

April 29, 2018

The World in 1900: Paper #3

Dr. Greg Shaya

### The World in 1900

The World in 1900, studied here as 1871 to 1914, was a dynamic and paradoxical world of progress that would ultimately end with World War I. In studying this world, we see often a Euro- or western-centric world, as many of its populations were controlled or influenced by Western societies. Overall, this was a world of modernity and hope, apparent through societal and technological advancements, but it was also a world of degeneration and pessimism. While a narrative of progress is evident, many others experienced hardships.

### Historiography

There is no shortage of scholarship of the world before WWI. After WWII, historians often wrote this history as a Euro-centric view of the complexities of this era. During the 1950s and 1960s, Dutch historian Jan Romein and American historian Barbara Tuchman oriented their studies around the new century and considered 1900 to be the end of an era of progress and the beginning of a tragic era.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Tuchman, Romein argued in *The Watershed of Two Eras: Europe in 1900* (1978) that the complexities of the era led to in WWI.<sup>2</sup> Similar to Romein, British historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote several decades later in his *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (1987) of the inevitability of WWI which resulted from the many paradoxes of the era and the “strange death” of bourgeois liberalism.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary historians who focus on this era

---

<sup>1</sup> Jan Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras: Europe in 1900* (Wesleyan University Press, 1978); Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890–1914* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras*.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (Vintage, 1987), 10.

often take a different approach, such as Charles Emmerson argued through an analysis of urban centers that the year before WWI was a world of possibilities and not predestined events.<sup>4</sup>

Other historians have, especially more recently, told the story of this world thematically. For example, both Sven Becker and Stephen Harp have added to the growing body of commodity histories.<sup>5</sup> Harp and Beckert write of industries as they grew and exploited peoples abroad for raw materials, as with rubber, and of the rise and also fall of European-dominated industries, as with cotton.<sup>6</sup> Historians Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes illuminate the growing influence on culture by the United States and question the traditional view of Europe's domination of culture.<sup>7</sup> While many works of history still tell a western-centric story, more recent historical works have begun to tell this story differently and as a world of possibilities as opposed to a world leading to an inevitable war.

### **Labor in the West**

By 1900, society was changing at a rapid rate, especially due to the developing and expanding economy. Throughout the western world, free trade and business created a rich upper class, especially in the United States, where business leaders like Henry Ford revolutionized production and worked to formulate the most productive use of labor.<sup>8</sup> Where in Britain a ruling class based on blood was losing its power, in the United States a powerful group of rich business-owners was taking control of American society.<sup>9</sup> In Great Britain, however, the aristocracy began to lose its power and the growing class of industrial workers, now more

---

<sup>4</sup> Charles Emmerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2014); Stephen L. Harp, *A World History of Rubber: Empire, Industry, and the Everyday* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, xi.

<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869–1922* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> This difference results from the United States' lack of hereditary governing class. See Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 119.

educated that previous generations, began to organize politically. Most movements took the form of labor parties or unions to fight working conditions, but other workers turned to socialism, Marxism or even anarchy.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1: From Riis in 1890, this photograph shows conditions faced by children

Across the world, conditions for industrial workers were dismal, referred to by Tuchman as the “Social Problem” in Britain.<sup>11</sup> Journalists investigated the depressing conditions under which workers lived, including Jacob Riis in his *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and Charles Booth in his *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1903). These

studies uncovered the crowded and unlivable conditions in the cities tenements and the long workdays and workweek.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, these conditions resulted from the inability of cities to adapt to a rapidly growing population, which was a result of a flight from rural areas and from increased immigration and migration.

## People and Society

Changes in society affected how men and women viewed themselves. The New Woman became a figure of the movement for “women’s emancipation.”<sup>13</sup> Many women fought for their right to vote, including Emily Davison, an extreme example, who threw herself under the English King’s horse in the Derby of 1913.<sup>14</sup> Women found victory first in New Zealand in

---

<sup>10</sup> Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 356.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 192.

<sup>14</sup> Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 382.

