On a drizzly March morning in 1893, a nursing student named Lillian Wald was teaching a public health class to residents of New York’s poor Lower East Side. Suddenly a girl broke in, disrupting the lesson. The child’s mother desperately needed a nurse. The interruption changed Wald’s life. She followed the girl to a squalid tenement, where she found a family of seven sharing their two rooms with boarders. The sick woman lay on a dirty bed. Wald later wrote:

“That morning’s experience was a baptism of fire. Deserted were the laboratory and the academic work of the college. I never returned to them. . . . To my inexperience it seemed certain that conditions such as these were allowed because people did not know, and for me there was a challenge to know and to tell. . . . If people knew things,—and “things” meant everything implied in the condition of this family,—such horrors would cease to exist. . . .”

—quoted in The House on Henry Street

In 1895 Wald and her friend Mary Brewster established the Henry Street Settlement. The young nurses offered medical care, education, labor organization, and social and cultural programs to the neighborhood residents.

Social Criticism

The tremendous changes brought about by industrialism and urbanization triggered a debate among Americans as to how best to address society’s problems. While many Americans embraced the ideas of individualism and Social Darwinism, others disagreed,
arguing that society’s problems could be fixed only if Americans and their government began to take a more active role in regulating the economy and helping those in need.

**Henry George on Progress and Poverty** In 1879 journalist Henry George published *Progress and Poverty*. His book quickly became a national best-seller. “The present century has been marked by a prodigious increase in wealth-producing power,” George observed, which should have made poverty “a thing of the past.” Instead, he argued:

> It becomes no easier for the masses of our people to make a living. On the contrary it becomes harder. . . . The gulf between the employed and the employer is growing wider; social contrasts are becoming sharper; as liveried carriages appear, so do barefoot children.

— from *Progress and Poverty*

Most economists now argue that George’s analysis was flawed. Industrialism did make some Americans very wealthy, but it also improved the standard of living for most other Americans as well. At the time, however, in the midst of the poverty, crime, and harsh working conditions, many Americans did not believe things were improving.

George offered a simple solution. Land, he argued, was the basis of wealth, and people could grow wealthy just by waiting for land prices to rise. George proposed a “single tax” on this unearned wealth to replace all other taxes. He believed it would help make society more equal and also provide the government with enough money to help the poor.

Economists have since rejected George’s economic theory. His real importance to American history is that he raised questions about American society and led the way in challenging the ideas of Social Darwinism and laissez-faire economics. Many future reform leaders first became interested in reform because of George’s book.

**Reform Darwinism** Four years after Henry George challenged the ideas of Social Darwinism, Lester Frank Ward published *Dynamic Sociology*. Ward took the ideas of Darwinism and used them to reach a very different conclusion than Spencer had. He argued that human beings were different from other animals in nature because they...
had the ability to think ahead and make plans to produce the future outcomes they desired.

Ward’s ideas came to be known as Reform Darwinism. People, he insisted, had succeeded in the world not because of their ability to compete but because of their ability to cooperate. Ward believed that competition was wasteful and time consuming. Government, he argued, could regulate the economy, cure poverty, and promote education more efficiently than could competition in the marketplace. While some disagreed with Ward’s conclusions, others did think that government should do more to solve society’s problems. Among these were the people who became reformers in the late 1800s.

**Looking Backward** By the late 1880s, some critics of Social Darwinism and laissez-faire economics had moved to the opposite extreme. In 1888 Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, a novel about a young Bostonian who falls asleep in 1887 and awakens in the year 2000 to find that the United States has become a perfect society with no crime, poverty, or politics. In this fictional society, the government owns all industry and shares the wealth equally with all Americans. Bellamy’s ideas were essentially a form of socialism. His book quickly became a bestseller, and although few people were willing to go as far as Bellamy suggested, his ideas, like those of George and Ward, helped to shape the thinking of American reformers in the late 1800s.

