Politics, Social Movements, and the Periodization of U. S. History
Rebecca Edwards, *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (2009)

It may be perilous for a member of the Society of Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era to propose, in the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, that we cease using the term "Gilded Age" as a label for the late nineteenth century. Since I admire Mark Twain, who famously coined the term in a novel that he cowrote with Charles Dudley Warner, such a suggestion feels disloyal if not downright un-American. But in struggling recently to write a synthesis of the United States between 1865 and 1905 (cutoff dates that I chose with considerable doubt), it became apparent to me that "Gilded Age" is not a very useful or accurate term. Intended as an indictment of the elite, it captures none of the era's grassroots ferment and little of its social and intellectual complexity….

The Gilded Age is usually defined as the "last third of the nineteenth century" or thereabouts, from the 1870s to about 1900. Reconstruction is often - but not always - treated as a distinct era running from 1865 to 1877, with the Gilded Age beginning after its demise….

However it is chronologically defined, the standard narrative of the Gilded Age is familiar. This was the era when capital and labor fought their first pitched battles on a national scale, and capital won. Wealth became far more concentrated; the super-rich turned their backs callously on the poor, lavishing millions on banquets and Worth ball gowns. Multinational corporations arose to exercise untrammeled power, while government stood by passively, bound by the ideology of social Darwinism and laissez faire. Where government was active, it was riddled with corruption. Although (this story goes) a series of admirable movements protested the new conditions, all of them failed. The most universally perceived feature of the Gilded Age appears to be political stagnation and corruption. I recently reviewed a host of U.S. history textbook chapters on the Gilded Age and found the following descriptors: "paralysis," "misrule," "spoilsmen," "degradation," "discontent," "malaise," and "ordeal."...students, confronted with such a static and demoralizing analysis, must surely skip to the next chapter if they think they can get away with it.

If they do, they are greeted by the start of the so-called Progressive Era, often in the figure of Theodore Roosevelt. The century turned, and Americans now felt optimistic about the possibility of change. They organized to challenge big business, restore good government, and ameliorate poverty. Those who organized before 1900 to challenge big business, restore good government, and ameliorate poverty are treated in a highly selective way. Jane Addams's Hull House, begun in 1889, is almost always identified as a progressive initiative. But I have not yet found a textbook in which the Farmers Alliance and Populists are treated as progressives, even though

Hull House was founded just as the Farmers' Alliance reached its zenith and the People's Party emerged.

The standard Gilded Age/Progressive Era narrative marginalizes several narratives of declension between the two eras - stories of political possibilities that were open before 1900 but closed off afterward. Two examples are worth mentioning briefly. First, in the main thread of African American history, emancipation was followed by several decades of institution building and intense struggle over the parameters of freedom. As late as the 1890s, in some parts of the South, African Americans voted in significant numbers and used the courts to fight discrimination and segregation. But the turn of the century ushered in the Solid South, disfranchisement, and *Plessy v. Ferguson*. As historians have noted, if there is any kind of progressive story here, it is a grim one.

The history of U.S. foreign relations highlights another glaring problem with the Gilded Age /Progressive Era storyline: Around 1900, the United States laid claim to Cuba and the Philippines and began a steady pattern of military interventions in the Caribbean and Central America. Imperialism may or may not mark a sharp discontinuity in U.S. policy - that remains contested - but overseas conquest fits awkwardly, at best, into a story of turn-of-the-century citizens who suddenly took up the causes of democracy, poverty eradication, and social justice. Students may well read about *Plessy*, disfranchisement, and imperialism and ask their professors, just what was so "progressive" about the emerging Progressive Era?
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In considering whether the so-called Gilded Age was truly marked by "stalemate" and "paralysis," a good place to begin is with concrete policy achievements. Despite the persistent idea that government stagnated before 1900, recent scholarship shows that the late nineteenth century was by no means an era of laissez faire. The Civil War era witnessed sweeping expansions of government power for new ends, and the postwar decades were marked by struggles over those expansions and proposals for many more. While much innovation occurred at the municipal and state levels, federal achievements were substantive. U.S. civil service reform began with the Pendleton Act in 1883. Congress passed the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887, the Hatch Act that same year, and the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890. The U.S. Post Office introduced a critical series of innovations, including Railway Mail, bulk postage rates, and finally rural free delivery by 1896. All these developments fit comfortably into the progressive narrative of professionalization, scientific expertise, and greater government efficiency and regulation.10 Meanwhile, in 1894, Congress and President Grover Cleveland enacted a progressive federal income tax, though this was struck down by the Supreme Court, and advocates had to work for a constitutional amendment that finally arrived two decades later. If

