

American Cultural History, Topic 8: The Rise of the City, Mass Consumption, and Leisure and Simon Patten, The Theory of Prosperity (1902)

Background: The industrialization and commercialization of America in the nineteenth century catalyzed the growth of the modern city, mass consumption, and leisure. The shift from a producer economy (in which most individuals are self-producers of the goods and food they use) to a consumer economy (in which most individuals are wage-earning employees who purchase manufactured goods and food grown by commercial farmers) that occurred in America in the late nineteenth century set the United States on a course of development that would see it leave its roots as a primarily agrarian republic and become an urban nation. As Americans left rural economies, and as European immigrants left hardships in their native lands, for the economic, cultural, and intellectual lures of America's rapidly growing cities, they were amazed by the enormity of the built environment, the diversity of the population, and the intimidating hustle and bustle of the great urban centers, whose towering skyscrapers, massive civic projects, and wealthy modern corporations seemed to be the stuff of dreams. By 1920, the great migration by train from the country to the city had resulted, for the first time in the history of the United States, in more people living in urban, rather than rural, areas: a trend which has continued through the present. By 1900, New York had grown from one million (in 1860) to three million, Chicago had grown from 100,000 (in 1860) to over a million, and other urban centers were experiencing similar growth. By 1890, the largest cities were also overwhelmingly ethnic. The population of Chicago was 87 percent, the populations of Milwaukee and Detroit were 84 percent, and the population of New York was 80 percent foreign-born or second-generation, with more Irish than Dublin and more Germans than Hamburg.

The growth of cities like New York and Chicago created urban sprawls with their characteristic skyscrapers and forms of mass transit, suburbs and tenements, and public spaces. To make the most of the limited real estate in a city, from the mid-nineteenth century, architects began experimenting with ways to make taller buildings that could hold more people. Machine-powered elevators and steel girders, which were stronger and longer-lasting than iron and which weighed only one third as much as stone walls, allowed William LeBaron Jenney to create the ten-story Home Insurance Building in Chicago in 1885: the world's first skyscraper, which began a mad rush in American cities, especially New York, to see who could build the greatest number, and highest, of the steel giants. To keep pace with the population growth spurred by the upward expansion of cities, urban planners paved streets and added streetlights, developed sophisticated water and sewer lines, hired streetcars, created elevated railways, built electric trolley lines (which, by 1850, operated in 850 American towns and cities), introduced subway systems (with the first opening in Boston in 1897), and engineered great bridges, including the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, which John A. Roebling designed using steel cables that made it the world's largest suspension bridge. Over time, as these innovations allowed cities to support more and more people in their teeming downtowns, the wealthy and the middle-class settled in urban fringe communities, called suburbs, which were close enough to have direct access to city life by public transportation or private vehicle but far

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enough away to boast natural scenery, clean air, and a respite from the breakneck pace and incessant noise of the urban centers. The great majority of workers in a city, however, could not afford to live in affluent suburban neighborhoods and, instead, rented tenements in the heart of the urban jungle, where living conditions were deplorable. Filth and disease filled the dilapidated wooden structures in which the poor were crammed to overflowing. By 1894, Manhattan had an average population density of 143 people per acre, which was higher than that of Europe's most crowded cities (Paris had 127 and Berlin had 101 people per acre) and far higher than that of any American city since that time. Its Lower East Side neighborhood reported 700 people per acre: one of the highest levels in the entire world. The slum dwellings, in which they lived three or four to a tiny room, were largely windowless—and, consequently, without sunlight or fresh air—and had little or no indoor plumbing or central heating. In *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), reformer Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant and New York newspaperman, shocked many middle-class Americans with his documentary, albeit sometimes sensationalized, photographs of the tenements, which led to the creation of more public spaces in slum neighborhoods. The public-space movement would become a distinguishing feature of urban life, as playgrounds for children, recreational parks for all ages, great public libraries, art galleries, natural history museums, theaters, and concert halls to enrich the lives of city-dwellers became government-funded public services. The public spaces were oases of recreation, culture, and learning that provided much-appreciated escapes from the stresses of city life, and New York's Central Park, which became a model for urban planners throughout the world, was the most famous refuge of all. Designed by Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux in the 1850s, the massive park boasted modern convenience (public pavilions, museums, walkways, streetlights, bathrooms, benches, skating rinks, carriage houses, fountains, and menageries) in the midst of great natural space (forests, shrubbery, boulders, gardens, grassy fields, ponds, lakes, and reservoirs), and it quickly became one of the most popular features of the city: one that was admired so much that it would be copied in other great American cities, including Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Washington, D. C.

