

Strikers and Populists in the Gilded Age

In 1872, two neighboring families in Hartford, Connecticut, shared dinner. As they argued over the quality of popular fiction, the two men concluded that they could write a better novel than any currently popular one. Although neither had ever written a novel, together Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner co-wrote *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, in which they satirized the business and politics of their day. The novel eventually gave a name to the Gilded Age—the historical period between 1860 and 1890 characterized by the sharp contrasts in society, in which America’s surface gleamed with gold while camouflaging the cheap base metal underneath.

Such symbolism was hardly lost on the ordinary people who lived through the Gilded Age and who experienced tremendous hardships and losses. Whether they lived in the rapidly industrializing cities where they had few services and even fewer amenities, or in small rural communities where they were victimized by grueling poverty, their hardships were similar. And while they got poorer, the rich were getting richer. The inequities that flourished in this seemingly gilded environment fueled a new generation of struggles.

Document-Based Questions

HENRY GEORGE

1. What is the message in Henry George’s statement, “The vice, the crime, the ignorance, the meanness born of poverty, poison, so to speak, the very air which rich and poor alike must breathe”? Do you agree or disagree?
2. Do you agree or disagree with George’s central point, that “the great majority of those who suffer from poverty are poor not from their own particular faults, but because of conditions imposed by society at large”? Do you think the same could be said about the poor today? Explain.

3. What did George mean when he wrote that “there is no natural reason why we should not all be rich”? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

AUGUST SPIES

1. Do you think August Spies presented a powerful self-defense? How could it have been more powerful? Why do you think the court sentenced Spies to death?
2. From what Spies says, do you think he was convicted on circumstantial evidence? How and why? What do you think might have been the most persuasive testimonies leading to his conviction?
3. What is the “subterranean fire” that Spies declares the court cannot put out? Do you think he was correct?

ANONYMOUS, “RED-HANDED MURDERER”

1. Were the actions of the African American resisters legal? If so, how was the government’s response justified?
2. Why were those in power so enraged about the fact that white laborers helped and harbored the black laborers? Is this the first time in American history that whites and blacks united in order to bring about change?
3. What is your reaction to this report?

REVEREND ERNEST LYON, ET AL.

1. How could African Americans be disenfranchised just over twenty years after passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments? How were they victimized by Ku Klux Klan (KKK) terror just eighteen years after the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was passed?
2. Why do you believe so few white persons rose to the defense of African Americans and denounced the activities of the KKK?
3. Why does the author criticize members of the Democratic Party?

MARY ELIZABETH LEASE

1. What is a monopoly? How does Lease explain that monopoly has become “a master” over “the common people of this country [who] are slaves”?
2. How would abolishing the national banks and home foreclosure or receiving the power to make loans directly from the government empower rural “slaves”?
3. Why does the author believe that the Farmers’ Alliance movement is not “a passing episode in politics”? What proof does she offer to back up her belief?

THE OMAHA PLATFORM OF THE PEOPLE’S PARTY

1. Why are the people “demoralized”?
2. What is the “vast conspiracy against mankind [that] has been organized on two continents”?
3. Do you think the platform provides a realistic plan to “restore the government of the republic to the hands of ‘the plain people’ with whose class it originated”? Explain.

REVEREND J. L. MOORE

1. What arguments does Reverend Moore use to show the similarities among white and black labor interests? Why do you think more whites did not join in such an alliance?
2. How is Moore’s entry similar to the anonymous report of the riot in Louisiana and to the Reverend Ernest Lyon’s statement about KKK violence?
3. How did Congress fail to provide “protection at the ballot box” for African Americans?

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

1. How does Wells-Barnett account for the acceptance and maintenance of lynching practices in the United States?

2. What does she mean when she writes, “Masks have long since been thrown aside and the lynching of the present day take place in broad daylight”? Do you think one type of terror is worse than the other? Explain.
3. What is the “crime of outrage” that Wells-Barnett exposes? How do you think the white public responded to this article—and especially this particular accusation—which was published by a black woman in 1893?

STATEMENT FROM THE PULLMAN STRIKERS

1. How did unions during this period provide their members with hope?
2. What are the worker’s grievances? How do they support their contention that “Pullman, both the man and the town, is an ulcer on the body politic”?
3. Why would Pullman decrease wages “from 30 to 70 percent”? Do you agree with the strikers that “preposterous profits have been made”? Is this analogous to twenty-first-century grievances in some sectors of the American working community? Explain.

