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Author(s): David P. Thelen

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Rutherford B. Hayes and the Reform Tradition in the Gilded Age

THE GILDED AGE WAS A DARK, UNCERTAIN TIME FOR THE REFORM TRADITION in America. "We are in a period when old questions are settled, and the new are not yet brought forward," observed President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1878.¹ The old questions and spirit of the moral reformers and Jacksonians seemed dead to Hayes and most Americans. But the aggressive, romantic ante-bellum reformers had destroyed many old institutions and created many new ones with their faith in the infinite perfectibility of the individual, in treating social injustices as sins, in direct appeals to the consciences of men, in skepticism toward government and legislation. Somewhere in the future, as Hayes sensed, lay the Populists and Progressives and their emphasis on collective action, environmentalism and the confident use of laws to remake men and regulate their behavior.

This transitional age has long interested scholars. Some have tried to show the continuity of white concern for the black American, from the abolitionists to the N.A.A.C.P.² Others have found roots for progressivism reaching back to the Granger movement of the mid-1870s.³ Many have been fascinated by men like Henry George, Edward Bellamy and Lester Frank Ward whose writings would appeal to the progressives.⁴

¹T. Harry Williams, ed., *Hayes: The Diary of a President, 1875-1881* (New York, 1964), p. 126.

²James M. McPherson, "The Antislavery Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP," in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1969), pp. 126-57.

³Russel B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870-1950* (East Lansing, Mich., 1951), for example.

⁴Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York, 1952), pp. 42-43, 97-100; Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's* (New Haven, 1950), pp. 199-226, for examples.

When, as in these cases, Gilded Age reformers could be directly linked with either the ante-bellum or progressive movements, they have received generally sympathetic treatment from historians. By contrast, scholars have been hostile toward those Gilded Age reformers whose major significance they have confined to these transitional years. This is particularly true of the age's most characteristic reformers, the Mugwumps, those men who scorned political partisanship, especially in 1884, and desired to restore their communities to leadership by the "best" people. Their sour and ineffective nativism and elitism have driven scholars to consign them to history's ashcan as an aberrant group whose influence was limited to a few years.⁵

In fact, however, many Gilded Age reformers showed strong continuity between the ante-bellum and progressive traditions. By examining the ideas and tensions of Rutherford B. Hayes, a representative of this group, this essay will attempt to show how these Victorian reformers incorporated the ante-bellum heritage, anticipated the Populists and Progressives, and thus swam in the mainstream of the American reform tradition.

Why Hayes? He is generally remembered as a conservative President who, with a shaky claim to his office, used his power to crush the 1877 railroad strike with Federal troops and to silence debtors' cries for relief by resuming specie payments and (unsuccessfully) vetoing the Bland-Allison silver purchase act. His subsequent career as a reformer has been forgotten and barely noticed even by his biographers.⁶ After Hayes left the White House, until he died in 1893, he thought about and participated in most of the reform movements of his day. He crusaded actively for public education, prison reform, Negro and Indian rights. By the mid-1880s he became deeply concerned about the widening chasm between rich and poor and the growing political power of wealthy individuals and corporations. He was repelled by his party's nomination of James G. Blaine in 1884. Unlike the more famous Mugwumps, whose professorships and editorships of elite journals isolated them from mass sentiment, Hayes was a more typical figure—worldly enough to be a Civil War general, Congressman (1865–67), Governor (1868–72, 1875–76) and President. But because he was uncertain

⁵The most recent example is John G. Sproat, *"The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1968). While less hostile toward his subject, Geoffrey Blodgett, *The Gentle Reformers: Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), contends that Mugwumpery was dead by 1900, if not 1896.

⁶Charles Richard Williams, *The Life of Rutherford Birchard Hayes, Nineteenth President of the United States* (2 vols.; Boston, 1914), II, 379–85; H. J. Eckenrode, *Rutherford B. Hayes: Statesman of Reunion* (New York, 1930), pp. 329–31, 336; Harry Barnard, *Rutherford B. Hayes and His America* (Indianapolis, 1954), pp. 512–18. Henry L. Swint, "Rutherford B. Hayes, Educator," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXIX (June 1952), 45–60, explores an important part of his reform career.

of his ideas, lacked originality in his methods and possessed a strong sense of Victorian propriety, Hayes was content that newsmen gave little attention to his reform career. (His obscurity so impressed Eugene Field that the poet-reporter once facetiously suggested that the only person who would recognize the ex-President at a public meeting would be a policeman who would tell him to get off the grass.)⁷ Perhaps his very questioning attitude and uncertainty about the future was shared by many Americans and may reinforce his position as a representative figure. At any rate, such outspoken reformers as Edward Bellamy's followers believed that he was a perfect ex-President.⁸ Most importantly, Hayes reveals the tensions between the ideals and methods of ante-bellum and progressive reformers, and is, thereby, an important transitional figure in the reform tradition.

