Growth, Cities, and Immigration: Crash Course US History #25

Crash Course: U.S. History
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=====Intro (0:00)=====

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History, and today we're gonna continue our extensive look at American Capitalism.

Me from the Past: Mr. Green! Mr. Green! I'm sorry, are you saying that I grow up to be a tool of the bourgeoisie?

Present John: Oh, not just a tool of the bourgeoisie, Me from the Past, but a card-carrying member of it. I mean, you have employees whose labor you can exploit because you own the means of production. Which, in your case, includes a chalkboard, a video camera, a desk, and a xenophobic globe. Meanwhile, Stan, Danica, Raoul, and Meredith toil in crushing poverty. Stan, did you write this part? These are all lies! Cue the intro!

[Intro plays]

=====Growth of the American West and Metropolises (0:37)=====

So, last week, we saw how commercial farming transformed the American West and gave us mythical cowboys and unfortunately not-so-mythical Indian reservations. Today, we leave the sticks and head for the cities, as so many Americans and immigrants have done throughout this nation's history. I mean, we may like to imagine that the history of America is all, "Go west young man," but in fact, from Mark Twain to pretty much every hipster in Brooklyn, it's the opposite.

So, population was growing everywhere in America after 1850. Following a major economic downturn in the 1890s, farm prices made a comeback, and that drew more and more people out west to take part in what would eventually be called agriculture's Golden Age. Although, to be fair, agriculture's real golden age was in, like, 3000 B.C.E. when Mesopotamians were like, "Dude, if we planted these in rows, we could have more of it than we can eat." So it was really more of a second golden age, but anyway, more than a million land claims were filed under the Homestead Act in the 1890s, and between 1900 and 1910, the populations of Texas and Oklahoma together increased by almost 2 million people. And another 800,000 people moved into Kansas, the Dakotas, and Nebraska. That's right, people moved TO Nebraska! Sorry, I just hadn't yet offended Nebraskans. I'm looking to get through the list before the end of the year.

But one of the central reasons that so many people moved out West was that the demand for agricultural products was increasing due to the growth of cities. In 1880, 20% of the American population lived in cities, and there were 12 cities with a population over 100,000 people. This rose to 18 cities in 1900, with the percentage of urban dwellers rising to 38%. And by 1920, 68% of Americans lived in cities, and 26 cities had a population over 100,000. So in the 40 years around the turn of the 20th century, American became the world's largest industrial power, and went from being predominately rural to largely urban. This is, to use a technical historian term, a really big deal, because it didn't just make cities possible, but also their products. It's no coincidence that while all this was happening, we were getting cool stuff, like electric lights and moving picture cameras, neither of which were invented by Thomas Edison. I don't know if you've noticed, but suddenly there are a lot more photographs in Crash Course U.S. History B roll.

So, the city leading the way in this urban growth was New York, especially after Manhattan was consolidated with Brooklyn and the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island in 1898. At the turn of the century, the population of the 23 square miles of Manhattan island was over 2 million, and the combined 5 boroughs had a population over 4 million. But while New York gets most of the attention in this time period (and all time periods since), it wasn't alone in experiencing massive growth. Like, my old hometown of Chicago, after basically burning to the ground in 1871, became the second largest city in America by the 1890s. Also, they reversed the flow of the freaking Chicago River, probably the second-most impressive feat in Chicago at the time. The first being that the Cubs won two World Series!

=====Immigration (3:20)=====

Even though I'm sorely tempted to chalk up the growth of these metropolises to a combination of better nutrition and a rise in skoodilypooping, I'm gonna have to bow to stupid historical accuracy and tell you that much of the growth had to do with the phenomenon that this period is known most for: immigration. Of course, by the end of the 19th century, immigration was not a new phenomenon in the United States. After the first wave of colonization by English people and Spanish people and other Europeans, there was a new wave of Scandinavians, French people, and especially the Irish. Most of you probably know about the potato famine of the 1840s that led a million Irish men and women to flee. If you don't know about it, it was awful. And the second-largest wave of immigrants was made up of German speakers, including a number of liberals who left after the aborted Revolutions of 1848.