EDWARD BELLAMY

1. How does the society Edward Bellamy envisioned for the year 2000 compare and contrast with society as you know it in the early twenty-first century?
2. Can you envision a time as described by Dr. Leete, in which officials would no longer be “under a constant temptation to misuse their power for the private profit of themselves or others”? Explain.
3. Do you feel Bellamy has created the hope for a utopian society? Do you like the society he describes? Would you want to live in such a society?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 11, “Strikers and Populists in the Gilded Age”

After reading Chapter 11 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are four possible main points.

1. By the late nineteenth century, many working-class Americans believed that instead of protecting their life and liberty, the government deliberately sought to deprive them of their rights in order to protect the vested interests of the wealthy.
2. Although the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century was short-lived, its political influence lasted well into the twentieth century.
3. Working-class people—white and black, rural and urban—suffered at the hands of corporate industrial and agricultural interests during the Gilded Age.
4. Federal, state, and local governments devised many divide-and-conquer policies that discouraged workers from uniting.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 11, “Strikers and Populists in the Gilded Age,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 11, “Robber Barons and Rebels”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 11 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

5. Technological innovations of the late nineteenth century dramatically changed the urban and rural workplace.
6. The massive immigration of different ethnic groups during this period contributed to “the fragmentation of the working-class” (*People’s History*, p. 265).
7. The Horatio Alger “rags to riches” story was largely an American myth.
8. Throughout the Gilded Age, industries comprised of “shrewd, efficient businessmen” (*People’s History*, p. 257) built empires, destroyed competition, maintained high prices, kept wages low, and used government subsidies—all the while becoming the first beneficiaries of the “welfare state.”
9. During the Gilded Age, government, business, churches, and schools worked to control the ideas and actions of working-class Americans.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter II, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. How do the voices in this chapter challenge the myth of individual blame for poverty?
2. What is wage slavery? How do some of the entries in this chapter reinforce the idea of wage slavery? Do you see a difference in these entries between white and black wage slavery?
3. What is anarchism? Why were corporate and governmental powers so worried about the growth of anarchist thought toward the turn of the century?
4. How and why was it dangerous to belong to a union during the Gilded Age?
5. What is lynching? Why do you think it was most popular between the 1880s and the 1920s? Do you think lynching still occurs today?
6. Do you think late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century activities of the Ku Klux Klan were acts of terrorism? Did the federal, state, or local governments classify them as such? Why, or why not?
7. What similarities are shared among the voices of urban whites and urban and rural blacks in this chapter? How are they different from each other?
8. What were the reasons that rural men and women joined the Farmers' Alliance?
9. Howard Zinn mentions a "betrayal of the former slaves by the national administration in 1877." What was this betrayal? How did it lead to violence, especially lynching violence, in the next five decades?
10. What is the "mob spirit" Ida B. Wells-Barnett discusses in her essay? How is it described by and used against other voices in this chapter? Is this spirit still alive in America? Explain.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 11 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

11. What is the significance of the Chapter 11 title in *A People's History*, "Robber Barons and Rebels"?
12. These chapters illustrate many ways in which the government benefited the wealthy. If Howard Zinn is correct, what explains this behavior? Does the government continue to benefit the wealthy today? Explain.
13. Why was it important during the industrializing period for working-class children to learn "obedience to authority" (*People's History*, p. 263) in school? What behaviors are taught in schools today?
14. How did large numbers of new immigrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe alter urban life and work patterns in the United States?
15. What are some of the demands that working people and unions made of corporate owners?
16. What tactics did workers and unions use to try to better their working conditions and living wages?
17. Why did Eugene Debs become a socialist?
18. Debs wrote, "Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization." What did he mean? What is the "basis of civilization" today? In your opinion, what should be the "basis of civilization"?
19. Do you think it was possible that either the Republican or Democratic parties could have become parties of true reform for farmers and workers of this period? Why, or why not?
20. What role did the railroad corporations and corporate owners play in the development of the late-nineteenth-century United States? What price did working-class Americans pay for their success?
21. What is a welfare state? Do you agree with Howard Zinn that corporations were the first beneficiaries of the welfare state?

