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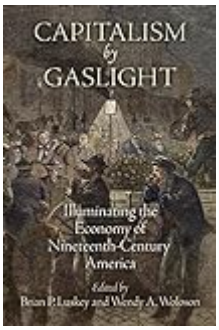

Brian P. Luskey, Wendy A. Woloson, eds. *Capitalism by Gaslight: Illuminating the Economy of Nineteenth-Century America.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 328 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4689-6.

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âThereâs honest graft, and Iâm an example of how it works,â Tammany Hallâs George Washington Plunkitt explained to a reporter in 1905. âI might sum up the whole thing by saying: âI seen my opportunities and I took âem.ââ[1] Although Plunkitt worked in the political world of New York Cityâs municipal government, his generous attitude towards an unsavory activity such as graft would seem very familiar to the characters populating the provocative new anthology on the shadowlands of the market economy entitled *Capitalism by Gaslight*, ably edited by Brian Luskey and Wendy Woloson. The eleven essays from scholars at various levels of seniority trample any clear lines between legitimate and illegitimate economic activity. Together they successfully reconstruct an economic world that Tammany Hall bosses would have known well, but remains largely uncovered by modern historians. Prior scholarship on nineteenth-century economic life, as well as the great bulk of primary source materials, focuses upon above the board behavior. This makes perfect sense, as the grifter, prostitute, or horse thief had little incentive to record and preserve their transactions for posterity. The economic activity covered in *Capitalism by Gaslight* dwelled on the margins of history until now; these are not great corporations or captains of industry at work here. And yet, the rigorous analysis of the margins of nineteenth-century economic life offers rich insights into the development of American capitalism.

This is an important correction. Much like the political historians of a generation ago revised the Progressivesâ dismissal of George Washington Plunkitt as a perversion of American democracyâhe delivered essential social services and made local government work for his voters in the endâthe authors here collectively reject the notion that informal or illicit behavior distorts the workings of a market economy. In fact, they see these activities at this particular point of history as essential for understanding the development of American capitalism. âThese essays reveal that during the nineteenth century the rules of economic engagement were still being established,â Luskey and Woloson argue in their brief introduction, âmeaning that definitions of terms such as legal and illegal, moral and immoral, acceptable and disdained were up for debateâ (p. 9). The contributors to *Capitalism by Gaslight* were participants in a 2012 conference sponsored by the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Library Company of Philadelphia, which might explain the prevalence of eastern and urban topics based mainly in the antebellum decades. Aside from that trend, though, the essays cover a wide scope of activities to

which this brief review will struggle to do justice.

Some of these subjects will strike modern readers as very specific to the antebellum economy, even as they demonstrate capitalism's contingency in a wider sense. Joshua Greenbergâs essay presents the curious story of the shinplaster, a paper form of money printed and issued by merchants, municipalities, or companies in the era before national banking. These notes of dubious value circulated throughout the antebellum period, even as they were a constant source of derision and ridicule from consumers. In a cash-poor system shinplasters became a necessity, and in a strange twist, their more reputable cousin the bank note suffered nearly the same poor reputation in the wake of the Panics of 1837 and 1857. Two of these essays deal with slavery, a more notorious nineteenth-century phenonomen. In tandem, these essays add a moral dimension to the consideration of what constitutes legal commerce, even as they expose the absurdity of logic employed by slave societies. Drawing upon a wide range of source material, Craig Hollander reconstructs the journeys of two ships, the *Science* and the *Plattsburgh*, to give insight on how the illicit slave trade operated in 1820, only a few years after the American ban on such activity. Michael Thompsonâs study of the Charleston waterfront finds that enslaved laborers often took the brunt of the blame for pilfered rice and cotton. In these cases, the hazy boundary between legitimate and illegitimate commerce becomes even more arbitrary. In Hollanderâs case the legal fiction that these slavers were Spanish was an attempt to legitimize activity. Thompsonâs story of petty theft engaged in by actors who had their wages and control over their own persons stolen from them every day recalls the underlying hypocrisy at work in the slave system.

