

Editors' Note

Boyd Cothran and Rosanne Currarino

“War,” the Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously observed, “is the continuation of politics by other means.” And although this issue is not concerned principally with formal warfare in the Napoleonic sense, our authors are interested in exploring how forms of social and psychological violence were used often to accomplish political ends throughout the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

We begin with Gideon Cohn-Poster’s article, “Vote for your Bread and Butter,” which examines the employers’ widespread use of economic voter intimidation throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Employers’ layoff threats and their systematic surveillance of workers at the polls amounted to economic warfare against workers exercising their political rights. In “Drug-Mad Negroes,” Douglas J. Flowe shows us the origins of martial metaphor that has defined the policing of Black America: the war on drugs. Flowe documents how the turn-of-the-century American public connected the specter of cocaine “delirium” to common anxieties about Black crime and miscegenation while simultaneously defining white Americans’ drug use as a treatable problem thereby ensuring an enduring unequal police response.

Confronted by the failure of the nation’s political leaders to address these pervasive forms of racial violence and intimidation, Black voters became increasingly disillusioned by the promises of equality once peddled by the Republican Party. David Oks, an undergraduate at the University of Oxford and former manager of Mike Gravel’s 2020 presidential campaign, argues that the 1916 presidential election was an important moment in which Black voters gave voice to their discontentment with the GOP, creating the atmosphere that would eventually see Black voters shift to the Democratic Party in the 1920s and 1930s.

Teaching the history of racial violence in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era has never been more important, and this issue includes a series of microsyllabi five scholars developed over the last year in response to the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police officer Derek Chauvin. These microsyllabi collect articles and other readings on the history of racial violence in our era and offer us all an opportunity to reflect on how we can better teach these sensitive and important topics. Finally, we conclude this issue, as always, with a fascinating and engaging selection of book reviews.

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