

The Search for Power, Inc.: Robert Wiebe and Alan Trachtenberg on the Gilded Age

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Alan Trachtenberg's recent book, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, offers a striking reinterpretation of the formation of modern America. In addition, it presents a reconsideration of the terms in which contemporary American society is to be understood. It does for American culture of the period from the end of the Civil War to the middle of the 1890's what Harry Braverman did for the notion of work, what Lawrence Goodwyn did for the history of Populist movement, what David Noble has done for the origins of science and technology, and what Christopher Lasch has done for the conception of the modern family.¹ That is to say, Trachtenberg has reclaimed perceptions and meanings with which to think historically about the contemporary condition. What has been recovered is not only a sense of the origins of the modern age, a sense of what was created, but rather an awareness of what was destroyed in the act of creation.

The Incorporation of America is best put in historiographical perspective by way of comparing it to Robert H. Wiebe's *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* with which it shares both format and publisher, Hill and Wang's outstanding American Century Series.² Trachtenberg's book covers a shorter span of time, but it is carried out with a broader conception of the scope of the cultural changes that took place. Although Wiebe is mentioned on the first page of the preface, Trachtenberg has not wanted to discuss explicitly his revision of Wiebe's work. Perhaps the relationship between Wiebe and Trachtenberg is most briefly described as a matter of the historical teaching and the historical unteaching of modernization in America.

Since its publication in 1967, Wiebe's book has been formative of a general consensus among American historians about where and how to look for the Gilded Age.³ The book has been accepted as the dominant interpretation not only because it is a rich and learned piece of work and a model of historical craftsmanship. Perhaps equally important was its assimilation of the concept of modernization which had been developed over the fifties and sixties by social and political scientists such as Gabriel Almond, Lucien Pye, and Samuel Huntington. As Wiebe made clear a few years later, the "model" of modernization enjoyed widespread acclaim:

There is approximate agreement that its components are found somewhere in these categories: the mechanization of production and its distribution; the impersonality of social relations, including large bureaucratic organizations and centralized power; the development of mass communication with increasing uniformity of attitudes; and the secularization of popular thought, accompanied by a greater discipline to the clock and calendar and by a rising faith in scientific solution to human problems.⁴

The adoption of "modernization" as the covering metaphor for a historical project depends upon a particular kind of cognition. Every theory is distinguished by its abbreviation of the reality it claims to bring under intellectual control. It is suited to deal with one range of perceptions rather than with another. The definition of modernization makes no secret that it depends upon an intellectual range which begins with efficient production and administrative competence and ends with a "scientific solution." The persistent emphasis on force and regularity in Wiebe's language is further indicative of a political condition in which human beings and social relations are continually adapted and made receptive to the requirements of contemporary forms of power. As Wiebe made abundantly clear: "Modernization is the process creating this present."⁵

What does this "model" entail, when it is turned into the standard against which the past is measured? Or, to put it differently, what is lost to historical concern when history as an academic activity is incorporated within the social sciences? What is being taught in this instance, is the historical necessity of forms of political power which remain veiled in the terminology of the social sciences. What is being taught is belief in an order of incessant change, contained within structures of enforced regularity and scientific control. What modern man needs to know is how the past contributed to the present. What he or she does not need to know is the dimensions of historical life that do not readily conform to modern

expectations. To view past labor in the image of "mechanized production" is to leave out the experiences of work and crafts. To view political life in terms of the origins of "bureaucratic organization" is to leave out the tradition of democratic orientations. What is at stake is not whether historians have to rely on value judgments of one sort or another in order to create meaningful statements about past phenomena. The more important issue is whether historical investigation should be guided by the principles with which contemporary conditions are understood, or whether the spirit of historical activity is to create a critical distance from the imperious demands of present circumstances.

At stake is a peculiar modern impoverishment of historical imagination. Notice how Wiebe's celebrated notion of the "island communities" that constituted American society during the nineteenth century is conceived in the image of modernizing society. "Island communities," according to Wiebe, are characterized by "weak communication;" they "inhibited specialization" and "discouraged ... accumulation of knowledge;" "local autonomy" is translated as inability even to "conceive of a managerial government."⁶ Note also that the metaphor of the "island communities" is waiting to fulfill its manifest destiny and overcome its geographical restrictions in the transubstantiation into a continental society. One is hardly surprised to learn that the image depends upon the view from an air plane.⁷

