

Note from the Editor

If, this time, the American Age really is over, then the Gilded Age and Progressive Era will become a different sort of past, perhaps more of a foreign country in David Lowenthal's sense. For every generation of professional historians from World War II until now, the decades between the Civil War and World War I had a special status. In these decades, the country took shape as an urban, industrial power, so the period was the place to start to explain the character and structure of the modern United States and its role in the contemporary world. What if the world henceforth becomes not only post-industrial and post-modern, but post-American? Most of us practicing history now cannot imagine what would draw scholars imbued with a post-American consciousness to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. People will study the period, but how and to what end?

For the time being, America goes on. And each of the essays in this issue offers large or new perspectives on themes that have customarily attracted historians to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: immigration and ethnic life and politics; the urban environment, class divisions, and efforts to bridge social divides; and rationalization, professionalization, and the corporate society.

In her 2010 distinguished historian address to the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, Hasia Diner graced those attending with a thoughtful summary of her decades of studying Jewish immigration and American Jewish life. Even when one considers all plausible qualifications, Diner explains, the customary view that the United States offered unprecedented favorable circumstances to Jewish immigrants has a great deal of evidence to support it. The society did afford Jews an institutional openness that they knew to be unavailable to them in Europe. Overall Jews did come with skills and experiences that created an "advantageous and basically whiggish fit" with the American economy. Moreover, the religious, racial, and political divisions and quarrels that wracked the United States usually left Jews off to the side. Although commonplace, anti-Semitism was never a driving issue in American society; no major political movement developed a durable interest in

fomenting hostility to Jews. Diner's essay brings one back to the recurring question of why the historical memory over generations of immigration and assimilation differs so markedly among the country's many ethnic groups.

Julia Guarneri traces a New York City institution so taken-for-granted that no one has thought to study it carefully until now: the Fresh Air Fund, which since 1877 has provided vacations in the country to children from poor and working-class neighborhoods. Guarneri came upon the subject through her research on newspapers' role in urban life; the *New York Tribune* sponsored the Fresh Air Fund as a community service project. As readers of the journal should know, the *Tribune* was a standard voice on the middle-class side of New York's divide between its comfortable half and its tenement-dwelling other half. Its program thus reflected the New York middle class's view of their city and its ethnic and working-class children. As Guarneri documents, the Fresh Air Fund's emphases evolved with the city itself and with middle-class perceptions of urban life and urban problems. In the Gilded Age, the country seemed redemptive for children; in the Progress Era, hygienic and uplifting; and after World War I, consumerist and acculturating.

Finally, Nikki Mandell provides a thoroughly researched and probably landmark essay on a recurring theme in the history of American social welfare, corporate management, and labor relations that matters a great deal in international context. In all industrial, capitalist countries, corporate employers retained prerogatives in the workplace and at times relentlessly enforced these. However, elsewhere, social-welfare institutions tended to extend more into the workplace and treat what happened there as within their concerns. In the United States, social work has generally happened in homes, schools, and neighborhoods. The workplace became the site of personnel management and perhaps welfare capitalism. Mandell traces the steps by which professional institutions, practices, and training programs coalesced in the Progressive Era so as to divide social work from personnel management.

Alan Lessoff