Alright, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble (4:03)=====

The Irish had primarily been farmers in the motherland, but in America, they tended to stay in cities like New York and Boston. Most of the men began their working lives as low-wage unskilled laborers, but over time, they came to have much more varied job opportunities. Irish immigrant women worked, too, some in factories or as domestic servants in the homes of the growing upper class. Many women actually preferred the freedom that factory labor provided, and one Irish factory woman compared her life to that of a servant by saying, "Our day is ten hours long, but when it's done, it's done, and we can do what we like with the evenings. That's what I've heard from every nice girl that's tried service. You're never sure that your soul is your own except when you're out of the house."

Most German speakers had been farmers in their home countries and would remain farmers in the U.S., but a number of skilled artisans also came. They tended to stay in cities and make a go of entrepreneurship. Bismarck himself also saw immigration from Germany as a good thing, saying, "The better it goes for us, the higher the volume of immigration." And that's why we named a city in North Dakota after him.

Although enough German immigrants came to New York that the Lower East Side of Manhattan came to be known for a time as Kleindeutschland, "Little Germany," many moved to the growing cities of the Midwest, like Cincinnati and St. Louis. Some of the most famous German immigrants became brewers, and America is much richer for the arrival of men like Frederick Pabst, Joseph Schlitz, and Adolphus Busch. And by "richer," I mean "drunker."

Hey, thanks for not ending on a downer, Thought Bubble! I mean, unless you count alcoholism.

=====Discrimination (5:30)=====

So, but, by the 1890s, over half of the 3.5 million immigrants who came to our shores came from southern and eastern Europe, in particular Italy and the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. They were more likely than previous immigrants to be Jewish or Catholic, and while almost all of them were looking for work, many were also escaping political or religious persecution. And by the 1890s, they also had to face new "scientific theories"--which I'm putting in air quotes to be clear, because there was nothing scientific about them--which consigned them to different races, whose low level of civilization was fit only for certain kinds of work, and pre-disposed them to criminality. The Immigration Restriction League was founded in Boston in 1894 and lobbied for national legislation that would limit the number of immigrants and one such law even passed Congress in 1897, only to be vetoed by President Grover Cleveland. Good work, Grover! You know, his first name was Stephen, but he called himself Grover. I-I would have made a different choice.

But before you get too excited about Grover Cleveland, Congress and the president were able to agree on one group of immigrants to discriminate against: the Chinese. Chinese immigrants, overwhelmingly male, had been coming to the United States, mostly to the West, since the 1850s to work in mines and on the railroads. They were viewed with suspicion because they looked different, spoke a different language, and they had strange habits, like regular bathing.

By the time the Chinese Exclusion Act went into effect in 1882, there were 105,000 people of Chinese descent living in the United States, mainly in cities on the west coast. San Francisco refused to educate Asians until the state supreme court ordered them to do so, and even then the city responded by setting up segregated schools. The immigrants fought back through the courts. In 1886, in the case of Yick Wo v. Hopkins, the United States Supreme Court ordered San Francisco to grant Chinese-operated laundries licenses to operate. Then, in 1898 in United States versus Wong Kim Ark, the court ruled that American-born children of Chinese immigrants were entitled to citizenship under the 14th Amendment, which should have been a 'duh', but wasn't. We've been hard on the Supreme Court here at Crash Course, but those were two good decisions. You go, Supreme Court.

=====Worldwide Immigration (7:30)=====

But despite these victories, Asian immigrants continued to face discrimination in the form of vigilante-led riots, like the one in Rock Springs, Wyoming that killed 26 people, and Congressionally-approved restrictions, many of which the Supreme Court did uphold, so myehhh. Also, it's important to remember that this large-scale immigration--and the fear of it--was part of a global phenomenon. At its peak between 1901 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, 13 million immigrants came to the United States. In the entire period touched off by the industrialization from 1840 until 1914, a total of 40 million people came to the U.S. But at least 20 million people immigrated to other parts of the western hemisphere, including Brazil, the Caribbean, Canada--yes, Canada--and Argentina. As much as we have Italian immigrants to thank for things like pizza--and we do thank you!--Argentina can be just as grateful for the immigrant ancestors of Leo Messi. Also, the Pope, although he has never once won La Liga.

