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## Wikipedia Entry the World in 1900 Outline

### Introduction

The world in 1900 was a world of opportunity and change. The propagation of political ideologies such as Socialism and Anarchism, revolutionary changes in production from innovators such as Henry Ford, technological advances in international communication, and changes in social constructs and traditions suggested rapid modernization. But in reality, the world of 1900 was a world of contradictions<sup>1</sup>, modern yet medieval, advanced but clunky - a world of transforming ideas and technologies.

Historians typically write about the world in 1900 as a world of great possibility, modernity, and transition. In Charles Emmerson's *1913*, a non-teleological depiction of the world in 1900, he writes of his work, "It is a book self-consciously engaging with the idea of 1913, and the year before it, as a period of unprecedented globalization, rich in encounters, interconnections, and ideas. 1913 was a year of possibility not predetermination."<sup>2</sup> Many historians choose to write about the period of 1900 only in relation to the period's relevance to the First World War<sup>3</sup>. But Emmerson's approach is refreshing in that he describes the world of 1900 and acknowledges its own relevance. Eric Hobsbawm, author of *The Age of Empire*, writing about the modernity of 1900 and the influence the period had upon the present, states that, "Meanwhile the culture of everyday life is still dominated by three innovations of this period: the advertising industry in its modern form, the modern mass circulation of newspaper

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<sup>1</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 12

<sup>2</sup> Emmerson, *1913*, xiii

<sup>3</sup> Cristopher Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxvii

and periodical, and (directly or through television) the moving photograph and film.”<sup>4</sup>

Hobsbawm does not claim that the world in 1900 was a completely modern one<sup>5</sup>, but he acknowledges that many of the technologies and ideas that we take for granted today originated from this period. Many historians view 1900 as a period of transition. Jan Romein writes in his article titled, *the Watershed of Two Eras*, about the transition and challenge to European supremacy in 1900. Romein writes of the rise of new powers, such as Japan and the United States, and the fall of the old ones such as Britain and Spain<sup>6</sup>. Romein describes the change of 1900 with this short passage, “A chill wind was from west and another from the east. Within Europe herself tension kept increasing: the summer of European supremacy was making way for the autumn.”<sup>7</sup> This paper will describe the world in 1900 with a focus on three areas of development. The economic, political, and cultural developments of the world in 1900.

### **Economic Developments**

The world in 1900 was defined by colonialism. The European powers were said to have around 600 million non-whites under their control in 1900.<sup>8</sup> For many, colonies provided access to valuable commodities such as cotton and rubber, for others, colonies were symbols of imperial reach and national pride<sup>9</sup>. The demand for raw goods would lead the British to South East Asian and India, and Belgium to the Congo. In 1900, the world was experiencing technological innovation like never before<sup>10</sup>. Rubber was a particularly important commodity because of its connection with the automobile. The automobile would become an financially viable purchase

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<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm, 8

<sup>5</sup> Hobsbawm, 7

<sup>6</sup> Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras*, 24

<sup>7</sup> Romein, 24

<sup>8</sup> Romein, 16

<sup>9</sup> Romein, 12

<sup>10</sup> Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, xi

for the average American after Henry Ford's revolution production technique of Fordism<sup>11</sup>.

Fordism was an incredibly streamlined process of production that reduced production times and costs, thus enabling more people to purchase automobiles, something that previously only the rich could do. Fordism contributed to the rise in consumerism in 1900<sup>12</sup>. Education began to receive more attention at the turn of the century. The age of peasantry and ignorance of the masses, while still prevalent in some countries<sup>13</sup>, was seen as a means of subjugation especially in the United States among African Americans. Booker T. Washington and W. E. B Dubois debated frequently about what role education should play in the liberation of African Americans. Education also played a role in advancing workers' rights<sup>14</sup>. The economy of 1900 was diverse. The rise of new technologies and production capabilities ultimately laid the groundwork for the industry, leisure, and consumerism that we consider normal today<sup>15</sup>. Economy activity and trade clearly show the interconnectedness of the world in 1900. According to ourworldindata.org, the volume of economic activity through trade between nations in 1900, would not be reached again after the World Wars, until around 1980<sup>16</sup>.