At the core of Hayes' social thought was a passion for social harmony. Perhaps because he was President at a time when fierce regional, partisan, religious, ethnic, class and racial tensions bitterly divided Americans, he made national unity the leitmotiv of his presidency. A conciliator by temperament, Hayes "tried to impress the people with the importance of harmony between different sections, States, classes and races, and to discourage sectionalism and race and class prejudice."⁹ He fervently believed that his southern policy, for example, would unite South and North, black and white, Democrat and Republican.¹⁰ He urged men to forget the social barriers that divided them and join him in extolling the common virtues of order, thrift, honesty, "the gospel of work," the sanctity of property, "the supremacy of law," devotion to family, faith in God, and a Puritanical sense of duty.¹¹ Although few Presidents have favored social chaos, few have matched the zeal of Hayes' commitment to social harmony.

One sure way to secure harmony was to suppress those groups which undermined the community. No group had a right to dictate its wishes by force, and when it did, Hayes would use any power to destroy it. "All lawless violence must be suppressed instantly, . . ." he wrote in 1886.¹² Although he believed that violence was often rooted in unbearable condi-

⁷Slason Thompson, *Life of Eugene Field: The Poet of Childhood* (New York, 1927), p. 222.

⁸"The Function of an Ex-President," *Nationalist Magazine*, II (July 1890), 329.

⁹T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of a President*, pp. 94-95.

¹⁰Vincent P. De Santis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question—The New Departure Years, 1877-1917* (Baltimore, 1959), esp. pp. 66-103; T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of a President*, pp. 73, 85, 99; Charles R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes, Nineteenth President of the United States* (5 vols.; Columbus, O., 1922-26), III, 424-25, 431, for example.

¹¹C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 145, 248, 286, 288, 365, 575, for example; Barnard, *Hayes*, p. 506; William D. Howells, *Sketch of the Life and Character of Rutherford B. Hayes* (New York, 1876), p. 125; T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, p. 128.

¹²C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 286.

tions, it was not permissible because it ripped apart the social fabric and encouraged rioting, looting and further crimes. For this reason he sent Federal troops to disperse the 1877 railroad riots and urged swift police action in the 1884 and 1886 riots.¹³ More troubling to Hayes than isolated riots were the spoilsmen who repeatedly subordinated community needs to partisan gains. "He serves his party best who serves the country best," Hayes had said in his inaugural, and he wanted to inscribe that phrase on the family coat of arms.¹⁴ If he failed to produce the "thorough, radical, and complete" overthrow of the patronage system that he had pledged in 1876, he did show real courage and persistence in fighting such blatant spoilsmen as Roscoe Conkling.¹⁵ The need for harmony dictated the suppression of violent strikers and greedy politicians.

But social harmony could not be created simply by suppressing discordant elements. Hayes deeply believed that the community owed an obligation to those groups it oppressed. While he included Indians, Chinese and criminals in this category, this former Civil War general was most concerned for the former slaves. ". . . the American people have a grave and indispensable duty to perform with respect to the millions of men and women among our countrymen whose ancestors our fathers brought from Africa to be held in bondage," he declared to a group of reformers in 1890.¹⁶ Fourteen years earlier, when it had appeared that he had lost the Presidency to the Democrats, he and Mrs. Hayes "felt more anxiety about . . . the colored people . . . than about anything else sinister in the result."¹⁷ He hoped that "the real thing to be achieved" by his southern policy would be "safety and prosperity for the colored people."¹⁸ After he left the White House, he devoted most of his energies to helping the former slaves, and, at his death, young W.E.B. DuBois was so impressed by Hayes' efforts that he applauded the ex-President's "tireless energy and single-heartedness for the interests of my Race. . . ."¹⁹ White Americans owed a similar obligation to the Indians whose ancestors they had so ruthlessly slaugh-

¹³T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, pp. 87–91, 93; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 145, 286; James D. Richardson, comp., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (20 vols.; New York, 1917–22), IX, 4424.

¹⁴Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers*, IX, 4397; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 570.

¹⁵Ari Hoogenboom, *Outlawing the Spoils: A History of the Civil Service Reform Movement, 1865–1883* (Urbana, Ill., 1961), pp. 135–78; Howells, *Hayes*, p. 123; T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, p. 100, for example; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, III, 435, 436, for example; Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers*, IX, 4402–3, 4463–64, 4501, 4502–6.

