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# Making the Gilded Age: Myth, Money, and Misery in a Market Society

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MAKING THE GILDED AGE: MYTH, MONEY, AND MISERY IN A MARKET  
SOCIETY

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
Murray State University  
Murray, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Arts in History

By: Austbrook Hudson  
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## **Abstract**

This project argues myths are central to society. For the Gilded Age, this was especially true. Myths helped to explain the world, individually and nationally. Stories structure life. Stories structure nations. They are consequential in times of change when the world is incomprehensible. At an individual level, the self-made ideal explained success and failure. It came with an implicit promise: every individual had an equal opportunity to succeed in the new economy, and the system was fair. Myths of the Western experience explained national identity. It revealed traits including rugged individualism, independence, and perseverance came from taming the frontier. These myths bound the country together. As the world continued to change, these optimistic versions of the world faced reality. Reality was much different. This disconnect created a sense of unease and anxiety about the future, and it led to a breakdown in narratives about the individual and society.

Myths that at first functioned as cohesive forces resulted in division and turmoil. Economic progress and technological advances made society unequal and more lopsided. Values transitioned from those of a market economy to a market society. People questioned myths as inequalities grew wider. Counter narratives emerged to combat prevailing myths. The resolution, the inevitable political backlash, thought of as the progressive era is not the focus here. Rather it is the beginning of the Gilded Age when new ways of understanding the world entered for the first time.

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## **Introduction**

“History does not refer merely or even principally to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact we can’t carry it with us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways and history is literally present in all we do.” –James Baldwin

Uncertainty was central to the Gilded Age, an era marked by disruption, the kind that left people mystified. Belief is never a replacement for truth, but like duct tape, it can work as a temporary fix for most problems, in most situations. Myths can be personal or national; their purpose is to make the inexplicable understandable. Similar to organized religion, myths are created to control the masses. Gilded Age Americans witnessed change at a blinding, fast-paced speed, and they wanted a frame of reference to understand it all. Myth provided it, filling in gaps with stories, providing meaning for the collective imagination where in reality chaos reigned.

These changes assumed many forms. The most obvious one was rapid industrialization, but it also took on other mutations, for example, in geographic expansion. It had taken over a century for the United States to extend to the trans-Missouri region. A decade later, that line moved from the center to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>1</sup> This accelerated speed altered peoples’ perceptions of time and space. Other changes like the growth of new cities and factories transformed the demographic makeup and encouraged immigration from Europe, Asia, and around the world. It resulted in less homogeneity and more heterogeneity. African-Americans, once considered commodities, gained equal political and legal rights (at least in theory). Emancipation and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Volume 63, (New York: Century Company, 1902), 95.

enfranchisement transformed racial divisions and the very idea of rights. Many wondered whether rights might extend to other groups, perhaps women. Another radical idea espoused by labor was the idea of incorporating democracy in the workplace. Throughout the Gilded Age, anything seemed possible because the world was so unpredictable.

Technology was a flood that saturated everyday life, overwhelmed, and inspired awe. Notable inventions appeared throughout the last decades of the nineteenth-century era: the steam engine, the locomotive, the telephone, the telegraph, the internal combustion engine, the rifle, ironclad ships, electricity, the light bulb, photography, and the cotton gin.<sup>2</sup> Even architecture inspired awe. The opening ceremony for the Brooklyn Bridge created a feeling of reverence. Abram S. Hewitt, one witness, gushed, “Could there be a more astonishing exhibition of the power of man to change the face of nature.” He went on, “Highways of commerce ablaze with the flags of all the nations; and where once was the green monotony of forested hills, the piled and towering splendors of a vast metropolis, the countless homes of industry, the echoing marts of trade, the gorgeous palaces of luxury, the silent and steadfast spires of worship.”<sup>3</sup>

Humanity appeared to have acquired supernatural abilities at the end of the century. Such sentiments were pervasive in Gilded Age literature. Henry Adams, for one, used the language of awe to describe the various technologies. At a Philadelphia exhibit, he wrote about it as possessed by a “moral” force.<sup>4</sup> In his words, technology was “supersensual.” He wrote about the unseen magic of “electricity” as an achievement that

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen van Dulken, *Inventing the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: 100 Inventions that Shaped the Victorian Age* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), vi.

<sup>3</sup> *Opening Ceremonies of the New York Brooklyn Bridge*, May 24, 1883 (Brooklyn, NY: Press of The Brooklyn Eagle Job Printing Department, 1883), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), 381.

required “faith,” and made “fiction of thought.” Even the chapter’s title, “Dynamo and the Virgin,” spoke to the marvel and amazement modern technology elicited.<sup>5</sup>

Astonishing inventions created extraordinary wealth (even by modern standards). In fact, “of the 75 richest people in all human history, 14 were Americans born between 1831 and 1840, including John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, J.P. Morgan, Frederick Weyerhaeuser, and Andrew Carnegie.”<sup>6</sup> The Gilded Age was a turning point for business, a time when small firms evolved into large monopolies. At the start of this process was fairness, at first a feature, something not true later on, which led to growing disparities in the distribution of power, both economic and political. People noticed related phenomenon in other signs. Henry George, activist and social reformer, for one, painted this picture: “The ‘tramp’ comes with the locomotive.” He juxtaposed “the almshouses and prisons” which were “surely the marks of ‘material progress’ as are the costly dwellings, rich warehouses, and magnificent churches....some get an infinitely better and easier living, but others find it hard to get a living at all.” George believed deciphering the “association of poverty with progress,” was the “great enigma” of his time. And the stakes were high. It was a “riddle” that if “not answer[ed],” would destroy society.<sup>7</sup>

Put yourself in the shoes of a Gilded Age American. Imagine being a tourist on vacation. Imagine walking down the street and seeing the castles built by men who made (accounting for inflation) several hundred billion dollars (yes—hundreds of billion!).

This Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller accomplished in their lifetimes.<sup>8</sup> They

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<sup>5</sup> Adams, *Education*, 381.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, Co., 2008), 61-62.

<sup>7</sup> Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry Into The Cause of Industrial Depressions, And Of Increase Want With Increase of Wealth: The Remedy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886), 7-9.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Krass, *Carnegie* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 537.



lived on “Millionaire Row.” A tourist described, “carriages crowding along, people jostling each other rushing ahead all bent on getting somewhere.” Further down they “passed Mr. Cornelius Vanderbilt’s mansion, Mrs. W.K. Vanderbilt’s elegant residence.” Then, a “little farther on we saw old Mr. Vanderbilt’s residence.” They did not know one of the gentlemen, a “Mr. Rockefeller” whose “mansion [was] even finer.”<sup>9</sup>

Some suggest that wealth isolates. Usually, this is a subjective judgment. Sometimes Freudian slips express themselves in unlikely places. Sometimes a word stands out and proves revealing. In a book written about Fifth Avenue, this seemed true. Notice the repetition of a word: “The other gates along the stretch of the Avenue are the Students’ Gate, at Sixty-fourth Street, the Childrens’ Gate, at Seventy-Second Street, the Miners’ Gate, at Seventy-ninth Street, the Engineers’ Gate, at Ninety-sixth Street, and the Girls’ Gate, at One Hundred and Second Street.”<sup>10</sup> Gate captures the isolation, a physical barrier, but also a mental state. It encapsulates in a single word how the upper class distanced itself from everyone else in the Gilded Age.

Now, imagine the other end. Five miles from “Millionaire’s Row,” were the tenements. Tenements were “large rooms” that were “partitioned into several smaller ones,” built without regard to light or ventilation.” Life inside was “degrad[ing],” space “squalid.” It was an environment festering with “untold depravities,” containing “evils more destructive than war.” Outside children huddled in “the street, with its ash-barrels

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in, Esther Crain, *The Gilded Age in New York, 1870-1910* (New York: Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2016), 88.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Bartlett Maurice, *Fifth Avenue* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1918), 300.

and its dirt, the river that runs foul with mud, are their domain.”<sup>11</sup> How could these two worlds, a few miles apart exist side-by-side? People created stories to explain.

Each section of this thesis deals with myths, but let me define the word. Instead of relying on my own definition, I have relied on one provided in Robert Segal’s *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. The author defines it “as simply a story about something significant,” and “to qualify as myth, a story, which can, of course, express a conviction, must have a powerful hold on its adherents. But the story can be either true or false.”<sup>12</sup> Myths are interesting and they raise questions. Let me outline the chapters that follow. The section that follows this one is a summary of related historians and historiographical debates that overlap with this project. It focuses on historians that have combined cultural history with business history. Emphasized are historians who specialize in looking at their relationship and the impact on culture.

Chapter two explores personal myths. It includes the work of Horatio Alger, as well as another self-help guru, Reverend Russell Conwell, famous for “Acres of Diamonds.” Conwell like Alger is not well known today but was in his own time. One historian summed up Conwell as a man who “traveled the country and the world to spread the word that there was no incompatibility between the teachings of Jesus and the amassing of wealth.”<sup>13</sup> Better known is Andrew Carnegie. The next chapter examines Carnegie’s writing—autobiography, essays, et cetera—and his contribution to the self-made ideal.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1914), 8, 183.

<sup>12</sup> Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3-5.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2015), 320.

Chapter four transitions from personal to national myths. Edward Everett Hale wrote about the importance in his book, *The Man Without a Country*. He claimed “one’s identity—indeed one’s very life—was dependent on immersion in a larger national identity.”<sup>14</sup> Symbols of the West, including Cowboys, Native Americans, and acts of violence are brought into focus. These symbols and contradictions, are used to explain social contradictions and a desire for simplicity. The chapter is organized around the real West and the Wild (or mythic) West. In the latter half, Frederick Jackson Turner, “Buffalo Bill” Cody, and others are used to explore themes of innocence and nostalgia.

Chapter five deals with the implications that come with perpetuating themes, myths, and stories, and how when they become unrealistic, they become destructive. This section looks at conspicuous glitches in individual behavior as well as the failure of the progress and prosperity to trickle down to the rest of society.

To provide one example, take the new mental phenomenon, the so-called widespread problem of “American Nervousness,” a mental disorder first diagnosed by George Beard in 1881. Symptoms included “fear of responsibility, of open places or closed places, fear of society, fear of being alone, fear of fears, fear of contamination, fear of everything, deficient mental control, lack of decision in trifling matters, hopeless,” all of which signaled the lack of willpower.<sup>15</sup> Emphasis on the individual likely influenced the rise of new psychiatric disorders, among the most prominent ones, George M. Beard’s “American Nervousness,” which he believed was caused by “over-civilization.”

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<sup>14</sup> Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 18.

<sup>15</sup> George Miller Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1881), vi, 5-8.

The job of the historian is to figure out the people who write these stories, to figure out and try to understand why they wrote them, why they wrote them when they did and what the stories tell us about the values and morality, fantasies and reality, ideas in the abstract and ideas in the concrete, the real world. Of course, historians study changes over time, but when studying change over time one is also quick to notice that there are also things that do not seem to change, that according to Mark Twain, do not repeat but rather rhyme. Myths and themes embedded in them have rhymes, and the rhymes are beats, beats in the beating heart of the country.

