“The word of the modern”

“Culture” in Industrializing America

Why did countless American men and women who lived during the era of industrialization believe “culture” was prize worth fighting for? And what exactly was the prize? In recent decades, many specialists in intellectual and cultural history have recognized the importance of these questions. But they have not been able to give them straightforward answers, and with good reason. Because the concept of culture enjoyed a prominence in late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century American society it had never known before, we cannot avoid thinking of culture as an influential force. Yet precisely because at one time or another the concept embraced so much of what surfaced during the industrial era—science, literature, ethics, music, the university movement, the women’s club movement, struggles for racial and social justice, even health and fitness consciousness—historians have been reluctant to view culture as an internally coherent force. The best we can do, it seems, is to adopt a pluralist approach that emphasizes the multiplicity of interests displayed by its many advocates and promoters during the era of industrialization.

This chapter adds weight to the new pluralist approach by drawing attention to several important but still poorly mapped developments that enriched and sustained American discourse about culture. But it also addresses the question of where the pluralist approach should be leading us. Stressing the malleability of the American concept of culture has allowed historians in the pluralist camp to see that those who believed in its individually and socially redemptive power did so for a variety of reasons we only trivialize by trying to reduce them to a single agenda. But there is an important difference between acknowledging the limits of interpretation caused by the abundance of historical evidence and failing to provide a coherent account of that evidence. Or put more strongly, I believe the new pluralist approach, while commendably concerned with avoiding the charge of reductionism, runs the risk of antiquarianism as it gathers
more and more facts that threaten to become a burden to memory. I end the chapter with a discussion of three steps that may help historians in the pluralist camp avoid this trap.

I

“The writers of a time hint the mottoes of its gods. The word of the modern, say these voices, is the word Culture.” No discussion of the history of American talk and thinking about culture during the industrial era can proceed very far without quoting several sentences from Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* (1871), an essay that contains, among other things, one of the most powerful statements of an understanding of culture that is democratic and inclusive rather than hierarchical and elitist. More specifically, it is Whitman who gave expression to the hope that the pursuit of culture in postbellum America would entail “a radical change of category,” a new program “drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the west, the workingmen, the facts of farm and jackplanes and engineers, and of the broad range of women also of the middle and working strata.” He also believed that talk of culture was just beginning to gain widespread circulation in American society, and he depicted this development as an opportunity to “include the widest human area” and “have for its spinal meaning the formation of a typical personality of character, eligible to the uses of the high average man—and not restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses.”

In directly associating the concept of culture with the promising future of American democracy, however, Whitman also worried he had put himself “abruptly in close quarters with the enemy.” For while “culture” was “the word of the modern,” it disturbed him that “as now taught, accepted, and carried out,” it also seemed to have become a new mark of social privilege in America, defining a new preserve of “mainly educated classes” who found the masses an “affront” and understood culture as an activity to be administered to them from above, as if from a celestial source. In these remarks Whitman did not make use of the word “genteel” to describe his “enemy,” but it probably captures what he had in mind.¹

Approached by way of the received account of the industrial era, which typically proposes the story of American cultural development in the late nineteenth century as one of exclusion and sacralization, Whitman’s brief chronicle of a *Kulturkampf* taking shape in the immediate postwar years has a plausible ring. In fact, nothing remains more frequently cited in *Democratic Vistas* than Whitman’s nervous anticipation
of the triumph of a genteel concept of culture that will serve to distinguish a new American elite rather than unify its ordinary people, as if he were almost conceding in advance that efforts to develop institutions and practices rooted in a democratic and inclusive understanding of culture are bound to fail. Yet there are various other strands of this story, which, when pulled, require us to construct a more complicated narrative in which Whitman’s uneasiness about associating the word “culture” with the cause of democracy seems either premature or simply misplaced.

I begin by pulling on just three. First, at the time *Democratic Vistas* appeared—Whitman’s legendary pamphlet of 1871 had its origins in two
essays that first appeared in the late 1860s in the New York–based magazine the *Galaxy* (1866–78)—the word “culture” was considerably less “modern” than he believed (or cared to acknowledge). Derived from the Latin root *cultura* (meaning “tending” or “cultivation”), culture had first come into English in the sixteenth century, when it was linked primarily to natural processes of tending and preservation. While that usage remained commonplace in late-nineteenth-century America, “culture” had long since been extended to include human nurture and development. Advocates of “self-culture,” in particular, believed that human souls were living things not unlike plants or animals, and that with careful cultivation human souls too could be nurtured to develop their full capacities.

Throughout the nineteenth century, dictionary definitions typically included examples of both usages. But use of the word “culture” to describe the development of individual human capacities also grew increasingly complicated, with distinctions now drawn among the moral, mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of individual self-development. It is true that during the late 1860s some sophisticated British and American writers such as Matthew Arnold had begun to say that culture meant “the best that has been thought and said,” yet it is extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly when the sense of culture as literary and artistic masterpieces gained widespread currency in American life. (Frederick Jackson Turner’s several references to culture in his famous 1893 essay on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” for example, were all synonyms for cultivation and tillage.) Arnold’s haughty personal manner and his dismissal of postwar America as a society of Philistines did little for his American reputation, which fluctuated in the 1870s and 1880s before fading in the 1890s. It also is worth noting that many American cultural historians have overlooked the fact that the wording of one of Arnold’s other, now less-well-known definitions of culture—“a harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature”—echoed conventional nineteenth-century usage.