¹⁶*First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question Held at Lake Mohonk, Ulster County, New York, June 4, 5, 6, 1890* (Boston, 1890), pp. 9, 137.

¹⁷T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, p. 48.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁹Louis D. Rubin Jr., ed., *Teach the Freeman: The Correspondence of Rutherford B. Hayes and the Slater Fund for Negro Education* (2 vols.; Baton Rouge, 1959), II, 281.

tered, and Hayes did not let the Little Big Horn massacre prevent him from becoming one of his generation's most sympathetic champions of the Indian.²⁰

As Hayes grappled with these issues, he built on the heritage of the ante-bellum moral reformers. This was hardly surprising, for he had direct contact with the heritage. His wife had devoutly followed her church in its belief that slavery was a sin to be immediately destroyed, and his first cousin was John Humphrey Noyes, the leading communitarian.²¹ While not as dedicated as these members of his family, Hayes had given legal assistance to fugitive slaves and had helped to found the Republican Party in Cincinnati in 1854.²² For the rest of his life he never shed the earlier reformers' faith that the Bible and the Declaration of Independence held all the truths reformers needed to know. They remained his only two inspirations.²³ With the Declaration of Independence, he believed, at least in theory, that oppressive enough conditions justified revolution or war.²⁴ From his reading of the Bible he could argue in 1887, as had an earlier generation, that "Society is silent and inactive in the presence of many recognized evils, because society has no faith; they are accepted as inevitable and endured, because they are believed to be beyond cure. But in a world God governs, no notion can be more false and harmful; in God's world, what ought to be done can be done."²⁵ The ideas of Darwinians like Herbert Spencer simply had little meaning for Hayes, who was content with the same sources that had inspired the ante-bellum reformers.

Hayes used the ideals and methods of those reformers in his own activities. They had worked in the antislavery movement. His foremost intellectual debt to his predecessors was his basic strategy for achieving change—direct appeals to the minds and hearts of individuals. Since the sins of men produced social injustices, the moral reformers had believed, the only way to destroy those injustices was to convert and regenerate individuals. If enough individuals were converted the sinful injustice would disappear.²⁶

²⁰New York Times, Feb. 3, 1881; Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers*, IX, 4427–28, 4454–56; X, 4528–30, 4575–77, 4582–86; *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian*, 1889, p. 44.

²¹Barnard, *Hayes*, pp. 101, 179.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 190–91, 196.

²³C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 248, 434–35.

²⁴*Ibid.*, IV, 280, 365, for example.

²⁵Rutherford B. Hayes, "President's Annual Address," *Proceedings of the Annual Congress of the National Prison Association* . . . 1887, p. 51.

²⁶See, for example, David Brion Davis, ed., *Ante-Bellum Reform* (New York, 1967), pp. 1–2, 140–52; John L. Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America, 1815–1865," *American Quarterly*, XVII (Winter 1965), 656–81; Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830–1860* (New York, 1960), pp. 28–81; Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830–1844* (New York, 1933), esp. pp. 3–16.

Until he discovered new problems near the end of his life, Hayes also placed total faith in the efficacy of direct appeals to individuals. He argued repeatedly that only such direct techniques as education, moral suasion and example had the power to change individuals. If reformers reached enough individuals they could create “that enlightened and favorable public opinion which is the successful precursor of successful reform.”²⁷ Favorable public opinion constituted the total of regenerated individuals.

But Hayes, good Victorian that he was, gave a new dimension to the ante-bellum reformers’ emphasis on the individual, and that new emphasis made him profoundly more conservative. Where earlier reformers had measured success by the zeal of their converts, Hayes emphasized the re-constructed character of individuals. “The life—character—is more than the creed, . . .” he declared in an 1882 statement which the ante-bellum reformers would have contested.²⁸ While Hayes liked to define the men of character, or the “good people” as he sometimes called them, as those whose vision of community good was not blinded by allegiance to some group, he also assumed that men of character would own a home, be devoted family men, attend church, work hard and, above all, obey the law.²⁹ Hayes thus twisted the ante-bellum desire to convert individuals into an effort to build “character” into men. And, if there is some scholarly debate over whether the earlier reformers were primarily interested in controlling social inferiors, there is little doubt that Hayes hoped that “reform” would produce individuals with a deep stake in perpetuating the community’s values. Thoreau and Garrison simply were not men of character; they broke the law. Racial prejudice was not a sin; it undermined character by making “hoodlums and vagabonds” of the bigots.³⁰ By shifting the definition from sin to character, Hayes also shifted the tempo of change. Sins must be immediately wiped out, but it takes time to change character. As he transformed the reformers’ job from saving souls to uplifting character, Hayes could retain the ante-bellum faith in direct appeals to individuals while losing the earlier sense of the urgency of change.