## **Chapter I: Historiography of the Gilded Age**

“The task of [history] is not to provide answers, but to show how the way we perceive a problem be itself be part of the problem.”  
–Slavoj Zizek

Rarely is it the case the ingredients needed to engage in a historiographical debate are built into the name of an age but that happens to be true of the Gilded Age. Mark Twain, a journalist and humorist, branded the period in a novel of the same name, *The Gilded Age*. The eponymous novel about casual double-dealing might also describe the promotion and sale of the book. Door-to-door salesmen hyped it as the “book everyone would be talking about” and once lured in, revealed it was “available only by advanced subscription.”<sup>1</sup>

*The Gilded Age* is a book where the cover proved more important than the content. One misconception about the book is that it was an acerbic attack à la Matthew Josephson. That is inaccurate. The novel lampooned D.C. lobbyists, not greedy industrialists, which has been the focus of other critics. The setting was not cities or factories, but Washington D.C. and the western territories.

What many people know of the Gilded Age centers on Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, libraries and oil respectively. No one outside of specialists can list the achievements of the placeholder presidents of the period: Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland, and Harrison. Therefore, its history usually includes some vague sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Scott A. Sandage, “The Gilded Age,” in *The Gilded Age: A Companion to American Culture History*, Karen Halttunen ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 139.

industrial development and a few notable moments such as the inauguration of Teddy Roosevelt and the start of the Progressive era. It was an “epoch of bigness,” the spirit of the age described by many as the evolution of “commercial enterprise and conquest.”<sup>2</sup> In the ether was something almost ineffable, but pounding with frenetic “force.” Something drew men in and motivated people with the same force as gravity.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there was magic in the appearance of city skyscrapers, sprouting up, and kissing the skyline. American nervousness, even madness, defined the middle-class. So mentally fraught was the situation that one physician claimed, “One [of] five people walking the streets were insane.”<sup>4</sup> These twin crises or phenomenon pinpointed tensions brewing in the Gilded Age, namely the intersection of business history and cultural history. The first debates about the Gilded Age shaped cultural history as much as business history, creating modern myths of narratives that continue into the present.

To dub three decades in American history “gilded” is to suggest something different from neutral labels like “reconstruction” or “progressive era.” Something gilded is by definition fake, bogus, and fraudulent. It is an artistic phrase, Twain’s phrase. Whether historians should adopt loaded terminology is a matter of personal taste. What was not a matter of taste were the efforts of the first professional historians who embraced and built on the fictional phrasing and explored the essence of ideas of their own generation. Vernon Parrington stylishly quipped that “the slovenly reality beneath the gaudy exterior” contained the critical insights.<sup>5</sup> Parrington’s metaphor, the “Great

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<sup>2</sup> *The Pittsburg Press*, October 5, 1890, 10; *The Sun* (Chanute Kansas), June 15, 1901, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), 454-455.

<sup>4</sup> *Report of the Proceedings in the case of the United States v. Charles Guiteau* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882), 2039.

<sup>5</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920*, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954), 10.

Barbeque” perfectly captured the business, politics, and ideas of the period, where all were presumably welcome but “not quite all, to be sure,” among them the “overlooked...inconspicuous persons, those at home, on the farm, or the millworker, cloistered in factories.” However, “all the important persons, leading bankers and promoters and business men, received invitations.” There wasn't room for everybody, and these were presumed to represent the whole. It was a splendid feast.”<sup>6</sup>

For Parrington and discerning readers, the Gilded Age was less about contradiction or paradox, but what was intentionally obscured. Monopolists championed individualism and “plutocrats governed in the name of democracy.” As Parrington explained, the Gilded Age had supplanted golden ages: the idealism of the 1840s, “the romanticism of the fifties—all the heritage of Jeffersonianism and the French Enlightenment,” everything for the pursuit of “the business of money-getting.”<sup>7</sup>

The year 1893 proved to be important for the crop of historians who would write the history of the period. Parrington graduated from Harvard, at the same time as Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famous ‘frontier thesis’ to the American Historical Association’s meeting in Chicago. Over the next decade, Turner would refine his “frontier individualism” to challenge “those captains of industry whose success in consolidating economic power now raises the question as to whether democracy under such conditions can survive.”<sup>8</sup> Charles A. Beard spent the summer of 1893 editing a newspaper in Indiana before heading off to DePauw College.

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<sup>6</sup> Parrington, *Main Currents*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Parrington, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921), 260.

All three developed their ideas about what history should be roughly at the same time, “when the great depression of the 1890s—a turning point in the development of the American mind—was at its worst.”<sup>9</sup> Parrington, Turner, and Beard witnessed the depression, the worst economic downturn up to that point. These events shaped how they saw the world. More importantly, it could be this period that they helped define through the New History, which accepted presentism and argued that history should be used to tackle the question of policy and social reform. Their writing sought to reach a broad audience and attempted to make history relevant within the larger public sphere. Unlike the writing of a generation before, their writing was “marked by its aloofness from if not hostility to popular aspirations.” They wrote history that was “critical, democratic, [and] progressive.”

Richard Hofstadter referred to all three as “progressive historians” for their politics, but equally important for the way they transformed the practice of history to make American cultural history relevant. Beard and Turner were elected to head the AHA. Parrington and Turner each won the Pulitzer Prize for history. Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* eked out the prize over its rival that year, *The Rise of American Civilization*, authored by Beard and his wife, Mary. The Beards’ hefty two-volume opus continued on their earlier efforts tracing the origin of plutocracy in America, in *The Economic Origins of the Constitution*. *American Civilization* is a comprehensive synthesis of American history, interpreted through a progressive lens. The nearly hundred-page chapter about the Gilded Age approaches it through its economic conflicts,

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 27.



“the era of triumphant business enterprise,” led by “new plutocrats.”<sup>10</sup> The first volume sympathizes with antebellum praise of the businessmen for their talent and initiative. Beard argued that “the cash nexus pure and simple was the outstanding characteristic of social relations.”<sup>11</sup> The economic narrative continued with the work of one of Beard’s former students, Matthew Josephson.

With the Great Depression, a renewed interest sparked a reexamination and revision of the history of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s for the generation of 1930. Parrington, Turner, and Beard sought to change history and make it available and useful for those outside the professions, and there is little doubt they were successful in reaching a broad audience. The generation that would return to the Gilded Age were not professionally trained historians, but collectively they helped push history in the right direction, to expand into other areas of culture that translated the interaction between business and culture.

An instant classic, Josephson’s *Robber Barons*, took its name from the anti-business slang of the era. Josephson, more of a biographer than an academic, imaged “an age which seemed ‘gilded’ or ‘tarnished’ or ‘dreadful’ or ‘tragic’ by turns.”<sup>12</sup> He reconsidered Parrington’s “Great Barbeque,” a feast where guests had an “uncontrolled appetite for private profit.” Josephson’s main chapter, entitled “Mephistopheles” put Jay Gould as the main villain. Borrowing from theorists who would become mainstays of later cultural history, among them R.H. Tawney, Werner Sombart, and Thorstein Veblen, from the latter’s work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and *The Theory of Business*

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<sup>10</sup> Charles A. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 383.

<sup>11</sup> Beard, *Rise of American Civilization*, 394.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1934), 162.

*Enterprise*—Josephson linked to “new patterns of devices of consumption.”<sup>13</sup> For a non-professional, Josephson’s work had a tremendous impact that continues today, although his work did not please everyone. As one business historian scoffed, “no study of the past is more urgently in need of revision than *The Robber Barons*.”<sup>14</sup>

Another Beard devotee, Lewis Mumford, sympathetic to Josephson’s view would write *The Brown Decades* three years before Josephson published his book. Mumford was self-taught, an urban historian, architectural and culture critic, and technological theorist. While he agreed with much of the design, even the foundation laid by Beard and Parrington, Mumford argued that they missed critical elements, mostly that of cultural construction. Mumford wanted to keep the foundation of what Beard and others had constructed earlier but he proposed that the Gilded Age “need[ed] a fresh name, to see it freshly,” he wrote in *The Brown Decades*—his suggested name for replacing the Gilded Age.<sup>15</sup>

Brown referred to the ugly devastation brought on by the Civil War, the newly freed slaves, and “the visible smut of early industrialism,” the particles of polluted air, oil rags, and rigs. “Beneath the crass surface,” Mumford found that something new “was stirring in departments of American thought and culture” that became “a source of some of the most important elements of contemporary culture.”<sup>16</sup> For Mumford, it was about contradiction, destruction for the sake of progress, the expansion and contraction of the economy, which might be interpreted only for its negative aspects. However, it was better

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<sup>13</sup> Josephson, *Robber Barons*, 338.

<sup>14</sup> Maury Klein, *The Life and Legend of Jay Gould* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 495.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Mumford, *The Brown Decades*, 9.

“we ceased to be dominated by the negative dimensions of *The Brown Decades*,” because underneath there were other “creative manifestations.”<sup>17</sup>

Mumford was unsuccessful in changing the era’s name; it remained Gilded. He succeeded in raising other issues at the intersection of business and culture, raising the issue of ‘bigness’ and whether it was an inevitable outcome of modern life, an integral part of it, and how this translates into the arena of law and daily life. Someone else who had contemplated the impact of technological change on democratic institutions was Justice Louis Brandeis, whose collective writing—a retrospective “I told you so”—titled *The Curse of Bigness* had been engaged in the debate from the beginning.

Twenty years earlier, he had published *Other People’s Money and How the Bankers Use It* to warn against the new evil of bigness, not only in government but also in every other major American institution, including economics, specifically in the corporation. Brandeis held that bigness was a curse in all of its forms. He understood that such systems could not be contained by law or economics, but would spread and be dispersed through culture and everything else.<sup>18</sup> Other legal thinkers too saw the parallels, including Thurman W. Arnold, Yale Professor of Law who pursued unorthodox ideas about the legacy of the Gilded Age.

In *The Folklore of Capitalism*, Arnold contended most had failed to recognize that bigness had both structural and cultural implications. Carnegie and Rockefeller perfectly captured “the struggle of a creed of individualism to adapt itself to what was becoming a highly organized society.”<sup>19</sup> The creed, however, instead of defining the limits of

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<sup>17</sup> Mumford, *Brown Decades*, 1, 9, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Brandeis, *The Curse of Bigness: Miscellaneous Papers of Louis D. Brandeis* (New York: Viking, 1934), 134.

<sup>19</sup> Thurman W. Arnold, *The Folklore of Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937), 211.

business organization, gave way to the “personification of the corporation as an individual.”<sup>20</sup> Quickly, before many understood what it meant for a corporation to become a person, it happened. Corporations and their leaders paid lip service to the older tradition of individualism, while at the same time larger corporations sought to quash the possibility of competition from ever developing. Even though “the corporation was a person” the legal theory held, “bigness” alone “could not make it a bad person.”<sup>21</sup> As corporations grew, “antitrust laws became the greatest protection to uncontrolled business dictatorship.”<sup>22</sup>

When appointed as the Assistant Attorney General for the Anti-Trust Division of the Department of Justice, Arnold argued his job was not just trust busting, but also reconciling two fears held by Americans: the fear of bigness and the fear of regulation. These phobias prevented real debate or progress over enacting pragmatic policy. Until these irrational fears could be stopped the “the neurosis [would] continue” this “spiritual [and] psychological conflict” that saw itself as “representing the ideals of a culture.”<sup>23</sup>

Miriam Beard, the daughter of Charles and Mary, carved out a niche while simultaneously remaining consistent with themes, ideas, and perspectives pursued by her parents in their work, namely the influence of economic forces on politics and culture. Not formally trained but adept at spotting gaps in knowledge, Miriam investigated “the interactions of business and culture” as they “form[ed] one of the least explored phases of history.”<sup>24</sup> In *A History of the Business Man*, she analyzed the archetypes and activities of

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<sup>20</sup> Arnold, *Folklore*, 191.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold, 210.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold, 207.