being thwarted by the Supreme Court keeps one from being called "progressive," then legions of twentieth-century reformers will have to forego their titles, as well; an important continuity was that, with notable exceptions, the Supreme Court remained hostile to progressive measures from Reconstruction well into the New Deal.

Other patterns of grassroots activism also show continuity across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As noted above, Hull House began in 1889. The women's club movement was well underway in many cities by the 1880s, with some clubs tackling social and political issues. Leon Fink has shown that the Knights of Labor were busy in the 1880s advocating such progressive urban goals as school funding, affordable mass transit, and garbage collection. The movement for women's voting rights arrived prominently on the national scene in 1869 and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in the 1870s; ratifications of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the Constitution, circa 1920, are obvious ending points for the stories of prohibition and women's suffrage. Meanwhile, nascent environmentalists were among those who persuaded Congress to designate the world's first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872. John Muir wrote about Yosemite in the late 1860s and early 1870s, and John Wesley Powell's Report on the Arid Lands, now an environmentalist classic, appeared in 1878. The Sierra Club was founded in 1892, the same year that Populists met in Omaha. Recent scholarship suggests, as well, that Grover Cleveland's forestry chief, Bernard Fastow, may deserve as much credit as Gifford Pinchot for the rise of federal conservation.

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Perhaps it would be useful to broaden our vision. Instead of looking for consistency inside Populism and progressivism, both of which were sprawling and protean movements (and probably, in the case of progressivism, not one coherent movement at all), we could step back and look for themes and threads extending across the entire period between 1877 and 1920, or perhaps even 1932. This long era was characterized by economic and political integration within and beyond the boundaries of the United States and by substantive policy innovation, though at no time did state-building achieve the ambition and scope that would characterize the New Deal. What did mark the Long Progressive Era was a diverse, creative array of proposals for expanding government power and institutional capacity. This period also witnessed struggles over the United States' new identity as a multiracial society and over whether people of color (including not only African Americans, but also Asians and Latinos) had equal citizenship rights; the dramatic entry of women into the public sphere and an extended debate over whether they had equal citizenship rights; a series of Protestant adjustments, including both creative and reactionary responses, to increasing religious pluralism and the challenges posed by science and consumer culture; and the use of new technologies of communication and transportation to build national and international alliances of reform and protest.

A Long Progressive Era could incorporate the Grange and the Greenbackers in a story that points in the direction of the New Deal. Discontinuities within the period could be acknowledged if we identified an Early Progressive Era, running from about 1880 to 1894, and a Late Progressive Era, roughly dating from 1894 to 1920. What divided these was the cataclysmic depression of 1890s, Republicans' resulting electoral triumph, and Theodore Roosevelt's unexpected ascendancy, all of which shifted the course of state-building and reform in various ways. But, though these crucial events shifted the channels of the great reform river between 1894 and 1901 - narrowing here, deepening there - historians should not look for the river's source in 1900 or even the 1890s. It was already flowing deep and wide.

I will just note here, briefly, two benefits that might accrue if we abolished the Gilded Age and began thinking about the late nineteenth century as part of a Long Progressive Era and if we eventually persuaded non-scholars to adopt the same view. First, political commentators who argue that we now live in a "New Gilded Age" would have to confront the fact that social and economic inequality, selfish uses of wealth, and indifference to the poor have characterized most eras of U.S. history, not just the first three decades after the Civil War. That would suggest how intractable these problems really are. Commentators would thus have to look beyond the modest achievements of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, and perhaps even beyond the New Deal, as models for reform. They might discover in the Early Progressive Era not "paralysis" and "stagnation," but an array of radical ideas potentially worth revisiting….