And there was also extensive immigration from India to other parts of the British Empire, like South Africa, Chinese immigration to South America and the Caribbean. I mean, the list goes on and on. In short, America is not as special as it fancies itself.

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document?

=====Mystery Document (8:36)=====

The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the Mystery Document. I get it wrong, and then I get shocked with the shock pen. Sorry, I don't mean to sound defeatist, but I don't have a good feeling about this. Alright.

"The figure that challenged attention to the group was the tall, straight, father, with his earnest face and fine forehead, nervous hands eloquent in gesture, and a voice full of feeling. This foreigner, who brought his children to school as if it were an act of consecration, who regarded the teacher of the primer class with reverence, who spoke of visions, like a man inspired, in a common classroom...I think Miss Nixon guessed what my father's best English could not convey. I think she divined that by the simple act of delivering our school certificates to her he took possession of America."

Ahhh, I don't know. At first, I thought it might be someone that works with immigrants, like Jane Addams, but then at the end, suddenly, it's her own father. Jane Addams's father was not an immigrant.

Mary Antin?! Does she even have a Wikipedia page?! She does? Did you write it? Stan--Stan wrote her Wikipedia page. AAAHHHH!

=====Immigrant Labor (9:35)=====

So, this document, while it was written by someone who should not have a Wikipedia page, points out that most immigrants to America were coming for the most obvious reason: opportunity. Industrialization, both in manufacturing and agriculture, meant that there were jobs in America. There was so much work, in fact, that companies used labor recruiters who went to Europe to advertise opportunities. Plus, the passage was relatively cheap, provided you were only going to make it once in your life, and it was fast, taking only eight to twelve days on the new steam-powered ships.

The Lower East Side of Manhattan became the magnet for waves of immigrants. First Germans, then Eastern European Jews, and Italians, who tended to recreate towns and neighborhoods within blocks and sometimes single buildings. Tenements, these four-, five-, and six-story buildings that were designed to be apartments, sprang up in the second half of the 19th century, and the earliest ones were so unsanitary and crowded that the city passed laws requiring a minimum of light and ventilation. And often these tenement apartments doubled as work spaces, because many immigrant women and children took in piece work, especially in the garment industry.

Despite local laws mandating the occasional window and outlawing the presence of cows on public streets, conditions in these cities were pretty bad. Things got a little bit better with the construction of elevated railroads and, later, subways, that helped relieve traffic congestion, but they created a new problem: pickpockets. "Pickpockets take advantage of the confusion to ply their vocation ... the foul, close, heated air is poisonous. A healthy person cannot ride a dozen blocks without a headache." So, that's changed!

This new transportation technology also allowed a greater degree of residential segregation in cities. Manhattan's downtown area had, at one time, housed the very rich as well as the very poor, but

improved transportation meant that people no longer had to live and work in the same place. The wealthiest, like Cornelius Vanderbilt and J. P. Morgan, constructed lavish palaces for themselves, and uptown townhouses were common.

But until then, one of the most notable features of gilded-age cities like New York was that the rich and the poor lived in such close proximity to each other. And this meant that with America's growing urbanization, the growing distance between rich and poor was visible to both rich and poor. And much as we see in today's megacity, this inability to look away from poverty and economic inequality became a source of concern. Now, one way to alleviate such concern is to create suburbs, so you don't have to look at poor people. But, another response to urban problems was politics, which, in cities like New York, became something of a contact sport.

Another response was the so-called Progressive Movement. And in all of these responses and in the issues that prompted them--urbanization, mechanization, capitalism, the distribution of resources throughout the social order--we can see modern industrial America taking shape, and that is the America we live in today.

Thank you for watching. I'll see you next week.

=====Credits (12:12)=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. The script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Rojas, and myself. Our associate producer of the show is Danica Johnson and our graphics team is Thought Café.

Every week there's a new caption for the libertage, if you'd like to suggest one, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thank you for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown: don't forget to be awesome.