

Note From The Editor

On the theory that in summer people take time for detailed reading, this issue presents two extended articles rather than three standard-sized ones. The first, by Richard Schneirov, takes on a glaring historiographic problem: When did the Gilded Age begin and end, and why do we delimit it that way? Whereas most of us seem to assign periods to history either unreflectively or for implicit reasons, Schneirov derives an explicit rationale for defining the Gilded Age as roughly 1873-1898 from the history of political economy. We invited comments from two historians: James Huston, who has used ideas drawn from political economy to divide the American nineteenth century in different ways; and Rebecca Edwards, who has in several venues called for abolishing the term “Gilded Age” as hopelessly misleading. When wearing my historian hat, I tend to sympathize with Edwards’s suggestion that as a periodization device, “Gilded Age” may be irredeemable, because connotations weigh so heavily upon it. As an editor, I worry about our stationery budget, our listings in indexes, and so on. So I will go on record as favoring compensation to this journal should the profession ever undertake to prohibit further production, distribution, and use of the Gilded Age.

The second long article concerns the intersection between midwestern industrial history, marketing and advertising, and the standardizing and consumer protection inclinations of the Progressive Era. Timothy Messer-Kruse adopts the perspective of the Toledo Computing Scale company in probably the first systematic historical account of the Progressive Era movement for “honest weight,” on the surface a typical example of the progressive concern for business honesty and civic responsibility. As happened frequently in the Progressive Era, Toledo Scale and state and local weights-and-measures officials raised their profile and furthered their interests by positioning themselves as guardians of the public interest. By the mid twentieth century, the midwestern United States was filled with enterprises making devices as mundane, ubiquitous, and indispensable as grocery scales. Messer-Kruse explains how one taken-for-granted brand in American industry came to be taken for granted.

I write this during an interval from our packing to leave Ankara, Turkey, where we have spent the last semester. As Russell Johnston suggested in an essay in this journal in October 2002, if we assume that the Gilded Age did indeed happen, modern Turkey has a lot in common with it. Loose points of comparison might include a frontier ethic poorly suited to urbanized life

and expanses of arid plain that have impressed themselves on national culture. Especially at the local level, Turkey features free-wheeling, influence-peddling politics that can unsettle scrupulous people. Huge sections of the country are experiencing helter-skelter development that rushes ahead of the financial system. Like the Gilded Age United States, Turkey is engaged in a torrent of cultural institution-building: Ankara, as ungainly and fascinating a capital as Berlin or Washington, has around a dozen universities, the vast majority of which were founded in the last forty years.

Turkey, too, is a nation of immigrants, but there a great divergence emerges. With some glaring exceptions, of course, emigrants to North America chose to go. A surprising proportion of the current Turkish population consists of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of people who had to leave somewhere. The eighty million or so people of modern Turkey descend from the ten million or so who were left within the borders secured by Kemal Atatürk's nationalist movement at the end of the grinding succession of wars, the communal, ethnic, and religious violence, and the expulsions and population exchanges that accompanied the dreary, prolonged collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Anatolia, therefore, encourages one to mull over modern Western society from the opposite end, in both a geographic and an experiential sense.

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