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Published by: Society for Historians of the Gilded Age & Progressive Era
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40542874
Accessed: 04-05-2016 13:04 UTC

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Politics, Social Movements, and the Periodization of U.S. History

By Rebecca Edwards, Vassar College

It may be perilous for a member of the Society of Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era to propose, in the Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, that we cease using the term “Gilded Age” as a label for the late nineteenth century. Since I admire Mark Twain, who famously coined the term in a novel that he cowrote with Charles Dudley Warner, such a suggestion feels disloyal if not downright un-American. But in struggling recently to write a synthesis of the United States between 1865 and 1905 (cutoff dates that I chose with considerable doubt), it became apparent to me that “Gilded Age” is not a very useful or accurate term. Intended as an indictment of the elite, it captures none of the era’s grassroots ferment and little of its social and intellectual complexity. A review of recent literature suggests that periodizing schemes are now in flux, and a reconsideration may be in order.

The Gilded Age is usually defined as the “last third of the nineteenth century” or thereabouts, from the 1870s to about 1900. Reconstruction is often—but not always—treated as a distinct era running from 1865 to 1877, with the Gilded Age beginning after its demise. The Twain and Warner novel appeared in 1873, and taking the narrowest view one could argue that their satire pertained to the scandals and malaise of the second Grant administration (1873–77), though that is not much of an “age.” At the other extreme, some connoisseurs of architecture describe the Gilded Age as running from “the end of the Civil War to the Crash of the Stock Market

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1The synthesis is New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865–1905 (New York, 2007). It was my desire to leave “Gilded Age” out of the title, but editors at Oxford University Press argued that it still defines the era and that dates alone would not enable readers to identify the era covered. This suggests the enduring significance of the term “Gilded Age,” though I have reached an agreement to put the term in quotation marks for the forthcoming second edition. In recent decades, historical research on women, gender, and women’s reform has been an especially powerful influence on rethinking conventional periodization of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era; see Elisabeth Perry, “Men Are from the Gilded Age, Women Are from the Progressive Era,” Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 1 (Jan. 2002): 25–48.

2Charles W. Calhoun, ed., introduction to The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD, 2007), 1. The fine essays in this volume generally date the era from 1870 to 1900 or 1901, though some begin at 1877. Lewis L. Gould defines the era as “the quarter century between the end of Reconstruction and Theodore Roosevelt’s accession to the presidency” in The Oxford Companion to United States History, ed. Paul S. Boyer (New York, 2001), 308.
in 1929.”3 This erases the Progressive Era, and I suspect few scholars would concur. It does point up an interesting continuity: From the perspective of those who, today, manage great estates like the Flagler Museum, industrialists’ ascendance lasted until the Great Depression and New Deal finally knocked the stuffing out of their fortunes. The Progressive Era made barely a dent. Among scholars, the single most influential view may continue to be that of Robert Wiebe, who famously dated the rise of progressivism to around 1900 and attributed it to “the ambition of the new middle class to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means.”4

However it is chronologically defined, the standard narrative of the Gilded Age is familiar. This was the era when capital and labor fought their first pitched battles on a national scale, and capital won. Wealth became far more concentrated; the super-rich turned their backs callously on the poor, lavishing millions on banquets and Worth ball gowns. Multinational corporations arose to exercise untrammeled power, while government stood by passively, bound by the ideology of social Darwinism and laissez faire. Where government was active, it was riddled with corruption. Although (this story goes) a series of admirable movements protested the new conditions, all of them failed. The most universally perceived feature of the Gilded Age appears to be political stagnation and corruption. I recently reviewed a host of U.S. history textbook chapters on the Gilded Age and found the following descriptors: “paralysis,” “misrule,” “spoilsman,” “degradation,” “discontent,” “malaise,” and “ordeal.” Making America sums up politics between 1865 and 1890 as “Parties, Spoils, Scandals, and Stalemate” and “the Politics of Stalemate”; America’s History describes “The Politics of the Status Quo.”5 Students, confronted with such a static and demoralizing analysis, must surely skip to the next chapter if they think they can get away with it.