Also quite forgotten in most discussions of *Democratic Vistas*, and perhaps more important, is the fact that during the late 1860s and early 1870s talk of culture was accompanied by an unprecedented wave of interest in creating new cultural institutions. Amid confident pronouncements that a vast intellectual and spiritual renewal would sweep through American society—after all, if the Civil War had settled the supremacy of national political institutions, why should it not also have cleared the road for building national cultural institutions?—a remarkable variety of new developments claimed the name of culture in the immediate post-war years.
After decades of what seemed fruitless agitation, the university movement began abruptly with the opening of Cornell under Andrew White in 1868 and the election of Charles William Eliot as Harvard’s president in 1869. About the same time that architects of the modern American university began to brake the grip of religious sectarianism and reorganize higher education to serve the needs of a more professionally conscious society, other reformers undertook initiatives designed to expand educational opportunities for women and African Americans. The first of the great private women’s colleges were established: Vassar in 1865, Smith and Wellesley in 1875, and Bryn Mawr in 1880. Midwestern states that received land-grant funds from the 1862 Morrill Act either began to admit women to their universities or founded new state universities that admitted women from the start. In the South the first African American institutions of higher education—Atlanta University (1865), Fisk University (1867), Howard University (1867), and Talladega College (1870)—also date from the immediate postwar years.

Yet cultural reform was by no means limited to, or even focused primarily on, formal education in schools. In the period of economic expansion immediately following the war, Ohio, Wisconsin, Connecticut, Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, and Texas followed the lead of four New England states in passing laws enabling municipalities to tax their residence for the support of free libraries. The growth and intellectual vitality of the natural sciences also attracted considerable attention among educated Americans, who read accounts of technological innovations and new research in the “scientific columns” or “scientific departments” of magazines and newspapers as well as in new general science magazines such as *Popular Science Monthly* and *Science*. The woman’s club movement also dates from the late 1860s, with the establishment of Sorosis in New York and the New England Women’s Club in Boston. Eventually drawing women from all social groups in postbellum America, the club movement not only gave women a new place beyond parlors and schools to pursue self-development but also allowed them to redefine the concept of culture to include their own human interactions.5

By any reasonable standard, these developments signaled the onset of changes that by the turn of the century would serve to transform America nearly beyond recognition. But how could so many different developments claim the name of “culture,” and what meaning was the word meant to convey? We can make a start at answering these questions simply by reminding ourselves that during the immediate postwar decades the concept of culture for most Americans remained roughly synonymous with self-culture. Hence its pursuit did not logically entail any particular place of activity so much as a particular manner of being
in the world that invited an intense moral and intellectual preoccupation with one’s self. Or put another way, because culture continued to carry its antebellum meaning of individual self-development or self-construction, various individuals and groups could (and did) apply it—with no inconsistency—to a wide variety of new activities and institutions.

Three examples from the late 1860s and 1870s will suffice here. Although we usually think of the work of building American universities as marked by a new and growing stress on professional credentialing and scientific research, Eliot and the other architects of the modern university did not have to abandon the rhetoric of culture in pressing their reforms, and initially, at least, none of them did. Precisely because they remained wedded to an understanding of culture as the practice of self-construction and self-development, they saw no inconsistency between promoting new possibilities for vocational training and research in higher education and imagining the university as an institution within which a student would also be free to make choices, exercise his will, and thereby begin the work of creating a life for himself. “Liberal culture” was Eliot’s label for a new educational ideal that gave university students freedom to choose their own courses at the same time as it encouraged them to feel at home in every field of knowledge. The rhetoric of culture also offered itself to him as a reassuring polemical resource. At the outset of Eliot’s famous 1869 inaugural address, it allowed him to cut through what he saw as pointless internal controversy over the primary purpose of a university education. Because Harvard was committed the ideal of “liberal culture,” Eliot said, it recognized no real antagonism between literature and science and “consents to no such narrow alternatives as mathematics or classics, science or metaphysics. We would have them all, and at their best.” Later he also used the rhetoric of culture to announce his alternative to the antebellum collegiate ideal of the classically trained and generally educated Christian gentleman. Knowing his nonsectarianism pitted him directly against still-powerful forces of religious orthodoxy, Eliot anticipated their criticism with the succinctly confident proclamation that Harvard now considered “the worthy fruit of academic culture” to be “an open mind.”

Schematic as these and countless other similar formulations seem from afar, it clearly mattered to Eliot and other university presidents of his generation that Americans view university reform as a matter of creating institutions in which the pursuit of culture (understood as an ongoing process of individual self-development), professional training, and scientific training would be conterminous activities. In his 1876 inaugural address, for example, Daniel Coit Gilman announced that Johns Hopkins University had been created to promote both “the liberal and
special culture of advanced students.” Its faculty, he said, would pursue
their particular academic interests “on the foundation of a broad and
liberal culture,” thereby developing “character” in their students and in
turn making them men “who would be wise, thoughtful, and progres-
sive guides to whatever department of work or thought they may be
engaged in.”

