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Reform Movement Workshop

REFORM MOVEMENTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY:
A VERY ROUGH TIMELINE

Most of my teaching directly on American reform movements treats the period from 1789 to 1919, as you will see from my sample syllabus. My publications cover an even narrower time span, 1815 - 1865. I do, however, incorporate discussions of reform movements into my teaching of other subjects in twentieth-century American history. Here is a very, very rough list of what I cover, with some comments about issues and themes.

BEFORE 1815:

My major point is that there are very few reform movements in the sense of organized efforts to improve society, although individual Quakers and others were active critics of slavery. Equally striking, there are few reformers and with exception of the Quakers I have in mind, most are occasional do-gooders like Ben Franklin or the Boston minister, Cotton Mather. It is not until around 1830 that we begin to see professional reformers, men and women who make reform a full-time career. Why? My short answer is that until the late eighteenth century most Americans didn't think the world could be improved very much by human effort. It took an intellectual reorientation, as well as improved printing and transportation technologies, to create the flowering of reform that began around 1815 and continued through the Civil War.

1815 TO 1865:

This is the period covered in my book, *American Reformers*, and I emphasize the variety and range of reform movements within it, as well as links between them. Many abolitionists, for example, were also against alcohol, for women's rights, against war, and for health reform. My major focus is on why this period provided such extraordinarily rich material for reform and radical movements, as well as utopian cults. I also address the question of how different reformers were from their contemporaries, a matter I address in the readings and will talk about in the workshop.

1865 - 1890:

Reconstruction looms large over this period, but I also deal with what I see as a major shift among reformers. Antebellum ones were often utopian in hoping for a perfect society on earth and believed that change began with individuals. After the war reformers often scaled down and narrowed their goals. They also placed greater faith in institutions to effect change. This narrowing in the campaign for women's rights. Before the War

advocates often called for equal rights for women in a number of different realms of life. After the War they focused on getting the vote. In treating this time period I also raise the question of whether or not movements we do not like qualify as reform movements. My case in point is Eugenics, also a matter for discussion in the workshop. Finally, the Temperance movement—really several different movements—runs throughout my discussions of this period, as well as the one before and after. It changes dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century and in ways that are very instructive about how reform movements adapt, change tactics, and find new constituencies. It is, moreover, the longest-lived and largest reform movement of the nineteenth century.

1880 - 1919:

I go back a decade and talk about the emergence of genuinely radical groups—anarchists, socialists, and communists—and note that until the Red Scare of 1919 mainstream Americans were often willing to tolerate, even pay attention, to ideologies they would pretty much eliminate from public discourse afterward. Populism in the 1890s also merits attention, both as a revolt of farmers, with some radical proposals, and for occasional attempts to build alliances between blacks and whites at a time when segregation was taking shape. My own take on Populism is a somewhat iconoclastic one: I see it as riddled with contradictions, especially over the issue of what the government should and should not do to help people. Black leaders like the two best-known, W.E.B. DuBois were also articulating important critiques of American racism after 1890, as were lesser-known African American artists, intellectuals, and religious leaders, including women. Progressivism, however, is the largest presence in discussions of this period. I take apart its various strands, often using Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt as exemplary figures. Also important are ways in which Progressivism rose out of the cities and states to become a national force. It further marks a new willingness to use government and experts to set social policy.

1919 - 1929:

On the surface, this appears to be an interlude, a time of disillusion among reformers and a moment when many intellectuals and artists turned inward to put personal experience ahead of social change. But interesting things were happening in African American communities, such as the black nationalist movement of Marcus Garvey and the cultural and political flowering known as the Harlem Renaissance. Behind the over-all conservatism of the period, moreover, some political and other leaders were formulating programs and ideas that would shape the New Deal.

1929 -1970:

This is a long and rich period and I won't try to summarize all the topics I treat. What defines it as a unit, however, is the New Deal and the line of Liberalism it created. As

with Progressives, New Deal Liberals saw the state as an instrument of social change and drew heavily upon the advice of experts and professionals. In that sense, they brought reform into the political system as part of the on-going process of governing the nation. They had, of course, enemies on the right and left whom I examine. Liberalism itself began to wane as a political force during the Cold War, with a revival in the 1960s. At that point, I talk about the Civil Rights Movement, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, a shift in youth culture from the “conformity” of the 1950s to student radicalism in the 1960s, and—naturally—Vietnam.

1970 - Present:

The 1970s mark a turn away from collective action and toward looking to changing one’s self rather than the world. That strand is strong in feminism, which emerged as a major force in this decade, and in a proliferation of popular health reform and self-help movements. The decade also marks the beginning of the rise of a powerful Conservative critique of Liberalism and of an Environmental movement that is a case study of how diverse something can be and still be called a movement. With both Neo-Conservatism and Environmentalism I raise two difficult questions: 1) are we witnessing a fundamental rethinking of American values and goals?; and, 2) are we seeing very different kinds of movements for change than those of the nineteenth century, ones less dependent on formal organizations, but quick to mobilize on particular issues and heavily dependent on instantaneous communications? If I am in a really malicious mood, I ask students a question I probably will pose in the workshop: is Oprah Winfrey a movement?