If they do, they are greeted by the start of the so-called Progressive Era, often in the figure of Theodore Roosevelt. The century turned, and Americans now felt optimistic about the possibility of change. They organized to challenge big business, restore good government, and ameliorate

5The textbooks surveyed include Edward L. Ayers et al., American Passages (Fort Worth, TX, 2000); Carol Berkin et al., Making America, 4th ed. (Boston, 2006); John Mack Faragher et al., Out of Many, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2000); Steven M. Gillon et al., The American Experience, 2nd ed. (Boston, 2006); James A. Henretta et al., America’s History, 6th ed. (Boston, 2008); Patricia Nelson Limerick et al., This Land (Maplecrest, NY, 2003); John Murrin et al., Liberty, Equality, Power, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA, 2007); Mary Beth Norton et al., A People and a Nation, 6th ed. (Boston, 2001); and James L. Roark et al., The American Promise, 3rd ed. (Boston, 2005). The Gillon and Roark textbooks suggest a possible emerging trend to date the beginning of the Progressive Era to around 1890, though they are still in the minority.
poverty. Those who organized before 1900 to challenge big business, restore
good government, and ameliorate poverty are treated in a highly selective
way. Jane Addams's Hull House, begun in 1889, is almost always identified
as a progressive initiative. But I have not yet found a textbook in which the
Farmers Alliance and Populists are treated as progressives, even though Hull
House was founded just as the Farmers' Alliance reached its zenith and the
People's Party emerged.

The standard Gilded Age/Progressive Era narrative marginalizes several
narratives of declension between the two eras—stories of political possibilities
that were open before 1900 but closed off afterward. Two examples are
worth mentioning briefly. First, in the main thread of African American
history, emancipation was followed by several decades of institution building
and intense struggle over the parameters of freedom. As late as the 1890s,
in some parts of the South, African Americans voted in significant numbers
and used the courts to fight discrimination and segregation. But the turn
of the century ushered in the Solid South, disfranchisement, and Plessy v.
Ferguson. As historians have noted, if there is any kind of progressive story
here, it is a grim one.²

The history of U.S. foreign relations highlights another glaring problem
with the Gilded Age/Progressive Era storyline: Around 1900, the United
States laid claim to Cuba and the Philippines and began a steady pattern of
military interventions in the Caribbean and Central America. Imperialism
may or may not mark a sharp discontinuity in U.S. policy—that remains
contested—but overseas conquest fits awkwardly, at best, into a story of
turn-of-the-century citizens who suddenly took up the causes of democracy,
poverty eradication, and social justice. Students may well read about Plessy,
disfranchisement, and imperialism and ask their professors, just what was so
“progressive” about the emerging Progressive Era?³

The Gilded Age/Progressive Era dichotomy also obscures very substantial
continuities over the period between the 1870s and 1920s. These include,
to mention just one key example, legal exclusion of Asian immigrants

²Dewey W. Grantham, Southern Progressivism (Knoxville, 1983); William A. Link, The Paradox
³Walter LaFeber, The American Search for Opportunity (New York, 1993), and Thomas
⁴One strain of Progressive Era historiography emphasizes social control, and by this ar-
gument segregation, disfranchisement, and imperialism may all be defined as “progressive”
initiatives. By going this route, however, historians of progressivism have created a narrative
muddle. If people who worked for racial justice, disfranchisement and segregation, immigrant
restriction, immigrant assimilation, imperialism, and anti-imperialism were all progressives,
then we are simply saying that American politics was lively in the first two decades of the
twentieth century, involving many competing interests and visions. That was true, but equally
or perhaps even more true of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. See footnote 22, below, for more
on this debate.
combined with large-scale immigration from all parts of Europe, both of which characterized the entire period (starting most notably with Chinese Exclusion in 1882, though it had precursors like the Page Act) up to 1924. I will limit myself here to a necessarily partial account of grassroots movements and policymaking. Other historians may wish consider whether it would be useful, in their own fields, to abolish the Gilded Age and adopt the model of a Long Progressive Era, beginning in the 1870s and ending in the 1920s or quite possibly with the New Deal.