<sup>23</sup> Corwin D. Edwards, “Thurman Arnold on the Antitrust Laws,” *Political Science Quarterly* 58 (September 1943), 338.

<sup>24</sup> Mary A. Yeager, “Mavericks and Mavens of Business History: Miriam Beard and Henrietta Larson,” *Enterprise & Society* 2 (December 2001), 717.

“the organizer of economic enterprise” across history, from ancient to modern times. For her, the figure of the business person that evolved from the Gilded Age was the shift from “the apogee of the Individualist” to that of “the big business man.”<sup>25</sup> While her thesis was similar to Arnold’s, business historians dismissed the book as little more than a “contribution to socio-cultural history.”<sup>26</sup> Whatever faults might be found, Beard was correct in her assertion that “[the business man] remains outside the main stream of history writing, and therefore is not... ‘historified’ in the popular estimation.”<sup>27</sup> Others agreed and hoped to correct the record.

Allan Nevins, a journalist turned scholar, wanted to create a different narrative altogether. In 1927, his first shot at earlier accounts of the Gilded Age took the form of *The Emergence of Modern America, 1865-1878*, which coincided with the introduction of formal business history and as the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration began offering its first elective course in the subfield. Economic history had long been the turf overseen by muckrakers and progressive historians who wrote with a sharp edge. As defined in 1927, business history was “primarily the study of the administration of business units of the past.”<sup>28</sup>

Norman S.B. Gras taught the course at Harvard. He collaborated in the 1930s with Henrietta Larson, whose teachers had included Charles Beard. She would become the first woman awarded a full professorship at Harvard Business School. Together they developed the “casebook” approach, which studied individual firms, enlivening the field

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<sup>25</sup> Miriam Beard, *A History of the Business Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 229.

<sup>26</sup> N.S.B. Gras, “Review of *A History of the Business Man* by Miriam Beard,” *American Historical Review* 44 (October 1938), 66.

<sup>27</sup> Miriam Beard, *A History of the Business Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 2.

<sup>28</sup> N.S.B. Gras and Henrietta M. Larson, *Casebook in American Business History* (New York: F.S. Croft, 1939), 3.

but keeping it cloistered in universities and arcane monographs as opposed to reaching a broader audience. This reinterpretation of the Gilded Age as less about the rapacity of the age and more about “the demonstration of the useful possibilities of large-scale organization,” would remain the focus of business history, as its own subfield in the post-WWII era.<sup>29</sup>

Nevins too, zeroed in on the individual, how a person can shape the course of history. For Nevins this took 1,500-pages, a doorstop of a book, challenging those equally massive volumes written by the likes of Parrington and Beard. The product, *John D. Rockefeller: The Heroic Age of American Enterprise*, tested the postulates of progressive historians, reframed Parrington’s image of a “Great Barbeque,” and reformulated it as the “Great Game.”<sup>30</sup> In this case, the game was the emergence of complex business organizations, whose decade long rivalries shrank from a few players to a single firm. The winner of the great game in the story he told was John D. Rockefeller. Nevins contended that Rockefeller managed to become the world’s first billionaire through heroic innovation and presciently foreseeing that competition would be obsolete, where the “survival of the fittest” in the economic arena was a zero-sum game where one lived or died.

Some of the unsavory features of Rockefeller’s businesses, the conspiracy, sabotage, and financial chicanery, something that had been the primary feature since Ida Tarbell’s exposes in *McClure’s Magazine*, was for Nevins less important than the end result, which was rationalization in the market place, dominance of a market commodity,

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<sup>29</sup> Allan Nevins, *John D. Rockefeller: The Heroic Age of American Enterprise*, Vol. 1 (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1940) 521.

<sup>30</sup> Nevins, *John D. Rockefeller*, 100.

oil, and everything that went into the extraction and production by a single man. One could focus on the greed or ruthless nature that characterized the period, but for Nevins, such an approach missed the central point: “Quite apart from this issue of ethics, the time was to come when Standard would be praised for its pioneering qualities and its demonstration of the useful possibilities of large-scale organization.”<sup>31</sup> Corporate consolidation did not occur as a matter of course, but rather was discovered through a “huge experiment in industry which [Rockefeller] had inaugurated.”<sup>32</sup> Individual competition in the marketplace, which most Americans believed in, proved ineffective compared to what Rockefeller advocated, financial consolidation.

Within a decade, though, scholars lost interest in documenting the “heroes and innovators” as Nevins had done since such studies were limited and ultimately reflected, “the side of the corporate organization.”<sup>33</sup> At Harvard, Arthur Cole in 1940 began to look at the social, cultural, and conceptual nature of enterprise and entrepreneurs. Trained as an economist, he viewed American society as “an entrepreneurial system.” He argued this was an outcome of contingent historical processes rather than a cause. America as an entrepreneurial system was not a given.

It was not a presumptive fact nor attributable to more abstract principles like the Yankee “spirit of enterprise,” unlike the conventional way people thought about business, where “railroads ‘were built’ and banks ‘were organized.’” Managers and other actors followed managerial principles and reason based on their understanding of economic

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<sup>31</sup> Nevins, 683.

<sup>32</sup> Allan Nevins, *John D. Rockefeller: The Heroic Age of American Enterprise*, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles C. Scriber’s Sons, 1940), 67.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur H. Cole, “Entrepreneurship as an Area of Research,” *Journal of Economic History* (December 1942), 123.

laws; Cole said there were other features equally important.<sup>34</sup> Cole studied “social conditioning” and personal “ideologies” such as the “strenuous life” or the piecemeal tips found in Horatio Alger novels.<sup>35</sup>

It would be Cole’s protégé and his colleague, Thomas Cochran, who continued the cultural tradition in business history. In 1939, Cochran presented a paper at the American Historian Association, titled “The Social History of the Corporation in the United States,” and the following year *The Cultural Approach to History*, an anthology, came out, which delved into ways in which historians might incorporate the concept of culture into their work similar to anthropologists and sociologists.

For his part, Cochran built on Cole’s ideas to analyze “corporateness and bigness.” Large corporations, such as the railroads that built the transcontinental line were, in Cochran’s mind, “both enterprising entities and political governments.”<sup>36</sup> The dominance of the corporation in daily life and the entangled alliance between the corporation and the state were concealed. Cochran pointed out the railroads in the 1880s and 1890s more or less ran the state of California. They were “personified as a kind of frontier folk hero.”<sup>37</sup> Legally, once the courts blessed the corporate form with rights of persons, people naturally viewed “the personality of the corporation as an enterprising individual” to provide a legitimate basis for their continued expansion.<sup>38</sup> Cochran argued that historians who thought companies were pure, natural or legal institutions should dive into cultural histories, especially if he or she planned to pursue business history.

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<sup>34</sup> Arthur H. Cole, *Business Enterprise in its Social Setting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 140.

<sup>35</sup> Cole, *Business Enterprise*, 140.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas C. Cochran, “The Social History of the Corporation in the United States,” in Caroline F. Ware, ed., *The Cultural Approach to History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 171-172.

<sup>37</sup> Cochran, “Social History of the Corporation,” 172.

<sup>38</sup> Cochran, 172.



Three years after presenting his social history of corporations, Cochran along with his student William Miller published *The Age of Enterprise: A Social History of Industrial America*, which boldly promised “a new interpretation of the history of the United States based upon existing monographic material on American history, economics, and related social subjects.”<sup>39</sup> Using all three—history, economics, and society—they hoped to get beyond what they saw as other scholars’ naive attempts at understanding businesses’ influence on American culture. Simple formulas, primarily regarding the profit motive, prevented historians from understanding the centrality of economic freedom in American life, or why it had been the “most powerful [force] in determining the nature of our culture.”<sup>40</sup> The two introduced a re-periodization of the Gilded Age, placing it within a single continuous stream of a long nineteenth century that stretched from 1800 to 1929. They were critical of “the worship of Bigness in American industry and...the developments of immense corporations.”<sup>41</sup> They presented “industrial leaders” as the fulfillment of the enterprising tradition, similar to Nevins’s belief that they were not a break from the past.

They presented industrial and corporate capitalism as the productive and quintessential part of business life, betrayed by its offshoot: finance capitalism, which led to “the decline of individualism in American enterprise.”<sup>42</sup> Once the “new oligarchy” entered the scene, replacing “the places once occupied by the Vanderbilts, McCormicks, Rockefellers, and Carnegies” there were no longer a need for innovative heroes, but

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas C. Cochran and William Miller, *The Age of Enterprise: A Social History of Industrial America* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Cochran and Miller, *Age of Enterprise*, 181-182.

<sup>41</sup> Cochran and Miller, 273.

<sup>42</sup> Cochran and Miller, *Age of Enterprise*, 326.

rather financial wizards who knew how to make zeros multiply after a number from one to ten.<sup>43</sup> How individualism should die through financial capitalism was clear to the two authors: as industries grew and expanded they needed more than good ideas; they needed access to investment capital. Capital in the Gilded Age was largely restricted, controlled by a few firms, controlled by an even smaller number of people who could make the decision to lend to those firms.

Similar to earlier narratives of the Gilded Age, *The Age of Enterprise* had a cast of characters filled with protagonists. These protagonists represented the new villain: not those irredeemable robber barons but rather the robber banks and bankers. Cochran and Miller left an impact on subsequent histories such as Irvin G. Wylie's *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches*, a book that included "the human element" often missing in business history, but taking it and reconciling it with "actual human behavior and...rigorous economic analysis."<sup>44</sup>

The post-WWII literature of the 50s, of which Wylie's book was one, pursued culture over conflict. The defining characteristic, he argued, was persistent peace and prosperity enjoyed by Americans, making it unlikely they would stomach or develop a taste for class conflict. Instead, culture and consensus would be the defining feature of 1950s history. David Potter's *People of Plenty* used the "concept of culture thesis" to argue that the alliance between "the new corporations" and the state created a culture of abundance.<sup>45</sup> Abundance had always been the embodiment of the American dream, not

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<sup>43</sup> Cochran and Miller, 194.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Cochran, "Problems and Challenges in Business History," 113.

<sup>45</sup> David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954.), 35.

individualism. Scholars had focused on individualism merely because it was “the very best means of fulfilling possibilities of abundance.”<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, Potter added this had always been true about the American political system, stating “[t]he politics of our democracy was [always] a politics of abundance rather than individualism.”<sup>47</sup> Further moving away from conflict, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1915* by Samuel P. Hays reflected the dominance of consensus. In the preface, Daniel Boorstin made the case that “continuing geographic and social fluidity” had “prevented the hardening and sharpening of class lines.”<sup>48</sup> As a result, “few American have sought refuge in ideologies like those which had congealed in European countries during comparable eras of industrialism.”<sup>49</sup>

*In Industry Comes of Age: Business, Labor, and Public Policy, 1860-1897*

Edward Kirkland used “typical American” values and experiences to explain the abundance, the American standard of living that came with the post-war world. National institutions were the reason that America stood out in the world, Kirkland concluded that “today many nations seeking industrialization would be fortunate if they had, not so much America’s resources, but the national qualities which gave birth to our industrial strength and the institutions under which these qualities flowered to achievement.”

Cochran and Miller updated the preface to *Age of Enterprise* also finding much to cherish in the American cultural legacy: “The American standard of living has grown strikingly in the two decades since we first wrote. But its standing as a primary American ‘value’

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<sup>46</sup> Potter, *People of Plenty*, 125.