**Naturalism in Literature**

Criticism of industrial society also appeared in literature in a new style of writing known as naturalism. Social Darwinists and realists argued that people could control their lives and make choices to improve their situation. Naturalists challenged this idea by suggesting that some people failed in life simply because they were caught up in circumstances they could not control. In other words, leaving society and the economy unregulated did not always lead to the best result. Sometimes people’s lives were destroyed through no fault of their own.

Among the most prominent naturalist writers were Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser. Stephen Crane’s novel, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893), told the story of a girl’s descent into prostitution and death. Frank Norris’s work, *McTeague* (1899), described how a dentist and his wife are driven mad by greed and violence. Jack London’s tales of the Alaskan wilderness demonstrated the power of the natural environment over civilization. Theodore Dreiser’s stories, such as *Sister Carrie* (1900), painted a world where people sinned without punishment and where the pursuit of wealth and power often destroyed their character.

**Helping the Urban Poor**

While naturalist writers expressed pessimism about the individual’s life in an industrialized world, some critics of industrial society were working for reform. Their reform efforts gave rise to the Social Gospel movement, the Salvation Army and the YMCA, women’s clubs, settlement houses, and temperance movements.

**The Social Gospel** From about 1870 until 1920, reformers in the Social Gospel movement worked to better conditions in cities according to the biblical ideals of charity and justice. An early advocate of the Social Gospel, Washington Gladden, a minister from Columbus, Ohio, tried to apply what he called “Christian law” to social problems. During a coal strike in 1884, for example, Gladden preached about
the “right and necessity of labor organizations,” despite the fact that his congregation included top officers of the coal company.

Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister who spent nine years serving in a church in one of New York City’s poorest neighborhoods, later led the Social Gospel movement. As he put it, “The Church must either condemn the world and seek to change it, or tolerate the world and conform to it.” Unlike Social Darwinists, Rauschenbusch believed that competition was the cause of many social problems, causing good people to behave badly.

The efforts of leaders like Gladden and Rauschenbusch inspired many organized churches to expand their missions. These churches began to take on community functions designed to improve society. Some of their projects included building gyms and providing social programs and day care. Others focused exclusively on helping the poor.

**The Salvation Army and the YMCA** The combination of religious faith and interest in reform nourished the growth of the Christian Mission, a social welfare organization first organized in England by a minister named William Booth. Adopting a military-style organization, the group became known as the Salvation Army in 1878. It offered practical aid and religious counseling to the urban poor.

Like the Salvation Army, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) also began in England. The YMCA tried to help industrial workers and the urban poor by organizing Bible studies, prayer meetings, citizenship training, and group activities. In the United States, YMCAs, or “Ys,” quickly spread from Boston throughout the country. YMCA facilities included libraries, gymnasiums, swimming pools, auditoriums, and low-cost hotel rooms available on a temporary basis to those in need.

**Revivalism and Dwight L. Moody** One prominent organizer of the American YMCA was Dwight L. Moody, who was president of the Chicago YMCA in the late 1860s. A gifted preacher and organizer, Moody founded his own church in Chicago, today known as Moody Memorial Church. By 1867 Moody had begun to organize revival meetings in other

---

**What If... English Spelling Reform Had Been Accepted?**

In 1906 the Simplified Spelling Board suggested a list of 300 words that it thought needed to be simplified. For example, it recommended spelling “axe” without the silent “e.” The association also asked for more radical changes, such as replacing the “-ed” at the end of past-tense verbs with a “t.” Thus, “kissed” and “missed” would be “kisst” and “misst.” “Thoroughly” would be simplified to “thoro ly.”

Although the reforms were not accepted, they received support from such famous people as Mark Twain and President Theodore Roosevelt. After Roosevelt suggested that the Government Printing Office adopt the new spellings, Mark Twain tried to convince the Associated Press news agency to follow along:

“If [you] will adopt and use our simplified forms . . . [W]e shall be rid of . . . pneumonia and . . . pterodactyl, and all those other insane words which no man . . . can try to spell. . . . What is the real function . . . of language? Isn’t it merely to convey ideas and emotions . . . ? [I]f we can do it with words of fonetic brevity and compactness, why keep the present cumbersome forms?”