In considering whether the so-called Gilded Age was truly marked by "stalemate" and "paralysis," a good place to begin is with concrete policy achievements. Despite the persistent idea that government stagnated before 1900, recent scholarship shows that the late nineteenth century was by no means an era of laissez faire. The Civil War era witnessed sweeping expansions of government power for new ends, and the postwar decades were marked by struggles over those expansions and proposals for many more. While much innovation occurred at the municipal and state levels, federal achievements were substantive. U.S. civil service reform began with the Pendleton Act in 1883. Congress passed the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887, the Hatch Act that same year, and the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890. The U.S. Post Office introduced a critical series of innovations, including Railway Mail, bulk postage rates, and finally rural free delivery by 1896. All these developments fit comfortably into the progressive narrative of professionalization, scientific expertise, and greater government efficiency and regulation. Meanwhile, in 1894, Congress and President Grover Cleveland enacted a progressive federal income tax, though this was struck down by the Supreme Court, and advocates had to work for a constitutional amendment that finally arrived two decades later. If being thwarted by the Supreme Court keeps one from being called "progressive," then legions of twentieth-century reformers will have to forego their titles, as well; an important continuity was that, with notable exceptions, the Supreme Court remained hostile to progressive measures from Reconstruction well into the New Deal.

9 For overviews, see Roger Daniels, Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life (New York, 1990), pt. 2; Walter T. K. Nugent, Crossings (Bloomington, IN, 1992); Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore (Boston, 1989); Erika Lee, At America's Gates (Chapel Hill, 2003); and Sucheng Chan, ed., Entry Denied (Philadelphia, 1991).

10 Richard Bensel, Yankee Leviathan (New York, 1990) and The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877-1900 (New York, 2000); Richard R. John, "Recasting the Information Infrastructure for the Industrial Age" in A Nation Transformed by Information, ed. Alfred D. Chandler Jr. and James W. Cortada (New York, 2000), 55-105; William R. Brock, Investigation and Responsibility: Public Responsibility in the United States, 1865-1900 (New York, 1983). Brock writes in his preface, "I beg reviewers not to use the phrase 'gilded age' except to record my rejection of a meretricious label that has done much to obscure the true character of a period to which we owe so much" (vii).
The late nineteenth century brought an even greater rising tide of government innovation at the municipal and state levels. In fact, it is difficult to draw a clear line between the innovations of Reconstruction and those that followed. Massachusetts began to investigate unemployment during the 1870s, the same years when a spate of Granger laws arrived in the Midwest. Twenty-nine states had created railroad commissions before 1890, twenty-one had passed antitrust laws, and many others regulated banks, insurance companies, and public utilities. It may justly be argued that such boards and commissions—like the Interstate Commerce Commission—faced overwhelming hurdles and had to be strengthened and reorganized later on. But one can hardly deny the reform impulse, and the limits of late nineteenth-century initiatives were often equaled by those passed between 1900 and 1920, few of which pre-empted the need for stronger measures during the New Deal.11

“Muckraking” journalism also arose well before Theodore Roosevelt applied that epithet in 1906. Helen Campbell reported on urban tenement life in the 1880s, and her work in turn influenced Jacob Riis’s How the Other Half Lives (1890). Ida B. Wells’s investigative reports on lynching in the 1890s also preceded the rise of Ida Tarbell and Ray Stannard Baker. Similarly, it is hard to cite the work of Lincoln Steffens and Upton Sinclair as stimuli to progressive thinking and not include Henry George’s Progress and Poverty (1879), Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888), and Henry Demarest Lloyd’s Wealth Against Commonwealth (1894). Lloyd, in fact, began his career with a crusade against Tammany Hall in 1871, joined the Chicago Tribune in 1872, and wrote prominently on the dangers of corporate monopoly throughout the 1870s and 1880s. The moment of truth for William Dean Howells was the hanging of Haymarket anarchists in 1887, after which he became a leading advocate of social and economic justice.12

Other patterns of grassroots activism also show continuity across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As noted above, Hull House began in 1889. The women’s club movement was well underway in many cities by the 1880s, with some clubs tackling social and political issues. Leon Fink has shown that the Knights of Labor were busy in the 1880s advocating such