The growth of the modern American city also sparked the rise of mass consumption and leisure. The new urban, consumer culture was fueled by the combination of higher salaries (for “white collar” workers and certain “blue collar” workers, which rose by an average of a third between 1890 and 1910) and cheaper goods that resulted from improved techniques of mass production and distribution in the industrial age. New mass-merchandising techniques also made consumer products available to a broad market for the first time, and Americans of all classes, but especially the middle and upper classes, began flocking to networks of chain grocery stores and chain dry goods stores, which sold mass-produced, affordable canned goods (in newly created tin cans) and perishables (that had traveled across the country in new, refrigerated railroad cars) and wardrobes and tools, respectively. The chains, such as the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company (the “A & P”) and F. W. Woolworth's “Five and Ten Cent Store” (the “Five & Ten”), were joined by large mail-order houses, such as Montgomery Ward and

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Sears Roebuck, which introduced millions of Americans to the popular culture of mass consumption through the bulky mail-order catalogs that brought the fashions, technologies, ideas, morals, and markets of the city to rural folk without ever asking them to leave their front porches. The cultural homogenization of society along urban, middle-class lines of mass consumption had begun. In larger cities, great department stores, such as the “Grand Emporium” in Chicago, Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia, Macy’s in New York, and Jordan Marsh in Boston, transformed spending habits by creating “palaces of consumption,” where escalators, elevators, central heating, elaborate decorations, restaurants and bathrooms for relaxation and rejuvenation, specialized departments with enormous arrays of products under one roof, display cases, browsing racks, advertisements, cash registers, and, due to economies of scale, lower prices made shopping for the latest mass-produced, popular goods an exciting social experience that allowed more and more Americans to feel glamorous or “fit in” with the current trends of mass culture. Shopping in the emerging consumer age was just one of many new ways to spend the “leisure time”—time spent for the purpose of personal relaxation or enjoyment—that was made possible by the large blocks of time (evenings, weekends, holidays, and vacations) that, in a consumer economy based on mechanization, no longer needed to be spent working. Though spending large amounts of time seeking recreation and entertainment would have seemed foreign to the generations of Americans who had lived in the producer economy of the agrarian republic, the age of the modern, industrial city made it possible for Americans to compartmentalize their lives into limited periods of productivity and periods of nonproductive amusement. As a result, industrial workers began expecting “eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, and eight hours for what we will” and claimed that leisure was both a right and a significant part of every person’s physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. “Progressive” economist Simon Patten, in *The Theory of Prosperity* (1902) and *The New Basis of Civilization* (1910), argued that modern industrial economies created so much wealth that a great transition from a “pain economy” (an economy of scarcity and production) to a “pleasure economy” (an economy of abundance and consumption) was occurring. In an economy of abundance, where wealth could satisfy wants, as well as needs, pursuing personal pleasure would become a characteristic of modern life. The growth of public leisure—and its amusement parks and resorts (such as those of Coney Island in New York), large urban parks (such as Central Park), “movie palaces” (which relied on motion-picture technology created by Thomas Edison and others to provide the first truly mass medium of entertainment), pubs and clubs, spectator sports (such as National League and American League baseball, founded in 1876 and 1901, respectively), and vaudeville theatricals (such as those by George M. Cohan and Florenz Ziegfeld, which became the most popular form of urban entertainment in the early twentieth century)—proved Patten to be a prophet and was a harbinger of even more widespread pursuits of pleasure and mass consumerism in the decades to come, as American cities continued to transform the culture of the nation.

