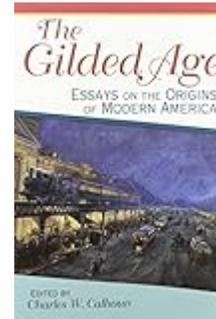




Charles W. Calhoun, ed. *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1996. xix + 347 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2499-0; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2500-3.



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Published on H-SHGAPE (October, 1996)

New Essays on the Gilded Age

It has been over thirty years since H. Wayne Morgan edited *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* (1963) and many years since its second edition (1970) went out of print. Those of us who teach courses about the Gilded Age have in the Calhoun essays a suitable successor to the Morgan volume. While the Morgan collection emphasized politics, Calhoun's book reflects the present interest in social history. It is, nevertheless, a well balanced collection with articles on the economy, politics, constitutional history, and foreign affairs. Sympathizing with their subjects, the authors present fourteen points of view and differing nuances abound, but there are surprisingly few contradictions. Most important for a classroom tool, the authors write with stimulating conviction.

Glen Porter, for example, points out that industrialization was for the most part carried out by small manufacturers, specializing in highly competitive custom or batch production, who wore a "gentler face" than big business. Despite its "harsher face," big business, Porter stresses, made a positive contribution of new and abundant goods and services. This outweighed its threat (which did not materialize) to democratic and republican

values. And James Rodger Fleming shows that advances in science and particularly the American proficiency in technological innovations under-pinned the multiplication of goods and services.

Eric Arnesen, on the other hand, portrays the harsher face of big business as it gazed upon its employees and their efforts at organization. While Porter states that business historians have gone beyond viewing big businessmen as either robber barons or industrial statesman, Arnesen—a labor historian—minces no words when he calls Jay Gould a "robber baron." Arnesen stresses the downtrodden condition of labor rather than the rise in real wages and the fall in hours worked. Arnesen's heart is with the Knights of Labor, but he credits Samuel Gompers with making possible the American Federation of Labor's expansion in the Progressive Era.

While sympathetically treating immigrants, who formed an important segment of American labor, Roger Daniels handles statistics most informatively. He notes that during the Gilded Age immigration increased sharply, shifted its points of origin significantly, and suffered its first restrictions. Robert G. Barrows also uses

statistics effectively as he traces the rapid growth of small cities (the home of most urban dwellers) as well as the atypical metropolises. In the Gilded Age cities were transformed by technological innovations in transportation and construction from towns of wood and masonry to cities of steel and their dwellers from pedestrians and climbers of stairs to riders of trolleys and elevators. Barrows also divides past and present interpreters of Gilded Age urban history into “reformists,” who believe contemporary condemnations of corrupt boss-ridden political machines; “functionalists,” who stress that the bosses and their political machines met crucial needs of their constituents—jobs, food, fuel, and help when in trouble—that reformers would ignore; and those who celebrate Gilded Age municipal governments as an “unheralded triumph” for solving incredible problems of water supply, sewage disposal, public health, and transportation, while developing parks and libraries. Barrows leans toward the celebrationists, but he is not wholly convinced.

Gilded Age industrialism, Stacy A. Cordery demonstrates, had an enormous impact on women. Working-class women whether from off the farm or off the boat of necessity found employment in factories or took in laundry, kept boarders, or did piece-work in their homes. Middle-class women were expected to run the household, but the more wealthy, with hired help and labor-saving appliances, had time on their hands in a society that refused to condone idleness and stressed responsibility. They, however, did not join with their working-class sisters to ameliorate conditions in the slums, but with fellow members of the middle class to attack alcoholism, secure the vote, house-clean municipal government, and staff settlement houses. By the end of the Gilded Age, middle-class women, having moved beyond their “proper sphere,” were positioned to become the “new women” of the Progressive Era.

Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., argues that African-Americans were similarly positioned to secure their rights as citizens and human beings in the twentieth century. Fishel does not minimize the violence and repression blacks suffered during the Gilded Age, but argues that the term “nadir” belongs to white America for its low, vicious behavior not to its victims. In the face of repression, African-Americans kept their families, churches, and communities together, encouraged the education of their children, nurtured talent, and enabled a W.E.B. Du Bois to emerge from the Gilded Age to lead the struggle for black rights.