12 For coverage of many of these figures, see David E. Shi, Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850–1920 (New York, 1995).
progressive urban goals as school funding, affordable mass transit, and garbage collection. The movement for women’s voting rights arrived prominently on the national scene in 1869 and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in the 1870s; ratifications of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the Constitution, circa 1920, are obvious ending points for the stories of prohibition and women’s suffrage. Meanwhile, nascent environmentalists were among those who persuaded Congress to designate the world’s first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872. John Muir wrote about Yosemite in the late 1860s and early 1870s, and John Wesley Powell’s Report on the Arid Lands, now an environmentalist classic, appeared in 1878. The Sierra Club was founded in 1892, the same year that Populists met in Omaha. Recent scholarship suggests, as well, that Grover Cleveland’s forestry chief, Bernard Fastow, may deserve as much credit as Gifford Pinchot for the rise of federal conservation.\(^\text{13}\)

Obviously, all these grassroots movements and initiatives experienced changes and discontinuities between the 1870s and the 1920s. But the breadth, complexity, and intensity of grassroots movements and ideas that arose before 1900 refutes the standard view that they were simply a prologue, and that the “real” era of reform began after 1900. In many ways, in fact, the 1880s and early 1890s were decades of great activism and political creativity, while the long decade from 1896 through 1910 was less so. Women’s suffragists, for example, won four territorial and state victories between 1869 and 1896, but then the movement plunged into a “decade in the doldrums.”\(^\text{14}\)

The reason for this was, in large part, the profound shift in political


\(^{14}\)Maureen Flanagan, for example, dates the start of the Progressive Era to the 1890s but argues that the Knights of Labor, Farmers Alliances, and Populists were not progressives for these reasons: They were backward- rather than forward-looking; they focused on “one group or issue,” while progressives “worked to develop a comprehensive reform program”; and the period after their demise was characterized by a larger “variety of reform groups . . . and numbers of people involved.” This seems to me to get it backwards. Perhaps more middle-class Americans became politically engaged after 1900, but the Populists were a cross-regional, mass-based political movement with a broad-based platform. Progressive reform groups that worked for such reforms as the direct election of U.S. senators, abolition of child labor, and preservation of wildlife were no less “single-issue” than the Populists, and probably more so. Maureen A. Flanagan, America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivism, 1890s–1920s (New York, 2007), 9–10. On the “decade in the doldrums,” see Rebecca Edwards, Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era (New York, 1996), chs. 7–8.
power that occurred in 1894 and 1896. The overwhelming Republican victories of those years must be taken into account as a turning point in any narrative of national political development, and if there is any place to demarcate the start of a new era, it might lie here. Republicans had lost their Reconstruction dominance in 1874, when Democrats’ stunning gains in the midterm elections gave them control of the House of Representatives by a large margin. Between that date and 1894, partisan control of the Senate and House switched several times; no president served more than one consecutive term. During these years, the size and makeup of Congress and the Electoral College were also remarkably unstable, due to the resurgence of ex-Confederates, the entry of new western states, and rapid population growth (which increased the number of U.S. representatives from 293 in 1880 to 356 in 1893). By contrast, after their sweeping victories in 1894 and 1896, Republicans controlled the White House, Senate, and House all the way through 1911. When power shifted again, it did so completely: From 1913 to 1917, Democrats took their turn as the party controlling the executive branch and both houses of Congress.15

This transformation in the political landscape helped some initiatives advance more easily, after the more friendly party held comfortable control, but it also set serious limits on the post-1896 agenda. Was the era of close party competition really one of “stalemate” and “paralysis”? If so, how does one account for victories like Pendleton, the Interstate Commerce Act, and Sherman Antitrust? Did Theodore Roosevelt, after his accidental elevation to the presidency in 1901, single-handedly erase the conservative impact of the 1894–96 realignment, initiating a whole new era?16 I am not persuaded, though it is possible that one’s views on the existence of a Progressive Era beginning around 1900 rest largely, in the end, on one’s assessment of TR. To organized labor the Republican ascendancy was, on the whole, bad news, occurring in conjunction with the Supreme Court ruling In re Debs (1894), which gave corporations free rein to use injunctions to demobilize strikes.17 As noted above, the women’s suffrage movement also fared poorly in the decade of one-party control. One long-term result was to push grassroots reformers away from party-based activism, which had been more productive in the period of competitive elections and narrow partisan majorities. After 1900, groups like the National American Woman Suffrage Association and

17David Ray Papke, The Pullman Case (Lawrence, KS, 1999).
Anti-Saloon League more often chose nonpartisan approaches, though the rise of the Socialist and Progressive parties seriously complicates this story.