Although he was probably unconscious of what he had done, Hayes demonstrated this transition with the new burdens he placed on education and the public school, perhaps the major institutional legacy of the ante-bellum reformers to the Gilded Age. Education became the best way to convert individuals. By reaching the individual directly at an impressionable age, he

²⁷Hayes, “Address,” *Proceedings of the . . . National Prison Association . . . 1887*, pp. 51–52.

²⁸C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 99.

²⁹For examples, *ibid.*, IV, 286, 288; T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, pp. 100, 307; Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers*, IX, 4512–13.

³⁰T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, p. 187.

argued, the public school would build “character” and social harmony by bringing all classes together and inculcating respect for law and property.³¹ “The *real* remedy” for the 1877 strikes was not suppression, but “education of the strikers.”³² Hayes could “find nothing which overthrows or even tends to overthrow” his feeling that education was the basic solution for the problems of southern blacks.³³ Schools would instill in the freedmen “the thrift, the education, the morality, and the religion required to make a prosperous and intelligent citizenship.”³⁴ Perhaps his chief claim as a reformer was his devotion to the causes of education, which he called his “hobby,”³⁵ in the last years of his life. After leaving the White House, he gave considerable energy to his positions as president of the Slater Education Fund and trustee of the Peabody Education Fund, which financed the education of southern Negroes. He found these educational programs successful with southern Negroes because, as a result, “almost all of them are peaceable, orderly, and law-abiding.”³⁶ Since the schools produced such desirable results, Hayes sturdily championed Federal aid to education throughout the 1880s.³⁷ Because the job of the schools was to build character and give students respect for community values, Hayes vigorously opposed all efforts by such groups as Catholics and Mormons to influence the public schools or use their funds. He made this a major issue in his 1875 gubernatorial and 1876 presidential campaigns. The principle of no “sectarian control or interference” with public schools was at the heart of Hayes’ hopes for education.³⁸ The schools would be a menace if they inculcated the wrong values. The ante-bellum reformers’ major institutional contribution thus became a leading agency for character building and social stability.

Hayes gave similar twists to other parts of the ante-bellum heritage. Religion had been a major wellspring for the moral reformers, many of whom favored revivals to create disinterested benevolence.³⁹ Through Hayes’

³¹C. R. Williams, *Life of Hayes*, II, 350.

³²T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, p. 93.

³³C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 624.

³⁴*First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question . . . 1890*, p. 10.

³⁵C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, III, 619.

³⁶Swint, “Hayes, Educator,” and Rubin, ed., *Teach the Freeman*; Samuel R. Spencer Jr., *Booker T. Washington and the Negro’s Place in American Life* (Boston, 1955), pp. 74, 112; C. R. Williams, *Life of Hayes*, II, 351–54; *First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question . . . 1890*, p. 11.

³⁷*New York Times*, July 5, 1883, May 30, 1886; *First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question . . . 1890*, pp. 11–12; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 272–73; Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers*, X, 4531.

³⁸Howells, *Hayes*, pp. 110, 124; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, III, 338, 339, 340, 366, 367, 368; IV, 52, 53.

³⁹See especially Barnes, *Antislavery Impulse*, pp. 3–16.

Victorianism religion came to serve wholly different "reform" ends. Hayes, too, used religion to reach individuals directly, but its main function, as he said in 1890, was to "purify morals, guide conduct, [and] elevate character."⁴⁰ Where the Bible was not found "vice and crime prevail."⁴¹ Religion should primarily teach men to shun vice and obey laws, not to destroy sinful social injustices. When Hayes condemned a "merely emotional religion" because his Victorianism left him too secular to be a zealot, he also condemned one of the major ways ante-bellum reformers had won converts.⁴² His passion for social harmony and regenerated character led Hayes to use religion, as he had education, for conservative ends.

The faith in education and religion as the agencies for changing individuals drove Hayes, as it had the earlier reformers, to scorn the use of force to make men good. Hayes, of course, did not view legislation as a positive evil, as had Garrison when he burned the Fugitive Slave Law and the Constitution; no "higher law" warranted civil disobedience.⁴³ ("Self-control is 'the higher law,'" Hayes typically observed.)⁴⁴ But he did agree with those moral reformers and Jacksonians who preferred moral discipline to a strong government.⁴⁵ For Hayes believed that legislation and force would only succeed after the community had been converted by appeals to individuals. "The will of the people depends on education, religion, example, discussion and the like. Whoever neglects these forces, and attempts to call in the constable to do the duty which belongs to the reformer, puts the cart before the horse," he wrote in 1885.⁴⁶ If an individual behaved wrongly, Hayes believed that his behavior could only be changed by converting his character, not by passing or enforcing laws which regulated behavior. Although he opposed the saloon, he also opposed prohibition. "Legislation and political parties in the interest of temperance all aim at the liquor seller. They do not reach his customers. . . . If there are no customers there will be no sellers."⁴⁷ "Law is no substitute for character."⁴⁸ While such statements paralleled the argument of social Darwinists that morality could not be legislated, Hayes derived them from the moral reform heri-

⁴⁰First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question . . . 1890, p. 10.

