

The 20th Century in a Nutshell

The 20th Century

The 20th century represents just 1 percent of the time since humanity began to practice agriculture.

Yet there was more novelty, more epoch making changes in human life than in the preceding 99 percent. If humanity seems deranged, even neurotic, it is because we are trying to cope with immense changes that go far beyond anything our species has experienced before.

The twentieth century reflected all the extremes of human nature. It was scarred by some of history's most horrific examples of brutality and violence. But it also demonstrated humanity's idealism, inventiveness, and humanitarianism. It was the most technologically advanced century; it was also the most ideological and most destructive.

It witnessed unparalleled growth in knowledge, wealth, nutrition, and health. But it was also a century of unimaginable savagery. More than 150 million people perished in war, in concentration and reeducation camps, in government induced famines, or in genocides.

It was a century of mass production, mass consumption, mass media, and mass entertainment--but also of mass murder. It was a century marked by searing images: of trenches, the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the death camps.

The Bad Old Days

What was the United States like in 1900?

For most Americans, **life was nasty, poor, and short**. Life expectancy: 43 years for whites, 33 years for blacks, about the same as a peasant in 19th century India. The gap in life expectancy between blacks and whites was 15 years.

Superficially traditional family values reigned supreme. 45 percent of women had 5 or more children; 15 percent had 10 or more.

But appearances were misleading. Single parent households were just as common as today. 20-25 percent of children grew up in **single parent homes**. The causes—death and desertion.

Half of all children lost a parent by the age of 16. Half of all parents lost at least one child. We have milk cartons with pictures of missing children. They had newspaper columns: Have you seen my father?

The average breadwinner made just \$438 a year and earned just 2/3 of the family's income. The rest was earned by child laborers. Most teens were in factories or fields.

boy of 19 earned a promotion because he had already worked in a textile mill for 11 years.

In 1900, the average family had an annual income of \$3,000 in today's dollars. The family had no indoor plumbing, no phone, and no car.

The nation's population was still concentrated in the Northeast. In 1900, Toledo was bigger than Los Angeles. California was the size of Arkansas or Alabama.

In 1900, about 60 percent of the population lived on farms or in rural villages. Today, just one in four Americans live in rural areas. Fully half live in suburbs.

The top five names in 1900 were John, William, James, George and Charles for boys; and Mary, Helen, Anna, Margaret, Ruth for girls. The top five names today: Michael, Jacob, Matthew, Christopher, and Joshua; Emily, Samantha, Madison, Ashley, and Sarah. Florence and Bertha no longer make the top 10,000.

Two of America's ten biggest industries were bootmaking and the manufacture of malt liquor. There were only 8000 cars in the country--none west of the Mississippi River. Dot com communication still meant the telegraph.

The World in 1900

Certain years stand out as historical watersheds, as turning points that foreshadow the future. That was certainly the case with the year 1900.

Concentration Camp In South Africa, British Commander Horatio Kitchener confined 75,000 families in prison camps. Most quickly died. They were the first victims of one of the century's most evil inventions: the concentration camp.

Genocide In Namibia, genocide was invented. The discovery of diamonds brought German settlers, land grabs and lynchings. After poisoning the water holes, the native people were driven into the desert. About 80,000 were bayoneted, shot, or starved. 20,000 survivors were condemned to slavery.

Nietzsche 1900 was the year of Friedrich Nietzsche's death. He voiced many of the ideas that would rock the 20th century: the death of God, the idea of a superman who existed beyond good and evil, the will to power, and the denunciation of slavery morality. Science would displace religion and philosophy as the chief explanation of the natural world.

Freud Also in 1900, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, which revealed dark storms of irrationality beneath of serene surface of civilized order.

The 20th century was the best, the worst, the most **inventive**, the **cruelest**, the least **religious**, the most **ideological**, the most **technologically advanced**, the most

destructive. It was an epic century of human progress unrivaled in history. It witnessed unimaginable advances in knowledge, nutrition, health, and freedom. And also unrivaled horrors.

Century of Revolution

The 20th century was a century of revolution. Political revolutions, including the Russian and Chinese revolutions; the sexual revolution; a revolution in business organization; and a revolution in women's roles and status.

Some revolutions are obvious. Others less so.

We usually think of revolutions in terms of banners and barricades, and the twentieth century certainly witnessed social and political upheavals. But many of the twentieth century's most lasting revolutions took place without violence.

1. Let's begin with revolutions in technology, science, and medicine utterly transformed the way people lived.

The scientific revolution is perhaps the most obvious development. During the 1890s physics and medicine radically changed our view of the world. The discovery of X-rays, radioactivity, subatomic particles, relativity, and quantum theory produced a revolution in how scientists view matter and energy.