One of the most enduring and frequently cited divides between the Gilded Age and Progressive Era—and one that rests squarely on the 1894 and 1896 elections—is the defeat of Populism. Historians have long described Populism as a farmers' revolt, while progressivism is identified as an initiative of the urban middle classes. Recent scholarship breaks down this distinction from two directions. First, in *Roots of Reform*, Elizabeth Sanders traces a critical agrarian role in the passage of federal legislation during the Progressive Era. By documenting who sponsored and voted for specific bills, she finds an "agrarian statist agenda" that endured from the 1870s all the way up through the New Deal. As Glenda Gilmore has written, Sanders's "stunning analysis" refocuses our attention on rural progressives and "suggest[s] that we may be struggling with the question 'Who were the Progressives?' for some time to come."18

While Sanders identifies a strong agrarian element in progressivism, other authors have located progressive strains within agrarianism. Michael Kazin's *A Godly Hero* offers a refreshing portrait of William Jennings Bryan, the great agrarian who helped Democrats transform themselves into a modern, state-building party. Connie Lester traces strong continuities between Populists and progressives in Tennessee. Charles Postel's new Bancroft Prize-winning book, *The Populist Vision*, also depicts Populists as modernizers and entrepreneurs—in short, as progressives. Noting that agrarian revolt was only one component of Populism, Postel emphasizes the significant contributions of labor and middle-class reformers to the cause. He argues that "the righteous, progressive, and modern society of the Populist imagination was to be built on empirically revealed and scientifically established truth."19

If any single theme characterizes debates over the meaning and definition of progressivism and the Progressive Era, it is neglect of the agrarian contribution. From its title, for example, it would appear that Michael McGerr's book *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement, 1870–1920* might integrate the Populists (and even Greenbackers) into a vision of progressive state-building. McGerr does touch briefly on the Grange and Farmers' Alliance in an opening chapter called "Signs of Friction." But, alas, here is his first mention of the Populists: "The vote totals of the People's Party, the greatest political expression of agrarianism, had

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lurched downward from a million in the presidential election of 1892 to a mere 50,000 in the national contest of 1900.” So when we meet the Populists, they are “dogged by weakness and internal division” and “suffer[ing] from a . . . sense of defeat and decline.” Yet, in defining progressivism, McGerr says that it was a movement for “control of big business,” “amelioration of poverty,” and “purification of politics.”20 Surely the Populists articulated those goals? One sympathizes with Kansas Populist Frank Doster, who observed in the early twentieth century that progressive-minded Republicans were “highway robbers” who had “sandbagged old-time Populists in broad daylight and robbed them of all their issues.”21 In textbooks all over America, the Populists are still getting robbed.

With luck, historians like Sanders, Kazin, Lester, and Postel will finally help rural folks gain entry into the progressive club. This might be helpful in more ways than one. To the extent that scholars continue to define progressivism as a phenomenon that appeared between 1900 and 1920, they are having a terrible time making it cohere. Some scholars despair, admitting that they have little “expectation of gluing back together the fragments of the conceptual entity that used to be called the ‘progressive movement.’”

In a recent synthesis, Maureen Flanagan identifies four key strands of progressivism but cautions that the groups she describes “are not intended to be identified as the progressives . . . nor should they be seen as defining progressivism; rather, they . . . often articulated ideas and programs that other Americans could adopt, reject, or refine to meet their own needs and ideas.” Even after textbook writers have shunted off the “angry farmers,” disfranchisement, segregation, and imperialism into other chapters, the chapter called “Progressivism” still tends to feature fuzzy language about the movement being “inconsistent and contradictory,” the “sheer variety of reform initiatives and the contrast of motives mak[ing] it difficult for historians to interpret this age,” and Progressivism being “at Odds with Itself.”22 I submit that the average student is going to have a tough time making sense of this for the final exam.

