CHAPTER THIRTEEN: COMING TO TERMS WITH THE NEW AGE, 1820s-1850s

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- The Growth of Cities
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ANTISLAVERY AND ABOLITIONISM
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THE WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT
- The Grimké Sisters
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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
* The new social problems that accompanied urbanization and immigration
* The responses of reformers
* The origins and political effects of the abolitionist movement
* The involvement of women in reform efforts

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: SENECA FALLS WOMEN RESPOND TO THE MARKET REVOLUTION  A community of reformers gathered for the Seneca Falls women’s rights convention in 1848. Almost 300 people attended and passed resolutions calling for a wide range of rights for women, including the right to vote. Women’s rights was just one of many reform movements of the time. The vignette illustrates how the dislocations of the market revolution stimulated the rise of reform organizations to address societal issues, including women’s rights.
URBAN AMERICA  The market revolution increased the size of cities, beginning in the seaports. With one exception, the largest cities in 1800 kept that status in 1850. Preindustrial cities were geographically small since most people had to walk everywhere. The lack of municipal services fostered voluntarism. Due to the market revolution, urban population rapidly grew between 1820 and 1860. Tremendous amounts of commerce passed through the older port cities. “Instant” cities like Chicago sprang up at critical transportation points in the interior.

Immigration was a key part of urban growth. Beginning in 1830 immigration soared, particularly in the North. Immigrants from Ireland and Germany represented a significant new element. Although some Americans opposed them, many others saw immigrants as a way to fill up the frontier or as a source of cheap, reliable labor. The great wave of Irish immigrants came in the wake of the Potato Famine of 1845–50. They tended to settle in eastern seaboard cities and faced discrimination and poor working and living conditions. The German immigrants often had been dislodged by the same market forces at work in America. They generally settled in farm communities in the Midwest. Both groups developed ethnic communities that eased their adaptation to life in America. A third area attracting immigrants was Gold Rush California that drew Chinese prospectors. The Chinese faced hostile discrimination but played a vital role in the building of the first transcontinental railroad. To escape violence, the Chinese developed Chinatowns.

The gap between rich and poor grew rapidly and economic class was reflected by residence. Poor people (nearly 70 percent of the city) lived in cheap rented housing. Middle-class residents (25-30 percent) lived in more comfortable homes, while the very rich (about 3 percent) built mansions and large town houses. In the early nineteenth century, cities had no adequate sanitation systems, leading to disease epidemics. The introduction of municipal services helped create residential segregation as the wealthy clustered in neighborhoods with these services. Increasingly the poor became packed in dirty and crime-ridden slums.

Irish and German immigrants created ethnic enclaves to maintain cultural traditions and institutions. A new urban popular culture emerged centered around the tavern, theaters and the penny press that challenged middle class respectability. Blackface minstrelsy was also popular among the working class. The middle and upper classes patronized more respectable theaters. About half of the nation’s free African Americans lived in the North, mainly in cities. They encountered residential segregation, job discrimination, segregated public schools, and limits on their civil rights. They formed community support networks, newspapers, and churches. The church was the center of the community. Nevertheless, their economic prospects deteriorated as black men were forced out of skilled trades and faced increased competition on the lower end of the scale from immigrants. One of the few occupations remaining open to free African American men was sailor.

THE LABOR MOVEMENT AND URBAN POLITICS  Public protests and demonstrations by urban workers had been an integral part of urban life in the eighteenth century. By the 1830s, the status of skilled craft workers artisans had declined. Workers’ associations became increasingly class-conscious as workers turned to their fellow laborers, not employers for support. At first, urban worker protest against change focused on party politics, including the short-lived Workingmen's Party. Both major parties tried to woo the votes of organized workers,
though neither could provide well-paid stable jobs. Not satisfied, workers organized. Trade unions came together and formed city-wide “General Trades Unions.” These local groups then organized the National Trades Union. The trade union movement was met with hostility and most collapsed during the Panic of 1837. Early unions included only skilled white workers.