The modern overview of the processes of modernization entails a heightened sense of conspiracy in history. The older suspicions of malefactors of great wealth or of plots to restrain production or trade have been updated. To the political scientist this is the conspiracy of backwardness. To Wiebe it is a conspiracy of incomprehension, a cognitive plot which depends upon the forces of cultural continuity confederating with forces of swift technological change:

An age never lent itself more readily to sweeping uniform description: nationalization, industrialization, mechanization, urbanization. Yet to almost all of the people who created them, these themes meant only dislocation and bewilderment. America ... lacked those national centers of authority and information which might have given order to such swift changes ... As men ranged farther and farther from their communities, they tried desperately to understand the larger world in terms of their small, familiar environment. They tried, in other words, to impose the known upon the unknown, to master an impersonal world through the customs of a personal society. They failed, usually without recognizing why; and that failure to comprehend a society they were helping to make contained the essence of the nation's story.⁸

Modernization theories among political scientists have long been

accused of ethnocentrism. The equivalent fallacy among historians amounts to presentism, i.e. the habitual disposition to judge the people of a past epoch on the standards and practices of one's own culture. This aspect of Wiebe's argument has gone unnoticed, largely because Wiebe has replaced the condescending note that usually follows from the premise of the observer's superior knowledge with a tragic note. The loss of the assumption that the maker is entitled to knowledge of what is being made is indicative of a condition of cultural dispossession. Modern man however, has no difficulty in sympathizing with this kind of ignorance, since we have good reasons for seeing ourselves as the inheritors of the confusion which presumably beset the Gilded Age. Its bewilderment has become the modern way of life. Meeting the future on the modernizer's schedule has if anything become an even more exacting assignment. The general advance of knowledge over the twentieth century may or may not have made the few very knowledgeable. It is quite certain, however, that most of us have been turned into ignorants mystified by the administrative and technological processes that determine even our most immediate circumstances. What is there to learn from the state of incomprehension in the Gilded Age? It would seem to follow that the best one can hope for are the basic lessons of modernity: belief in the functions of planning and control, belief in the autonomy of process and the competence of modern forms of power. The effect of this kind of historical teaching can most appropriately be called the re-modernization of historical imagination.

The achievement of *The Incorporation of America* is to replace the terms of understanding the Gilded Age. In place of Wiebe's themes of ignorance and knowledge, confusion and order, Trachtenberg has attempted to work out a set of political terms relating to cultural contrariety, conflict and cooperation, power and powerlessness, equality and inequality, people and America. The notion of incorporation itself is given a political meaning which extends far beyond the well known business practice of raising capital for investment, centralizing decisions, and extending horizontal and vertical control over markets and goods.

The rise of the corporation during the Gilded Age is usually seen as the fall of the entrepreneur. Trachtenberg brings the story into unexpected directions. Various chapters explore different themes of social history. The wide range of issues is tightened by Trachtenberg's persistent attention to "the encompassing image and myth being that of America itself: a symbol of contention."⁹ Regarding the West, myths

of "civilization" were extended to the Pacific. In the factory, "production of goods" was ambiguously associated with the destruction of work. Other chapters deal with the antagonism between business and labor, between conflicting images of the city, and the development of the distinction between "high" and "common" culture which became prevalent in the years of the Gilded Age. A chapter on "the politics of culture" centers upon the beliefs and political practices of the Populist movement; the literary responses to the emerging social formation are discussed. Finally, by way of conclusion, Trachtenberg invites the reader to rediscover the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago **1893**. The chapter is formed as a guided tour of the cultural and social presumptions of the new incorporated elite.

The book may be read as a social history of cultural phenomena, of ideas, things, art, politics, processes, machines, constructions, which are all drawn into Trachtenberg's account as a kind of figurative language, embodying social relationships. The covering metaphor is the notion "incorporation". Incorporation represents a form of energy which restructured the whole of American culture. It may be understood as a principle of reality which was strong enough to replace the variety of associations of citizens that were earlier seen as the dynamic center of political life. Incorporation stands for clean power, delivered from the ambiguities and contradictions of human motives or political identities. It was a technique which freed capital for the humanness of its owner and put money in a position to do what throughout Western history had been a distinctive human prerogative: to combine energies and to act for the specific purpose of "the good life" (read "profit"). Incorporation was to capital what the factory was to work and what the party was to politics in the nineteenth century: the structural form of activity as well as the road from concrete life to abstraction'. The stunning political implication of incorporation was that common purpose was now conceived in a context freed from human conflict, freed from politics.