<sup>47</sup> Potter, *People of Plenty*, 126.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2014), ix.

<sup>49</sup> Hays, *Response to Industrialism*, x.

was firmly established during what we called *The Age of Enterprise*.<sup>50</sup> The Cochran legacy did not last and the “cultural path was not taken.”<sup>51</sup>

Alfred Chandler carved out a new path looking at the organization of big business “the large vertically integrated, centralized, functionally departmentalized industrial organization.”<sup>52</sup> Chandler’s shift lasted from 1960-1990. For him, the Gilded Age had been “the years of system-building.”<sup>53</sup> Less interested in “cultural trends” which Chandler took as a given, he dismissed “cultural attitudes and values” as secondary to “the dynamic forces” of rationalization and innovation.<sup>54</sup> He polished up the robber barons and saw them as responding to visible changes in large-scale organizations that “made possible the availability of new sources of energy and by the increasing application of scientific knowledge to industrial technology.”<sup>55</sup> Unlike Nevins, who focused on heroes and case studies, Chandler was much more invested in how technologies drive change. The human element was mostly gone, both bosses in upper and middle management, as well as the workers on the factory floor. Absent the human element, Chandler had remade business history and transformed it into a sub-discipline of American history. Louis Galambos said Chandler’s work had ushered in a new paradigm shift that applied new concepts to bureaucracy and organization, “the organizational synthesis in modern American history.”

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas C. Cochran and William Miller, *The Age of Enterprise: A Social History of Industrial America*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper, 1961), x.

<sup>51</sup> David B. Sicilia, “Cochran’s Legacy: A Cultural Path Not Taken,” *Business and Economic History* 24 (Fall 1995), 37.

<sup>52</sup> Alfred D. Chandler, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1990), 145.

<sup>53</sup> Chandler, *Scale and Scope*, 145.

<sup>54</sup> Alfred D. Chandler, “The Beginnings of ‘Big Business’ in American Industry,” *Business and History Review* 33 (Spring 1959), 2.

<sup>55</sup> Chandler, *Scale and Scope*, 145.

Galambos outlined the unifying themes. He assumed that “some of the most (if not the single most) important changes which have taken place in modern America have centered around a shift from small-scale, informal, locally or regionally oriented groups to large-scale, national, formal organizations.”<sup>56</sup> Deterministic and precise, the organizational model downplayed conflict and focused on commonality. It found a synthesis that cut “across the traditional boundaries of political, economic, and social history.”<sup>57</sup>

Robert H. Wiebe wrote a synthesis of the changes that came to America after the Civil War to the post-World War I society that marked a period of chaos, a search for in order a “distended society” consisting of autonomous “island communities” to the “bureaucratic system of new middle-class rationality.”<sup>58</sup> Wiebe argued that a “new consciousness” emerged among middle managers and professionals that were at “the heart of progressivism” for “the ambition of the new middle class to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means.”<sup>59</sup> The period then from 1877 to 1920 sparked a revolution in industrialization and management, but more importantly a “revolution in values.”<sup>60</sup> Wiebe had discovered through cultural history and sociological analysis a hypothesis about the middle class in American history.

Critical theory stimulated a new generation of historians, turning cultural history into a preeminent school for studying the past in the twenty-first century. In turn, they prompted business historians to rethink their presumptions about approaches to culture.

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<sup>56</sup> Louis Galambos, “The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History,” *Business History Review* 44 (Autumn 1970), 280.

<sup>57</sup> Galambos, “The Emerging Organizational Synthesis,” 280.

<sup>58</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967), 170.

<sup>59</sup> Wiebe, *Search for Order*, 166.

<sup>60</sup> Wiebe, 295.

With the infusion of social, labor, urban, and gender history, historians were equipped with new tools to expand the meaning of cultural history. This intersectionality can be traced back to David Brion Davis, who mapped out three levels of historical inquiry. Level one was “the description of the characteristic styles, motifs, and patterns of a given period.” The second level centered on “tensions embedded within the culture itself as the result of an interplay between past choices and commitments and new ideas or situation.” The “third level of cultural history obliged the scholar to search out lines of intersection between the development of cultural and individual personality.”<sup>61</sup> In *No Place of Grace*, Jackson Lears explored American culture from 1880 to 1920 through the lives of “antimodernists” like Henry Adams. Lears used the concept of “cultural hegemony” developed by Antonio Gramsci to capture the influence of the emerging culture of consumption and the bureaucratic state.<sup>62</sup> Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* viewed incorporation itself as a phenomenon.

The inspiration for this thesis comes from historians mentioned or named above. Those earlier studies focused on the juncture of economics, politics, and culture. This project continues in that direction. In the Gilded Age, cause and effect are clear. Changes in business and technology transformed the world.

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<sup>61</sup> David Brion Davis, “Some Recent Directions in American Cultural History,” *American Historical Review* 73 (February 1968), 696-707.

<sup>62</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985), 567.

## Chapter II: Marketing a Self-made Mythology

“I felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger... a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident.” –Hunter S. Thompson

One thing that never changes is the need to remake the world. One way to do this is through narratives or myths. Like mirrors, they are surfaces that allow individuals or nations to get a glimpse of their reflection. And, like skyscrapers, commercial sports, or laissez-faire sex sold on city street corners, myths were ubiquitous in the Gilded Age. What brought together the individuals—Alger, Carnegie, Conwell—was the self-made man ideal. The ideal of the self-made man celebrated a person who rose through the ranks because of a strong work ethic, a person who possessed a can-do attitude, a willingness to sacrifice and take risks. Self-made men lack special advantages and often face formidable disadvantages.

This ideal has a long history. Its origin dates back to colonial days, a time when everyone, by definition, was an aspiring self-made man. Indentured servants hoped to gain freedom, land, and success; they wanted to believe in the possibility of success. Benjamin Franklin represented the idea incarnate. His *Poor Richard's Almanac* dispensed aphorisms like "A penny saved is a penny earned," or "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."<sup>1</sup>

Horatio Alger, largely unknown today was a bestselling author of the nineteenth-century. His biography embodies both enthusiasm and unease. Raised in a religious

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<sup>1</sup> Huge Rawson and Margaret Miner, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of American Quotations* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 308, 438. The editors include this funny aside: “For all his advice about money, records of the Bank of North America in Philadelphia show that Franklin was overdrawn *at least three times a week* (emphasis added).”

household, he trained and landed a position in the ministry. His upbringing, like his books, depicted morality or a moral universe set in stone. He believed in the eternal truth of good and evil. This sense of righteousness concealed a perverse predator, an ugly appetite. Not long after settling into his career as the minister for a small congregation, alarm bells sounded. Parents of one child came forward, then another. They accused Alger of unnatural acts. The exact nature of events is unclear. Euphemistic terms like unspeakable or buggery, obfuscate rather than clarify. Either way, he molested boys who trusted him. Soon after, he admitted to the charges. In exchange for keeping the knowledge close-lipped, Alger promised to leave and never return.

He left for New York City, an expanding metropolis, first building out, then building up (skyscrapers, for example). Unlike antebellum America or rural America where everyone knew everyone else, the opposite held true in New York City. It was a perfect place for people with personal blemishes to hide, to live anonymously. Anyone could blend in. People streamed in, hour by hour, by land and by sea. Whether this feature appealed to him, no one knows; whether Alger planned to continue satisfying his secret pleasures is also unknown.

Alger became a famous author of children's book. He started on this path by walking the streets of New York, a time when thousands of children slept, worked, and lived on the streets. Parents abandoned children, mistreated and abused them. Poverty was rampant. In an unregulated world without a safety net, finding misfortune came easy. Alger watched them, approached them, listened to them, and took some of them into his home. In their stories, he found inspiration for the hundred books he wrote. From his interactions, Alger created composite characters. He set his characters in the moral



universe of his childhood. The formula was simple: hard work, honesty and personal integrity pay off. Laziness, indolence, smoking, and drinking led to a moral and financial decline. He was less curious about the background of the city. Why were children living and working on the street, left to fend for themselves, exposed to weather, and easy targets for exploitation? Such observations never came up.<sup>2</sup>

Moving from his personal life to his literary life, Alger, considered the “father of the rags to riches,” authored more than a hundred books in his lifetime. Some argue he helped perpetuate more than anyone else did, then or since, the American belief in the American dream, the ease of upper mobility, or simply, the idea that hard work pays off. His stories were typically set in urban centers. His plots were formulaic, easy to read, didactic, and wildly optimistic. Alger’s stories according to one scholar, “recount the struggles of an honest, enterprising boy who overcomes adversity to achieve success and respectability.”<sup>3</sup>

The tone of his books is one of complete innocence. Good characters were unambiguously good; bad characters were unambiguously bad. Darkness and danger appeared but never pose an actual threat. They were merely foils, obstacles to demonstrate the inevitability triumph of good over evil. In most cases, the main character engaged in a selfless act, a testament to his character and his heroic nature. The setup is quite simple. The bad character pushes boy off something into a body of water. Someone shouts, “He can’t swim.” Next, there is a splash, a moment of courage, rescue and

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<sup>2</sup> Although, in reality, Alger’s aw-shucks style should not be surprising, first because children’s books by definition would not be for children in nuanced and messy universes where distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil are tangled enough to be indistinguishable. At the same time, it is the earnestness, the constant assertion of innocence that likely leads skeptical readers to question just how conspicuous and clean Alger’s surface world was.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey H. Hacker, *The Gilded Age and Dawn of the Modern* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 23.

resolution. By coincidence, the saved boy turns out to be the son of a banker or merchant of some kind. Innocence was a guiding feature in the life of his characters; darkness and danger appeared, but they were quickly and easily eliminated by a heroic act, which was witnessed by others and came with a reward. His novels have been “touted as embodiments of the ‘American Dream,’ ‘rugged individualism’ and ‘lifting oneself up by the bootstraps.’”<sup>4</sup>

Alger is best known for his serialized *Ragged Dick or the Street Life of a Bootblack*. In it, Richard Hunter, the protagonist, a street orphan, called ‘Ragged Dick’ lives by various street hustles. Due to a lack of curiosity, societal problems never entered the equation. The reader learns Dick's life lacks purpose, his days a series of endless repetitions. In the morning, he shines shoes until he earns enough money for breakfast. After that, he continues to do the same thing, doing whatever odd jobs he can find until the end of the afternoon. In the evening, he wastes his earnings on ephemeral pleasures: drinking, smoking, and cheap entertainment.

One day, Dick overhears a man tell his nephew he will be unable to show him around the city. Dick intervenes, and this intervention puts him on the right path, a righteous path. Soon after, he quits drinking and smoking. Later, a wealthy older male buys him a suit, transforming his physical appearance, making him respectable. One character references fairy tales. He interjects, “It reminds me of Cinderella...when she was changed into a fairy princess.”<sup>5</sup> On his initiative, Dick rents an apartment. Dick takes in a tenant, who in exchange for board teaches him how to read. By the end of the story,

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<sup>4</sup> Hacker, *The Gilded Age*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick, or Street Life in New York with the Boot-Black* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co.), 24.

Alger's character, through a combination of hard work, honesty, and pluck overcomes all obstacles.