1893, but in many countries, it would take several more generations before women could vote, such as France in 1945. Additionally, many women fought for emancipation in their daily lives. For example, women began to protest wearing the restrictive corset. In practice, the feminist movement was overwhelmingly one of the middle- or upper-class woman with European ancestry.<sup>15</sup> When not arguing against female suffrage, men around the world became diagnosed with neurasthenia, a nervous condition related to urbanization and increased mental work.<sup>16</sup>

The World in 1900 suppressed not only women but also promoted increased xenophobia and racism. The development of scientific racism provided European Christians with justification for their treatment of minority groups and for colonization as a whole (to be examined below). A theme was anti-Semitism, most famously exemplified in the Dreyfus Affair, as Jews were often treated as the scapegoat for society's problems.<sup>17</sup> Out of this, the Zionist Theodore Herzl published *The Jewish State*, which called for Jews to leave Europe for a common homeland.<sup>18</sup>

## **Globalization**

As international trade became more profitable and possible, globalization affected much of the world. Increased use and efficiency of railroads, coupled with better naval power, mass-produced cars, and telegraphs allowed the world to become more connected as these technologies encouraged the movement of people, ideas, commodities, and raw materials.

Globalization manifested in trade and consumerism. The increasing need for raw materials led to exploitation of colonies and unnecessary consumerism in some Western countries. For example,

---

<sup>15</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher E. Forth, "Neurasthenia and Manhood in Fin-de-Siècle France," in *Cultures of Neurasthenia*, 329–61 (Brill, 2001); Paulo Drinot, "Madness, Neurasthenia, and 'Modernity': Medico-Legal and Popular Interpretations of Suicide in Early Twentieth-Century Lima," *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 2 (2004): 89–113.

<sup>17</sup> Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

increased demand for automobiles required increased cultivation of rubber abroad, a trade made possible only because of globalization.

One way that ideas (and, in the case of Buffalo Bill, sometimes people) moved to many people was through mass culture, defined by Rydell and Kroes as “the mobilization of cultural and ideological resources on a scale unimaginable in a preindustrial society lacking mass transportation and communication facilities.”<sup>19</sup> A prominent example is the World’s



Figure 2: French government officials at the Eiffel Tower’s completion for the World’s Fair, an impressive industrial feat, 1889

Fairs, where different cultures were brought to and shared with (western) cities, such as Paris in 1878, 1889, and 1900, St. Louis in 1904, and Barcelona in 1888.<sup>20</sup> While these fairs brought different cultures across the world, they were urban- and Euro-centric and appealed mostly to the middle- and upper-classes. Dime novels emerged in this era and often told of adventures of their protagonists, such as in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*.<sup>21</sup> These novels brought mass culture at a low price to the urban working-class, but at a cost: they often encouraged the cult of domesticity, devalued women, and harmed the efforts of feminists.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Rydell and Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 47–72.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 34–38.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 36.



Figure 3: A cartoon of Cecil Rhodes striding from Cape Town to Cairo, in *Punch*, 1892

## Colonization

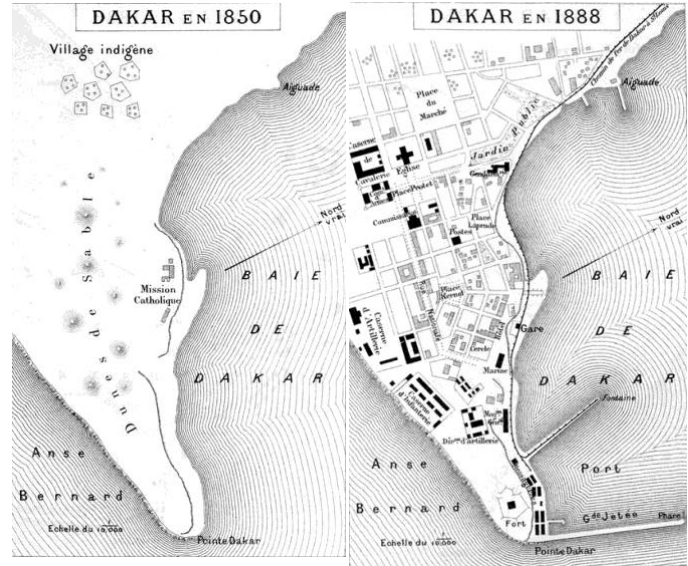
Colonization neither began nor ended during this era, but reached its second wave and demonstrates conflicts and tensions between European powers. While colonization spanned continents, a major focus for European powers was Africa, characterized as the Scramble for Africa by Thomas Pakenham.<sup>23</sup> The Berlin Conference from 1884 to 1885 regulated European colonization and trade in Africa and partitioned the continent to European powers. Motivations for colonization took many forms, from France's *mission civilisatrice* that began earlier in the century to King Leopold's desire for power and influence in Africa that turned into a decimation of the Congolese for the rubber trade.<sup>24</sup> While the King Leopold's "Congo Free State" is a particularly shocking example of the atrocities of colonization, it is considered the most extreme form that colonization in Africa would take. Even when colonization did not take this extreme form, it still radically transformed the way that Africans lived their lives across the continent. For example, French efforts to create a port and urbanized center in Dakar built a city that was rapidly built to be French (see Figures 4 and 5).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876-1912* (New York: Random House, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> See Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Liora Bigon, *French Colonial Dakar: The Morphogenesis of an African Regional Capital*, Studies in Imperialism (Manchester University Press, 2016).