Who Were the Gilders? And Other Seldom-Asked Questions about Business, Technology, and Political Economy in the United States, 1877- 1900
Richard R. John, *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (2009)

Historians of the United States have for many decades termed the late nineteenth century the "Gilded Age." No consensus exists as to when this period began and ended, or how it might best be characterized. Most textbook authors place the origins of the Gilded Age around 1877 and its demise around 1900. Few would deny that this period witnessed a host of epochal innovations that included the rise of the modern industrial corporation, the building of large-scale technical systems, including the electric power grid, and the creation of governmental institutions that were conducive to rapid industrialization. Yet the significance of these innovations remained a matter of dispute. This essay contends that no synthetic account of the late nineteenth-century United States that aspires to be at all comprehensive can ignore these innovations - innovations that have come to be known by various names such as the

"managerial revolution," the "Second Industrial Revolution," and "modernization." It further contends that the reluctance of some of the most respected historians of business, technology, and political economy to embrace the Gilded Age construct raises questions about its utility as a periodizing device.

The reluctance of historians of business, technology, and political economy to conceive of the late nineteenth century as a Gilded Age is manifested in their reluctance to characterize the people responsible for these innovations as "gilders." Historians of the 1790s routinely write about the "federalists," while historians of the 1900s have long tried to identify precisely who deserves to be regarded as "progressive." Historians of the late nineteenth century, in contrast, have failed to reach a consensus as to what to call its *dramatis personae*, let alone what made them distinctive.

In one sense, this is unsurprising. The magnitude of the late nineteenth-century innovations in business, technology, and political economy were so enormous, and their effects so far reaching, that it would seem unlikely that a single group of people could have brought them about. Indeed, it may well be the very momentousness of this transformation that helps to explain why the "Gilded Age" construct has proved so enduring. The construct is so open-ended, and its meaning so vague, that it can embrace a variety of phenomena.

To be sure, there has long been a consensus among social and cultural historians that a more or less coherent group - long known as "businessmen" or, more recently, the "bourgeoisie" - dominated center stage. Yet with a few notable exceptions, in describing this group, historians who do not specialize in business, technology, or political economy tend to fall back on language that has changed little since the 1930s, when journalist Matthew Josephson published his muckraking expose of "robber barons…."

Historians of business, technology, and political economy have long regarded the popular fascination with the machinations of late nineteenth-century businesspeople with mixed emotions. On the positive side, it has goaded textbook authors into including at least a thumbnail sketch of certain well-known businesspeople. Andrew Carnegie, Jay Gould, and John D. Rockefeller are so well known that it would seem foolhardy to leave them out. Indeed, there may well be no other period in U.S. history in which textbook authors find themselves obliged to include at least a cursory discussion of what specific businesspeople actually did. Contemporaries reached an analogous conclusion. "It is a notorious fact," declared Maryland congressman David J. Lewis in 1914, articulating a common view, "that since the Civil War the history of our country has not been the narrative of social institutions, but a stirring story of the

gigantic achievements of individuals in the domain of private finance." It was easier to remember a half-dozen of this era's financiers, Lewis lamented, than to recall the names of the presidents of the United States.

On the negative side, all this attention has come at a cost. In no other period in U.S. history is the actual conduct of businesspeople more likely to be caricatured. At least part of the problem can be traced to the propensity of historians who do not specialize in business, technology, and political economy to characterize the late nineteenth century as the Gilded Age. This construct implies that this period was distinctive, if not unique, in the extent to which it was characterized by vulgarity, materialism, and political corruption. And more often than not, these evils are blamed on businesspeople - they set the tone for public life, or so it is assumed. The phrase "Gilded Age," it is worth remembering, is the only widely used periodization that is unambiguously pejorative - even "Cold War," after all, has its defenders.