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Questions to Consider as You Read:

- According to Patten, what effects should America's modern, industrial economy of abundance have on the lives of every worker?
- According to Patten, what roles should comfort, leisure, and recreation play in modern, industrial America?
- What does Patten propose that Americans should do to realize the potential of the consumer economy of abundance that is replacing the producer economy of scarcity?

Research: Simon Patten, *The Theory of Prosperity* (1902)

- As you read, don't forget to mark and annotate main ideas, key terms, confusing concepts, unknown vocabulary, cause/effect relationships, examples, etc.

In modern nations the productive power [of an economy of abundance] is more than sufficient to produce the minimum of existence. There is a social surplus above the costs of production in which every worker has a right to share. All men cannot be made wealthy, but they can be made comfortable by some of the social surplus going to each of them. The right to comfort is a right to share in the social surplus; it demands that the workman get on each increment of his production some surplus above its cost. To be free is to be comfortable, to have a home and the decencies that go with it. Frugality, contentment, and domestic bliss are impossible unless the surplus of the isolated worker is retained by the workman in complex industrial conditions. The right to comfort is not a right to equality in the distribution of wealth, but to that income necessary to secure to the worker the best physical conditions. Mere living means unwilling, painful labor, for no one works efficiently without surplus energy.

The right to leisure is a corollary to the right to comfort. No matter what income a person receives, he cannot be comfortable without some time for enjoyment. Leisure means more than time to eat and sleep. The full revival of mental and physical powers demands a period of rest in which the loss of surplus energy can be restored. A normal working day must end while work is still pleasurable. Any drain on the system reduces the vitality of the worker, and causes a reduction in future production greater than the present gain from overwork. The right to leisure is in harmony with the greatest efficiency, and cannot be lost by workmen without detriment to other classes besides themselves.

The right to recreation may be regarded as an outcome of the narrow division of labor demanded by production on a large scale; for then work is a constant repetition of single acts, tiring some parts of the body but leaving other parts without sufficient exercise. The normal man must have all the parts of his body developed and all his mental powers kept active. Recreation is the only process by which this is accomplished. Each one must have outside of his industrial occupation enough activity to revive and sustain the mental and physical powers of

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the normal man. There would also be a racial degeneration if each class neglected the aptitudes and mental qualities not demanded in its particular occupation. The homogeneity of the population would then be destroyed, and with it would disappear the bonds that keep society peaceful and harmonious.

Leisure is a demand for time; recreation is a demand for active occupation outside of labor hours, and involves conditions that can be secured only by large social expenditures. Walking, cycling, travelling, and other forms of exercise are made agreeable only by pleasant surroundings; hence, good roads, attractive streets, fine parks, and wholesome places of resort are necessary. Mental recreation also demands churches, concerts, lectures, libraries, public discussions, and other means of exciting spiritual life. Present expenditures indicate this right is partially recognized, but it must gain more complete recognition before industrial efficiency reaches its maximum.¹

Notebook Questions: Reason and Record

- According to Patten, what effects should America's modern, industrial economy of abundance have on the lives of every worker?

- According to Patten, what roles should comfort, leisure, and recreation play in modern, industrial America?

- What does Patten propose that Americans should do to realize the potential of the consumer economy of abundance that is replacing the producer economy of scarcity?

¹ SOURCE: Patten, Simon. *The Theory of Prosperity*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1902.

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Notebook Questions: Relate and Record

- How does the document relate to FACE Principle #2: The Christian Principle of Self-Government: “*God ruling internally from the heart of the individual*. In order to have true liberty man must be governed internally by the Spirit of God rather than by external forces. Government is first individual then extends to the home, church and community”?

- How does the document relate to Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Doctrine and Covenants 136:28, and Mosiah 4:27?