However, not every group supported colonization. After years of atrocities in the Congo Free State, certain activities decried King Leopold's methods to produce rubber in the colony. While these efforts did aid in the push to end King Leopold's reign, many of them were racist and patronizing (such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) or condemned King Leopold's extreme



Figures 4 and 5: Side-by-side maps of the urbanization and colonization of Dakar in 1850 and in 1888

methods while supported their own country's colonization that led to a loss of lives (such as Britain in the Boer War or the United States in the Philippines).<sup>26</sup> Africans often fought for independence from colonial powers as well. While many uprisings were quelled quickly, others required more manpower from colonists, resulting in more lives lost, such as the Maji-Maji Revolt of 1905.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, the world in 1900 was a world of possibilities, not necessarily leading to a degenerate century or the Great War, though elements of the era could lead to a destructive war. While many did not benefit greatly from the changes of the era, everyone experienced these changes and would be greatly affected by the War to come.

<sup>26</sup> Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 268.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Tignor et al, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World from the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present*, fourth (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 667.

## Images

Figure 1: Riis, Jacob. "Street Arabs in sleeping quarters." *Museum of the City of New York*. C. 1890. <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Street-Arabs-in-sleeping-quarters.-2F3XC5U9KLT5.html>

Figure 2: "Eiffel Tower Completed." Time Life Pictures, Getty Images. March 31, 1889. <https://www.gettyimages.com/license/583668605>

Figure 3: Sambourne, Edward Linley. "The Rhodes Colossus Striding from Cape Town to Cairo." *Punch*, December 10, 1892. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Punch\\_Rhodes\\_Colossus.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Punch_Rhodes_Colossus.png)

Figure 4: Faidherbe, Louis Léon César. *Le Sénégal; la France dans l'Afrique occidentale; ouvrage contenant 18 gravures d'après les dessins de Riou, 3 gravures de Thiriat d'après des photographies et 5 cartes ou plans*. 1889. New York Public Library. Pg. 24. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-83b6-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Figure 5: Faidherbe, Louis Léon César. *Le Sénégal; la France dans l'Afrique occidentale; ouvrage contenant 18 gravures d'après les dessins de Riou, 3 gravures de Thiriat d'après des photographies et 5 cartes ou plans*. 1889. New York Public Library. Pg. 25. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-83b6-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



## Bibliography

- Beckert, Sven. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. New York: Vintage, 2014.
- Bigon, Liora. *French Colonial Dakar: The Morphogenesis of an African Regional Capital*. Studies in Imperialism. Manchester University Press, 2016.
- Drinot, Paulo. "Madness, Neurasthenia, and 'Modernity': Medico-Legal and Popular Interpretations of Suicide in Early Twentieth-Century Lima." *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 2 (2004): 89–113.
- Emmerson, Charles. *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War*. New York: Public Affairs, 2014.
- Forth, Christopher E. "Neurasthenia and Manhood in Fin-de-Siècle France." In *Cultures of Neurasthenia*, 329–61. Brill, 2001.
- Gilbert, Martin. *A History of the Twentieth Century*. Volume One: 1900–1933. New York: Avon Books, 1977.
- Grenville, J.A.S. *A History of the World in the Twentieth Century*. Volume I: Western Dominance, 1900–1947. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Harp, Stephen L. *A World History of Rubber: Empire, Industry, and the Everyday*. Wiley Blackwell, 2015.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914*. Vintage, 1987.
- Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston: Mariner Books, 1998.
- Press, Steven. *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Romein, Jan. *The Watershed of Two Eras: Europe in 1900*. Wesleyan University Press, 1978.
- Rydell, Robert W., and Rob Kroes. *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869–1922*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Tignor, Robert, et al. *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World from the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present*. Fourth. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.
- Tuchman, Barbara. *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890–1914*. New York: Ballentine Books, 1966.