### **Political Developments**

Politically, 1900 was just as complex as it was economically. The 19th century had been the century of monarchy<sup>17</sup>, however that would change in the 20th century. While monarchs retained significant power at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for many nations there was significant growth in the role that foreign ministers played in government<sup>18</sup>. The management of

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<sup>11</sup> Rydell, Kroes, Buffalo Bill in Bologna, 8

<sup>12</sup> Rydell Kroes, 8

<sup>13</sup> Romein, 14

<sup>14</sup> W. E. B Dubois, The Souls of Black Folk

<sup>15</sup> Rydell, Kroes, 8

<sup>16</sup> OurworldinData.org

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Clark, Sleepwalkers, 170

<sup>18</sup> Clark, 183

day-to-day foreign affairs by ministries marked a significant shift from sole governance by European autocrats that characterized the previous century. At the same time, the idea of the nation would rise<sup>19</sup>. In India and Serbia ideas of independence and sovereignty would occupy the thoughts of many in 1900. Dylan Cox writes, “The late 1800s would see the formation of the Indian National Congress which would promote Indian ideals and national interests as well as other nationalist movement in South Africa led by Mahatma Gandhi. After the turn of the century, important reforms would influence growing Indian nationalism and the independence movement.”<sup>20</sup>

Similar sentiment would inspire Serbian terrorists to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June of 1914. This assassination was one of the main factors that contributed to the start of the First World War. In the east, Russia too would begin to consider new political ideologies with the rise of socialism. Socialism in Russia would lead to the bloody overthrow of Russian autocracy in 1917<sup>21</sup>. Changes in long standing political traditions, rising conceptions of national identity, and a reduction in the power and influence of monarchs defined many aspects of the political landscape of 1900.

## **Cultural Developments**

1900 saw an abundance of cultural changes throughout the world. One of the most influential cultural players in the world of 1900 was the United States<sup>22</sup>. This influence would come to be known as Mass Culture. The Mass Culture of the United States made its way into all forms of cultural, innovational, and imaginative realms in this time period. Journalists such as

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<sup>19</sup> Clark, 33

<sup>20</sup> Dylan Cox, *The Rise of Indian Nationalism at the turn of the Century*, 1

<sup>21</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Sinking Globalization*, 69

<sup>22</sup> Rydell, Kroes, 9

W.T. Stead, who wrote the 1901 book *the Americanization of the World*, argued that, “American economic organization had already reached such an advanced stage of development that England and, eventually, the rest of the world would be swamped by American products and American cultural values.”<sup>23</sup> In 1900, the United States already showed signs of its eventual development into a superpower because of its economic ambitions as well as its cultural influence. Race relations in the world of 1900 were still seen through the prisms of the colonial and slave economy with whites and Europeans at the top of the food chain. But even this was beginning to change as African and other non-Europeans began to express themselves and influence culture more freely. Samba music is a form of African influenced music that was developed by ex-slaves primarily in Rio de Janeiro<sup>24</sup>. The music scene provided opportunities for many African musicians to flourish and become successful, while others were demonized and criticized for their looks or attitudes<sup>25</sup>. 1900 saw the rise of “racial” science<sup>26</sup>. This meant that researchers attempted to assign traits and characteristics to whole ethnicities in part as a means to justify many of the atrocities committed under colonialism<sup>27</sup>. An idea that was tied closely to racial science is that of social Darwinism<sup>28</sup>. Social Darwinism and anti-Semitism were also commonplace ideas around 1900<sup>29</sup>.

The world in 1900 would seem quaint to us today. However, the world of 1900 was a world on the verge of modernity undergoing important changes in the economic, political, and cultural arenas. It was a world of interconnectedness, innovation, and political change. There was

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<sup>23</sup> Rydell, Kroes, 9

<sup>24</sup> Marc Hertzman, Making Samba, 2

<sup>25</sup> Hertzman, 62

<sup>26</sup> Frank M. Turner, Race and Anti-Semitism In European Intellectual History from Rousseau to Nietzsche, 175

<sup>27</sup> Turner, 180

<sup>28</sup> Turner, 188

<sup>29</sup> Turner, 191

an increased focus on education, advertising, consumerism, international trade, mass culture and leisure. New communication technologies were speeding up the spread of information even as innovations such as Fordism were changing manufacturing. In many ways, the rapid pace of change and innovation in that analog era mirrors the rapid pace of change in our own digital era. Maybe we can learn something about our own challenges by understand more about the complex world of 1900.

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