Perhaps it would be useful to broaden our vision. Instead of looking for consistency inside Populism and progressivism, both of which were sprawling and protean movements (and probably, in the case of progressivism, not one coherent movement at all), we could step back and look for themes and threads extending across the entire period between 1877 and 1920, or perhaps even 1932. This long era was characterized by economic and political integration within and beyond the boundaries of the United States and by substantive policy innovation, though at no time did state-building achieve the ambition and scope that would characterize the New Deal. What did mark the Long Progressive Era was a diverse, creative array of proposals for expanding government power and institutional capacity. This period also witnessed struggles over the United States' new identity as a multiracial society and over whether people of color (including not only African Americans, but also Asians and Latinos) had equal citizenship rights; the dramatic entry of women into the public sphere and an extended debate over whether they had equal citizenship rights; a series of Protestant adjustments, including both creative and reactionary responses, to increasing religious pluralism and the challenges posed by science and consumer culture; and the use of new technologies of communication and transportation to build national and international alliances of reform and protest.

A Long Progressive Era could incorporate the Grange and the Greenbackers in a story that points in the direction of the New Deal. Discontinuities within the period could be acknowledged if we identified an Early Progressive Era, running from about 1880 to 1894, and a Late Progressive Era, roughly dating from 1894 to 1920. What divided these was the cataclysmic depression of 1890s, Republicans' resulting electoral triumph, and Theodore Roosevelt's unexpected ascendance, all of which shifted the course of state-building and reform in various ways. But, though these crucial events shifted the channels of the great reform river between 1894 and 1901—narrowing here, deepening there—historians should not look for the river's source in 1900 or even the 1890s. It was already flowing deep and wide.

It is tempting to carry the Long Progressive Era forward all the way to the New Deal. Stopping at 1920, for example, marginalizes Robert La Follette's Progressive Party of 1924, which wove together agrarian, socialist, and other political strands into a movement that was in some ways more ambitious (though less electorally successful) than the Progressive Party of 1912. The Great Depression and New Deal probably represented for most Americans—from Henry Flagler all the way down to the South's poorest tenant farmers—the clearest turning point in the early twentieth century. So there may be an argument for trying to pull together all the material from Reconstruction
through the New Deal as a coherent whole. But I have already overstepped my own license to practice history, which expires around 1917, and I leave it to historians of the 1920s to consider whether that decade should be part of a Long Progressive Era, if such an idea were adopted.

A biologist colleague observed to me that when it comes to categorizing birds as distinct species or subspecies, all ornithologists are either “lumpers” or “splitters.” Historians probably come in the same two categories, more or less, and the above proposal qualifies me as a lumper extraordinaire. Any effort to suggest such a paradigm shift in four-thousand words must, of course, be tentative and partial. It is my hope that other historians will take up the discussion.

I will just note here, briefly, two benefits that might accrue if we abolished the Gilded Age and began thinking about the late nineteenth century as part of a Long Progressive Era and if we eventually persuaded non-scholars to adopt the same view. First, political commentators who argue that we now live in a “New Gilded Age” would have to confront the fact that social and economic inequality, selfish uses of wealth, and indifference to the poor have characterized most eras of U.S. history, not just the first three decades after the Civil War. That would suggest how intractable these problems really are. Commentators would thus have to look beyond the modest achievements of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, and perhaps even beyond the New Deal, as models for reform. They might discover in the Early Progressive Era not “paralysis” and “stagnation,” but an array of radical ideas potentially worth revisiting. As the American political landscape is now in upheaval (to my astonishment, someone in my neighborhood just spray-painted “NATIONALIZE OIL” across the back of his pickup truck), it might be a propitious moment to make the effort.

Another benefit would be far more modest but closer to home for readers of this journal. SHGAPE may be the most ungainly acronym in the historical profession. Whenever I identify myself as a member of SHGAPE, this information is met with incredulity (and sometimes a snicker). If the Gilded Age became part of the Progressive Era, SHGAPE could become SHPE, which could be pronounced either “ship” or “shape.” Whether this would make the historiography more ship-shape is another question. But I hope recent scholarship is promoting renewed attention to the challenge of periodization and that this will spark continued reflection on whether using the term “Gilded Age” is the most useful way to think about the late nineteenth-century United States.

See Perry, “Men Are from the Gilded Age,” which cites recent work on progressive continuities in the 1920s, and Robyn Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935 (New York, 1991), which suggests an end date of 1935, with the passage of Social Security.