---

**What might have happened?**

1. Why do you think these spelling reforms were never accepted?
2. Would English be easier for immigrants to learn and understand if the reforms had been accepted? Why or why not?
American cities. In 1870 Moody met Ira Sankey, a hymn writer and singer. Together they introduced the gospel hymn into worship services in the United States and Great Britain. Moody’s preaching and Sankey’s hymns drew thousands of people to revival meetings in the 1870s and 1880s.

Moody strongly supported charities that helped the poor, but he rejected both the Social Gospel and Social Darwinism. He believed the way to help the poor was not by providing them with services but by redeeming their souls and reforming their character.

The Settlement House Movement In a way, the settlement house movement was an offshoot of the Social Gospel movement. It attracted idealistic reformers who believed it was their Christian duty to improve living conditions for the poor. During the late 1800s, reformers such as Jane Addams established settlement houses in poor neighborhoods. In these establishments, middle-class residents lived and helped poor residents, mostly immigrants.

Addams, who opened the famous Hull House in Chicago in 1889, inspired many more such settlements across the country, including the Henry Street Settlement run by Lillian Wald in New York City. The women who ran settlement houses provided everything from medical care, recreation programs, and English classes to hot lunches for factory workers. Their efforts helped shape the social work profession, in which women came to play a major role.

Summarizing What were the beliefs of Dwight L. Moody?

Public Education As the United States became increasingly industrialized and urbanized, it needed more workers who were trained and educated. The demand for skilled workers led to a much greater focus on building schools and colleges in the late 1800s.

The Spread of Schools The number of public schools increased quickly after the Civil War. In 1870 around 6,500,000 children attended school. By 1900 that number had risen to over 17,300,000.

Public schools were often crucial to the success of immigrant children. It was there the children usually became knowledgeable about American culture, a process known as Americanization. To assimilate immigrants into American culture, schools taught immigrant children English, American history, and the responsibilities of citizenship. They also tried to instill discipline and a strong work ethic, values considered important to the nation’s progress.
Americanization could also pose a problem for immigrant children, however, because sometimes parents worried that it would make the children forget their own cultural traditions.

Not everyone had access to school. In the rush to fund education, cities were way ahead of rural areas. Many African Americans, also, did not have equal educational opportunities. To combat this discrimination, some African Americans started their own schools. The leader of this movement was Booker T. Washington, who founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881.

**Education for the Workplace**  City schools helped immigrants assimilate, and they also helped future workers prepare for the jobs they hoped would lift their families out of poverty. The grammar school system in city schools divided students into eight grades and drilled them in timely attendance, neatness, and efficiency—necessary habits for success in the workplace. At the same time, vocational and technical education in the high schools provided students with skills required in specific trades.

**Expanding Higher Education**  Colleges also multiplied in the late 1800s, helped by the Morrill Land Grant Act. This Civil War–era law gave federal land grants to states for the purpose of establishing agricultural and mechanical colleges. By 1900 land-grant colleges were established across the Midwest. The number of students enrolled expanded rapidly in this period. In 1870 around 50,000 students attended college, but by 1890 the number had more than tripled to 157,000.

Traditionally, women’s educational opportunities lagged behind men’s. Around this time, however, things began to change. The opening of private women’s colleges such as Vassar, Wellesley, and Smith, along with new women’s colleges on the campuses of Harvard and Columbia Universities, served to increase the number of women attending college.

**Public Libraries**  Like public schools, free libraries also made education available to city dwellers. One of the strongest supporters of the public library movement was industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who believed access to knowledge was the key to getting ahead in life. Carnegie donated millions of dollars toward the construction of libraries all across the United States. These libraries, as well as the various educational and social reform movements that arose in the late 1800s, helped people cope with the harsher aspects of a newly industrialized society.

---

**Reading Check**  Explaining  How did the United States try to Americanize immigrants?