

## Key Ideas/Overview to Guide Your Reading of *A Fierce Discontent*

- By the time this book opens, Populism, a reform movement led largely by Midwestern farmers who felt the establishment didn't listen to them, has died out
- The U.S. was not a land of one united people with a common culture; instead, there were many cultures, divided by "region, race, and ethnicity" (p.4)
- America was stringently divided not just along ethnic lines, but among class ones as well. The so-called "Gilded Age", a term coined by Mark Twain (also known as the Victorian Era, after Queen Victoria of Great Britain) was one in which a few soared to wealth not seen before; this happened especially in industries such as coal, oil, steel, and the railroads. These large corporations often integrated, meaning they controlled every step of the process, squeezing out competitors.
- The late Victorian Era was to excess materially, but morally, people were still quite restrained. The lack of empathy and feeling of being "self made" and "anyone could achieve what I did" individualism of many of the upper class towards those of the lower, farmer, and working classes, helped to drive the reform efforts of the Populists, and then the Progressives.
- At the turn of the 20th century, the election of Theodore Roosevelt, and the beginning of the Edwardian era in Great Britain following Queen Victoria's death in 1901, all showed a shift, a culmination of various attitudes and a backlash to the social constraints and harsh working life for many during the late 1800s.
- A legitimate middle class arose during the Victorian era, with white collar jobs, such as store clerk, typist, accounting, etc. Middle class women also began to work outside the home in larger numbers, particularly before they had children. Once they did have children, they practiced various forms of early birth control to limit their family size. May more women went to college than ever before. Lower class, African American, and Eastern/Southern European women typically didn't have a choice - they had to contribute to the family economy. Children in those groups also were expected to contribute.
- African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, and women struggled against laws that were passed during this era. White women did gain the right to vote, but for many the law didn't go far enough, and men still enjoyed "masculine privilege" at work and at home. African Americans experienced disenfranchisement (losing the right to vote after gaining it, along with citizenship in the "Reconstruction Amendments" of the 1870s), along with the passage of restrictionist laws known as "Jim Crow" after the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that "separate but equal" was allowed, at least on railroad cars. Native Americans faced the forcible removal of their children from their homes to be educated "like whites" during the Gilded Age; during the Progressive Era, still in poverty and on reservations, laws passed that made it even harder to become a citizen of the United States. McGerr argues that Progressives upheld this segregation because the "alternative" of trying to integrate people into a society who didn't want them, would be much more violence and bloodshed than the arrests and lynchings that these groups already endured.

- Some of the most popular reforms were for working hours/conditions (especially for factories & child laborers), anti-Prostitution, anti-divorce, anti-corruption, anti-food adulteration, and anti-alcoholic/temperance. Also, democracy gained an upper hand with the passage of the 17th Amendment, which allowed for “the people” to choose their senators, instead of a state’s legislatures selecting who would go to Washington D.C.
- Progressives such as Jane Addams opened settlement houses to help society. They believed that only through the mixing of classes could Americans truly remake society.
- Progressives were trying to remake society in a “purer” image. This had mixed results. The most famous result was probably the passage of the 18th Amendment, prohibiting alcohol. Ultimately, though the government became more “activist”/involved in the day to day of business and people’s lives during World War I under the guise of the “war effort”, their influence died out post - World War I as people were tired of so much intervention in their affairs. Many of the laws that were passed stuck around, such as the Pure Food and Drug Act, as did the government oversight of “Americanizing” immigrants and trying to find “subversives” or those who had Communist leanings during the First Red Scare in the 1920s.
- McGerr also argues Progressivism died out because they were not in favor of the new culture of “pleasure” - more permissiveness in dating/mating and of leisure, including Ragtime & Jazz music, baseball, World Fairs, motor vehicles, and other amusements - and stayed too Victorian in this regard. Many Americans wanted to be more “individualist” in this regard.