

Note from the Editor

The Progressive Era notion that contemporary concerns inevitably govern reinterpretation of the past—so one might as well be self-conscious about it—permeates present-day historical writing on the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. In different measure, the essays in this issue reveal the complex ways that professional historical writing interacts with and comments upon contemporary society.

The feature on intercultural bridges and brokers illustrates such historiographic tendencies most obviously. The forum, which began with a session at the Organization of American Historians meeting in 2008, touches upon the range of political, ethnic, and cultural issues that have recently led scholars in numerous disciplines to explore the operations of U.S. society at its North American and overseas peripheries. The most manifest issues, of course, have to do with volatile matters of racial attitudes and divisions and the contentious contradiction between the country's imperial tendencies and republican principles. But Lynne Getz, Judith Raftery, and Eileen Tamura all end up at a more subtle concern, one highly relevant to the circumstances facing American society over the next half century.

Angry and anxious rhetoric about whether newer groups can appreciate the real America (whatever that ever has been) and become truly American (another chimera, for sure) is almost certainly rear-guard resistance. Many millions of people who do not conform to customary notions of American will nonetheless soon have manifold opportunities to redefine that society in their own way. What will they reject, and what will they embrace? How will they reshape American practices and principles to balance with aspects of their own histories and cultures that they wish to maintain? In adopting the role of bridge or broker between their own society and American society, Paz Marquez Benitez in the Philippines (as recounted by Judith Raftery) and George I. Sánchez in New Mexico and Texas (as explained by Lynne Getz) both acted upon the belief that despite the myriad problems one could recount at length, Filipinos and Mexican Americans would benefit from a partial, selective embrace of Anglo-American attitudes and mores. Significantly, the figure in these stories who turns his back on the United States—Joseph Kurihara as recounted by Eileen Tamura—was disillusioned by an act of authoritarian political oppression after having remained optimistic through decades of daily insults and slights. Lynne Getz adds the dimension of Anglo-Americans Richard Wetherill and Mary Austin, who sought, sometimes awkwardly, to bridge gaps from the other direction.

To the above concerns, Douglas Firth Anderson adds the elements of religion and politics, a dynamic that has re-emerged with force in recent decades.

Most historians have some familiarity with the so-called Peace Policy toward Native Americans attempted by the U.S. Grant administration, a nineteenth-century episode in faith-based social reform that generated much discussion and activity but few positive results. Fully dedicated to the application of evangelical Protestant values to Indian policy, William Vandever became such a sweeping critic of un-Christian—in the sense of heavy-handed, inhumane, and hypocritical—U.S. actions toward Native Americans in the West that he complained himself out of his job as an Indian Affairs inspector. Still, as Anderson stresses, Vandever's version of "Christian principles" were themselves ethnocentric, limiting his capacity for understanding Native peoples on their own terms and empathizing with their perceptions, worries, and goals.

David Sellers Smith and Karen Ahlquist touch on issues that nowadays concern the geographic centers of American society as well as its peripheral regions. Smith's account of the National Association of Credit Men deals not simply with the institutional structures and professional practices of credit in a society that encourages pervasive debt, but with the morality of credit and debt in a mass-distribution and consumption society. Readers might ruefully remark that in postindustrial circumstances no one pays attention to the so-called moral hazards of credit and debt until after a financial collapse, when people want to expose scoundrels and blame profligates.

Soon after the crash of 2008, meanwhile, urban studies experts began to speculate over how the recession might reshuffle the country's urban network. Which metropolitan areas would emerge strengthened and which would decline in influence and dynamism? As Ahlquist explains, Cincinnati civic leaders hoped to preserve their city's status as the Midwest's cultural center even as economic power shifted to Chicago. But the arts, too, go where the money is, and Cincinnati became a secondary music city as well as a secondary commercial city.

Alan Lessoff