22. What reforms took place during the Gilded Age? What was the impetus behind such reforms?
23. How was the Supreme Court “doing its bit for the ruling elite” (*People’s History*, p. 260) during this period? How did the other two branches of government help?
24. What problems did immigrants face upon arrival in the United States during the Gilded Age? Which groups were most and least successful and why?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. In the late nineteenth century, Horatio Alger published over 118 novels in book form and another 280 novels in magazine format. All the young heroes in all the books have remarkably similar characteristics. Read one of Alger’s books or passages from several. What central theme in these books gave rise to what many have called the Horatio Alger myth? Why do you think this myth became so popular in the early twentieth century? Do you believe that all Americans in the late nineteenth century had an equal chance to become wealthy? Do you believe people today have such an opportunity? Use socioeconomic facts and statistics from the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries to support your answer.
2. Using a wide variety of primary documents, learn more about the anti-lynching movement. What efforts did such people as Ida B. Wells-Barnett make on behalf of the antilynching movement? What do you think were the most and least persuasive arguments for a federal antilynching law? Why do you think there was so much resistance to a federal law against lynching? Who led the fight against such a measure?
3. Using the Internet, primary documents, and secondary resources, find out more about the company town of Pullman. What did George Pullman

envision for the town when it was built? What rules and regulations governed the town? In what way did Pullman feel these to be beneficial? How did the workers come to see them as oppressive? What led to the 1894 strike against Pullman? Do you think the workers had the right to strike? How and why did the federal government break the strike? Do you think this an appropriate use of federal troops? Explain your answers.

4. In 1892, Francis Bellamy—a well-known Baptist minister and Edward Bellamy’s cousin—was asked to design the National Educational Association’s (NEA) National Columbus Public Schools Celebration. He created a program that focused on a flag-raising ceremony and a flag salute. After reading the “Official Programme” in the September 8, 1892, issue of *The Youth’s Companion* and the original flag salute, trace the origins and use of that first salute. Then examine the ways in which it has changed over the past hundred years. Learn more about the Supreme Court case on the flag salute that was decided in 2004. How do you think Francis Bellamy—a man of the Gilded Age—might have responded to the ongoing debate about the flag salute in contemporary society?
5. Third parties played a big role in the politics of the latter part of the nineteenth century. Learn as much as possible about these new parties and their political platforms. Why did they attract a following? Then research the growth of third parties from the turn of the twentieth century forward. When were they most influential, and why? What are the largest third parties of the twenty-first century? What are their political goals and accomplishments? Are there any that you might support? Explain. Do you think casting your vote for a third-party presidential candidate in a tight race is “wasting your vote”? Defend your answer.
6. Conduct biographical research on one of the robber barons of this era. Once you learn as much as possible about his upbringing, involvement in corporate America, and the manner in which he accumulated and maintained his wealth, learn how his endeavors influenced workers in his industrial sphere. Search for primary documents that describe how his workers responded to the rules and regulations of his industry. After learning as much as possible about the robber baron, describe how his particular biography does or does not fit the description of “Robber Barons and Rebels” in Chapter 11 of *A People’s History*.

7. Read the presidential inaugural addresses given between 1877 and 1901. What similarities do they contain in terms of support for or against corporate control? What similar promises, if any, do they make to working-class Americans? Which do you find most and least compelling? Explain. Which are most and least reflective of Gilded Age values? Explain.
8. Beginning in the 1870s, corporate lawyers argued that corporations were not “artificial persons” but were instead “natural persons,” with the same rights as persons. With such status, they hoped, corporations would gain a great deal of leverage against legal restraint. In 1886, in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company*, the Supreme Court gave corporations all the rights of “natural persons.” Research this case, being certain to learn about its origins, the controversy over the decision, and the consequences of this decision for the next hundred years. Do you think corporations ought to have personhood? Explain.
9. Learn more about the Haymarket Square Riot. Using primary documents written from the perspective of the workers, the police, the government, and the corporations, write a journalistic report for your local newspaper to commemorate the 120-year anniversary of the riot in 2006. Be sure to explain all sides of the conflict, as well as the short- and long-term consequences on the national labor movement as a whole and the movement in Chicago.
10. Learn more about unions in the United States today. How are their philosophies, goals, and actions similar to and different from their counterparts that operated more than a hundred years ago? What historical factors do you think account for decreases in union membership and in union power? Which unions continue to be strong in the twenty-first century and why? Which are weaker and why?
11. Learn more about the Pinkertons. How and why did they originate during the Gilded Age? What was their purpose? Who used them and why? How did their use of private security differ from the government’s use of militias? Are they still in existence today? How and why are they used? What conflicts between private and public security exist in the twenty-first century?
12. Learn more about Alexander Berkman and his plot to kill Henry Clay Frick. Who was Berkman? How and why did he become an anarchist? What led him to believe that killing Frick would help other workers? What