⁴¹C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 248.

⁴²First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question . . . 1890, p. 10. For Hayes' lack of denominational affiliation, C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 574.

⁴³Hayes argued: "Those who make laws are without excuse if they break the laws. Lawmakers should not be lawbreakers. All Americans are lawmakers." C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 288.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, IV, 550.

⁴⁵For example, Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, Cal., 1957), pp. 22-23.

⁴⁶C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 177.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, IV, 46, also 522. ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, IV, 426.

tage, not from Herbert Spencer, and he could therefore support such programs as Federal aid to education.

His experience further confirmed the validity of the moral reformers' approach. Better than anyone, he knew how southern whites had nullified the efforts of Congressional Republicans to give equality to the freedmen by force and legislation.⁴⁹ Not until southern whites were converted, as individuals, would the Reconstruction amendments be obeyed. In accepting the Presidential nomination, he declared that southern progress "can be most effectively advanced by a hearty and generous recognition of the rights of all by all, without reserve or exception."⁵⁰ After trying as President by conciliating them, to persuade southern whites to obey the laws Hayes turned after 1881 to educating them. Hayes had good reason to believe that legislative experiments produced neither real reform nor social harmony. Small wonder, then, that Hayes argued that the reformers' first task was to create a favorable public opinion and that he never lost his skepticism toward legislation.

Like the ante-bellum reformers, Hayes maintained that public opinion could be changed by conferences of reformers. Such conferences also helped reformers to agree on their approaches to problems. Hayes took part in conferences on the "Indian Question" held at Lake Mohonk, New York, in the 1880s, and he was hailed widely as the "founder" of the 1890 Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question.⁵¹ The meetings of the National Prison Association, over which Hayes had presided as early as 1870 and which he had keynoted annually since leaving the White House, were also forums for changing popular attitudes toward criminals. The ante-bellum reformers had used the conferences and conventions to mold public opinion, and Hayes never lost faith in their value even as he transformed their substance. In keynoting the 1890 Negro conference, he insisted that the participants "avoid whatever is sectarian, or that smacks of partisanship or sectionalism" and that they ignore "the social question, with its bitterness, irritations, and the ill-will which it often breeds. . . ."⁵² Discordant tones, which split many ante-bellum conventions, were banished from these gatherings of men of character and like mind. The passion for social harmony and the Victorian preoccupation with character emasculated these meetings intended to change public opinion.

⁴⁹For Hayes' positions as a Reconstruction Congressman, see, for example, *ibid.*, III, 12, 20.

⁵⁰Howells, *Hayes*, p. 125.

⁵¹"The Functions of an ex-President," p. 329; *First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question . . . 1890*, pp. 7-8.

⁵²*First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question . . . 1890*, p. 9.

Hayes' Victorianism transformed other ante-bellum legacies. The earlier reformers had dreamed of the family as a buffer against the institutions of a hostile world; some communitarians had even hoped to build new communities on the guiding principle of family warmth.⁵³ The family was also a crucial institution for Hayes, but he, like other Victorians, gave it a conservative thrust. Now a well-integrated family protected men from indolence, intemperance and crime.⁵⁴ Further, a man who was loyal to his family would be less likely to identify with the regional, partisan, religious and class groups which undermined the community. Hayes transformed the family from an inspiration for change and an encouragement for brotherhood and attacks on other institutions into a vehicle for stability and "character."