Meanwhile, physicians, during the 1890s, identified the first virus. Laboratory-based science reshaped the practice of medicine. Beginning with a cure for yellow fever, scientific medicine eliminated polio and smallpox.

2. A revolution also took place in **health and living standards**.

The end of the 19th century was an era of tuberculosis, typhoid, sanitarians, outhouses, and horse manure. Each horse deposited 25 pounds of manure on city streets each day. . It was also a time of child labor, 12-hour work days, and tenements. In 1900, more Americans died from tuberculosis than from cancer.

In the space of just 25 years, life expectancy increased by 30 years and child mortality fell 10-fold.

In 1900, families spent an average of 43 percent of their income on food; now they spend 15 percent.

At the beginning of the century, 40 to 50 percent of all Americans had income levels that classified them as poor. At the end of the century, that was cut to between 10 and 15 percent. Until the twentieth centuries, large numbers of working class men and women faced the poor house as the conclusion of their working lives. Today, thanks to social

security and retirement plans, most Americans can expect a period of more than a decade when they no longer have to work.

Household incomes of African Americans increased ten fold. Although African Americans still earn less than whites, the gap has decreased. In 1900, blacks earned about 40 percent of whites. It is now 80 percent.

The average length of the work week decreased by 30 percent, falling from 66 hours to 35 hours. Because of more holiday and a shorter work week, the average number of hours worked in a year is half of what it was in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile the percent of workers on the farm fell by 93 percent.

The percentage of households with electricity went from 10 percent to near universal. At the same time, the average American in 1900 had to work six times as many hours to pay his electric bill than did an America a century later.

The number of telephone calls per capita increased 5,600 percent. The number of households with cars increased 90-fold. The percentage of people completing college was four times higher. Today, more people (28 percent) have bachelor's degrees than the number of Americans who held high school degrees in 1900 (22 percent).

3. A third revolution was a revolution in economic productivity.

Despite depression, oil shocks, and inflation, the 20c was a century of unparalleled prosperity. World population grew five fold; production of goods increased 14 times.

Between 1900 and 2000, the world's population roughly quadrupled, from almost 1.6 billion to 6 billion. But global production of goods and services rose 14-fold. In 1900, the Standard & Poor's 500 index stood at 6.2. In 1998, it was 1085.

4. Another revolution we are all familiar with is a revolutionary advance in **technology**. The most dramatic involved the technologies of medicine, energy, transportation, communication, and work.

In 1900, there were just 8000 cars in the country—none west of the Mississippi river. Cars were playthings for the very rich. Technology **shrunk the work week a day and a half**.

Women's Liberation and the Rise of Youth Culture

Let's turn to the really crucial revolutions, beginning with women's liberation and the rise of youth culture. Some new words entered the English language during the 20th century: feminism, adolescence, dating, teenagers.

In 1900, **biology was destiny**. Women had the vote in just four states and New Zealand. Just 4.5 percent of married women worked for wages. Today the figure is well over 50 percent. Women either married or had a career—not both.

In 1900, women accounted for one percent of lawyers and six percent of doctors. At the end of the century, those percentages had risen to 29 percent and 26 percent, respectively.

For the first time there was a gap between puberty and incorporation into adult life. In 1900, less than 2 percent of young people graduated from high school. By 1930 the figure was already over 50 percent.

Rise of Mass Communications and Mass Entertainment

Another crucial revolution involves the rise of mass communication and mass entertainment.

In 1890 there were **no billboards, no trademarks, no advertising slogans**.

There were also no bestselling **novels**, no **movies**, no **radio**, no **television**. No magazine had a circulation of a million. There was no shared culture that cut across religion, region, or class.

After 1900, mass culture became our **most influential educator**: teaching us lessons about masculinity, femininity, and glamour.

Modern sports like football and basketball were inventions of the 1890s, but were confined to eastern colleges. Print culture still meant genteel magazines like Scribner's illustrated with expensive etchings.

The end of caste society

In 1900, inequality was the rule. 939 of every 1000 Americans died without any property to their name. 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South, 75 percent on farms, mostly as sharecroppers. 4,500 black men and women were lynched, more than a hundred a year.

It was also the **age of empire**. In 1900, freedom existed only for the upper crust. Empires dotted the globe. The British empire contained 400 million people, a quarter of the world's population.

In the span of 20 years, Europe partitioned 9/10s of Africa. France ruled Southeast Asia and West Africa. The Netherlands ruled Indonesia and New Guinea. Japan established a colonial empire in Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan. Not to be let out, the U.S. acquired the Phillipines, Guam and Puerto Rico and annexed Hawaii.

At the start of the twenty-first century, 88 of the world's 191 countries are free, with 2.4 billion people--about 40 percent of the total population.

Human subjugation was the rule, not the exception.