While women and African-Americans wanted to be admitted as full partners in American society, the indige-

nous peoples of America (Indians or Native Americans) were content with their own culture. Their way of life, however, required vast areas of land, which was coveted by whites powerful enough to take it. Edmund J. Danziger, Jr., sympathizes with the desire of Indians to retain their culture and the lands that sustained it and condemns both the wars (ending in 1877) that restricted them to reservations and the reformers who favored a policy of acculturation and Americanization. Danziger is pleased to report that acculturation failed, that Native Americans accommodated to the dominant culture sufficiently to retain their identity, and with new leaders have become stronger numerically, culturally, and politically in the twentieth century.

Both Charles W. Calhoun and Lewis L. Gould emphasize that Gilded Age politics was more than a struggle for spoils between parties that stood for nothing. Republicans favored a more active government that would stimulate the economy with a protective tariff, improve morals by prohibiting the manufacture and sale of liquor, protect voters from fraud and intimidation at the polls, and many of them supported federal aid to education in poor school districts. Democrats, on the other hand, favored restraining the hand of government, a revenue tariff, not interfering with personal behavior by depriving anyone of drink, local control of elections, and keeping blacks in ignorance by opposing federal aid to education. Gilded Age Americans were passionate over politics because the parties did offer a choice. Although the major parties were evenly matched (only twice from 1875 to 1897—each time for just two years—did a party control both houses of Congress and the presidency), by 1892 it seemed as if the Democrats would emerge as the dominant party. Then disaster struck with the panic of 1893, followed by a terrible depression. The Democrats, who were blamed for the hard times, compounded their problems by fighting among themselves; and the Republicans entered the twentieth century as the dominant party.

The major parties may have stood for something, but until 1896 neither addressed the concerns of Midwest farmers. Robert Miller notes that during the 1880s and 1890s virtuous and hardworking farmers, receiving less and less for their crops because of overproduction and deflation, dwelt on the injustice of their plight and concluded that the growth of big business threatened republican egalitarianism in general and themselves in particular. The Populist party of the 1890s advocated a sub-treasury plan which would earn the highest prices possible for farmers, an inflation that would also jack up prices, and a variety of regulatory and political reforms

that would promote political and economic equality. Although the Populist party's appeal was too narrow to win the presidency it was broad enough for both major parties to legislate adaptations of virtually all of its 1892 platform.

Joseph A. Fry sees the emergence of an imperialist United States as the fruition of a long-held racist ideology. That ideology was shaped by centuries of suppressing Native Americans, of viewing people of color as inferior and in need of cultural and political guidance by a superior United States. That attitude coupled with the perception that imperialism in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines would foster prosperity at home explains the relative ease with which it was adopted. Since constitutional rights had not been automatically extended to Indians in the past why, in 1898, should they be extended to the people in the new territories?

Gilded Age interpretations of the Constitution and the law were, Michael Les Benedict observes, profoundly conservative. The Supreme Court adopted "laissez-faire constitutionalism," which curtailed the power of government to regulate to the barest minimum. Specifically the court utilized the doctrine of "substantive due process"

to overturn regulatory legislation. This judicial activism, exercising broad powers of review, prevailed well into the twentieth century.

But the final essay by Ballard C. Campbell demonstrates that the practice of laissez-faire constitutionalism was not as severe as its theory. The states, he emphasizes, exercising their "police powers," legislated widely on social concerns. These laws including the support of education, the care of the insane, the licensing of various professions, and prohibition, were for the most part allowed to stand despite the vogue of substantive due process in the courts. Forced to deal with the problems created by industrialism, the states were more than ever "laboratories of democracy."

It should be clear from these brief, scarcely adequate, summaries that there is much of value for classroom discussion in this volume. The authors have rethought the major issues of the Gilded Age and with their fresh view have given us much to think about.

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Citation: Ari Hoogenboom. Review of Calhoun, Charles W., ed., *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

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