UNIT I: [extra materials- chapter 12]

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Chapter 12. Reform, Politics and Expansion, 1824-1844

The gaunt, bearded New Englander Henry David Thoreau was skeptical of the value of the artifacts of a changing economy and society: railroads, steamboats, the telegraph, factories, and cities. "There is an illusion about" such improvements, he wrote in Walden, or Life in the Woods (1854). "There is not always a positive advance... Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour... but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain."

Thoreau was seeking to escape the marketplace, to forgo the world of cities and factories, to live simply in the landscape that existed before the plow and the engine, when he retreated to the wilderness shores of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Yet for all his idealization of the simple life, Thoreau did not withdraw from the world, much less from Concord. While at Walden he dined with townsfolk, joined the men congregating around the grocery-store stove, and hosted picnics. In reality his everyday life was infused with all those modern improvements he seemed to spurn. Thoreau even raised a cash crop—beans—and sold it to support himself at Walden. As he said in his own journal, he loved "society as much as most." But he was caught up in a basic ambivalence toward industrialization and urbanization that he shared with millions of other Americans. They were lured on the one hand by the simplicity and beauty of pastoral days gone by, pulled on the other by their belief in progress and the promise of machine-generated prosperity and happiness.

In the early nineteenth century, reformers of all kinds sought to find or impose harmony on a society in which economic change and discord had reached a crescendo. Prompted by the evangelical ardor of the Second Great Awakening and convinced of the perfectibility of the human race, they crusaded for individual improvement. Some withdrew from the everyday competitive world to seek perfection in Utopian communities. Others sought to improve themselves by renouncing alcohol. Inevitably the personal impulse to reform oneself led to the creation and reshaping of institutions. Schools, penitentiaries, and other institutions all underwent scrutiny and reform. Women were prominent in the reform movement, and the role of women in public life became an issue in itself.

Eventually one concern overrode all others: anti-slavery. No single issue evoked the depth of passion that slavery did. On a personal level it pitted neighbor against neighbor, settler against settler, section against section. Territorial expansion in the 1840s and 1850s would make it politically explosive as well.

Once reformers of various causes became a cohesive group, they naturally turned to the state as an effective instrument of social and economic change. The line between social reform and politics was not always distinguishable. Their opponents were no less concerned with social problems. What set them apart from reformers was their skepticism about human perfectibility and their distrust of institutions and power, both public and private. To them, coercion was the greater evil. They sought to reverse, not shape, change.

In the late 1820s the opponents of reform found a champion in Andrew Jackson and a home in the Democratic party. Jackson reversed the emphasis
of previous presidents on an activist national government, believing that a strong federal government restricted individual freedom by favoring one group over another. In response, reformers rallied around the new Whig party, which became the vehicle for humanitarian reform. The two parties competed energetically in the second party system, a system marked by strong organizations, intensely loyal followings, and religious and ethnic differences.

During the economically prosperous 1840s, both Democrats and Whigs eagerly promoted westward expansion to further their goals. Democrats saw the agrarian West as an antidote to urbanization and industrialization; Whigs focused on new commercial opportunities. The idea of expansion from coast to coast seemed to Americans to be the inevitable manifest destiny of the United States. The politics of territorial expansion would collide with the antislavery movement with explosive results in the 1850s and 1860s.

12.1. reform and religious revival

While the South was becoming more entrenched in a plantation system and slave society, the vast changes taking place in the rest of the country were having an unsettling effect. Population growth, immigration, internal migration, loosening family and community ties, the advancing frontier, and territorial expansion all contributed to the remaking of the United States. But the undisputed symbol of change was the machine—that fine-tooled, power-driven substitute for men's and women's own hands, stamping out interchangeable parts for other machines. Some feared it would turn America into a giant factory, in which everything would be viewed as a commodity to be sold at the marketplace.

Many people felt they were no longer masters of their own fate. Change was occurring so rapidly that people had difficulty keeping up with it. An apprentice tailor could find his trade obsolete by the time he became a journeyman; a student could find himself lacking sufficient arithmetic to enter a counting house when he graduated; a young rural woman could find her tasks unneeded on her family's farm Americans had fought the Revolution to make themselves independent; poverty and obsolescent trades and education made them dependent. Other aspects of change were simply unpleasant or culturally alien. Respectable citizens found their safety threatened by urban mobs and paupers, and the Protestant majority feared the growing Catholic minority, with their distinctive customs and beliefs. Protestants had waged war to preserve the rights they claimed as Englishmen, not to protect alien cultures and religions. To many, all these changes seemed to undermine republican virtues.

Disturbed by change, yet convinced that the world could be improved, and confident that they could do something about it, various reformers and reform movements began to emerge and coalesce during the 1820s. Basically, reformers sought to restore order to a society made disorderly by economic, social, and cultural change. They were so active from 1820 through the 1850s that the period became known as an age of reform.

Reform was at its core an attempt to impose more direction on society. The movement encompassed both individual improvement (religion, temperance, health) and institutional reform (antislavery, women's rights, and education). Some reformers were motivated more by fear than by hope—Ant Masonic, natives, and anti-Catholic. Not all the problems that reformers addressed were new to the nineteenth century; some were generations old. Slavery had existed in the United States for two centuries, and alcohol had been a colonial problem; yet neither became a national issue until the 1820s and after, when the reformist ferment prompted action.

