

Opening the Door to Opportunity

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Abstract

Before the Civil War, the United States gradually became one of the most democratic and egalitarian countries in the world, driven by the dual forces of pursuing equality and material wealth. Despite rapid economic development, true equality remained elusive. This equality was primarily limited to white men, while middle-class women and other groups faced significant restrictions, and enslaved individuals and Black people suffered severe discrimination and exploitation. Particularly in the South, although the traditional order was overthrown, a new social order had yet to be established, resulting in further deterioration of the social status and living conditions of both Native Americans and Black individuals.

Keywords

The Civil War; equality; material wealth; the South; discrimination.

1. Introduction

During the American Revolution, Americans gradually awakened to the reality that they could no longer dream of creating a republic characterized by Neoclassical ideals. In the first half of the nineteenth century, some members of the elite were still studying Latin and traditional culture, but they began to realize that this new republic could not simply mimic the systems of ancient Athens, Sparta, or Rome. They started to pursue a broader future. By the time of the Civil War, the U.S. no longer aspired to a republic led by traditional aristocrats; it was evolving into a democratic nation, an evangelical Protestant society, characterized by individualism and a commercial mindset. This transformation was driven by two major forces: the pursuit of equality and the pursuit of material wealth.

2. The Pursuit of Equality

The tradition of pursuing equality has deep roots. As early as the beginning of the American Revolution, Jefferson proclaimed the slogan "all men are created equal." However, equality was not meant to imply an equal distribution of wealth; rather, most Americans sought a society of equal opportunity, where everyone had the chance to pursue knowledge and wealth. This pursuit of equal opportunity manifested itself in three main areas: lifestyle, work, and political life.

In terms of lifestyle, the inhabitants of British North America, the Quakers, and Americans in the Midwest were among the first to practice an egalitarian way of life. Titles such as "gentleman" and "lady," which once signified social status, became accessible to people of all classes, gradually evolving into symbols of equality and promoting social parity. However, this change also had its downsides; both true ladies and prostitutes were referred to as "ladies," leading to confusion and a dilution of language. The ideals of the New World clashed with the views of the upper classes in Europe, where the American social approach to equality appeared chaotic, disorderly, and intolerable. This egalitarian social relationship posed a threat to the hierarchical order that Europeans held dear. Americans' attitudes toward work have undergone several stages of change. During the colonial period, only the Puritans and Quakers approached

work with a wholly positive and enthusiastic attitude. They believed that the ultimate purpose of work was to glorify God and benefit the community. Benjamin Franklin is a prime example; he believed that the fruits of one's labor should ultimately serve the community, and after achieving success, he dedicated himself to public service. However, this does not mean he denied the importance of wealth. He was a very industrious artisan and businessman, driven by the desire to increase personal wealth and enhance his economic well-being.

During the American Revolution, Americans were influenced by the ideals of equality and, while advocating for hard work, they opposed the leisurely lifestyles of the aristocracy. They believed that the moral decay of the aristocrats would undermine the frugality and virtue of the nation's citizens. In the early nineteenth century, Americans highly praised talented individuals, diligent workers, inventors, and entrepreneurs. Hard work became the most celebrated virtue in American society, with the ethos of "taking pride in diligence and shaming laziness" widely propagated.

In America, even the wealthy have a strong desire to work. As a result, Americans place great importance on personal development. Ordinary white men and the working class pursue equal opportunities and self-improvement, which necessitates a focus on education. Schools serve as the starting point for equal opportunity and act as a leveling force to achieve equality for all. Consequently, the U.S. has become one of the countries with the most developed public education systems in the world. Furthermore, American adults not only emphasize personal cultivation but also prioritize acquiring practical knowledge that facilitates wealth accumulation. They participate in discussion groups, libraries, lectures, and various activities to enhance their self-cultivation.

The political life of Americans has also been influenced by the ideals of equality. They oppose the "public interest" advocated by traditional republicanism, insisting that every individual's interests must be adequately represented in government. After the 1820s, American political culture became more democratic and egalitarian. In the 1820s, the first government required voters to possess a certain amount of property; by 1832, almost all states no longer imposed property requirements for voters, allowing anyone, regardless of wealth, to participate in elections. Additionally, in 1832, changes were made to the electoral process and format. By the 1830s, the democratic political system in the U.S. was essentially established. Political activities in the nineteenth century also took on an entertaining quality, with large political gatherings fostering a sense of "brotherhood" among Americans, strengthening social connections, and increasingly linking voters to their government. At this time, voters hoped that political parties would uphold social fairness and promote equal opportunity. A notable example of this is the emergence of the Anti-Masonic movement in the 1820s. The Freemasons were a large secret organization at the time, whose members committed crimes without facing legal repercussions. The inequality before the law sparked public protests, leading to the formation of the Anti-Masonic Party, which became America's first third party and later merged into the Whig Party. In the 1830s, the inequalities and privileges in the financial sector caught the attention of Americans. The Democratic Party and the Whig Party held differing views on the privileges of the financial industry. The Democrats believed that the power to issue currency was a government-granted privilege that hindered social equality, while the Whigs argued that the development of the financial sector fostered rapid economic growth, providing more opportunities and promoting equality. By the 1850s, the issue of equality primarily centered on the question of slavery. The emerging Republican Party (developed from the former Whig Party and the "Know Nothing" movement) supported the abolition of slavery. Northern farmers and workers aligned with the Republican Party believed that supporting the party meant advocating for the end of slavery. Conversely, the Democrats contended that white individuals enjoyed equal opportunities precisely because Black people were enslaved and therefore could not receive the same treatment as whites despite the impact of equality on political life and the

focus on various inequalities, equal opportunity remained limited to white males, while the social status and living conditions of Native Americans and Black individuals worsened.