Similarly, between 1866 and 1870 the notion of culture as a process of
individual self-development helped to underpin J. W. Alvord’s efforts to
refute the idea of Negro inferiority. In his semiannual reports as the gen-
eral superintendent of Freedmen’s Bureau schools, Alvord addressed
himself to almost every major theory of racial inferiority then current,
challenging the idea that some races were naturally so inferior that, in
competition with superior races, they inevitably must succumb or per-
ish. He argued in reply: “We have a better theory. The human race,
though diverse in characteristics, is progressive in culture, with oppor-
tunities and right conditions for improvement overcoming every defi-
ciency.” “Equal endowments substantially, with equal culture,” he wrote,
“will produce that equality in all mankind.” True enough, Alvord may
not have perceived the irony in trumpeting an individualistic ideal of
self-construction in the name of a people whose very survival as slaves
had depended on mutual assistance. In the late 1860s, however, there
can be little question that throughout the South freed slaves embraced
the promise of “culture” offered by bureau schools, trusting that educa-
tion would equip them to take full advantage of citizenship and provide
the skills and knowledge needed to succeed as free laborers. More
specifically the “opportunities and right conditions for improvement”
Freedmen’s Bureau had been established to coordinate were new edu-
cational efforts launched by both freed slaves and northern missionary
and benevolent associations in the South. As early as the summer of
1867, some 3,695 new schools enrolling 258,342 students were reporting
to Alvord. With assistance from the bureau, northern societies also
founded and staffed the first black colleges in the South, from which
emerged members of the first generation of a professional class of
African American teachers, ministers, businessmen, and doctors. These
were also the black men and women “emancipated by training and cul-
ture” for whom, as we shall see, DuBois presented himself as spokesman
in the late 1890s.

Finally, we can learn something more of the welter of new circum-
stances in which the rhetoric of culture was employed in the late 1860s
and 1870s by taking a brief look at the magazine in which Whitman
originally sketched his nervous vision of democratic culture. Although
published only between 1866 and 1878, the Galaxy was one of the more
important magazines of the immediate postwar period. Conceived by its editors as a national publication in which “the current of thought in every sector could find expression as thoroughly as New England” did in the Boston-based *Atlantic Monthly*, the journal melded an egalitarian and nationalist cultural ethos with a loathing for an elite ideal of culture that at the time of its founding was perhaps most clearly represented by the vogue in America of England’s leading critical monthly, the *Saturday Review*. Although the *Galaxy* published some of Whitman’s postwar poetry and prose, and for a brief time counted Mark Twain and Henry James among its contributors, it did relatively little to promote the new class of “native authors” Whitman believed was needed to prepare the way for America’s democratic culture. In practice its embrace of an egalitarian cultural ethos took shape instead as an editorial commitment to explore a variety of serious social issues, among the most significant of which was its effort to grasp the growth and intellectual vitality of the natural sciences. For the editors of the *Galaxy*, the “culture” postbellum America needed included “scientific culture,” and with that end in mind they published a steady stream of articles and notices on a broad range of scientific subjects ranging from public health problems to contemporary research in the natural sciences.\(^{10}\)

It also is worth noting here that the *Galaxy’s* widely read and imitated monthly feature “Scientific Miscellany”—which began to appear in 1871, the same year Whitman published *Democratic Vistas*—was introduced and, for the next three years, edited by E. L. Youmans. Now remembered mostly as the founder of *Popular Science Monthly*, and one of the great popularizers of scientific ideas in the late nineteenth century, Youmans grounded his career in his belief that scientific education lay at the heart of what, as early as 1867, he had called “the culture demanded by modern life.” While promoting a democratic concept of the use of science, he also argued that those engaged in the work of “self-instruction in science” were pursuing “a new type of culture” that was not only different from an “older literary ideal of culture” but also “in essential respects superior to it.”\(^ {11}\)

II

Other examples of efforts to adapt and expand the antebellum ideal of self-culture are not difficult to find in books, magazines, and newspapers published during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. James Freeman Clarke’s *Self-Culture: Physical, Intellectual, Moral, and Spiritual* (1880), which had its origins
in a popular national lecture series of the mid-1870s, was a contemporary book that in itself perhaps summarized the ideal of self-construction as generally understood by most Americans in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Published at a time when Clarke was viewed as an intellectual equal of Emerson, *Self-Culture* went through at least twenty-one editions by the end of the century. Beginning in the mid-1870s, architects of the American Library Association and the Chautauqua movement joined with the leaders of the woman’s club organizations to establish voluntary adult education—“culture study” some would call it—as one of the primary means by which Americans set out to develop their faculties and talents. At the founding of the American Library Association in 1876, one observer commented that while leaders of European industrializing societies exercised their power over an illiterate majority, it fell to the United States to demonstrate that “real culture is possible to a class or to an individual in society only when all members of it are cultured.”

A similar sort of language was used again and again to promote the various undertakings of the Chautauqua movement, perhaps most visibly in the pages of the *Chautauquan* (1880–1914), a monthly magazine for home study that was devoted to, as its subtitle proclaimed, the “Promotion of True Culture.” Steady growth in the number of institutions for voluntary popular adult education also introduced new elements into the story of what self-culture meant in America. Virtually nonexistent before the Civil War, by the turn of the century free public libraries became almost as much a part of America as churches and school houses. The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) was the first major experiment in education by mail in the United States. Between 1878 and 1894, some 225,000 students signed up for CLSC courses, subscribed to the *Chautauquan*, and purchased textbooks distributed through the CLSC, which in many cases were written specifically for the ten thousand local Chautauquan circles that came into existence by the end of the nineteenth century.