To read one Alger book is to read every Alger book. The names change, but the plot remains unchanged. The author often intrudes, leaving no ambiguity about why a character failed or succeeded. He provides explanations, as seen here at the end of the first chapter of *Ragged Dick*:

I have mentioned Dick's faults and defects, because I want it understood, to begin with, that I don't consider him a model boy. But there were some good points about him nevertheless. He was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straightforward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults. I hope my young readers will like him as I do, without being blind to his faults. Perhaps, although he was only a boot-black, they may find something in him to imitate.<sup>6</sup>

Alger never asks about social conditions. While the moral qualities of his teens are poked and prodded, fundamental questions about the moral qualities of society were never questioned. Concern for these children who live mere miles from Wall Street seems odd. Some critics suggest Alger clung to antebellum morality, not the new morality of "money-getting." It could be that his "sincerity and rationality were supposed to counteract the destruction unleashed by the market."<sup>7</sup> It could be that the men that swooped in and saved the day were stand-ins for Alger. Early in *Ragged Dick*, Alger provides Johnny Norton's backstory, one of Dick's friends. Norton had "but one tie to the city," his father. Alger continued that "he might as well have been without one,"

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<sup>6</sup> Alger, *Ragged Dick*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 7.

describing the father's abuse. In one instance “[the father] threw a flat-iron at his son’s head with such terrific force that unless Johnny had dodged he would not have lived long enough to obtain a place in our story.” Still, circumstances are no excuse. Even abused and abandoned children must accept personal responsibility. Johnny, the audience learns, “had not energy enough to succeed.”<sup>8</sup> If circumstances were irrelevant to the world, then Alger is merely peddling false hope and calling it a meritocracy.

What is noticeable about Alger’s stories can be found in particular absences or omissions. For example, Alger’s characters rarely worked. Beyond that, he “overlooked a number of key social and environmental factors.”<sup>9</sup> It is unlikely that Alger’s characters regardless of their personal qualities would have succeeded in the Deep South or Appalachia. Statistically, the chance of success there was slim. Irvin Wyllie estimated that three out of four millionaires of this period were born in New York or Pennsylvania.<sup>10</sup>

As the protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* disappointedly notes, reflecting on the African-American experience, the idea of Horatio Alger was “that lie that success was a rising upwards. What a crummy lie they kept us dominated by.”<sup>11</sup> Stanford Professor Gavin Jones highlighted the danger of society embracing the Alger myths. According to Jones, these market myths were a “zone of ethical fantasy, or wishful thinking, that work to animate a kind of comforting ethical continuity between old fashioned values (hard work, good character, proper charitability) and the pursuit of

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<sup>8</sup> Alger, *Ragged Dick*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Miller and Mike Lapham, *The Self-Made Myth: And the Truth about How Government Helps Individuals and Businesses Succeed* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Irvin Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Leonard Cassuto ed., *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 420.

wealth.” On the surface, this might seem correct, but Jones contended from his perspective, “there is no need to address rising class disparities.” Wealth and poverty can be reduced to simple formulas, where “the poor seem poor because they lack character; by implication, wealth is a sign of inherent ethical sensibility.”<sup>12</sup>

Alger’s stories preach respectability more than riches. His lessons show how “ambitious young boys [could] make themselves useful and acceptable to potential employers—to prepare themselves, as it were, for the dispensation of economic grace.” Popular perceptions lead one to believe Alger’s novels taught independence. They did not. Quite the opposite, they “demanded ongoing subordination.” The unstated message was that the world rewarded sycophants and yes-men. Learn to please, learn servility, as when Dick lathers his employer with promises like, “I’ll try to serve you so faithfully, sir, that you won’t repent having taken me into your service;” the audience is reminded of a serf more than free men.<sup>13</sup> In *History of New York City*, Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace wrote Alger’s philosophy “was a creed for clerks.”<sup>14</sup>

Satirists attacked such portrayals, that of virtuous young boys, acquiring reward from Protestant Work Ethic formulas. In *The Story of a Bad Little Boy*, Mark Twain countered Alger. “The Bad Little Boy” did the opposite of Alger’s boys, but they still claimed the same rewards. A short passage state that “once [the bad little boy] climbed Farmer Acorn’s apple-tree to steal apples, and the limb didn’t break, and he didn’t fall and break his arm.” A self-aware narrator reflected how “strange” it is. “Nothing like it

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<sup>12</sup> Gavin Jones, “An Embarrassment of Riches: Literature and the Ethics of Wealth in the Gilded Age,” *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, February 12, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Alger, 193.

<sup>14</sup> Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 978.

ever happened,” he says “in those mild little books with the marbled back.”<sup>15</sup> Twain made a career out of creating characters that defied cherished morality myths, Tom Sawyer provided the ultimate example.

Twain’s *Poor Little Stephen Girard* was meta-narrative. The story begins with a boy, Stephen, listening to his uncle read an Alger story. In it, a “little boy” “chewing licorice” enters a bank. The boy sees a pen and picks it up. A man walked over, a chance encounter. The man is the bank manager. Soon after, the “little boy” was taken “into partnership,” and given “half the profits.” Not only that, but he married “the bank man’s daughter.” “Now all he has is all his,” wrote Twain, adding, the boy knew about making it “all his own too,” truly self-made.<sup>16</sup>

After listening to the story, Stephen decided to replicate the process. His results are a bit different. When he enters the bank he “expected the bank man would call me in and say: ‘Little boy, are you good?’ and I was going to say ‘Yes.’” He was ready to “become a partner and marry his daughter.” The bank man, however, “wasn’t anxious to have a partner, and I guess the daughter was a son.”<sup>17</sup> Twain poked holes in the myths, ideas like “Providence rewards the good little boy and punishes the bad one.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite fact or humor, or anything else, myths persisted. One reason is that there was no alternative. To raise children to believe the world operates like Cinderella actually fed illusion and bred discontent. To expose kids too early to the world’s worst horror is its own cruelty. One produces narcissists, the other, sociopaths. In the Gilded Age, the

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Twain, *Sketches* (Toronto: Belfords, Clarke & Co., 1918), 41-42.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Twain, “Poor Little Stephen Girard,” in *Carleton’s Popular Readings*, Anna Randall-Diehl, ed., (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., Publishers, 1879), 183-184.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Twain, 183-184.

<sup>18</sup> Tom Quirk, *Mark Twain and Human Nature* (Columbia, MO: Missouri University Press), 95.

problem was two-fold. First, there was a conflict between old values and new values. Old values included honesty, modesty, and decency, rooted in the pre-capitalist notion of civic virtue. New values championed self-interest and wealth. The new did not denounce the old. The new wanted the old to remain, but not when it conflicted with self-interest or the accumulation of wealth.

This conflict between what people say and what they do was a conflict between new values and old values. This conflict is inherent in myth. It allows individuals and nations to say one thing and do another. This tension between belief and action was perfect for comedy, however in an article titled "A German Satire on American Character," that tension was accentuated. The story was about a kid named Freddy. Freddy "always attacked the boys who were weaker than himself, beat them, and took away their pennies in the name of civilization and humanity."

In the quote below, the anonymous author wages a larger criticism of the country. The author tries to hold up a mirror to society. He points out while Americans claimed they believed in honesty, the financial system was dishonest. It highlights a belief in fairness, but unfairness seems to win. While everyone hates cheating and cheaters, cheating and cheaters prevailed. Americans championed law and order, but lawlessness and chaos defined the economic order. Here is the abbreviated version:

One day Freddie's father was told that his son had swindled a friend of the family with a bogus dollar, and had gotten 85 cents change. And the father deeply moved, said: 'I always knew Freddie would some day be a great man.' Then he turned Freddie's pockets inside out and transferred the 85 cents to his own. After that, Freddie was placed with a wise merchant who taught him that two and two make five. Freddie was wiser than he, and he learned how to make two and two equal nine. Then his boss made him a partner. And Freddie was worthy of the trust. He managed to get hold of all the shares and to give his old boss the

bounce. And all the people were loud in their praises of Freddie. Then Freddie bought sugar and sold it at a quarter of its value until he had ruined all competition, when he made good his losses tenfold by raising the price enormously. And all the people praised Freddie. Freddie built a railroad to ruin the road which ran through his city, and he succeeded, and made the public pay. He oiled the machinery of Congress and worked it so that tariffs excluded everything he wished to sell dear, and there was no competition. And the people still more praised Freddie. All the papers published vile portraits of him; he was called the man of the hour and the Napoleon of finance. Freddie had become a great American.<sup>19</sup>

This sort of spoof attacked the widespread economic mythology of the Gilded Age. Humor worked because it deeply resonated with deep economic anxieties held by the public.

Walk into a bookstore today and you will come across the genre of self-help, promising wealth and success. Titles include *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People, Think and Grow Rich*, and *The Millionaire Next Door*. All owe their origin to Andrew Carnegie. He wrote articles and gave short talks. Carnegie's "How to Succeed in Life" outlined key lessons for those wanting self-made status. Some lessons are merely bromides, "[d]rink only in moderation and never enter a saloon." Others reflected the prejudice likely found with most property and business owners: "[a]lways do more work than is asked of you—promotion comes from exceptional work." Others restated Franklin, "[n]o matter how small your earnings always save something and never gamble or speculate."<sup>20</sup>

Carnegie did not follow his own advice about speculation. Speculation made Andrew Carnegie, or he would never have become Andrew Carnegie. Historian Jackson

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<sup>19</sup> "A German Satire on American Character," *The Literary Digest*, June 16, 1900, 734.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Carnegie, "How to Succeed in Life" *The Pittsburgh Bulletin*. December 19, 1903.



Lears recounted Carnegie's early rise. He did not climb the ladder through hard work or savings. Instead, it was the result of his "knack for ingratiating himself with corporate mentors and turning them into dependable cronies." People associated Carnegie with steel, but he was a "very rich man even before he got into the steel business." He did this "mainly by capitalizing on inside tips and timely stock sales." In fact, his "earliest and most lucrative enterprises involve manipulating money." It is ironic that "[t]he man who would come to personify productive industry began as a beneficiary of crony capitalism."<sup>21</sup> Carnegie was a master of public relations, skilled at celebrating himself and industrial capitalism.

As the name suggests, *The Gospel of Wealth* turned economic ideas, specifically materialism and morality, into a narrative. Carnegie, of course, viewed himself as the hero. Much of the book tried to reconcile inequality with progress. In many ways, he defused his critics by acknowledging that wealth comes not from a single individual, but from the community. Moreover, Carnegie did not believe in what the self-help manuals of the time often told readers. In fact, as David Nasaw wrote in his biography "there is something charmingly subversive in Carnegie's attempt to disrupt the American success narrative by preaching the virtues of idleness, leisure, and immediate gratification." Both John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie subscribed to the Doctrine of Stewardship, although Rockefeller understood it in religious terms, arrogantly asserting, "God gave me my money."

Carnegie's vision married innocence with traditional values. It allowed him to conceal the defects of the new economy. Similar to Alger, Carnegie's ideas were taken

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<sup>21</sup> Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 56.

from a fictionalized universe, with the ultimate result providing a justification of his own life, and spreading the message that wealth and money, by men like him, were accumulated through their virtue, perhaps the purest display of a market society at work. Hoping to fend off attacks from critics regarding what appeared to many as the systemic problems of the industrial revolution, Carnegie tried to allay their concerns: “The contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer with us today measures the change which has come with civilization. This shift, however, is not to be deplored but welcomed as highly beneficial...Much better this great irregularity than universal squalor...The ‘good old times’ were not the good old times.”<sup>22</sup> So said one of the wealthiest men that had ever walked the earth.

