other groups. Such was the power of the Horatio Alger prototype whose position enabled him to ignore the demands of labor and consumers, with resulting injustices. Among those who adhere to the thesis that the forces within society are equally balanced is the school of "New Liberals" represented by such men as Reinhold Niebuhr, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., and John K. Galbraith. Allen indicates his basic agreement with these liberals when he cited Galbraith's thesis that unionized labor today is a "countervailing force" within the American economy, a force which is able to counter the demands of management.

There are some grave doubts as to the practicability of countervailing power as a solution to economic ills. In the first place, even Galbraith admits in his study of *American Capitalism* that countervailing power does not function during an inflationary period. It can operate only in a deflationary period and can not prevent nor contain inflation. Galbraith also recognizes that the development of countervailing power is dependent upon government assistance. This presents the further limitation that government may not always know when or may not be politically able to increase the power of one force in society at the expense of other forces. Let us take the case of organized labor. There are those among us today who, although they are not necessarily political conservatives, believe that unions have too much power, that they can cripple any industry, include or exclude any person and can charge monopolistic rates which the employer must pay. It is possible that we have created new men with irresponsible power in the guise of union leaders. Even if equally balanced forces produce harmony (a point which is yet to be proved) how are we to maintain harmony if

A Book Critique

government is denied the power to make this adjustment? For in *The Big Change* government is also a force within society whose powers must be limited.

An essential factor in Allen's optimistic view of our "democratic economic system" is the fact that the large corporations are not owned by a few individuals. Ownership of corporate stock is so widespread that control has passed from the hands of the owners to the hands of the trained technicians and managers. This holds two possible implications. It is possible for an individual or several individuals to control a corporation even though they do not own a majority of the stock. All that is needed to direct the activities of a corporation is a plurality. A large stock holder may have enough power to appoint all the directors and determine which managers to hire and fire. This widespread ownership also implies that a few people by the use of proxies can vote—if they wish—contrary to the interests of shareholders who trustingly give up their proxies without examining the issues involved. Moreover, the division of responsibility between corporation executives, board members, and stockholders, means that it will be difficult to place the blame where it belongs in the event of an antisocial act on the part of the corporation.

Allen's interpretation of the separation of ownership and control opens the door to the further possibility that perhaps we may have, in the near future, a society similar to the one envisioned by James Burnham (*Managerial Revolution*), who argues that society will be run by bureaucratic managers who, since they are not actual owners, may operate on a completely amoral and impersonal plane.

One might even go further and question the validity of actually how widespread is corporate ownership. Walter P. Webb, a professional historian, argues in his study of our economy (*Divided We Stand*) that the ownership of corporate stock and wealth follows sectional lines with the North having at least an 80 per cent advantage over the South. Webb also points out that the income gain of the people of the South is not anywhere near that of the North.

We like to think of ourselves as a nation of practical men who face crises as they arise with an empirical approach. To Allen this is a source of our strength, for he feels that our unsystematic patchwork method of reform has produced results which could not have been accomplished if they were left in the care of utopians who, Allen contends, can only theorize but do not know how to implement. This, I believe, illustrates the author's limited knowledge of our progressive historical tradition. How often have the dreams of the so-called lunatic fringe been made realities. There is a place for the long range philosophy of reform that does and will always exist. A case in point is the Populist Movement.

The Historian

an agrarian third party in the 1890's. Their platform had long range and immediate goals. Their opponents called them visionaries; but were they? When the two major parties became aware of the fact that Populist agitation was gaining public attention, they in turn, for the practical purpose of getting votes, incorporated many of these reform measures into their programs. Government regulation of railway rates, direct election of senators and woman suffrage were some of their "visionary" and "utopian" desires. Who then can say that those who hold a philosophy of the progressive betterment of human conditions are superfluous to a society of practical men? Our strength lies in the fact that this is a land where idealists can voice their plans in a free market of ideas.

The greatest weakness of *The Big Change* lies in its major conclusion, a conclusion which is accepted by many of the defenders of the American system. Allen feels that over the past fifty years we have learned a very important lesson. "We have brought about a virtually automatic redistribution of income from the well-to-do to the less well-to-do." This did not slow down our economic system but acted as a stimulus. "We have discovered a new frontier to open up: the purchasing power of the poor." The corollary to this is that if underprivileged people are given an increased purchasing power they will become responsible citizens. In simpler terms this means that the United States will never go socialist or communist because everyone has an automobile, a nice wardrobe and a television set. We have moved past socialism.

The fallacy in this argument lies in the fact that communism has a spiritual and cultural appeal that is not dependent upon material possessions.

The Big Change quite adequately describes the slum and tenement conditions which faced most immigrants who settled in our larger cities at the turn of the century. These people did not have a large purchasing power, and yet their desire to conform to standards led them to reject political radicalism. But what of their children, the first generation Americans? They are faced with a problem of culture conflicts that is not functional of their housing conditions.

Allen grants the fact that the Negro presents a difficult problem but he sees this difficulty mostly in terms of economic status. We are given the impression that if the Negroes' earning power is enhanced, as it has been over the past fifty years, their social problems will be proportionately mitigated. This is only half of the problem, for the communist appeal to the Negro is twofold—caste as well as class. A Negro family may be in the middle income group but its members remain in the lowest caste, second class citizens. The existence of caste lines may be more pronounced in the south, but they exist even in the north.

A Book Critique

IV

We live in an age of anxiety and insecurity which can not be removed by an advanced standard of living or more scientific improvements. In fact, each advance of our industrial system alienates men from one another and from their society. Too many people today feel the boredom of being but a cog in a huge wheel. Standardization is too frequently accompanied by stagnation. When an individual is deprived of a sense of initiative, of fulfillment, of belonging, he reaches desperately for anything that will save him. As Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. so incisively wrote, "People deprived of any meaningful role in society, lacking even their own groups to give them a sense of belonging, become cannon fodder for totalitarianism." Communism holds an emotional appeal and gives a sense of belonging and accomplishment to those who have been alienated by an advancing complex industrial system. The greatest defect of our transformed civilization is the existence of a culturally passive society with a mass of noncreative personalities. Although less tangible, the problem of human relationships is more significant than the problem of supplying more homes with indoor plumbing. Some problems can not be washed away even if the water comes from hidden plastic taps and pours into a pastel-colored four-dimensional sink that folds into the wall when a button is pressed.