These were Hayes' basic ideas before he discovered a new set of problems toward the end of his life. He used the individualistic approaches of the ante-bellum reformers for such conservative ends as promoting order and social harmony. These ends, as well as his suspicion of politics, might make him appear to be a typical Mugwump. But his ante-bellum heritage created important differences between himself and the Mugwumps. Unlike the Mugwumps, Hayes was a genuine child of the Jacksonian generation's desire to liberate the individual and of its worship of the self-made man,⁵⁵ and this shielded him from the elitism which pervaded Mugwumpery. The typical Mugwump wanted to retain his superior social position over those people he was trying to help, but Hayes believed that the community must guarantee to all its members "equal rights—a fair stand and an equal chance in the race of life. . . ." For the Mugwump it was a matter of charity; for Hayes it was a matter of equalizing opportunity.⁵⁶ Equal opportunity meant that uncultured people might become wealthy or powerful. This prospect scared the Mugwumps, who scorned the *nouveau riche* and feared the political power of immigrant groups, but it elated Hayes, who found in the self-made man vindication of the finest features of the American tradition. He was delighted that the Republicans had selected James Garfield in 1880, for Garfield was "the ideal self made man." "Such struggles with adverse circumstances and such success!"⁵⁷ Russell Conwell, premier propagandist for the rags-to-riches legend, emphasized these

⁵³Thomas, "Romantic Reform," pp. 665-68, 677, 678; Davis, ed., *Ante-Bellum Reform*, p. 2.

⁵⁴C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 286, for example.

⁵⁵John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1955), pp. 166-80; Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New Brunswick, 1954), pp. 9-10, 16-20.

⁵⁶T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, p. 289; *First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question . . . 1890*, p. 138; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 607.

⁵⁷T. H. Williams, ed., *Diary of President*, p. 279.

same qualities in his campaign biography of Hayes. If Hayes treasured economic mobility, he also differed from the Mugwumps by his profoundly Jacksonian faith in political democracy. He deeply believed that all men's votes should be equal, and he did not favor a trained group of leaders. If all men could not participate equally in the political process social harmony would not exist. "Ours is not the government of the native born or of the foreign born, of the rich man or of the poor man, of the white man or of the colored man: it is the government of the freeman," he said in 1876.⁵⁸ While he shared the Mugwumps' belief that the electorate should be educated, he lacked their pessimistic views of the workings of democratic institutions and their fears of mass participation. If the American system were working perfectly, the crowning jewel would be a Garfield, not a George W. Curtis.

The heart of Hayes' position was the belief that the major differences between men were individualistic, were differences of character, not groups. The school, the church and the family encouraged his faith in unlimited social mobility, the perfectibility of man and the responsiveness of government. Assuming that white America was a middle-class democracy, Hayes could also assume that the significant differences were between individuals, not groups, and that those men with superior characters would rise. So long as Hayes could retain his faith that America was a middle-class democracy, he could confidently retain his individualistic heritage from the ante-bellum reformers.

But during the 1880s Hayes became increasingly convinced that his ideal society did not exist. He discovered menacing new problems which challenged the meaning and validity of his faith in middle-class democracy and his individualistic outlook. If the heavy weight of his Victorian twist of the ante-bellum tradition prevented him from solving these new problems, his failure was no greater than his transitional generation's. Hayes, who had devoted much of his energy in the quarter-century before the Haymarket Riot to aiding the victims of chattel slavery, now discovered the evil of industrial slavery.

"My brother," wrote Hayes to a clergyman in 1889, "the question of our day is, Shall a plutocracy own the earth, and all who work with their hands be left in ignorance and vice by reason of poverty? . . . The real enemy of human souls sits in your costliest church."⁵⁹ This question broke down into two basic problems for Hayes. The first was "the inherent defect, the fatal weakness, of our present social system—a system that fosters the

⁵⁸Russell H. Conwell, *Life and Public Services of Gov. Rutherford B. Hayes* (Boston, 1876), p. 188.

⁵⁹C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 457.

giant evils of great riches and hopeless poverty.”⁶⁰ The second was a result of the growing chasm between rich and poor: “the tendency plainly . . . towards a government the exact opposite of the popular government for which Lincoln lived and died— ‘a government of the people, by the people, and for the people’—and instead of it to set up a ‘government of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich.’ ”⁶¹

The reasons for these discoveries were not hard to find. They were all around him. The generalizations resulted from the growing number of strikes, climaxing at Haymarket Square in 1886, and the mounting evidence of corporation control of city councils and legislatures, culminating in nearby Toledo’s natural gas battle with Standard Oil and that corporation’s attempted domination of Ohio politics in the mid-1880s. Hayes’ test as a reformer was his reaction to these events. He could have used his passion for harmony and order to urge suppression of the strikers, or he could have demanded justice for the victims of poverty. He chose the latter. The ante-bellum tradition still had reformist legacies for him: his heritage of moral reform, of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, his ideal of a middle-class democracy, his conviction that no artificial barriers should prevent a man from rising as far as his character could carry him. Hayes’ increasingly bitter and piercing cries were those of a man whose worldview was being challenged by events around him.

