

DBQ In Class Essay

Mark Twain dubbed the period of American History from 1877 to the turn of the century the “Gilded Age,” underscoring the perceived grandeur and progress of the age in sharp contrast to the reality of the social, political, and economic degression of the late 1880s.

Although the social, political, and economic changes of the 1880s were not ultimately positive, the years were a time of great innovation for America in the way of new technology to improve manufacturing, farming, and home life.

Socially the 1880s did not provide progress in terms of race, gender, and class relations. African Americans in large numbers in the south could not write, while their white counterparts largely could (Doc 6). The south was unwilling to provide means to which African Americans could learn new vital skills due to lingering racism from the Civil War era. The majority of school-age African Americans in the south did not attend a public school due to economic constraints (Doc 7). Educational progress was slow to come to the south – in the late 1880s animosity toward African Americans still fueled social unrest and thus, social degression. Children who would otherwise attend school were required to work the land with their families in order to make ends meet. Also, in the late 1880s, even though women were fighting tirelessly for equal suffrage, they had still not been awarded the right to vote. Those in power stuck with their views of the previous years and did not bow to social progress. The emergence of the machine age created new lifestyles for many Americans. The lower class was firmly established, as was the middle and upper class, but with little chance for upward mobility (Doc 10). Although the Horatio Alger dream of success through hard work and honesty was widely believed, generally Americans remained in the class they were born into. The 1880s did not provide for social reform in America, but instead remained steadfast in racial animosity, gender inequality, and class rigidity.

Despite the corruption of some politicians in the late 1880s that fostered an overall feeling of degression in the American political system, large numbers of voters participated in elections. Many politicians had strong anti-immigration beliefs in spite of their own immigrant backgrounds (Doc 1). Politicians encouraged these beliefs, promoting a negative attitude in many Americans. The corruption of local politicians, especially party bosses, caused Americans to distrust their government. Immigrants from some countries, notably Ireland, were integrated into the local political system by the political machines for the mutual benefit of the politicians and the immigrants. Most immigrants were eager to become involved in the democratic process and most were members of the Democratic Party. Some states allowed immigrants to vote before they became naturalized citizens, and politicians, anxious to increase their base constituency, helped mold immigrants into a powerful voting block. Politicians worked for their own benefit, but failed to suppress violent crusades against citizens (Doc 8). During the time period, laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1875 (enacted after the Civil War to protect the freedom, safety, and rights of African Americans) were reversed in Congress. In the Supreme Court, Plessy v. Ferguson established the concept separate but equal. Politicians added to the provincial nature of the American government during the late 1880s due to their actions and beliefs toward immigrants and African Americans, and due to their general corruption and self-promotion.

The late 1880s brought great change to American economics. As factories were built across the northeast and some in the south (textile mills, etc.) the lives of many Americans changed drastically. Many women and children joined the forces of laborers working in city factories, creating in turn a flurry of efforts to enact child labor laws and to create labor unions that would work to improve working conditions. With new innovations came longer work days which were needed to keep up the scale of production required for profit making. Labor unions were generally unsuccessful in improving conditions. In the west, farmers and herdsman struggled to make ends meet, while southern African American farmers struggled to overcome the restrictions and racism of White southerners (Doc 3). Although African Americans were free, many resorted to

tenant farming and sharecropping as their only viable alternative, creating, in effect, an environment not much different from the slavery they faced in the pre-Civil War south. African Americans worked much less land on average than their white counterparts (Doc. 4). African Americans faced conditions in the south that made economic gain difficult. All across the country, Americans faced tough working conditions that made the goal of prosperity hard to reach.

On the surface, life in late 1880s America was rich with technological advancement and progress, but beneath the gilded surface, social, political, and economic degression was readily apparent.