It is true that architects of the public library movement and of the various subdivisions of the Chautauqua Assembly often spoke of culture in Arnoldian terms and conceived of their work as a matter of developing popular taste for great writers and thinkers. It is also true, however, that we will never satisfactorily decide how much their identification of “culture” with “good reading” helped to build constituencies for their institutions. In tracing the ways in which the ideal of culture served as an organizing motif for voluntary popular education movements during the 1870s and 1880s, Joseph F. Kett has shown that the growth in popular
demand for programs of “culture study” was in fact driven by a variety of religious, philosophical, and vocational concerns. For example, the cofounders of the Chautauqua Assembly, Methodist bishop John H. Vincent and Methodist manufacturer Lewis Miller, aimed to break the grip of evangelical Protestantism by promoting a nondenominational view of spirituality that equated it with the growth of knowledge. Yet they also moved quickly to establish educational programs that spread the reputation of the main assembly at Lake Chautauqua well beyond the confines of a Sunday school reform movement. Among the most successful of these were summer “scientific congresses,” the first of which Vincent organized in 1876 as a rival attraction to the prospective Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Vincent also catered to the popular taste for scientific culture with a steady supply of articles in the Chautauquan on technology and scientific research that came equipped with sundry aids for study, including tables of questions and answers. Local branches of the CLSC, which developed initially along the path taken by women’s clubs by organizing programs that included readings from great writers and group question-and-answer exercises, also came to serve more immediately practical purposes. Beginning in the mid-1880s, as a growing number of states required prospective teachers to secure formal educational certificates, many Chautauqua circles did double duty as teachers’ reading circles. And in this setting, both the Chautauquan and textbooks commissioned and distributed by CLSC were used as aides to study for examinations.

“Liberal culture,” “ethical culture,” “literary culture,” “scientific culture,” “Christian culture”: multiplicity of purpose notwithstanding, there was persistent agreement in many circles on two important points regarding how the pursuit of culture ought to be understood. The first was the belief that “culture” was synonymous with “self-culture” and thus connoted a process of individual self-construction that aimed at the full development of a variety of human capacities. Or as E. L. Youmans put it, “The aim of culture is to give such perfection to human nature as it is capable of—to develop not one set of faculties only, but all faculties.” The other was that to speak of culture in America was to speak of an inclusive ideal that aimed to open rather than close doors. Explaining what the idea of culture had come to mean in America at the turn of the century, Charles Eliot said in a 1907 speech to the National Education Association that “all authorities” now agreed that “true culture” was not “exclusive, sectarian, or partisan, but the opposite.” American teachers must recognize, he concluded, that “no single element or kind of culture” was essential but that “the best fruits of real culture” were “an open mind, broad sympathies, and respect for all the diverse achievements
of the human intellect at whatever stage of development they may actually be.”

III

It is clear, at least in retrospect, that during the last three decades of the nineteenth century belief in an individualistic and inclusive conception of culture was sustained by the existence of remarkably loose institutional boundary lines between the different levels of education within American society. With their book-buying and reading clubs, summer assemblies and scientific congresses, lyceums, seminaries, women’ clubs, academies, and municipal free libraries, most American men and women did not yet equate higher education with degree-granting universities and colleges. In fact, at its height in 1887, enrollment in the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle exceeded that of the nation's largest universities. A total of 4,468 men and women received diplomas for completing CLSC’s four-year program of study, 18,000 were enrolled in the program, and untold tens of thousands more unreported (non-dues-paying) members participated as ex officio circle members or casual readers. In this context it is not surprising that many late-nineteenth-century Americans were proud autodidacts who believed that the pursuit of culture entailed a variety of activities and institutions. The spread of programs to promote voluntary adult education, however, was not the only development that sustained belief in an individualistic and inclusive concept of culture. It was also the consequence of at least two other less widely recognized developments, which I approach in the final sections of this essay by concentrating on two texts.

The first is the young Johns Hopkins political economist Richard T. Ely’s *Labor Movement in America* (1886), which appeared at the high point of academic and political radicalism during the industrial era. Ely’s book aimed to show that the American labor movement was playing an important yet largely misunderstood role in transforming the existing framework of industrial society. Rather than promoting class warfare, Ely argued, the Knights of Labor, then America’s largest and most encompassing labor organization (it numbered more than three-quarters of a million members by 1886), was in fact preparing the way for a moral and cultural regeneration with which both academics and middle-class reformers could identify. *The Labor Movement in America* not only emphasized the diverse occupational groups—including Confederate and Union Civil War veterans and freed slaves—integrated within the Knights’ ranks but also proclaimed that labor organizations in general were “among the foremost of our education agencies, ranking next to our churches
and public schools in their influence upon the culture of the masses.” By “culture,” Ely explained, he did not mean simply what could be learned out of books or acquired at school: “I mean what the Germans might perhaps express as Bildung,—the entire development of a man in all his relations, social, individual, religious, ethical, and political” (120–1).