One by one Hayes now had to evaluate the validity of his fundamental assumptions about the nature of American life. The first shift came in his ideas about property. Believing that ownership of property was the sacred root of a stable society, Hayes had assumed that a good character would allow anyone to acquire property. But now he discovered that property was increasingly being concentrated in a few hands and that a growing number of people possessed nothing. What use were individualistic appeals for home ownership when economic events were making this a futile dream? “. . . free government cannot long endure if property is largely in a few hands and large masses of the people are unable to earn homes, education, and a support in old age.”⁶² The American dream of opportunity was ebbing, and with it, Hayes feared, faith in a beneficent future. In 1890 he detected “the note of anxiety, the note of despair, the lack of opportunity, the lack of hope, written everywhere in the faces of the multitude, to whom the path to these great prizes is closed.”⁶³ And despair was the father of

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, IV, 537. See also *ibid.*, IV, 261–62, 277, 309, 367, 621; Curtis W. Garrison, ed., “Conversations with Hayes: A Biographer’s Notes,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXV (Dec. 1938), 379–80; Rutherford B. Hayes, “President’s Annual Address,” *Proceedings of the Annual Congress of the National Prison Association* . . . 1890, p. 12.

⁶¹C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 550–51.

⁶²*Ibid.*, IV, 277.

⁶³Hayes, “Address,” *National Prison Association* . . . 1890, p. 12.

vice, crime and revolution. A troubled Hayes observed in 1887 that “within twenty-five years the classes will stand in New York, every nine men out of ten without homes or capital—one-tenth will own everything. Then look out!”⁶⁴ Since Hayes never lost his faith that property was the basis for social order, he concluded from his discoveries that “the great question in our day and generation plainly is the property question—the question of wealth. Shall it be held, controlled, owned by a few? Or shall it be wisely, equitably, that is widely distributed?”⁶⁵ In his last years Hayes’ diaries and letters were increasingly studded with his painful broodings about the urgent necessity to redistribute property in order to maintain social order. Before the mid-1880s he had stressed the need for order because he had assumed that white society was essentially a just, middle-class democracy. But, at the end of his life, he concluded that justice must precede order. And justice and order in turn depended upon a redistribution of wealth.

The new discoveries also drove Hayes to examine his lifelong assumption that government was responsive to the will of the majority. By 1888 he had concluded that “vast accumulations of wealth in a few hands” tended “to corrupt politics, to bribe conventions, legislative bodies, courts and juries. . . .”⁶⁶ A “government of corporations, by corporations, and for corporations” had replaced Lincoln’s and Hayes’ political ideal.⁶⁷ He condemned politicians who blamed strikes on workers while they enacted the “hundreds of laws of Congress and the state legislatures [that] are in the interest of [capitalists] and against the interests of the workingmen.”⁶⁸ At the end of his life Hayes made sweeping attacks on the operations of legislative bodies.

His discovery of the erosion of political and economic mobility shook the basic premises of his individualistic approach to reform, and Hayes sensed that he needed new formulas. But as Hayes groped for solutions to the new problems, he showed how his use of the ante-bellum tradition had, in truth, left him unable to solve them. The fundamental problem was that he could not surrender his individualistic approach to social change. The Populists and Progressives would believe that the problems of poverty and unequal distribution of wealth required collectivist solutions, but Hayes could never see this. Although he had no deep prejudices against labor unions, for example, he thought that they were mainly irrelevant. Indeed, Hayes declared that the process of organization was itself evil because it was “stamping out personal independence, individual judgment and conscience, and the sense of responsibility to the claims of the

⁶⁴Garrison, ed., “Conversations,” p. 379.

⁶⁵C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 621.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, IV, 367; also, Hayes, “Address,” *National Prison Association . . . 1890*, p. 12.

⁶⁷C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 374.

⁶⁸*Idem.*

most sacred duty.”⁶⁹ “Individual judgment and conscience” still produced social change, and to them reformers must appeal. He believed that industrial education was the best hope for workers, and he was baffled when the Knights of Labor did not share his enthusiasm.⁷⁰

If his individualistic approach prevented him from embracing collectivist solutions, he still sympathized with the analyses, if not always the programs, of more modern reformers. While he could not accept the single tax, for example, he believed that “Henry George is strong when he portrays the rottenness of the present system,” and he seems privately to have supported George’s 1886 campaign for mayor of New York.⁷¹ Edward Bellamy, he wrote, “says many good things,” and Bellamy’s followers reciprocated by praising him as one of the few men who “become more liberal as they increase in age.”⁷² Hayes strongly sympathized with the Social Gospellers, particularly Washington Gladden, and he told prison reformers in 1889 that “through the spirit of the Golden Rule, a solution will be found for every problem which now disturbs, or threatens to disturb, the foundations of our American society.”⁷³ The ideal of brotherhood, as expressed by writers like William Dean Howells, was to Hayes, with his earlier debts, merely “the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence, and of the Sermon on the Mount.”⁷⁴ Coming to believe that “the progress of society is mainly . . . the improvement in the condition of the workingmen of the world,” Hayes could write that “. . . labor does not now get its fair share of the wealth it creates.”⁷⁵