3. The Pursuit of Material Wealth

Another major driving force behind the development of American society is the pursuit of material wealth. Compared to the pursuit of equal opportunity, the quest for material wealth serves as a deeper impetus for social progress in the U.S. After the nineteenth century, Americans enjoyed equal opportunities to pursue wealth, with traditional restrictions largely lifted.

First, career choices became more open. Professions that previously had high barriers, such as law and the clergy, gradually relaxed their restrictions, fostering a spirit of ambition throughout society. However, the pursuit of wealth inevitably led to economic friction, with more people opting to resolve disputes in court. This shift eroded the previously harmonious and polite atmosphere of society, leading to some negative impacts on social conduct.

Secondly, traditional contracts for white laborers began to fade, and the authority of masters in apprenticeship programs significantly diminished. This was replaced by a new model of free labor, where individuals worked primarily for themselves. This shift weakened the traditional patriarchal system, promoting greater equality within society.

The continuous expansion of American territory eliminated geographical limitations to the pursuit of material wealth. After the American Revolution in 1783, the nation's territory expanded between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. The purchase of Louisiana from France in 1803 nearly doubled the land area. By the 1840s, Texas, the Southwest, and Oregon were incorporated, again doubling the nation's size. This territorial expansion greatly increased arable land, providing many white families with opportunities to enhance their wealth and improve their sense of security, thereby promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth. It also helped to mitigate the negative influences of economic determinism, such as sycophancy and opportunism. However, the ideal of self-sufficient, free farming life starkly contrasted with the reality of American farmers' experiences. Farmers' incomes were heavily influenced by market conditions, and wealth inequality remained a persistent issue.

As Americans migrated westward during territorial expansion, they carried traditional lifestyles into regions with similar climates, contributing to both regional development and an increase in social wealth.

In the ongoing quest for equal development opportunities and social wealth, the American economy underwent significant transformations in the nineteenth century. Territorial expansion provided many development opportunities, but it was just one of several stimulating factors. The demand for cotton surged during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, literacy rates rose, and the government eliminated domestic tariffs and other taxes, all of which stimulated economic growth. Transportation also underwent tremendous changes, with government-funded roads and railroads dramatically reducing shipping costs.

The loosening of corporate laws further facilitated wealth accumulation. During the colonial period, creating a corporation was viewed as a privilege reserved for a select few. However, after the 1830s, any individual meeting the minimum requirements of corporate law could apply for a business license without bearing the risk of bankruptcy. The increase in wealth spurred consumer spending, leading to significant changes in production. The Industrial Revolution began to unfold. Before 1815, almost all goods were produced at home for personal use, and products crafted by skilled artisans were sold in small shops. After the nineteenth century, small-scale production gradually evolved into factory-based industrial production, as merchants pursued lower prices and higher profits, often sacrificing quality in the process.

Moreover, at the height of the social trend towards material wealth, success was measured solely by the amount of wealth one possessed. Tales of self-made individuals circulated widely among Americans, exemplifying the belief that the poor could achieve wealth, status, and success through hard work. These stories became emblematic of the American Dream. However, the intense obsession with material wealth led to significant social problems. The unrestrained pursuit of wealth fostered selfishness, disrupted interpersonal relationships, lowered moral standards, and increased tendencies towards violence, even resulting in psychological distress. Individuals' sense of happiness diminished greatly, making leisure and enjoyment of life seem out of reach, and people lost their capacity to feel love. Furthermore, there was a decline in literary and aesthetic appreciation, with some asserting that Americans were incapable of appreciating or creating great literary or artistic works.

In the pursuit of equal opportunity and wealth, the Southern U.S. stood out as an exception. Before the Civil War, the development patterns of the North and South were quite similar. However, post-war, the South remained primarily agricultural, heavily reliant on cotton production and characterized by vast plantations. There was severe exploitation of enslaved Black individuals, with clear discrimination in education and religion. Although some enslaved people in certain areas were able to negotiate their work roles with white employers, and some performed less strenuous, more fulfilling tasks, these arrangements provided only minimal psychological comfort. Southern laws were fraught with shortcomings, such as prohibiting enslaved individuals from owning property or signing contracts, which deprived them of positive incentives in their work and led to various issues.

The Southern social order adhered to a strict hierarchy, and its lifestyles and work practices differed significantly from those in the North, which emphasized the pursuit of equality and wealth. Southerners often believed that the wealth generated through work was ultimately intended for leisure and enjoyment, exemplified by extravagant parties and horse races. These factors hindered the South's development towards equality and prosperity.

Before the Civil War, America became one of the most democratic and egalitarian countries in the world, with the dual forces of pursuing equality and wealth driving economic development. However, this equality was limited to white men. Middle-class women faced significant restrictions, enslaved individuals lived in even worse conditions, and discrimination against Black people was pervasive. Wealth distribution became increasingly unequal, and class disparities widened especially in the South, the ideals of equality espoused in the Declaration of Independence did not foster social equality within Southern society. Although the traditional order was overthrown, a new social order had yet to be established. The social status and living conditions of both Native Americans and Black individuals deteriorated further during this period.

4. Conclusion

Overall, while the United States made significant progress in economic and democratic terms, this progress did not benefit everyone, especially non-white groups. The pursuit of equality and wealth exacerbated social inequalities, revealing the nation's shortcomings in achieving true equality. Future development must focus more on marginalized groups to attain a more comprehensive social fairness and prosperity.

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