In chapter 5 of The Labor Movement in America, Ely gathered a variety of anecdotal evidence that, in his view, suggested laborers themselves viewed their organizations as agencies of culture. From the earliest period of their existence, he explained, both British and American trade unions and labor organizations had aimed to provide workingmen with means of mental and moral improvement. As an example he cited an 1832 address to workingmen by the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and other Workingmen that explained the evils the organization had been created to remedy as follows: “An illiberal opinion of the worth and rights of the laboring classes; an unjust estimation of their moral, intellectual, and physical powers; an unwise misapprehension of the effect which would result from the cultivation of their minds and the improvement of their condition.” Ely also mentioned that during the antebellum period supporters of workingmen had been active in education movements. The most important of these, in his view, had been William Ellery Channing, whose still-celebrated essays on social topics—“Self-Culture” and “On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes”—had proclaimed that the American laborer was to be “a student, a thinker, an intellectual man, as well as a laborer” (121–22).

Direct testimony from contemporary American workers provided Ely with additional and more concrete evidence of the culture-bearing services provided by the American labor movement. “Glad to give the exact words of the workingmen,” Ely reprinted passages taken from the first Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics, which he presented as evidence showing that trade unions and labor organizations were, in part, “popular schools of oratory in which workingmen learn to express their thoughts and to address a public audience, while their press furnishes opportunity for the development of any literary talent among them” (127). Ely also praised the Knights and other labor organizations for beginning to turn their attention to the establishment of libraries for their members. Other examples of what the American labor movement was doing to “encourage social and moral culture,” he concluded, could be multiplied ad libitum (150).

Appearing in three editions before 1890, and remaining a standard work on American labor history for the next three decades, The Labor Movement in America was the book that established Ely’s reputation as the most influential academic reformer of his generation. His bid for the
language of culture, however, has been largely forgotten, partly because it is not without its problems. Writing as he did at the height of the power of the Knights of Labor, Ely of course could not have anticipated the labor organization’s sudden decline, and with it an explanatory reproach that attributed the decay of the Knights to “the undue elevation as well as the superabundance of their ideals”—the very features Ely believed had contributed so directly to their success. In reading chapter 5 of The Labor Movement in America, one also never gets the impression that Ely recognized that in the mid-1880s the concept of culture was beginning to operate in a new register of meaning, now just beginning service as one of the new ideals that late-nineteenth-century capitalists would use to constitute themselves as a social class. From Ely we hear nothing of the establishment and endowment of new urban institutions—museums, research libraries, orchestras, and exhibitions—that not only identified the high arts and artifacts of Europe as the inheritance of modern American capitalists but also promoted them as the primary agents of a missing American culture. In Ely’s account it is as if the primary institutional locations of culture had yet to be determined and the egalitarian political implications of the concept still could be taken for granted.

This is not the place for an extended discussion of the role and influence of culture in the American labor movement during the era of industrialization. For my purposes here, however, there are two points about the character of that movement at the time Ely came to write his book that bear emphasizing. The first is a simple one and probably would not be denied even by historians doubtful of his claim that the ideal of self-culture formed part of the native tongue of the American working class. During the immediate postbellum decades, leaders and advocates of workers organizations were, for the most part, figures who had come of age during the 1840s and 1850s and whose attitudes on social issues embodied an amalgam of values derived from various sources. Neither proletarian nor members of the middle class, they more resembled, as Leon Fink as described them, “worker-intellectuals” who championed equality and independence, mutuality and social obligation, and collective political action to correct injustice. Their popular and cross-class republican vision of American worker-citizens, however, was coupled with an equally powerful, if less well noticed, preoccupation with the inner life of ordinary working men and women. Prominent labor leaders such as Ira Steward (1851–83), William Sylvis (1828–69), George McNeil (1837–1906), and Terence Powderly (1849–1924) took the ideals of individual self-improvement and self-education as seriously as citizenship. They also encouraged rank-and-file workers to do the same by establishing their own libraries, reading rooms, and lecture programs in local
union halls and assemblies throughout the country. In fact, the keystone of organized labor during the years that marked the immediate onset of industrialization—the campaign for an eight-hour day—was routinely justified as a reform that would not only spread work and lessen unemployment but also give workers more free time for education and other cultural pursuits.22

Exactly how widespread the embrace of culture was among rank-and-file workers is of course hard to say. By the mid-1880s urban working-class neighborhoods had long since divided between the “rough” and the “respectable,” with the roughs—especially men—setting little premium on education, ignoring the dictates of respectability, and continuing to spend their leisure time in saloons and other social centers. Yet the rough and the respectable lived side by side, and respectable workers were attracted to and active in local labor organizations precisely because, as Ely was among the first to point out, they played a decisive part in efforts to educate as well as to represent the working class. Any reader of Francis G. Couvares’s account of the role and influence of the Knights of Labor in Pittsburgh during the 1870s and 1880s, for example, will be impressed by the fact that within working-class neighborhoods it was ordinary workers themselves who first established various organizations dedicated to cultural self-improvement: libraries and schools for adult education, book-buying and reading clubs, art galleries and brass bands. True enough, many of these organizations were also conceived as alternatives to the saloons, which had done much to nurture the labor movement but which respectable labor leaders such Powderly now believed were threatening its progress. Couvares demonstrates persuasively, however, that while the Knights’ ambitious national reform program aimed to discipline and unify all spheres of working-class life, to a remarkable degree the organization’s program closely corresponded to the existing cultural and social realities of Pittsburgh in the immediate postbellum decades. The citizen-worker idealized by the Knights of Labor, in other words, referred not simply to a local worker set in motion; he was, as Ely had recognized, a new man of culture as well: sober, self-educated, and cosmopolitan, rooted in the new world of the urban working class but also intent upon remaking it.25