Hayes even argued that the state would have to “control” corporations and wealthy individuals. He came to believe that the state could no longer leave business alone, as he had encouraged it to do for most of his life. “The Dartmouth College decision you and I have always regarded as an anchor that fixed things permanently in this country,” he wrote a friend in 1887. “I guess it was a mistake, and that it gave to capital a power that should rest only with the people.”⁷⁶ He was uncertain about the proper form of state control. At various times he seemed to advocate trust busting and strict Federal railroad regulation.⁷⁷ He was sure that the first

⁶⁹Rutherford B. Hayes, “President’s Annual Address,” *Proceedings of the Annual Congress of the National Prison Association* . . . 1892, p. 20.

⁷⁰C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 378.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, IV, 354; Garrison, ed., “Conversations,” pp. 376–78.

⁷²“The Function of an ex-President,” p. 329; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, V, 89.

⁷³Rutherford B. Hayes, “President’s Annual Address,” *Proceedings of the Annual Congress of the National Prison Association* . . . 1889, p. 22.

⁷⁴C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 434–35.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, IV, 550, 637.

⁷⁶C. R. Williams, *Life of Hayes*, II, 384.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 384; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 278, 282, 592.

step should be a steep inheritance tax which would reach accumulated capital when it changed hands and was a matter of public record.⁷⁸

But his earlier heritage blocked Hayes from more than sympathy with the newer reformers; he could not embrace them. The skepticism toward force and legislation, an ante-bellum legacy, and the fear of an oppressive government, a Jacksonian contribution, left Hayes without enthusiasm for a creative, positive state. The reformer and the constable remained two different people. The passion for social harmony, a residue of Mann's public school, prevented him from supporting labor unions or radicals. The Victorian emphasis on character and pastoral order drove him to emphasize the vice, crime and violence of the poor—not their hunger.⁷⁹ Since the function of religion was to build character, Hayes could not follow Gladden's plans for collective action. Hayes' social gospel views mainly reinforced his longtime educational assistance to "our brothers in black." If he stopped short of adopting programs, Hayes believed that his role was to publicize the new problems by appeals to individuals, and at conventions. "It is not yet time to debate about the remedy. . . . Let the people be fully informed and convinced as to the evil."⁸⁰ This, of course, did not imply the exposures of concrete evils by a Jacob Riis or a later generation of muckrakers; it meant simply that people should be told not to covet wealth.⁸¹

Hayes knew that his ante-bellum traditions had somehow hindered him in solving these problems. He believed that he was, in this sense, no different from the clergymen, writers and other reformers with whom he had worked and agreed. He called these people "nihilists." A "nihilist" for him was "the man who sees [the evil in the system] and is opposed to it" because he favors the "true equality of rights." Hayes was most comfortable with this political label; he could only oppose the new developments.⁸² Like many other "nihilists," he felt that the responsibilities of his high social position prevented him from doing anything unseemly. Americans hardly expected their ex-Presidents to become single-taxers or union organizers, and Hayes was not one to offend convention. But with his growing sympathy for workers, his mounting admiration for newer reformers, his deepening sense of the perils of thwarted economic and political mobility, Hayes might very well have blossomed from a

⁷⁸Garrison, ed., "Conversations," p. 379; C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 261–62, 355–56, 374.

⁷⁹C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 537.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, IV, 354.

⁸¹Hayes, "Address," *National Prison Association . . . 1890*, p. 12.

⁸²C. R. Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters*, IV, 635, for example.

“nihilist” into a progressive if he had lived through the searing depression of 1893–97 which so profoundly influenced other middle-class Americans.

But he died in 1893. When he died the *New York Times* sneeringly pronounced that “his intentions were right,”⁸³ and Hayes, good Victorian that he was, would probably have considered this the supreme compliment. This was, in fact, the major problem of his generation of reformers. Their intentions were pure—they possessed the ante-bellum reformers’ disinterested benevolence—but as Victorian morality had paralyzed the activist element in the ante-bellum tradition, so it blocked an effective activist response to the discovery of the evils in an urban, industrial society. By the time the Victorian reformers had incorporated the ante-bellum individualistic approach, their ideology of social harmony and strategy of moral suasion rendered them incapable of meeting the collectivist needs of an industrial society.*

⁸³*New York Times*, Jan. 20, 1893.

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