Yet was, in fact, the late nineteenth century uniquely vulgar, materialistic, and corrupt? This question is rarely asked, yet a plausible case can be made that it was not...Was the late nineteenth century uniquely materialistic? Here too, the verdict is mixed. No one would deny that many late nineteenth-century businesspeople craved luxury, built ostentatious mansions, and lavishly invested - often at the insistence of their wives - in expensive furniture, clothing, and art. Yet did this really set them apart from businesspeople in the early republic? Or, for that matter, did it distinguish them in a fundamental way from wealthy Americans in any decade from the seventeenth century to the present? The *nouveaux riches*, after all, have always been with us….What historian would seriously entertain the proposition that the late nineteenth century was the only epoch in which large numbers of Americans yearned to get rich quick?

Comments

Richard Bensel *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (2009)

Before engaging the critiques and recommendations that Rebecca Edwards and Richard John have so forcefully and provocatively offered us, we should remind ourselves of what is at stake in this debate. And what is at stake is simultaneously "a little" and "a lot." And that is because periodization schemes are as much a creature of academic sociology as they are intellectual and analytic constructs. As the several references to "textbook chapters" in these essays indicate, nothing is more central to the construction of American history as an intellectual and academic community than the textbook used in undergraduate survey classes. From that perspective, the goal of these critiques is to reconceive the chapter in these surveys now

usually dedicated to the period following the Compromise of 1877 up to the end of the nineteenth century. Rebecca would reconceive that chapter by linking the earlier period to what we now commonly regard as the Progressive Era in the early twentieth century. Richard would banish the misleading and rather gaudy adjective "Gilded," replacing it with, as I understand him, something like the Age of Industrialization.

There is much more at stake here than the mere title and boundaries of a chapter in a survey textbook. Titles tell the reader what to expect within the text and, because the author anticipates that expectation from the reader, they become a kind of sieve or filter when the author goes about gathering and synthesizing material for that text. What seems relevant to the title goes in and what appears to be beside the point stays out. Seen this way, Rebecca's recommendation proposes that politics take center stage in the chapter dedicated to this period. From this perspective, she very skillfully contends that the chapter should be dedicated to tracing the linkages between, on the one hand, the reform movements that we know as Greenbackers /Populists /Knights of Labor and the progressives, on the other. She suggests that the present periodization all too easily allows us to assume that "the Populists just up and died" in 1900, conveniently tying up one chapter and allowing the next one, highlighting the progressives, to begin a new theme. In a sense she wants to eliminate the boundary now demarcating the division between the Gilded Age and Progressive Era chapters because it is analytically deceptive. I heartily endorse that conclusion. And I also heartily endorse her more or less explicit suggestion that politics and public policy should play central thematic roles in the chapters dedicated to the period between the end of the Civil War and World War I (possibly continuing, as she notes, into the New Deal).

Richard, for his part, appears comfortable with crafting a period dating from about 1877 to 1900. He would, however, change the narrative content of most textbook accounts of the period by including as central elements the organizational, political, and economic innovations that made rapid industrial development possible. In particular, he would have us focus upon the rise of the immense communication, transportation, and energy systems that provided much of the infrastructure enabling industrialization. In fact, as he notes, these systems, along with the emergence of the modern corporation as an organizational template for coordinating economic production and marketing, comprised much of the substance of industrialization as well.

The problem, from Richard's perspective, is that the now hoary title "Gilded Age" encourages authors and readers to conjure up caricatures of the innovative and enterprising entrepreneurs who put these systems together the innovative and enterprising entrepreneurs who put these systems together and founded the corporations that encompassed their operations. Instead of

the robber barons who do depressingly animate the national stage in current narratives, he would have us focus upon these systems, corporations, and the theoretical strategies of the people who created them. This revision of the traditional narrative would also stress the rise of the administrative state that imposed a common organizational form upon what was, for the most part, private enterprise. In some cases, the robber barons that populate current narratives would reappear in his revision - but as economic innovators as opposed to corrupt speculators. But the thrust of his critique is that we should narrate the now largely overlooked story of how the United States became one of the leading industrial powers of the world, as opposed to the scandalous excesses of fraud and corruption that were merely incidental to that achievement. And I heartily concur with both this critique and the recommended revision.