Record Activity: Multiple Choice Comprehension Check

1. Background: Which of the following are true about the rise of the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?
 - a. The shift from a producer economy to a consumer economy that occurred in America in the late nineteenth century set the United States on a course of development that would see it leave its roots as a primarily agrarian republic and become an urban nation.
 - b. Newcomers to the growing cities were amazed by the enormity of the built environment, the diversity of the population, and the intimidating hustle and bustle of the great urban centers, whose towering skyscrapers, massive civic projects, and wealthy modern corporations seemed to be the stuff of dreams.
 - c. By 1920, the great migration by train from the country to the city had resulted, for the first time in the history of the United States, in more people living in urban, rather than rural, areas: a trend which has continued through the present.
 - d. Chicago was the largest American city at the turn of the twentieth century.
 - e. By 1890, the largest cities were also overwhelmingly ethnic. The population of Chicago was 87 percent, the populations of Milwaukee and Detroit were 84 percent, and the population of New York was 80 percent foreign-born or second-generation.
 - f. The rise of the city coincided with the rise of mass consumption and leisure.
 - g. all of the above but one
 - h. all of the above but two
 - i. all of the above

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2. Background: Which one answer correctly matches each of the pairs?
 - a. Home Insurance Building: Chicago and world's first skyscraper; Brooklyn Bridge: New York and world's largest suspension bridge; suburbs: middle and upper classes; tenements: urban poor; *How the Other Half Lives*: Jacob Riis; *The Theory of Prosperity*: Simon Patten; public space: Central Park
 - b. Home Insurance Building: urban poor; Brooklyn Bridge: Central Park; suburbs: Jacob Riis; tenements: Chicago and world's first skyscraper; *How the Other Half Lives*: Simon Patten; *The Theory of Prosperity*: middle and upper classes; public space: New York and world's largest suspension bridge
 - c. Home Insurance Building: Jacob Riis; Brooklyn Bridge: Simon Patten; suburbs: urban poor; tenements: New York and world's largest suspension bridge; *How the Other Half Lives*: middle and upper classes; *The Theory of Prosperity*: Central Park; public space: Chicago and world's first skyscraper
 - d. Home Insurance Building: Chicago and world's first skyscraper; Brooklyn Bridge: New York and world's largest suspension bridge; suburbs: urban poor; tenements: middle and upper classes; *How the Other Half Lives*: Simon Patten; *The Theory of Prosperity*: Jacob Riis; public space: Central Park

3. Source: Patten's economy of abundance is associated with all of the following except which one?
 - a. the growth of the modern American city that also sparked the rise of mass consumption and leisure
 - b. the new urban, consumer culture that was fueled by the combination of higher salaries and cheaper goods that resulted from improved techniques of mass production and distribution in the industrial age
 - c. the cultural homogenization of society along urban, middle-class lines of mass consumption
 - d. the public-space movement that would become a distinguishing feature of urban life and its playgrounds for children, recreational parks for all ages, great public libraries, art galleries, natural history museums, theaters, and concert halls
 - e. the "leisure time"—time spent for the purpose of personal relaxation or enjoyment—that was made possible by the large blocks of time (evenings, weekends, holidays, and vacations) that, in a consumer economy based on mechanization, no longer needed to be spent working
 - f. the belief that that modern industrial economies created so much wealth that a great transition from a "pain economy" (an economy of scarcity and production) to a "pleasure economy" (an economy of abundance and consumption) was occurring

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- g. the belief that—in an economy where vast amounts of wealth could satisfy wants, as well as needs—pursuing personal pleasure would become a characteristic of modern life
- h. the belief that a balance of work and leisure was an important part of every person’s physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being: one that could lead to happier, more fulfilled, and more productive members of society
- i. the growth of public leisure at amusement parks and resorts, large urban parks, “movie palaces,” pubs and clubs, spectator sports, and vaudeville theatricals
- j. It is associated with all of the above.