Carnegie used public forums to praise industrial capitalism. It was unusual for the time. Other people who had amassed immense fortunes took a different approach. Instead of cultivating a public persona like Carnegie, or eliciting praise here and there from regular people, the other scions of wealth assumed a distant, detached, even lordly disposition. When a reporter asked William Vanderbilt whether he ran trains for private interest or public accommodation, he replied with a line that would haunt him forever: “The public be damned. I am working for my stockholders,” he thundered. Vanderbilt added, “If the public wants the train why don’t they pay for it?”<sup>23</sup> Unfiltered contempt not only confirmed many American’s worries about the unchecked influence of an aristocratic class, but was also equally bad for business. Having a firm grasp of public relations before there was even a name for the industry, Carnegie understood the benefit

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* (New York: The Century Co., 1901), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1934), 187.

of presenting a public face, realizing the advantage of such an approach but never taking it seriously. As Paul Kahan, who wrote about Carnegie and his behind-the-scenes involvement in the Homestead Strike, “Vintage Carnegie” described a man who always relied on being “disingenuous and dishonest,” or at least when it came to public versus private positions.<sup>24</sup> Other industrialists were reluctant to have their picture taken but not Carnegie. He was always willing to allow photographers to snap his shot, looking like a distinguished grandfather or Santa Claus in a top hat.<sup>25</sup> Historian Steve Fraser pointed out that even though most historians think of Carnegie as a businessman, in reality, his real genius was found in salesmanship.

Fraser wrote, “Carnegie remained a salesman for the rest of his life; but as time went on and his fortune grew, he went mainly into the business of selling himself.”<sup>26</sup> Carnegie understood the power of projection. Powerful psychological associations, creation success myths, and the cult of personality that surrounded tycoons like Carnegie made it difficult to discern the boundary line between reality and falsity, public persona and private character. Margaret Carnegie Miller, Carnegie’s only child, confided that her father was a “kindly, friendly man who always wanted to be remembered as one who loved his fellow man.” But privately, she despised the overly fuzzy portraits found in

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Kahan, *The Homestead Strike: Labor, Violence, and American Industry* (New York: Taylor Francis, 2014), 47.

<sup>25</sup> David Nasaw, *Andrew Carnegie* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 600. Similar to his friend J.P. Morgan, Carnegie was insecure about his physical appearance. Morgan hated to be photographed because of his rosacea, and often reacted poorly when someone snapped a shot of him on the street. Carnegie, stood five foot three inches, and rarely allowed photographers to take a picture of him standing side by side with others, or even his wife, who towered over her husband. Unlike Morgan, Carnegie appears to have had more self-control, realizing the damage that might accompany a single outburst.

<sup>26</sup> Steve Fraser, “Take the Money and Run,” *The Nation*, March 15, 2007.

public forums. Margaret chastised a biographer, demanding that he quit with the cleansed version of her father and “[t]ell his life like it was...I’m sick of the Santa Claus stuff.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite giving away \$350 million for philanthropic endeavors, millions of working class men and women never forgave Carnegie for his role in the Homestead massacre where he hired private security forces, the Pinkerton Agency, to intimidate and threaten his employees, a move that precipitated one of the most violent labor conflicts in the history of the United States. Carnegie, the nation’s second wealthiest man, whose motivation was single-minded, destroyed the possibility of unionization at his steelworks. For some, the litigation against Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick, who oversaw the day-to-day operations of the company made “the public drool at the thought of seeing how the Santa Claus Carnegie really managed his business.”<sup>28</sup>

Warm feelings and psychological projections were turned into an art form by Baptist minister-turned-motivational-speaker, Russell Conwell. In the 1890s, Conwell joined the chorus of those extolling the virtues of the economy, its leadership, and management. He delivered his famous lecture, “Acres of Diamonds,” more than 6,000 times across the country. The speech generated eight million dollars in revenue for Conwell. Its thesis was that everyone ought to get rich because in America it was an easy thing to do. Conwell, a Baptist preacher by training, couched the obligation to obtain wealth in another imperative, the Christian duty to perform good works.

“Acres of Diamonds” referred to literal and figurative opportunities people ignore due to the belief one must search elsewhere for success. Conwell used “real-life” anecdotes where ambitious men failed to see the potential under their noses. Each mini-

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Krass, *Carnegie* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 536.

<sup>28</sup> Krass, *Carnegie*, 331.

drama included well-intentioned individuals who venture off seeking riches. They discovered the property left behind contained the very thing they went seeking after—gold, silver, and oil—those acres of diamonds. One story involved a young man who desperately wanted to be a part of the booming oil business. When he reached out to his cousin, he was rebuffed. His cousin wrote back that he could not afford to hire someone who “knew nothing of the oil business.” Undeterred, the man set out to learn everything he could about oil. After intensive study, he persuaded his cousin to hire him. Selling his property, he left town and dreamed of his future oil fortune. Conwell added the twist. The man who purchased the property discovered while “watering his cattle” a plank, which once removed, revealed a “flood of oil.”<sup>29</sup> His message: look deep within yourself and grab the opportunities in the here and now.

Conwell proceeded to the question of morality. He lambasted his audience, Christians in particular, who had been duped by the then fashionable idea that rich people were to be viewed with suspicion and the have-nots with sympathy:

I say that you ought to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich....The men who get rich may be the most honest men you find in a community....That is why they carry on great enterprise and find plenty of people to work with them. It is because they are honest men. I sympathize with the poor, but the number of poor who are to be sympathized with is very small. To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins....is to do wrong....Let us remember there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings.<sup>30</sup>

Poverty then was strictly a weakness of character. Upstanding people, the “right” kind of person “ought to get rich,” according to Conwell because they “did not have the

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<sup>29</sup> Russell Conwell, *Acres of Diamond* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1915), 8-10.

<sup>30</sup> Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds*, 15.

right to be poor.”<sup>31</sup> Impoverished individuals must have “done some great wrong...been untruthful to [them].” One academic concluded the genius of the lecture was in this transition from a story, to “creat[ing] [a sense of] guilt in his audience, so that they would be anxious to hear his prescription.” Once there, Conwell craftily welded materialism with a moral duty. He asked the audience to imagine if they “had the money, what [they] could do” for their wives and children, home and city. “Wealth is power,” he noted, and it was a Christian’s obligation to perform good works, money provided such an opening. Within a short period, Conwell managed to subvert conventional notions related to wealth, poverty, and a Christian’s obligation to their fellow man. He had transformed a “lack of wealth,” from an “annoyance” into a “crime.” He elaborated that the roots of poverty stemmed from laziness and laxity within individuals.

He not only reversed the idea of sympathizing with the penniless, but also urged the audience to see what he saw, someone “not doing God’s work.” If one tries to grasp the rhetorical appeal of the lecture, one finds something close to sleight-of-hand, a magic trick of words. Instead of giving the audience useful instructions, he merely redefined wealth as character as character as something the audience already possess. In the end, everyone “unearths[s] the diamonds of character” gaining the “treasure literally, under their noses.” Thus, “Conwell gives them nothing they did not already have.” Striking is how similar this strategy appeared to tricks pursued by confidence men. When successful, the confidence man got the person to give up their money for something satisfying but empty.

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<sup>31</sup> Conwell, 17.

The self-made man model was presented in positive terms, but it cloaked much darker dimensions. The idea taken to its logical end was anti-reform and could only explain life's misfortunes on personal failures, evident in Conwell's convictions that "there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings."<sup>32</sup> Veterans who lost limbs and could not be hired had themselves to blame. Workers injured on the job, only themselves to blame. An abused child without an education or opportunity, who reached adulthood in America, had himself or herself to blame.

The poor were doomed to poverty not because of policies but because of principles in nature. Nature provided society with a clear choice. It would be "the survival of the fittest," stressed William Graham Sumner, or it would be the "one possible alternative the survival of the unfittest."<sup>33</sup> Sumner warned his audience and then proceeded, "It may shock you to hear me say it a drunkard in the gutter is just where he ought to be. Nature is working away at him to get him out of the way" and nature Sumner snarled, "[r]emoved whatever is a failure in its line."<sup>34</sup>

The drunkard in the gutter trope was endlessly used in Social Darwinist literature—the Gilded Age equivalent of the welfare queen. Herbert Spencer, the most outspoken spokesperson for this view, admonished readers in *Coming Slavery* against falling under the spell of sentimentality when they witnessed suffering. Using the drunkard on the street as an example, he conceded that it was easy to feel sympathetic or concerned for the suffering of others. Unfortunately, the mind falls prey to the immediacy

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<sup>32</sup> Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> William Graham Sumner, *The Forgotten Man and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1907), 225.

<sup>34</sup> Sumner, *The Forgotten Man*, 480.

of a present experience. It is only able to see agony and pain in the immediate moment. In reality, if one had access to the bad decisions that led to the person living in the streets, that sympathy would disappear.

Spencer argued Christians must undergo mental training, training that would encourage a state of indifference, something akin to a Buddha-like state of worldly detachment. Such training would eventually lead them to a state of negligence where they could ignore suffering; walking past the homeless and hearing their pleas would be no different from walking past an inanimate object and hearing the sounds of the city. Here, we find economics and the market redefining the tenets of Christianity. Spencer changed the equation for Christian charity, too, preaching, “[i]f any would not work, neither should he eat.” For Spencer, this philosophy was “merely a Christian enunciation of that universal law of Nature under which life has reached its present height—the law that a creature not energetic enough to maintain itself must die.”<sup>35</sup>

Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the most renowned preacher of his time, also subscribed to Social Darwinism. He was indifferent to personal suffering. To Beecher societal poverty was virtuous. In the midst of the depression of 1877, railroad lines significantly cut wages and fired thousands of employees. In response, workers staged mass protests across the country. Beecher delivered a sermon at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn to denounce the labor uproar. Workers in his mind were acting like spoiled children. Instead of throwing tantrums, he proposed families should cut back and live off bread and water. He chastised anyone, the women or “the man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live. A family may

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<sup>35</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus The State*, (London: Williams & Norgate, 1884), 19.



live on good bread and water in the morning, water and bread midday, and good water and bread at night.”<sup>36</sup>

The fact that market forces penetrated the pulpit was not unusual. Religion had always been a weathervane in American history. It revealed the dominant groups of every era, the ascendancy of new ideas, and the emerging problems lurking underneath an otherwise seemingly coherent society. Religion acted like a camouflage underlying the major issues of the day. In the decades building up to the Civil War, it was slavery. Religion then was used as a cudgel to justify and denounce slavery. In the Gilded Age, religion was a way to wage a rhetorical war on the effects of industrialization. While the Social Gospel sought to remedy and reform its abuses, honing its message of ameliorating the plight of the poor, the Prosperity Gospel, and Social Darwinism on the other hand, held that the horrors of industrialization—poverty, child labor, and abysmal living conditions were irresolvable issues. Proposing reform, then, was a misguided effort.