War, genocide, terror

During the 20th century the human capacity for evil increased exponentially as a result of improved technology and the increased power of the state.

Ours has been a century scarred by gulags, concentration camps, and secret police terror. It has been a century of total war. 10 million died in WWI; 60 million in WWII. At least 100 million died in developing countries in civil wars and famines.

Technology helped make the 20th century the bloodiest in history. WWI introduced the machine gun, the tank, and poison gas; it killed 10 million almost all soldiers. WWII with its fire bombs and nuclear weapons produced at least 35 million civilian deaths. The Cold War added another 17 million deaths to the total.

But the other force for destruction was the utopian belief in the possibility of totally restructuring society and human personality. The old belief was that humans would be free when **the last king was strangled with the entrails of the last priest**. Radicalism in the 19th century meant **changing elites**; in the 20th century it meant **changing society root and branch and transforming human nature**.

A Revolution in Government

The expansion of government was one of the twentieth century's most striking developments. In 1900, the U.S. government took in just \$567 million in taxes. In 1999, \$1.7 trillion. Government spending as a share of Gross Domestic Product in 1913 rose from 1.8 percent to 34 percent.

What was the **driving force for change**? The answer: a series of **crises** that were totally **unpredictable and unexpected**.

The Impact of World War I

The first crisis was WWI, a war that no one wanted or expected. The AP ranked WWI as the 8th most important event of the 20c. Everything that happened in the 20c happened because of WWI: the **Depression**, **WWII**, the **Holocaust**, the **Cold War**, the **collapse of empires** all trace back to WWI.

No event better underscores the **utter unpredictability of the future**. Europe hadn't fought a major war for 100 years. At any point in the 5 weeks leading up to the fighting, the madness might have been averted. The war was a product of **miscalculation, misunderstanding, and miscommunication**. No one expected a war of such magnitude.

No one wanted one. A continent at the height of its success descended into senseless slaughter.

Lets take one battle. For six days British artillery bombarded German lines. Then in a single day, 100,000 British troops plodded across no man's land. They were met by steady machine gun fire. 60,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded. At the end of the battle 419,654 British were killed or wounded.

In 1918, the Germans fired shells containing tear gas and chlorine. The tear gas forced the British to remove their gas masks. The chlorine scarred their faces.

WWI **destroyed four empires**: German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Romanov. It touched off colonial revolts in the Middle East and Vietnam.

WWI allowed two ideologies to triumph: **communism and fascism**. It also paved the way for the **Great Depression**. For a decade, unemployment averaged 20 percent. In three years, the value of U.S. corporations fell 89 percent. Nations responded to the depression with totalitarian communism, fascist dictatorship, socialism, and welfare capitalism.

And finally, WWI created the grievances that produced WWII. The war ignited **mass migration** of African Americans from the South. It **propelled married women** in unprecedented numbers into the workforce.

Century of Freedom

Today, we are both freer and less free than people a century ago. We are more harried, more stressed, our lives are more structured. Our lives are more regulated, more supervised, more manipulated. In 1900 there were no passports and there was little of the professional credentialing that shapes our lives today.

The crises of the 20th century had an ironic consequence: they doomed Europe's empires and spread new ideas of freedom. The most significant development of the 20th century is the **expansion of the concept of freedom and its extension** to ever broader groups of people.

In the 19th century, freedom's meaning was surprisingly limited. It referred simply to equality before the law, freedom of worship, free elections, and economic opportunity.

But in the 20th century, the meaning of freedom expanded. It now involves a right to privacy, a right to education, a right to health care, a right to income support, a right to a clean and safe environment, a right to freedom from harassment and discrimination.

During WWI, Woodrow Wilson proposed universal self-determination—the idea that each group of people should have its own government. His secretary of state commented: “The phrase is simply loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives.”

Free speech only became a major issue during WWI, largely because of the struggles of socialists against the war, labor radicals struggling for the right to strike, and feminists seeking an end to restrictions on birth control.

WWII brought a basic contradiction to a head. It underscored the discrepancy between American ideals of equality and a reality of discrimination and racial exclusion.

During the 1960s, notions of rights extended still further. The discourse of rights expanded to include gay rights, abortion rights, the rights of criminal defendants, and children's rights.

Immense attitudinal changes took place during the twentieth century. Ecological consciousness grew leading people around the world to recognize that the world's resources are not limitless. New standards of human rights transcending race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender spread.

I predict that the dominant struggles of the 21st century will be struggles over competing and conflicting rights. Traditional freedoms were universal; everyone could enjoy freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

But freedom now means self-fulfillment. The new freedoms of individual rights and entitlements are exclusive. They tend to weaken a sense of community.

Finally, in trying to export our ideals of freedoms to other societies, we are likely to confront people who are not willing to abandon their own cultural values.

That is the 20c in a nutshell.