In short, Rebecca would stress politics when narrating the last quarter of the nineteenth century. She would particularly emphasize the continuity of reform movements and their claimants in that period with those that now populate accounts of the decades immediately following the turn of the century. Richard would stress what we might call the "mechanics" (in both senses of that word) of industrial expansion, including some of the administrative effects of the reform movements that Rebecca would privilege. As I have already said, I like both of these recommendations and the critiques upon which they rest. Furthermore, I believe that they can be combined to their mutual benefit. In order to see how we might do this, we must first return to the main reason why we must have periods at all.

The standard survey is, in large part, the product of the several interpretive communities that have divided up American history into separate periods. To a large extent, these communities go their own separate ways as they pursue themes and problems peculiar to their own practitioners and the periods in which they work. While the standard survey almost always has an overarching theme of some sort (lodged securely in the title of the textbook), the separate chapters also at least nod in the direction of the distinct and separate preoccupations of these separate interpretive communities...But the result, if the textbook is considered as a whole, is often a bit of a hodgepodge or potpourri in that these communities (and their periods) are preoccupied by distinctly different problems. That is why, in so many surveys, "the Populists just up and died" after 1900. Those historians who call the Progressive Era their home have had no use for the Populists. In fact, making a firm distinction between the Populists and the progressives has been a strategy in which they have defended the integrity of their own turf. And all of this also suggests that Rebecca and Richard, however much I agree with them (and that is a lot), could be accused of a bit of special pleading themselves.

The problem, as I see it, is the standard American survey itself. One possible solution would be to craft surveys along interpretive lines that cross the separate periods. And such surveys, of course, exist with respect to American economic history, to take but one example. But this merely replicates the disjunctive influence of the interpretive communities that preside over the separate periods, albeit within one narrower, more focused range of the American experience. What we need, instead, is a solution that liberates the focus of each period from the interpretive community that produces the scholarship. We could, for example, ask what Americans (in particular, American undergraduates) most want to know about each of the periods and let their interests determine the content and approach. While this, in fact, does influence textbook adoption (via sales), there would probably be something a little incestuous in this strategy in that many undergraduates would not know what most interested them about a period before they were exposed to it and the selective presentation of a theme by the textbook and the professor would, in many cases, merely be self-confirming.

What I would suggest, instead, is that we let scholars outside the United States tell us what they would most want to know about this country's history. This would largely free each chapter, however defined, from the possession of its interpretive community while, I would guess, providing a question around which to organize what that interpretive community can tell us about that period. For instance, I would wager and wager strongly that what scholars outside the United States would most want to know about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is how this country managed to combine a rather robust democratic politics with comparatively rapid industrialization. The compatibility of democracy and development is, for example, a central question in many rapidly developing nations, nowhere more so than in China. And answering that question would necessarily entail combining and integrating Rebecca's and Richard's critiques into a single narrative that would, also and not at all incidentally, significantly revise what we now relate to readers under the rubric Gilded Age. This would probably not solve most disjunctive problems, because foreign readers would likely have very different questions that they would pose to each of the separate periods. But it would address some of the rather incestuous qualities of contestation over the interpretive themes that are applied to them.

I am, of course, skeptical that this strategy would, in fact, achieve the result that we all want to see because, in the first place, the survey textbook is an industry (and a powerful industrial product) that operates on sales, and the sales of a textbook written from the cosmopolitan perspective of foreign interests and questions would probably not compete well with more parochial alternatives. In fact, the complex of academic sociology and publishing economics will probably trump even the strongest intellectual critiques favoring alternative interpretive themes. So I am rather pessimistic that things are going to change soon.