Though reform movements played an important role in all sections of the country, most were northern. In the South, slavery and the complex issues
surrounding that institution tended to suppress the reform impulse. Fear of educating blacks, for instance, led even antislavery southerners to ignore the movement for educational reform.

12.2. Second Great Awakening

The prime motivating force behind organized reform was probably religion. Starting in the late 1790s, a tremendous religious revival, the Second Great Awakening galvanized Protestants especially women (see pages 201-204). The Awakening began in small villages in the East, intensified in the 1820s in western New York, and continued through the late 1840s. Under its influence, Christians in all parts of the country tried to right the wrongs of the world.

Evangelical Christianity was a religion of the heart, not the head. In 1821 Charles G. Finney, "the father of modern revivalism," experienced a soul-shaking conversion, which, he said, brought him "a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause." Finney, a former teacher and lawyer, immediately began his career as a converter of souls, preaching that salvation could be achieved through spontaneous conversion or spiritual rebirth like his own. In everyday language, he told his audiences that "God has made man a moral free agent." In other words, evil was avoidable; Christians were not doomed by original sin. Hence anyone could achieve salvation. Finney's brand of revivalism transcended sects, wealth, and race. Presbyterians, Baptists, and Congregationalists became evangelists, as did some Methodists.

The Second Great Awakening also raised people's hopes for the Second Coming of the Christian messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Revivalists set out to speed the Second Coming by creating a heaven on earth. They joined the forces of good and light—to combat those of evil and darkness. Some revivalists even believed that the United States had a special mission in God's design, and therefore a special role in eliminating evil.

Regardless of theology, all shared a belief in individual perfection as a moving force. In this way the Second Great Awakening bred reform, and evangelical Protestants became missionaries for both religious and secular salvation. Wherever they preached, voluntary societies arose. Evangelists organized an association for each issue—temperance, education, Sabbath observance, antidueling, and later antislavery; collectively these groups formed a national web of benevolent and moral reform societies.

As social change accelerated in the 1830s and 1840s, so did reform. In western New York and Ohio, Charles G. Finney's preaching was a catalyst to reform. Western New York experienced such continuous and heated waves of revivalism that it became known as the "burned-over" district. The opening of the Erie Canal and the migration of New Englanders carried the reform ferment farther westward, and revivalist institutions—Ohio's Lane Seminary and Oberlin [327] College were the most famous—sent committed graduates out into the world to spread the gospel of reform. Evangelists also organized grassroots political movements. In the late 1830s and 1840s they rallied around the Whig party in an attempt to use government as an instrument of reform. Their efforts stirred nonevangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Jews as well as evangelical Christians.

Women were the earliest converts, and they tended to sustain the Second Great Awakening. When Finney led daytime prayer meetings in Rochester, New York, for instance, pious middle-class women visited families while the men were away at work. Slowly they brought their families and husbands into the churches and under the influence of reform. Women more than men tended to feel personally responsible for the increasingly secular...
orientation of the expanding market economy. Many women felt guilty for neglecting their religious duties, and the emotionally charged conversion experience set them on the right path again.

12.2.1. From Revival to Reform

At first, revival seemed to reinforce the cult of domesticity since piety and religious values were as associated with the domestic sphere (see Chapter 10). In the conversion experience, women declared their submissiveness to the will of Providence, vowing to purge themselves and the world of wickedness. Yet the commitment to spread the word, to become evangelicals, led to new, public roles for women. The organized prayer groups and female missionary societies that preceded and accompanied the Second Great Awakening were soon surpassed by greater organized reform and religious activity. Thus revival prompted and legitimized woman's public role, providing a path of certainty and stability amidst a rapidly changing economy and society.

The establishment and work of female reform societies were not merely responses to inner voices; they were reactions to the poverty and wretched urban conditions found in the growing cities. At the turn of the nineteenth century, most of the expanding cities had women's societies to help needy women and orphans, as did Salem, Massachusetts, with its Female Charitable Society. The spread of poverty and vice that accompanied urbanization increasingly affected women, especially those caught up in the fervor of revival.

An 1830 expose of prostitution in New York City revealed the diverging concerns and responses of men and women and demonstrated the convergence of urban problems, revival, and reform. John R. McDowall, a divinity student, detailed how prostitution had taken hold on New York City. Philip Hone, one of the city's leaders (see page 275), called McDowall's Magdalen Re/x/rt "a disgraceful document," and he and other New York men united to defend the city's good name against "those base slanders." Their condemnation led the male-run New York Magdalen Society to cease its work. Women, on the other hand, moved by the plight of "fallen women," responded by forming two new societies concerned with prostitutes and prostitution. In revival and reform, women acted in the face of men's opposition and indifference.

The Female Moral Reform Society, in particular, led the crusade against prostitution. Over the next decade, the New York-based association expanded its activities and geographical scope as the American Female Moral Reform Society. By 1840, it had 555 affiliated female societies among the converted across the nation. These women not only fought the evils of prostitution but also assisted poor women and orphans and entered the political sphere. In New York State in the 1840s the movement fostered public morality by successfully crusading for criminal sanctions against seducers and prostitutes.

Another response to change was the interest in Utopian communities. Such settlements offered an antidote to the market economy and to the untamed growth of large urban communities, and an opportunity to restore tradition and social cohesion. Whatever their particular philosophy, Utopians sought order and regularity in their daily lives and a cooperative rather than competitive environment. Some experimented with communal living and nontraditional work, family, and gender roles.