The cumulative effect of the mythologies that held people’s intrinsic worth was derived from the market had psychological effects. In fact, so ingrained was the idea that rich people were superior to poor people that even skeptics passively accepted it as true, even in popular literature. Edward Bellamy’s protagonist in *Looking Backwards*, arrived in Boston in the year 2000 and is shocked to discover that wealthy people were not biologically superior, or akin to a different species, which he remarks many believed in his own time. He compares the vanishing of this belief to a singular hallucination, a mass delusion of which that society had fallen under the spell. Taken aback, West, the

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<sup>36</sup> Jack Beatty, *Age of Betrayal: The Triumph of Money in America, 1865-1900* (New York: Random House, 2008), 269.

protagonist, realizes the power of belief, how acquiescence led to “such a delusion in moderating fellow feeling for the sufferings of the mass of men.” It turned misfortune “into a distant...indifference [that] only added to the misery of my brothers.”<sup>37</sup>

It is hard to discern Social Darwinism’s appeal for religious leaders. For John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, the appeal was evident. It confirmed through “science,” or what passed for science, what they were already predisposed to believe: their wealth was a function of their genius, hard work, and effort. Using theories from biology, the “laws of nature,” and adapting them it to a theory of personal economic success allowed the winners to view themselves as the most evolved animals. They could be most cunning and ruthless economic predators, whose gains were a function of a natural phenomenon that was as unavoidable as it was irreversible. The titans and tycoons even incorporated this language in descriptions of businesses.

John D. Rockefeller argued that this process was apparent in Standard Oil’s success, boasting, that “[t]he growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest...the working out of a law of nature...[t]his is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working-out of a law of nature and a law of God.”<sup>38</sup> Carnegie cautioned people about focusing on immediate problems to imagine the long-term results: “While the law [of competition] may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race because it ensures the survival of the fittest.”<sup>39</sup> From their perspective evolution was an instrument of God, also an immutable law of nature, something irreversible. Even though

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<sup>37</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (New York: The Modern Library, 1915), 6.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 45.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Carnegie, “Wealth,” *North American Review*. June 1889.

the process itself appeared at first glance to be brutal in the short-term in the long-term it was beneficial for everyone.

These sentiments remain a part of American culture and continue to influence policy into the present, specifically policies related to redistribution. These ideas have cemented the notion that hard work and wealth, even one's health, is an accurate reflection of one's worth and character. The veracity of these ideas is less important than their endurance. Horatio Alger, Andrew Carnegie, and Herbert Spencer provided an explanation to life's fundamental questions: why some people remain poor while others accumulate great wealth. In a general sense, they held that certain groups worked hard and were rewarded, and other groups avoided work and consequently were punished for their laziness.

An obvious question is who benefits, and what function does myth perform in society? Two transformations took place, the loss of old values and the emergence of new values (industrial values, in short). New values said that everyone could ascend from poverty to great wealth. The fundamental problem was that like the lottery, it happened only rarely. But was it insignificant that sometimes someone impoverished ascended out of poverty? Probably not, because it happens in every society—people climbing from the bottom to the top, that is. People realized this later but not at the start. People concluded that societies where people cannot rise out of poverty was a society not worth defending; if poverty was for the majority, wealth was for the minority. The losers in the system were the poor, middle, and working class while only the wealthy benefited. If you managed to reach the top of the economic and political ladder, then the new myths of industrialization had immediate appeal. Also, the system from the winner's perspective

was fair and reasonable. The self-made ideal was active, providing a glue of sorts, as long as society maintained balance. Meanwhile, it had the advantage of being the only story out there on the topic of personal success and failure. On the downside, it gave people in power control over others, as long as they accepted these stories. It meant submission without force, acceptance of a belief in fairness in an unfair world.

### **Chapter III: Myths of the West**

“The frontier has been the lasting and ineradicable influence for the good of the United States. It was there we showed our fighting edge, our unconquerable resolution, our undying faith. There, for a time at least, we were Americans. We had our frontier. We shall do ill indeed if we forget and abandon its strong lessons, its great hopes, its splendid human dream.”—Frederick Jackson Turner

The American West provided a symbol of rebirth. People went west to reinvent themselves, effectively, to be reborn. No other region of the country had that potential or could provide that sort of mystical magic. The North grew in the late nineteenth-century, swelling outward, the infancy of its modern form. The growing urban centers dominated the national conversation. The South, by contrast, was small, rural, and irrelevant to the national conversation. Recently destroyed in its defeat after Civil War, the South lingered as a center of anger and resentment. Capital and labor were shorthand for two dominant forms of work. One represented capital, the owners, and moneymen, the other labor, men toiling away for wages. The South had aristocrats, former southern slave owners, but they could no longer own people. That did not stop them from trying to restore their prior position by any means necessary, legal or extralegal. Slaves now free, forged ahead, though fettered by a lack of real freedom.

The West as a region, as an ideal, circumvented privilege or precedent. It cultivated the cowboy, a white Anglo-Saxon male, armed to the teeth, a creature of unbound masculinity. The cowboy was energy and animation in human form. He was righteous and unrestrained. His enemy was easy to identify, the Indian. Conquering the West meant more than conquering land; it was a quest and conquest of the American

imagination. The West became the stand-in for "real America," that positive place of uplift, where America always wins.

Most stories are reactions to other stories, as opposed to explanations of reality, the facts on the ground. The stories told about the West had more to do with retrospective accounts of the Civil War. The war killed any coherent, single story, about the nation, but the West offered a way to bypass old hang-ups rooted in regional identities. It could be the setting for the American story. In a sense "Reconstruction," offered both a political process and the processing of information into a story. Historian Martha A. Sandweiss' *Passing Strange* about Clarence King captures this process. Clarence King wrote a review ("The Biographers of Lincoln") of *Abraham Lincoln: A History in Century Magazine* in October of 1886, written by John G. Nicolay and John Hay, the private secretaries to Abraham Lincoln. The book concerned Lincoln's life and Civil War legacy, and how he led the country through the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

*Abraham Lincoln: A History* and the *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* fed the American fascination with the Civil War, understandable since it was the most significant event in the country's history to that point.<sup>2</sup> Both books portrayed slavery as the war's root cause. In many ways, Clarence King's article was a puff piece, fawning with praise for Nicolay and Hay. It was also subversive, contradicting their central premise. In his article, King stated the Civil War was a transient event between North and South, trivial and ephemeral. The real division, he posited, came down to "genuine Americans" and the "rabble."

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<sup>1</sup> "Lincoln as Pioneer," *The Century Magazine* (November 1886), 3-36.

<sup>2</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: C.L. Webster & Company, 1886).

For King, “the genuine American” the “Lincoln type[s]” were a “product” of “new life,” departing “very far from the Englishmen of colonial America.” The United States cast off its European habits at the end of the last century and began in earnest its own proper career.” According to King, “from that day to this its whole history may be summed up as the subjugation of the continent, the elaboration of democracy, and the rebellion.” In King’s telling, the rebellion was an aberration in the larger Westward expansion: “The very war of the Rebellion was but a quarrel in this business of Western home-making. In the midst of our career land settlement, we stopped short, flung down the ax and plow, and fought out the question whether these myriad new homes should be free or slave states. The war was only a furious, dreadful interruption, and when it was done, on rolled the Westward tide again, as if nothing had happened.”<sup>3</sup>

King went further. He compared westward migration with a second contemporary movement, that of the “rabble millions.” “The rabble millions that have had themselves ferried over here to clutch for a share of American abundance, and who taint the pure air with the odor of European degradation, are not numerous enough, thank God, to fatally dilute the strong new race. The sons of the pioneers are the true Americans; in the century’s struggle with nature they have gathered an Antaeian strength, and, flushed with their victory over a savage continent, believed themselves the coming leaders of the world.” “This vast act of possession is far the most impressive feature of our history,” King concluded. There was, he wrote, “nothing as wonderful as the great Westward march of home-makers.” “It [was] out of this great migration that the true, hardy American people have sprung; it was out of it that Lincoln came.” It was King that turned

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<sup>3</sup> Clarence King, “The Biographies of Lincoln” *The Century Magazine* (October 1886), 861-868.

Lincoln into the pioneer. This movement of home-making, this new race Frederick Jackson Turner amplified and made the center of his Frontier Thesis and which “Buffalo Bill” Cody, in a different form, made the heart of his Wild West performances.

The cowboy was a race-based hero. He “seems to come from nowhere, in fact, belongs to the dominant race and class. He stands as a bulwark, a fortress against dangers from without and from within. He cannot come in a variety of shapes and colors but must always exhibit the same set of attributes—those of the power elite—because his social function, among other things, was to ensure that the kinds of people who are in power will remain there.” Fear of change in the form of contamination by inferior breeds is as much a part of the West’s racism as is its assertion of Anglo-Saxon superiority.

That is why in Westerns such as *The Virginian* a Mexican is almost never the leading man, the whole point being to maintain the hierarchy that existed in western society.

Owen Wister’s essay about the cowpuncher portrayed an America threatened by “debased and mongrel...hordes of encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half pawn-shop, half broker’s office.”<sup>4</sup> Wister’s use of terms such as “mongrel” and “hybrid” to describe immigrants suggested a fear of mixing with others much like his socially conservative mother, “with her horror of associating with all kind of people.”<sup>5</sup>

In his *The Immigrant Invasion*, Frank Julian Warne stated, “By continuing our present policy we choose that which is producing a plutocratic class of idle nobodies

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<sup>4</sup> Owen Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* (September, 1895).

<sup>5</sup> Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 147-148.



resting upon the industrial slavery of a great mass of ignorant and low standard of living toilers. By restricting immigration, we influence the bringing about a condition that will give to a large body of citizens a decent and comfortable standard of living.”<sup>6</sup> He cited the work of Socialist Englishman H.G. Wells, who wrote around 1910, “The older American population is being floated up on the top of this influx, a sterile aristocracy above a racially different and astonishingly fecund proletariat.”<sup>7</sup> Wells had “a foreboding that in this mixed flood of workers that pours into America by the millions to-day, in this torrent of ignorance, against which that heroic being, the schoolmarm, battles at present all unaided by men, there is to be found the possibility of a rich industrial and mercantile aristocracy of western European origin, dominating a darker-haired, darker-eyed, uneducated proletariat from central and eastern Europe... That is the quality of the danger as [Well] saw it.”<sup>8</sup>

The character of the cowboy was defined by manliness and conferred “the right to lordship over other human beings.”<sup>9</sup> The idea of America and the cowboy was purity and distance from the past, unfettered from the familiar scripts of the North or South. Also, it rested on racial purity and separation from many blacks living in the South, or Jews, Poles, and Eastern Europeans migrating into Northern cities. Owen Wister, famous for *The Virginian* “regarded the mixture of races and ethnic groups in the modern city as a sign and cause of American’s degeneration.”<sup>10</sup> Wister, who created one of the most

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Julian Warne, *The Immigrant Invasion* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1913) 316

<sup>7</sup> Herbert George Wells, *The Future in America: A Search After Realities* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1906), 186.

<sup>8</sup> John Lukacs, *A New Republic: A History of the United States in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 135.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 146.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 159.

enduring literary legends like, Teddy Roosevelt came “from families of wealth and social standing and were members of the educated elite. They saw their class as the trustee of traditional American values imperiled by the struggle between the proletariat below and the plutocracy above.”<sup>11</sup> Wister worried “that this continent does not hold a nation any longer, but is merely a strip of land on which a crowd is struggling for money.” The cowboy had “overwhelming masculine sex appeal. The demands of Darwinian nature urged her to breed with the most virile male of her race, a conflict with the values of class.”