Workers did not create strong unions or form stable political parties, but competition for their votes did shape urban politics. Big-city machines run by bosses arose reflecting the class structure of the fast-growing cities. The machines cultivated feelings of community by appealing directly for working-class votes through mass organizational activities and by creating organizations that met basic needs of the urban poor. The machines also had a tight organizational structure headed by bosses who traded loyalty and votes for political jobs and services. Machine politics eased some of the negative effects of the market revolution on workers and helped lessen increasing class and ethnic divisions.

SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS Middle-class Americans responded to the dislocations of the market revolution by promoting various reform campaigns. Evangelical religion drove the reform spirit forward. Reformers recognized that traditional small-scale methods of handling the poor and criminals no longer worked. The need was for larger-scale institutions. The doctrine of perfectionism combined with a basic belief in the goodness of people and moralistic dogmatism characterized reform. Society was now to be converted. The reforms shared certain characteristics. Those who were targets of reform, however, frequently resented the reformers. Regional and national reform organizations emerged from local projects to deal with various social problems. Reformers mixed political and social activities and tried to use the power of the state to promote their ends.

Educational reformers changed the traditional ways of educating children. No longer were children seen as sinners whose wills had to be broken, but as innocents who needed gentle nurturing. The work of Horace Mann and others led to tax-supported compulsory public schools. Women were seen as more nurturing, and thus encouraged to become teachers, creating the first real career opportunity for women. Not only could children be molded, but so could adults. Middle-class reformers sought to change Americans’ drinking habits, which included consuming large quantities of alcohol. Temperance was seen as a panacea for all social problems. Prompted by the Panic of 1837, the working class joined the temperance crusade. Artisans formed their own temperance societies; so did their wives. By the mid-1840s alcohol consumption had been cut in half. Reformers also attacked prostitution by organizing charity for poor women and through tougher criminal penalties but had little success. The asylum movement promoted humane treatment of the insane and criminals, but prison often failed to meet their purposes.

Amid the reform fervor some people formed utopian communities. Religious utopians like the Millerites and Shakers saw an apocalyptic end of history. The Shakers also practiced celibacy amid a fellowship of equality. Conversely, John Humphrey Noyes’s Oneida Community practiced “complex marriage.” New Harmony and the various Fourier-inspired communities unsuccessfully attempted a kind of socialism. The most successful communitarian movement was Mormonism. Followers of Joseph Smith built a model community isolated from non-Mormon neighbors and practiced polygamy. Harassed by their neighbors they moved their experiment to Salt Lake City. Migration west did not bring the desired isolation.
**ANTISLAVERY AND ABOLITIONISM** Various antislavery steps had been taken prior to the 1820s, but they had not addressed the continuing reality of Southern slavery. The ineffective American Colonization Society resettled a small number of free African Americans in Africa where they founded Liberia. Free African Americans rejected colonization and founded abolitionist societies that demanded equal treatment and an end to slavery. Some encouraged slave rebellions. William Lloyd Garrison headed the best-known group of antislavery reformers. Garrison denounced all compromise (including political action and the Constitution) and called for immediate emancipation on moral grounds. Through the American Anti-Slavery Society, abolitionists drew on the style of religious revivalists as they tried to confront slaveholders and lead them to repentance. They mailed over a million pieces of propaganda that led to a crackdown by southern states and a stifling of dissent. Several abolitionists were violently attacked.

Abolition began as a social movement but soon became a national political issue. Abolitionists inundated Congress with petitions calling for abolition in the District of Columbia. Congress imposed a “gag rule” tabling all such petitions, leading many people to become concerned about the threat to free speech. Former president John Quincy Adams led the fight against the gag rule that was repealed in 1844. Abolitionist unity splintered along racial and political lines. The former slave, Frederick Douglass, broke with Garrison when he called for political action. White abolitionists (other than Garrisonians) founded the Liberty Party.