IV

In the late 1890s, the inclusive notion of culture Ely believed had been given new life by the Knights of Labor was employed again as a key element in a criticism of the outlook and style of Booker T. Washington, a former member of the Knights whose sudden ascendancy as national
spokesman for African Americans and accommodation with racism stimulated several chapters in the final text I review here, DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1905). In the opening chapter of this book, which first appeared in August 1897 as an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, DuBois proclaimed that while “the history of the American Negro” remained a story of two as yet unreconciled strivings—“to be both a Negro and an American”—the end of this struggle was clear: “to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius” (5). Criticizing Washington’s call in 1895 for political retreat and the exclusive cultivation of manual skills, DuBois demanded for African Americans access to the same economic opportunities, intellectual activities, and political advantages open
to whites. “Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need,” he wrote, “not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood” (8).24

In understanding DuBois's repeated invocations of “culture” in *The Souls of Black Folks*, it is, I think, almost impossible to overestimate the importance of his complex appraisal of Washington. Some contemporary interpreters who, on political grounds, find DuBois's bid for the language of culture not to their taste have suggested that the accommodation he denounced in Washington’s case was reinstated when DuBois came to celebrate cultural ideals and practices more or less identical with those of late-nineteenth-century educated white elites. But in fact it was not, as is often said, Washington’s accommodationist stance so much as his anti-intellectualism and his extraordinary power as a machine boss that disturbed DuBois. Close examination of the various ways in which he appealed to the ideal of culture in *The Souls of Black Folks* to challenge that power also suggests that his criticism of Washington is better understood as a delicate balancing act rather than an outright denunciation.

In presenting himself as a spokesman for “educated and thoughtful colored men in all parts of the land,” DuBois made it clear he believed that in America culture was an inclusive ideal that spoke of a desire for individual “self-assertion and self-development” (35) shared by all its people, white and black alike. Behind this argument lay the belief that if culture as a normative standard existed to draw attention to the greatest achievements of the human spirit, black Americans had already staked out important claims in this domain that Washington and his supporters had ignored. “We are that people,” DuBois proclaimed, “whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy.”25

On the other hand, DuBois also made it clear he believed a small class of “leaders of thought and missionaries of culture” had a particularly urgent role to play within the African American community at the turn of the century. Indeed, he argued in chapter 6 of *The Souls of Black Folks* that the best chance for the social regeneration of the African Americans lay neither in their music nor in their oral traditions but in making the existing structure of Negro colleges and universities solid and permanent. For these were institutions, DuBois believed, that promised to produce exceptional men and women who would embody and promote “a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks freedom and self-development.”
This last message, essentially a call for African Americans to recognize it was incumbent on them to develop more of their own “missionaries of culture,” was first presented in an address on “The Conservation of the Races” on March 5, 1897, DuBois had presented at the founding meeting of the American Negro Academy in Washington, D.C. There too he proclaimed that “the eight million people of Negro blood in the United States of America” were a nation “stored with wonderful possibilities of culture.” Yet he had stressed as well that the principal danger African Americans faced was not race prejudice so much as the prospect of being led to believe their destiny was “a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture.” “Let us not deceive ourselves at our situation in this country,” DuBois warned. “Weighted with a heritage of moral iniquity from our past history, hard pressed in the economic world by foreign immigrants and native prejudice, hated here, despised there and pitied everywhere; our one haven of refuge is ourselves, and but one means of advance, our own belief in our great destiny, our own implicit trust in our ability and worth.” From this diagnosis sprang not simply justification for the new Negro Academy but also a broader prescription to strive for “race regimentation” and “race solidarity.” To realize “that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities,” DuBois concluded, African Americans had to build and maintain more of their own separate “race organizations”—not simply Negro colleges and universities but also “Negro newspapers, Negro business organizations, a Negro school of literature and art, and an intellectual clearing house, for all these products of the Negro mind, which we may call a Negro Academy.” All these organizations, he added, were needed not simply for positive advances but also because they were “absolutely essential for negative defense.”

Analyzing DuBois use of the rhetoric of culture in this way suggests that by the turn of the century he was employing it to pursue a campaign with two different but related fronts. Clearly he wanted to raise the tone and the stakes in efforts to solve the problem of educating African Americans by breaking open the anti-intellectual blockhouse in which Washington and his supporters had taken refuge. Yet DuBois at the same time plainly wanted to build an alliance with what he labeled the “Tuskegee machine” on a platform of racial separation. Indeed, if we focus primarily on chapters 1, 2, 5, and 6 of *The Souls of Black Folks*, it seems clear that DuBois’s immediate practical purpose in publishing the book was to bring new support to Negro universities and colleges in the South by identifying them as the chief sources of teachers for Negro trade and manual training schools. Pointing out that “neither Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained
in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates,” DuBois apparently hoped that together he and Washington might usher in an era of “loving, reverent comradeship between the black lowly and the black men emancipated by training and culture” (75). He had no quarrel with Washington’s view that for the immediate future “the Negro must strive and strive mightily to help himself.” Yet he was also convinced, as we will see in more detail in chapter 5, that without the presence of a distinct class of educated African American professionals, this striving would never see any great success.

