

Note from the Editor

When H. Wayne Morgan died in January 2014, colleagues and admirers noted his large, enduring influence on historical writing about the Gilded Age. He was an especially prominent figure in the generation that during the 1950s–70s worked to free the notion of a Gilded Age from melodrama and stylized moralizing. That cohort believed, perhaps naively, that it was possible to analyze and write about the late 1800s in a detached, systematic, and even sympathetic way, in keeping with post-World War II principles of academic professionalism.

For Morgan and his colleagues, the Gilded Age was enough in the past that historians could reconsider it dispassionately. He may never have imagined that late nineteenth-century politics would again seem relevant and contemporary. In his writing, disputes over the currency, the tariff, civil service, and so on made sense at the time, given the country's stage of development. The post-New Deal, post-Bretton Woods United States—modernist, modernized, and rationalized—had advanced beyond that. In historical and political terms, the Gilded Age was another country, not a usable past.

Later historians working in the same vein have also tended to argue that the issues that divided the parties in the Gilded Age meant a lot at the time, even if they seem mysterious or quaint now. Charles Calhoun, a political historian of the Gilded Age similar to Morgan in tone and stature—and until this year, a member of the editorial board of this journal, whose founding he oversaw on behalf of SHGAPE—repeatedly and patiently explains in his writings that Gilded Age policy debates were “substantive” and “mattered to voters,” even if it took historical imagination a century later to grasp why.

As the essays in this issue underscore, the quaintness of the Gilded Age is itself becoming quaint. This is in part because, as Charles Postel and Robert D. Johnston recount, a loud and large political movement has coalesced around the idea that virtually every innovation in governmental structure and public policy from the Progressive Era forward represents a departure from the Founders' principles and is a candidate for rethinking, if not undoing. If conservatives indeed espouse George Will's aphorism, “Back to 1900,” then Americans need to understand the Gilded Age polity, because they may be living in it soon.

The current political and intellectual agitation—of which the conservative rejection of the Progressive Era is a part—in turn manifests the decay of political, legal, and social arrangements that twentieth-century Western Europeans and Americans assumed to be irreversible achievements. Greenbackers and Silverites make sense again in the aftermath of the Panic of 2008 and its attendant revelations about the unaccountability and self-serving opaqueness of financial systems. An out-of-touch, ineffectual political system, riddled with influence peddling and awash with business money—that is why high-minded reformers concocted civil service and then the idea of limiting political donations and publicizing their sources in aptly named Corrupt Practices Acts. The series of Supreme Court decisions negating Progressive Era attempts to define and protect a public interest in campaign finance represent the most vivid examples so far of “Back to 1900.” Much of that campaign money will come from businesses and trade associations lobbying for or against this or that trade deal or claiming before ill-attended legislative hearings that this or that consumer or environmental regulation or employment standard undercuts their international operations or makes them vulnerable to international competition. The tariff may have been a gnarled issue, rife with inconsistency and hypocrisy, but one readily understands what it was about.

As Postel also points out, the realization that “old battles from a century ago are being fought anew” has given a spur to the neo-progressive history that careful readers may have noticed appearing in the journal in recent years. The current “crisis of political economy,” Postel explains, has infused politics with “historical mindedness,” so that James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard seem worth retrieving from the dustbin of historiography.

This issue’s forum on populism and progressivism in contemporary politics showcases this reborn New History. Postel and Robert D. Johnston trace the intellectual provenance of various, deliberately politicized interpretations of progressivism in a manner that reveals the two writers’ emphases, agendas, and even personalities. Carol McNicol Stock takes the present moment in a different direction. She is among numerous historians who see in the unraveling of American globalism an opportunity to revisit alternate traditions of U.S. engagement in world affairs: in this case, Great Plains anti-militarism and isolationism. Daniel T. Rodgers’s 1982 “In Search of Progressivism” is about as timeless as a historiographic essay can be, but even Rodgers perceives in the country’s present mood and dilemmas an opportunity to update and add to his earlier and still persuasive framework.

Under the influence of historiographic models that prevailed three decades ago (including artisan republicanism, which Rodgers astutely picked apart in another formidable historiographic essay), Henry George epitomized the outmoded Gilded Age thinker. The term “backward-looking” seemed invented for him. If one removed dates and other obvious markers and sold *Progress and Poverty* via Amazon, the unwary might think it was published last year. Lawrence Lipin explains that George envisioned no return to an idealized, early republican small town. His preferred society made the benefits of the modern city, including suburbia, available to the vast majority of city dwellers, who through the single tax would be liberated from the machinations of property speculators and the dead weight of vested interests. If anything separates George from contemporary consciousness, it was his view, which has woven in and out of modernism, that nature is a limitless resource to be exploited by technology. Lipin underscores why, on both sides of the Atlantic, urban progressives and social democrats cited George as an inspiration and starting point. They did not dismiss him as an autodidact economist lost in romances and panaceas.

Disenchantment across the political spectrum with the ability of government to implement and stick by reasonable regulations reopens another Gilded Age and Progressive Era debate: the ongoing relation between the public and public agencies. As Ann-Marie Szymanski reveals, circumstances distinctive to Baltimore meant that the city was relatively slow to adopt newer approaches to smoke regulation that depended on ongoing oversight by municipal officials with expertise in the matter. The city’s persistence in practices derived from common law meant that segments of the public, along with affected businesses, competed to define when and why smoke amounted to a nuisance that should be suppressed through prosecution. Civic groups in Baltimore eventually gave up on the notion that the public could effectively serve as the municipality’s partner in the enforcement of such a key public health regulation. Air pollution hovers, they confessed, after enthusiasm for a crusade against it dissipates.

This brings one back to another lesson from the Progressive Era that is hard to convey now. Under urban, industrial conditions, democracies need the state, however vexatious and at times out-of-control politicians and bureaucrats can become. For all the watered-down compromises Robert Johnston observes in Barack Obama’s 2011 updating of Theodore Roosevelt’s fierce 1910 Osawatomie speech, the president did reiterate TR’s case for a vigorous, competent, accountable public sector as an indispensable, potentially effective

agent of a democratic, modern public. Those who deplore progressivism from a position of constitutional formalism (now there's a Gilded Age point of view) cannot write off the challenges raised by Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and their contemporaries by anathematizing them as statist enemies of the American principle. The most basic insight of academic historical writing on Gilded Age and Progressive Era reform movements is that in their different ways, populists and progressives struggled to find a thoughtful, humane response to industrialism, one that made democracy real by adapting it to unprecedented social and economic conditions. To undo the Progressive Era, one would ultimately need to undo urbanization and capitalist industrialization, and even the Back-to-1900 crowd does not recommend that.

Alan Lessoff