Incorporation developed until it was able not only to restructure the existing cities, but capable of building one of its own, White City of the Chicago Fair. Challenged by the financial panic of **1893** and/or by the strike of **1894**, the new social formation was forced to regroup. The corporation, in turn, was incorporated into the political economy of the progressive state. The question was no longer whether business corrupted politics, but whether politics corrupted business. Following the Second World War, the corporation and the state began to multinationalize one another.

Trachtenberg's story concerns the first phase of this process. It is presented as a history of the "remaking" and the "reorganization" of human perceptions. It is an epistemology of corporate forms of power, a story of the political education of the kind of citizen that was needed by the new system. The book contains numerous analyses of how people were taught to feel as a political mass, how they were brought to accept their new status as the pliable stuff out of which incorporated power could be fashioned. The book is loaded with paragraphs which untangle and unteach what modern man must take for granted: the subordination, the divisions, the categories, the distances inherent in modern life. It is a journey beyond loneliness, the ignorance and the powerlessness which were inscribed in human consciousness in order to prepare for the regiment of modern "interdependency". The account of the teaching of the machine, the teaching of the railroad and the railroad station, of the Americanization of business and the de-Americanization of labor and the education of the consumer are striking examples of Trachtenberg's historical pedagogy.¹⁰

The last chapter, "White City," may be read as one further reading of a complex cultural artifact in the light of incorporation. The chapter may also be seen as Trachtenberg's final attempt to formulate the political consequences of his cultural analysis. First and foremost, however, the chapter offers a revision of Wiebe's account in which the exposition was seen as an expression of perplexity, a typical distention of "that familiar language of beauty through size and display." To Trachtenberg, in contrast, the organization of White City, its architecture and design, its mode of expression as well as its corporate leadership is best understood as a successful political factuality. White City was "not a confusion of values" but "an effort to incorporate contrary and diverse values under the unity of a system of culture in support of a system of society." Trachtenberg claims that the exposition may be read as a political text which embodies the richest theoretical expression of incorporated America. It signified "the alliance and incorporation of business, politics, industry and culture. The spectacle proclaimed order, unity, coherence — and mutuality now in the form of hierarchy. White City manifested the conversion of the old ideal, its transvaluation into not a communal but a corporate enterprise."¹¹

The full meaning of the fair, however, is only apparent in the light of the Pullman Strike the following year. The strike and the sympathy boycott of the American Railway Union is used as the text from which Trachtenberg argues that "even in defeat advocates of "union" over

"corporation" retained their vision, their voice, and enough power to unsettle the image of a peaceful corporate order." With reference to Eugene Debs and his defense lawyer, Clarence Darrow, Trachtenberg argues that the older cultural practice of mutuality was augmented by the recent economic experiences. "Political economy itself raised the old mutuality to a new, more radical condition: the need for solidarity among an entire class of people." Upon this notion of "mutual aid" a new "vista" of solidarity was grounded "not in consumption but in equality, the dignity of labor, and the sympathy of common need."¹²

What is the political meaning of the contrast between the "union" and the "corporation"? Trachtenberg's book is open to different interpretations at this point. Perhaps it may be said that the persistence of the two visions over the twentieth century entailed the loss of a political culture. The loss is only partially offset by the politics of culture. Both vistas were in fact dependent upon the idea of one big economy. Both signified that small and particular selves were being submerged in the blessings associated with a large and general economy, in which the questions of power and governance were masked as economic choices. Between the organization of "consumption" and the solidarity of "common need" one is likely to find not a shared ground, but an encompassing basis which can be described as the systematic and endless generation of material needs whose most important reminiscence of democracy is contained in the experiences of common dependency.

In addition to their shared basis, both vistas seem to contain elements which may explain why interest politics rather than cultural confrontation was to become the dominant understanding of twentieth century politics, in the labor movement no less than in business and public administration. As Selig Perlman, the theorist of the AF of L has written, "the economic front was the only front on which the labor army could stay united."¹³ The teachings of the political economy could not be harmonized with the experiences of mutual aid. Considering the diverse origins of American labor, the notion of "an entire class of people" is hardly less abstract than the principles of incorporation.