Perhaps no figure who came of age in late-nineteenth-century America ever spoke and wrote more passionately of the redemptive power of culture. As with Ely’s earlier effort, however, DuBois’s bid for the language of culture, while by no means forgotten, is not without its problems. Because a very small class of African American “men of training and culture” are the acknowledged heroes of *The Souls of Black Folks*—“the talented tenth,” he would famously (yet also misleadingly) label them—DuBois has been reproached more than once for adopting an elitist attitude.27 And there is some justice in this view. It is worth noting again that when he made his case for the importance of an educated black leadership in chapter 6 of *The Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois did not argue for assimilation. He also appeared to accept the racist premise that postwar African Americans needed cultural leadership more than other contemporary groups because they had no customs, traditions, and family ties of their own. In fact, as he had done at the end of his address “The Conservation of Races,” in chapter 6 DuBois appealed to white Americans to support his argument less for the sake of the Negro than because it made good economic and social sense for themselves. And here, once again, he seemed to identify himself as both a supporter and a potential ally of the Tuskegee machine. The “question of the future,” DuBois wrote, was how best to keep “the nine millions of Negroes in this nation” from “brooding over the wrongs of the past and the difficulties of the present, so that all their energies may be bent toward a cheerful striving and cooperation with their white neighbors toward a larger, juster and fuller future.” Certainly one method for doing this was by means of the common schools and trade schools that aimed at closely knitting the Negro to “the great industrial possibilities of the South.” These efforts, however, needed to be supplemented and reinforced by black colleges and universities, institutions where the “foundations of knowledge in this race, as in others” were sure to find “a solid, permanent structure” (75).

As an interpretation of the central message of *The Souls of Black Folks*, however, too much can made of DuBois’s commitment to the concept of
a saving “cultured” elite. Robert Stepto has aptly described the chapters that form the final third of the book as “a cultural immersion ritual” that had DuBois, the one-time New England black, finding and reconstructing his cultural identity anew in the southern Black Belt. Here DuBois’s attention shifted from providing a blueprint for the duties of college-educated Negro leadership at the turn of the century to accounting for the transforming power, from antebellum slave culture through the post-Reconstruction period, of what he now presented as the central expressive form of African Americans, the “sorrow songs.” In the five chapters he wrote specifically for *The Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois substantially connected himself for the first time with the vast majority of African Americans he recognized had little in common with the “thinking classes of American Negroes” (39). And what came of this connection was, in part, a now well-known effort to gain for slave spirituals recognition as a central contribution to American culture. As Eric Sundquist has argued persuasively, however, the last five chapters also substantially tempered DuBois’s commitment to an understanding of culture that was too easily identified both with his own personal taste for past European achievements and with his belief in the importance of a black “talented tenth” whose future achievements, he had argued in earlier chapters, promised to raise up the uneducated black masses below them. In putting the spirituals at the center of *The Souls of Black Folks*, in other words, DuBois not only identified their slave creators as the foundational voice of African American culture but also signaled his refusal to accept as necessary a supposed contradiction between elite and folk.28

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V

Where should historians’ efforts to deepen and complicate our awareness of the many-sidedness of American talk and thinking about culture during the industrial era be leading us? In at least three directions, I believe. The first is toward full acceptance of the important truth that during the era of industrialization, the normative concept of culture served a variety of purposes that we trivialize if we reduce them to the single agenda of “social control.” More important, if historians want to reap the full benefits of a pluralist approach, we need to address an issue I consider in more detail in the four chapters that follow: the changing context within which the work of building new cultural institutions and practices actually went forward during the era of industrialization. Save for Neil Harris, the leading lights have displayed remarkably little interest in breaking down the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Thirty years ago, in a provocative essay on “Four Stages of Cultural
Growth: The American City,” Harris argued that at some point in the 1870s the character and motivation of patrons of cultural institutions in older eastern cities began to change. Their concerns shifted away from popular distribution and participation to what he called “certification”—of either the experiences and objects elite cultural institutions protected or the good taste and social standing of their affluent supporters.

Harris noted that the popularizing phase lasted somewhat longer in new western cities such as Denver and San Francisco. But it is arguable that even in older eastern cities, the overall pattern, as well as the pace, of change were complex and ambiguous in ways that even his more flexible periodization does not manage to suggest. Well past the turn of century, for example, it is clear that “participatory” and “certifying” understandings of the meaning of culture remained closely intertwined in the thinking and activities of the founders of the leading American settlement houses in Boston, New York, and Chicago. A vivid brief illustration of such thinking appears in Jane Addams’s 1901 speech.
to a national convention of women’s clubs. In explaining how the Social Extension Committee of the Hull House Women’s Club was a successful example of what settlement houses were trying to do, Addams described a winter “social evening” activity that unexpectedly brought together the women of the club and the husbands of Italian immigrant women who lived nearby. She recalled that one of the Italian men “did a number of pretty tricks, such as one sees in the streets of Naples,” and another “sang rousing songs.” “The evening went happily,” Addams concluded, and she recalled that at its close one of the women of the club said to her, “I am ashamed of the way I used to talk about Dagoes. I used to say that we must move off the street because there were so many Dagoes coming in. But they are just like other people, only you have to take more pains to find them out.”