**THE WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT** Women were active members of all reform societies and even formed their own antislavery organizations. The majority of women were too occupied at home to participate in reform movements. Sarah and Angelina Grimké left their South Carolina home and traveled north to denounce slavery, becoming the first female public speakers in American history. Many people disapproved of this public role for women. Two decades of activity culminated with the Seneca Falls women’s rights convention in 1848 and the beginnings of the women’s rights movement. Women played a central role in the various reform movements of this and later eras.

**CONCLUSION** Responding to changes caused by the market revolution, associations emerged to fulfill the desire for social connection and social order. As Francis Grund noted, “Americans love their country not as it is but as it will be.”

**Lecture Suggestions**

1. Make the connection between the material in this chapter and the discussion in the previous chapter. Emphasize the text’s theme of the impact of the market revolution on urban life. Before the Civil War, cities were primarily places of exchange. Examine how the booming commercial activity led to the growth of cities. Examine how this rapid growth created new problems and forced changes in urban life.

2. Contrast the range of responses to the rapid pace of change. Working-class Americans saw the changes as primarily negative and built trade unions and worker parties to try to offset the worst aspects of these changes. Middle-class Americans saw elements of the
changes as negative and created reform societies to deal with smoothing out the worst aspects of these changes. Note that the two groups were in many respects at odds with each other. Working-class Americans increasingly viewed the middle class as exploiters; middle-class Americans increasingly viewed the working class as a dangerous uncontrolled group. Note also that the communitarian movement is also a response to the rapid pace of change and offered yet another alternative to commercial society.

3. Make the connection between the rise of abolitionism and the religious and reform movements of the age. The Second Great Awakening called for immediate conversion; reforms like temperance called for immediate abstinence. Abolitionism rejected piecemeal proposals such as the gradualist approach of colonization and called for immediate emancipation. It also characterized slaveholding in religious terms as sinful and immoral.

4. Having laid out abolitionism, it is relatively easy to connect it to the emerging women’s rights movement. One might note the parallels between the women’s rights movements of the 1840s and of the 1960s. Both movements drew heavily on the experiences women had fighting for African Americans’ rights. In both cases, women encountered considerable discrimination within their own movements. They learned organizational techniques and had their “consciousness raised.”

Discussion Questions

1. What led to the growth of cities? What kinds of places were cities growing? What problems did this rapid growth cause?

2. Why did the 1820s and 1830s see the rise in working-class activism? Why did this not occur sooner? What direction did workers seek to go? (Try to get students to see the difference between the reform unionism of the workingman’s parties and the “pure and simple” unionism of the 10-hour movement.)

3. Why did middle-class Americans begin to push for reforms like temperance, common schools, etc.? How did the intended targets of these reforms feel about the reformers?

4. Why did the 1830s see the rise in utopian movements? How successful were they? Why were most of them unsuccessful? Why did the Mormons succeed?

5. Why did the abolition movement take off in the 1830s? How was it different from previous efforts to attack slavery? How successful was it, initially? What were its chief tactics?

6. What was the connection between the abolition movement and the women’s rights movement?

Out of Class Activity
The utopian experiments are a constant source of fascination for students—particularly the ones that promoted unconventional approaches to sexuality. Students could research the experiments and make presentations as to the rules that governed these communities. They might wish to compare 19th century utopias with 20th century “back to the land” communes. Arthur Bestor’s *Backwoods Utopias* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958) is the standard work. See also Alice Felt Tyler’s *Freedom’s Ferment* (University of Minnesota Press, 1944).

**If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject**


**Audio Visual Aids**

“Money on the Land” The first half shows the growth of cities in the midwest and west. It shows how Chicago grew from a small village. Narrated by Alistair Cooke. (Color, 52 minutes, 1972)

“Frederick Douglass: An American Life” Fast-paced portrait of Douglass. Graphically shows people and events that influenced his long and remarkable life. (Color, 30 minutes, 1985)