Other essays follow an explicit âbottom-upâ approach to economic history in order to explore the margins of America's urban marketplace. Philadelphiaâs âpromiscuous economy,â highlighted in the essay by Robert Gamble, served the less affluent consumer via a network of second-hand stores and hucksters who sold cheap and often inferior goods. In order to shed light on this world, Gamble draws heavily from the essays of a flamboyant correspondent for the *Mechanicsâ Free Press* known as the Night Hawk. Even so, the âpromiscuous economyâ is ephemeral by nature, and will probably always defy the close reconstruction its more aboveground counterpart has received from historians. Adam Mendelsohnâs careful reconstruction of the nineeenth-century secondhand clothes, or âragâ trade, is another attempt to understand economic life on the margins. Jews dominated Londonâs thriving rag trade, but Mendelsohn argues that the competitive atmosphere in the American secondhand clothes market pushed immigrant Jews into peddling, which in turn offered more opportunities for diverse career paths down the road. Brendan OâMalleyâs portrait of the agents in charge of drumming up boardinghouse or forwarding immigrants to destinations farther inlandâknown as ârunnersâ in the parlance of the dayâdemonstrates that new arrivals to antebellum America had a rough-and-tumble introduction. Runners employed aggressive sales techniques and bent the truth in order to sign up clients; complaints became so common that New York actually implemented a control system aimed at curbing their worst abuses. In the end, though, OâMalley successfully demonstrates that *caveat emptor* awaited immigrants right at the shoreline.

In his study of New York Cityâs lower-level booksellers, Paul Erickson delivers another example of the linkages between the shadow economy and its more reputable counterpart. In particular, he examines how the market for marginally legitimate textsâsensational literature and pornography, for exampleâdeveloped among booksellers. The street-level trade in prints and pamphlets of questionable taste became so notable that it drew the attention of Anthony Comstock, a curiously devoted crusader against materials he considered obscene. Erickson argues that Comstockâs campaign reminds us that print culture, in its widest forms, not only underwent an expansion that included many, some of them unsavory, fields. It also reminds us of the porous boundary that divided acceptable books and prints and illegal ones.

Some of these essays demonstrate how past practices echo into our own times. Will Mackintosh explains how the operations of the Loomis Gangâan infamous family of thievesâmirrored the habits of upstate New Yorkâs entrepreneurial class, even as they fenced stolen goods and snatched horses. Knowledge of markets, good timing, and the willingness to take risks were all skills required for commercial success; the Loomis Gang applied these traits to enjoy criminal success much as some modern-day criminals apply tried-and-true business practices in order to maximize revenue. New Yorkâs mock auction houses, where participants were much more likely to be swindled than rewarded with a good deal, peaked in the 1840s and 1850s. Corey Goettschâs essay does a great job of demonstrating how they strode on the boundaries of legitimacy. A clever auctioneer could count on separating a greedy customer from his or her money; fraud and deceit was employed if cleverness did not succeed. Modern readers might not recognize the mock auction house

at first glance, but their logic and workings very much resemble our generationâs endemic online schemes. Katie Hemphillâs essay on prostitution in Baltimore makes a compelling case for the expansion of this business in terms of both space and consumer base; in large part this growth was fueled by the expansion of urban space, transportation networks, and the sharpening of class differences among male clients. Many of Baltimoreâs prostitutes had been pushed into part-time sex work by the same burgeoning market forces that brothels drew upon to grow their business. Much the way Internet dating and escort sites of the twenty-first century cater to a customer base segmented by income and interests, so too did Baltimoreâs sex trade specialize to reach their nineteenth-century clients.

Ellen Gruber Garveyâs portrait of Robert âBack Numberâ Budd, a collector and dealer in newspapers, is a bit of an outlier for this volume in terms of chronology and subject matter. Nonetheless, Buddâs entrepreneurial talents lay in the acquisition and cataloging of ephemeral materialâif a reporter needed a back file, Robert Budd's New York office was the place to check. Budd did not really push the bounds of legality, but his journey from an African American child selling newspapers to Union soldiers to the nationâs leading dealer in used newspapers is a rich and interesting one.

George Washington Plunkittâs world collapsed with advent of the twentieth century, when voters âdidnât draw a distinction between dishonest and honest graft, but they saw that some Tammany men grew rich, and supposed they had been robbinâ the city treasury or levyinâ blackmail on disorderly houses, or workinâ in with the gamblers and lawbreakers.â[2] Deprived of his office and his âopportunitiesâ to gouge the city for paving stone contracts, Plunkitt bemoaned a new sense of propriety washing over the electorate and predicted the demise of the Republic. Although Progressive-Era reformers attempted to reform the economy in the same spirit in which they fought the political boss, most of those efforts focused on the abuses of large corporations and ignored the small-scale con artists, prostitutes, thieves, and other marginal figures so expertly analyzed in in *Capitalism by Gaslight.* These essays show quite clearly that the boundary lines between legitimate and illegitimate enterprise never really came into focus during the nineteenth century. One could still argue that they dwell in the shadows today. The editors and authors of this important volume have created a precedent and a pathway for future scholars to follow in tracing these important, if somewhat opaque, facets of the American economy. *Capitalism by Gasli*ght thus deserves the full glare of our attention.

Notes

[1]. William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics,* ed. Terrance J. McDonald (Boston: Bedford/St. Martinâs, 1994), 49.

[2]. Ibid., 51.