were the consequences of his failed attempt to kill Frick? What did Berkman contribute to the growing anarchist movement? Why do you think the movement was never able to gain a huge number of supporters in the United States?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Henry George argues that a “crime of poverty” existed in America during the Gilded Age. What was this crime? Provide examples from George, the other authors in Chapter 11 in *Voices*, and Howard Zinn in *A People’s History* to support this statement. Might the description still be applicable to American society today? Explain.
2. In her speech of 1890, Mary Elizabeth Lease declared, “This is a nation of inconsistencies.” Support or refute her declaration, using evidence from the readings to back up your position.
3. It has been argued by many historians that lynchings and Ku Klux Klan activities were tolerated at best and actively encouraged at worst by those in power in order to reinforce the status quo. What does this claim mean? How do the voices in your reading reinforce this belief?
4. When the Pullman strikers delivered their message to the American Railway Union in 1894, they began their speech by declaring, “We struck at Pullman because we were without hope.” Describe how the hopes and dreams of others whose voices we heard in the readings echo this sentiment. Do you think that at the end of the nineteenth century there was more reason for hope? Explain.
5. In “Robber Barons and Rebels,” Howard Zinn writes that the United States government was behaving almost exactly as Karl Marx had predicted by “pretending neutrality to maintain order, but serving the interests of the rich” (*People’s History*, p. 258). Use examples from both chapters to support this contention. Do you agree or disagree with Zinn? Explain.
6. Describe the demands that working people and unions made of corporate owners during the Gilded Age. What tactics did workers and unions use to try to better their working conditions and wages during this era? How did the corporations and government respond to their demands and tactics? What did the workers achieve?

7. Most textbooks refer to this period as the Gilded Age. Using examples from your reading, defend the use of this phrase to describe the era. Then create another phrase for the era and defend its use with examples from the readings.
8. Using examples from the reading, support or refute Howard Zinn's contention that late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century corporations were the "first beneficiaries of the 'welfare state.'" Do you think twenty-first-century corporations continue to benefit in a similar manner? Explain.
9. Describe how the three branches of the federal government helped the ruling elite at the expense of the working-class during the Gilded Age.
10. Using examples from the reading, defend or refute Joel Spring's statement in *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*, "The development of a factory-like system in the nineteenth-century schoolroom was not accidental."
11. Using examples from the reading, defend or refute Howard Zinn's assertion that the massive immigration of different ethnic groups during this period contributed to "the fragmentation of the working-class."
12. Describe what was happening in rural America during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Who were the robber barons and rebels of rural America?

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Imagine that you are an eighteen-year-old male or female laborer working in a textile mill during the Gilded Age. You have heard rumors of a strike, and you have been considering joining a union. If you lose your job or if you are arrested, your family will suffer. Write a weeklong diary in which you describe your working conditions, your options for change, your feelings about corporate management, and your concerns about your possible choices. Then describe the final choices you make, being sure to make your reasons clear.
2. Make a drawing of the United States' "pyramid of wealth" that shows the "skillful terracing" designed to "create separate levels of oppression" as Howard Zinn describes at the beginning of "Robber Barons and Rebels."
3. Write a short story about a poor working-class teenage immigrant in

America today in which you describe her or his hopes and dreams for the future, as well as her or his fears about impediments to such dreams. Then compare and contrast these hopes, dreams, experiences, and accomplishments with those experienced by the young people in Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories.

4. Write a letter to your local city council in which you ask the council to consider passing a resolution demanding an end to granting local corporations the rights to corporate personhood. In your letter, be sure to describe the history and abuses of corporate personhood. Draw your model resolution upon the efforts of a few of the over a hundred communities around the nation that by the year 2000 had denounced corporate personhood in their municipal and county legislative bodies.
5. Stage a town meeting in which you have invited Mark Twain to speak. Members of the community (all the students in the class) have come prepared with questions about Twain's beliefs related to political, social, and economic conflict in the late nineteenth century. Stage the question and answers.