Speaking to an audience that already understood the term “culture” to encompass a very wide variety of self-improvement projects, Addams then went on to account for the woman’s change in attitudes in terms her listeners would have had little difficulty in grasping: “That was the result of cultivation, if we take the definition that it is extended experience. It is exactly the thing we send our children to Europe for, the result we hope for when we read books about all kinds of people—to get over the differences raised by barriers and traditions, that really we may be fair-minded and may know people as they really are. And if we can do that in our social life as in our intellectual life, or if we are without much intellectual life, and do it with our social life it is a great achievement.”

In explaining and promoting the settlement house movement, Addams often assumed the role of spokesperson for a new class of already “cultivated,” college-educated American men and women. When she did so, however, it typically was to show how settlement houses had broken down conventional understanding of what cultivated men and women could or could not do and what cultivation actually entailed. Her 1901 speech is a case in point. At a time when many native-born Americans scoffed and some earlier immigrants distanced themselves from “new immigrants” from eastern and southern Europe, Addams and the founders of other settlement houses embraced an inclusive understanding of culture that counseled tolerance, reciprocity, and a benign recognition of cultural multiplicity. And the specific episode Addams recalled in her 1901 speech was one of countless similar “social evenings” at settlement houses in Boston and New York, all of which came to life with pictures, songs, and dances from the new immigrants’ native lands.

In Addams’s mind Hull House and other American settlement houses had created a world where the distinction between “participatory” and “certifying” concepts of culture existed but had little meaning. Two years
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after Hull House opened its doors in a poor, ethnically mixed neighborhood on the near west side of Chicago, Addams and Ellen Starr were welcoming eight hundred to a thousand people into their home every week. Men, women, and children came for a variety of reasons and joined with Addams and Starr to create a remarkably complex intercultural space. Faculty from the University of Chicago came to teach “College Extension Courses” on topics that included the history of art, mathematics, and zoology. The Chicago Public Library fitted up one of its five new branch library stations at Hull House, staffed it with two librarians, and supplied it with French, Italian, and German newspapers. Hull House itself also sponsored the Working People’s Social Science Club, where each week Chicago labor activists, businessman, civic leaders, university professors, and ordinary working people openly debated the merits of capitalism, socialism, progressive taxation, and anything else that sparked their interest. Residents and neighborhood volunteers also mounted art exhibits in the Butler Gallery, which they built next door to Hull House, and transformed a nearby saloon into a gymnasium. Every morning except on Sundays, they managed a day nursery and operated a kindergarten, and all the while they also ran interference between their neighbors and Chicago’s court system, hospitals, landlords, and city hall.

This characteristic effort to address simultaneously the needs and interests people who already considered themselves cultivated and people whose “faculties are untrained and disused” remains the most striking aspect of the American settlement house movement. And the fact that it persisted and gained strength during the first two decades of the twentieth century should remind us, among other things, that the immediate results of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century efforts to establish new institutions grounded in a “certifying” concept of culture hardly matched the high hopes that elite urban patrons invested in that concept. The actual number of people who visited museums and attended operas and symphonies during that period can only be guessed at, but it certainly was never large enough to signal the successful establishment of a new cultural hierarchy in America. History of course is not chronology. But if we are ever fully to understand the unprecedented importance culture assumed during the industrial era, that understanding should rest, in part, on a more refined temporal articulation of the various settings, and various ways, in which the pursuit of culture went forward in that era.

Finally, pluralist historians can do more work of the kind I pursue in this chapter by developing or strengthening narrative interpretations that allow us to recognize and understand the richness of the American rhetoric of culture on its own terms. The notion that the attitudes and
interests of Americans who championed culture during the industrial era are best understood simply as applications of British Victorian values to new circumstances ought to be put to rest. If we go looking for the actual historical origins of America’s interest in culture, there seems little question that the Unitarian ideal of self-culture must be counted among its prior and primary sources. Although it was that lapsed Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson who gave this ideal its most memorable expression during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, calls for the full development of the individual, and an optimistic faith in the almost limitless capacity of human nature implied by those calls, had been sounded by a long list of Unitarians who preceded him or could be counted among his contemporaries. The pursuit of culture during the industrial era of course was not simply Unitarianism detached from its theological foundations. Yet a remarkable number of the most prominent advocates of culture in fact did come from Unitarian families, especially during the immediate postwar years. Jane Cunningham Croly, for example, the founder of Sorosis and arguably the single most important figure in the early history of the women’s club movement, was the daughter of a Unitarian preacher. And what Charles Eliot called his non-denominationalism was viewed by some of his critics as “Unitariansim raised to the nth power.” Various other attitudes and ideas, some considerably less confident that individuals on their own could bear the responsibility for fostering self-development, inevitably influenced public understanding of what counted as culture. Yet just how a distinctively American ideal of self-culture was maintained, updated, and reinterpreted forms a central theme in the complex story of how American men and women went about “building culture” during the industrial era.