The "spectacle" of corporate order no less than the labor "front" appears to contain the seeds of interest pluralism. Since Trachtenberg looks at White City in the image of rational-bureaucratic authority, this theme remains underdeveloped in his notion of the spectacle. "The pleasing prospect" of White City exhibited "the legitimacy of power, the chain of command," the mastery of nature, an "orchestrating design and style," "a perfectly comprehensible ground." The relationship

between spectacle and spectators is seen in terms of distance and passivity. The stunning number of visitors were "witnesses to an unanswerable performance which they had no hand in producing or maintaining." What were the integrative elements that could be counted on to give the spectacle its political significance? The visitor, one might assume, should not only be entertained by "theatrical display," but should also be taught how to think and act.¹⁴

Perhaps the civil spectacle is best understood as a diversion of political imagination which is incorporated into the structure of governance and control. It is an awe inspiring show of power, intended to overwhelm any sense of social limits and restraints. The civil spectacle makes the citizen familiar with the powers he or she is dependent upon, and in so doing, it facilitates whatever undertaking the rulers intend to carry out, especially such projects which depend upon the establishment of new and unfamiliar institutions and practices.¹⁵ In this respect White City was a revolutionary chapter which demonstrated the obsolescence of established social bonds and traditional moral practices. Most visitors, one might assume, would hesitate when confronted with the dissolution of their world; most people — certainly the American middle class — must be assumed to have a good deal more to lose than their chains when faced with radical changes. White City was constructed not only to inspire fear among the minorities that were shut out of the future. The prospect of being left out was supplemented by fears of being left behind. The point is not only that White City produced kinds of anxiety that were fertile for group politics, but also that the emergence of a "more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control" entailed the chopping up of the American citizen, and his remaking into a conglomerate of conflicting interests as union member, consumer, employer, taxpayer, etc.

Wiebe's repeated references to the "confusion" and "bewilderment" of the Gilded Age made sense as a historical explanation, because it was taken for granted that mechanization, urbanization, and bureaucratization took place against the backdrop of a relatively stable culture of bourgeois protestantism and the mores of small city life. Trachtenberg has challenged this assumption and has convincingly shown that new and powerful forms of culture were incorporated along with the means of production and communication. Wiebe's belief in cultural continuity is replaced with a story of the collapse of traditional culture and the development of new forms of cultural education for the masses. Incorporated culture produced its "goods inscribed with culture." The effect of Trachtenberg's analysis is to stimulate the

suspicion against the modern agencies of cultural transmission which have specialized in the instant delivery of cultural emancipation for the masses. The attention to the modern means of cultural imposition relies on the belief that the grounds of democracy depend upon the revitalization of the diverse sources of common life, such as the institutions of family, workplace, and local community, that were forced to bear the brunt of the cultural transformations of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Consulting Editor, Eric Foner (New York, 1982). Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974); Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York, 1974); David F. Noble, *America By Design. Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York, 1977); Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World. The Family Besieged* (New York, 1977).
2. General Editor, David Donald (New York, 1967).
3. Louis Galambos, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History," *Business History Review*, 44 (1970), pp. 270-90; Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science. The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana, Ill., 1977), pp. 37-9; Richard L. McCormick, "The Discovery that Business Corrupts Politics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism," *American Historical Review*, 86, (April, 1981), pp. 247-74. Each of these works would exemplify Wiebe's remarkable influence. While making much of their attempts to criticize Wiebe, both Haskell and McCormick pay special homage to Wiebe by reproducing his views in a slightly altered vocabulary.
4. "The Progressive Years," in William H. Cartwright and Richard L. Watson, Jr., eds., *The Reinterpretation of American History and Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1973), p. 426.
5. *Zbid.*
6. *The Search for Order*, xiii.
7. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society. An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York, 1975), vii-xi.
8. *The Search for Order*, p. 12. For a random sample of Wiebe's use of synonyms for bewilderment among businessmen in the 1880s, see pp. 21-5. These pages contain at least seventeen expressions for uncertainty and intellectual paralysis which dominated the behavior of the men that were sometimes spoken of as 'the Robber Barons' in an earlier interpretation.
9. *The Incorporation of America*, p. 8.
10. *Zbid.*, pp. 54-5, 69, 58-9, 120, 86-7, 130-32.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 216, 230.
12. *Zbid.*, p p 232-34.
13. *The Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York, 1928), p. 197, as quoted in Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York, 1966), p. 80.

14. *The Incorporation of America*, pp. 230-31.
15. This formulation of civil spectacle is dependent on Sheldon S. Wolin, "America's Civil Religion," *democracy*, 2, (April, 1982), pp. 7-17. See also "The Discourses," in *the Portable Machiavelli*, ed. and translated by Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (Harmondsworth and New York, 1979), pp. 207, 299.