In “The Game and the Nation,” Wister’s opening paragraph explained:

There can be no doubt of this:—  
 All America is divided into two classes,—the quality and the equality.  
 The latter will always recognize the former when mistaken for it. Both  
 will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings.  
 It is through the Declaration of Independence that we acknowledged  
 the *eternal inequality* of man. For by it we abolished a cut-and-dried  
 aristocracy...[and] decreed that every man should hence have liberty to  
 find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave  
 freedom to true aristocracy, saying “Let the best man win, whoever he  
 is.” Let the best man win! That is America’s word. That is true  
 democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the  
 same thing. If anybody cannot see this, so much the worse for his  
 eyesight.<sup>12</sup>

In this view, democracy existed as a sorting mechanism that determined “a naturally qualified ruling class” or those that made it to the top. Implicitly it meant an endorsement of Social Darwinism since the “government had no business correcting the disadvantages (or bad luck) under which the ‘equality’ labored, and that indeed the ability

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> Owen Wister, “The Game and the Nation,” *The Harper’s Monthly* (May 1900), 884-904.

to overcome actual disadvantage was a valid test of admission to the ‘quality.’” Wister’s democracy “provides a biosocial rationale for class privilege.”<sup>13</sup>

The West was an enigma. As Henry Adams concluded, “there is no order in nature—just the illusion of order.”<sup>14</sup> In the West, we find perhaps not perfect order, but a consummate coalescence of American myths, maybe more accurately, the implicit promises of America. No one can say for certain what constitutes the West. As an image, the West was an open landscape, wooden buildings, saloons, horses, and guns. No big business, no big government, but a small community, kept in line by a man, usually a sheriff, maybe with a mustache, piercing eyes, who wields a badge and was quick to the trigger. Justice resided not on paper, but by the mob, the iconic “frontier saloon” an “image replete with atmosphere.” Everyone can picture the image: “those swinging doors open to reveal a long bar, a stern barkeep, spittoons, and barrels of whiskey set on top of a dusty floor,” a “rough-and-tumble place where men drank whiskey, gambled, and got into gunfights—often an evening’s trifecta.”<sup>15</sup>

Freedom was embodied in symbols, cowboys, Indians, pioneers, panhandlers, liquor, prostitutes, player pianos. Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, even the president “outfitted himself in buckskin cowboy garb and made sure he was photographed in it.”<sup>16</sup> This practice continued with Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, trying to package their brand with the West.<sup>17</sup> Corporations sold cigarettes with a Marlboro Man; Hollywood

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<sup>13</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 178.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), 354.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Sismondo, *America Walks into a Bar: A Spirited History of Taverns and Saloons, Speakeasies and Grog Shops* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103.

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Random House, 2007), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Jones and John Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 109.

owed its existence to John Wayne and the West.<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline Moore presented a mental image of this iconic, historical stereotype:

The masculine cowboy hero depicted in film and literature is usually a figure straddling the frontier between civilization and the wilderness, sometimes siding with the townspeople against the wilderness and sometimes with the equally mythical noble Indian savage against civilization. Whether he accepts or rejects white society, his manhood is clear, and often superior to those of the so-called respectable men around him. In real life, the historical cowboy in the early cattle industry did not conform to movie cowboy masculinity, nor did their employers and the surrounding townspeople share this image of the manly cowboy.<sup>19</sup>

In essence, this description played on several desires. With independence and autonomy, the only hindrance came with the weather, which the cowboy knew intuitively came from God, the only real authority figure. From this freedom and self-reliance, work-life was whatever one decided, but it was physical, built with metal tools, but noble unlike labors back east, under the control of men like Frederick Taylor, holding a stopwatch, timing how long it takes to shovel a ton of pig iron.<sup>20</sup> In the West, the solution to people like Taylor was the gun.

Even though the cowboy engaged in what Roosevelt called the “strenuous life,” an unending test brought on by adversity and danger, life had purpose and meaning.<sup>21</sup> Despite the hard living, the arduous lifestyle, weeks and months with little sleep, frequent

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Rollins, *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 198.

<sup>19</sup> Jacqueline M. Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: New York University, 2009), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Frederick Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1913), 67.

<sup>21</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “The Strenuous Life,” Speech before the Hamilton Club, Chicago, April 10, 1899.

gun battles, occasional abductions by Indians, not to mention heavy drinking, and satisfying sex with barmaids or the innocent ingénues who arrive too infrequently, life still had meaning.<sup>22</sup>

Even though the West once belonged to Mexicans and Indians, the ethnicity of the narrative was white. It is a fantasy of the promise of white superiority and greatness.<sup>23</sup> This racial mirage is evident in the way conflicts between cowboys and Indians possessed built in understandings. The common perception was the cowboys represented good and civilization and the Indians represented primitive savagery and conveniently godlessness. The reality though, often meant “Cowboys created violence; Indians offered refuge from it.”<sup>24</sup> The mythic universe is unambiguous, its appeal similarly so. The West cultivated and encouraged “white subjectivity” that “invariably” included “freedom, selfhood, humanity, desires, forged memory, authority, legitimacy, production, sociality, reproduction, space, and representativeness.” It created “the concept of freedom in the West developed through its negation, unfreedom,” for the non-white.<sup>25</sup>

These features, a love of violence outside existing structures of law, preemptive attacks, a suspension of outsiders as defective, immoral, and lazy defined the West. At the heart of this, the direct knowledge of God’s authorial hand, the reason behind the world’s resources, were hidden in the West. Regarding regret or reflection on the carnage that resulted, well, history is only the history of civilization, and casualties are only

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<sup>22</sup> Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 169.

<sup>23</sup> Jones and Wills, *The American West*, 319.

<sup>24</sup> Sherry L. Smith, *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 8.

casualties when it resulted in death on the right side. Otherwise, the accurate terminology, collateral damage, a term signifying abstraction, was disconnected from all that is human.

These themes predated the invention of the West, predated the cowboy and the Gilded Age. Already, before the founding of the country, the many colonists, those in Massachusetts Bay in particular, articulated some version of the beliefs embodied in the West, independence (of a religious variety), divine providence and reward derived from commerce, the division between Christians and the godless, who lived in the darkness. While John Winthrop and men that started the Massachusetts Bay Colony sought to create a godly community, its identity came from the New World. Winthrop understood—as Joseph Smith professed centuries later—that the continent resembled Eden, a garden, a paradise set aside for the chosen group.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, much like Western development, land and the fundamental confidence in their worldview carried the colony through wars, epidemics, death, and raids. Land use had a purpose, development, and land undeveloped meant anyone with the will had a right to it. Yeoman farmers and the agrarian vision championed by Jefferson created the dominant political philosophy of the country, a laissez-faire let-it-be approach to life found primarily on the small farm where self-sufficiency and family life combined into the same thing.

Manifest Destiny, first articulated by John O’Sullivan but primarily playing on themes of Winthrop and others, was explained in 1845 this way: “[It is] our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has

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<sup>26</sup> Howard E. McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2011), 166.

given for development of the great experiment of liberty.”<sup>27</sup> O’Sullivan simply made an observation, one likely held by much of the white population, to look around, notice the abundant resources; the only conclusion was the United States possessed a destiny to occupy the North American continent. Notice too, his invocation of Providence that is, God, who in this view intended Americans would move from east to west, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Richard Lehan offered a short summation of the process from the religious version to the political version, setting the stage for the imperial march westward in the nineteenth century:

This agrarian process combined history and myth (here defined as both idealized and a fictitious explanation of history) and brought about catalytic change as it evolved. The compounded experience brought European ideas to America, where they were changed by religious and philosophical influences that eventually gave way to Enlightenment values, which were in turn transformed by romantic assumptions, creating an evolved moment infused with both historical and mythic meaning.<sup>28</sup>

The cliché about wanting what you cannot have is particularly apt to describe the hunger for stories and narratives about the West, just as it concluded in the Indian Wars, which raged throughout the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. In this period, it might strike the reader as odd that myth could so closely align with actual historical reality. Another cultural theorist, who dissected narrative on screen, helped crystallize the process.

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<sup>27</sup> Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 202.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Lehan, *Quest West: American Intellectual and Cultural Transformations* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 2014), 3.

Richard Slotkin noted three stages of development, beginning with the primary stage: “In this embryonic stage of myth development, the myth is still linked quite strongly to the actual historical figures and events memorialized for posterity. Hence, the myth begins with people’s attempt to remember the real accounts of its beginnings.”<sup>29</sup> A real life example of that process was Buffalo Bill’s Wild West performance. Not only was William Cody an actual historical figure who worked odd jobs as the West developed in real-time, including as a scout and for the Pony Express, but once the frontier finally settled he established a circus of sorts that re-enacted the past, providing a sense of authenticity.

Cody even hired the famous Indian Chief Sitting Bull. Cody considered these re-enactments to be educational, as history, with real men replaced with actors. He provided “authentic accounts of what would become legend.”<sup>30</sup> According to Slotkin, “the primary function of any mythological system is to provide people with meaningful emotional and intellectual links to its past.”<sup>31</sup> Cody’s re-enactments, as well as the dime novels that projected his myths, were exaggerated, but over time and through repetition they evolved into formulas that developed into conventional narratives and established archetypes.

The second stage is “romantic,” and “at this point, the metaphor—what the myth represents on a psychological level—became more important than the actual artifact.”<sup>32</sup> Here, authenticity and even historical reality turned into secondary features, superfluous, favoring instead “the glorification of the mythic ideal, which is typically embodied in the

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<sup>29</sup> William Indick, *The Psychology of the Western: How the American Psyche Plays Out on Screen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland), 6.

<sup>30</sup> Indick, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1992), 638.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1973), 12-14.



singular figure of the mythic hero.”<sup>33</sup> Here too, because the cowboy, the mythic one, no longer existed with the development of the region, they could be transformed into something else, the mythic figure, larger than life.

In the romantic stage a lone figure representing the West, most often the cowboy, was an idealized version of the Western code of justice and honor. His acts were enshrined as founding acts, taking on a religious figure status, a Moses or Jesus-like figure. Later on, this changed as the western hero became a stand-in for the nation’s collective unconscious. “He became a more conflicted and haunted figure, a darker more potent projection of the true conflict with his people’s psyche.”<sup>34</sup> As John G. Cawelti traced the evolution at the turn of the century:

The classic western shifted its focus from the myth of foundation to a concern with social transition—the passing of the old West into modern society. The hero became not the founder of a new order but a somewhat archaic survivor, driven by motives and values that are somewhat anachronistic in the new social order. His climatic violence, though legitimated by the service to the community, does not integrate him into society. Instead, it separates him still further, either because the new society cannot quite contain his honor and his violence. In this situation, the hero increasingly tended toward isolation, separation, alienation.<sup>35</sup>

In the final stage, the hero became a product, the “consummatory” or “a product of a somewhat late and sophisticated stage of cultural development: a post-romantic attempt to recapture the lost innocence of the primitive mythopoeic attitude by transcending the narrative, logic, and linguistic form which romantic mythologizing accepts and utilizes.”<sup>36</sup> The West in real life was messy and involved questionable acts

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<sup>33</sup> Indick, *Psychology of the Western*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Indick, *Psychology of the Western*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> John G. Cawelti, *The Six-gun Sequel* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 92.

<sup>36</sup> Indick, *Psychology of the Western*, 7.

that defied norms and standards of basic human decency. No one wanted that story to be the national story. That story lacked innocence and people preferred innocence to ambiguity. When there was a desire for something, eventually it will be served. Frederick Jackson Turner offered an answer, a product and solution; so too, did Buffalo Bill. Both realized the power of nostalgia—to paraphrase an adage from business, “the [audience] is always right.” Where there is desire, there is a way to manufacture mythologies.

Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a speech emblematic of the country’s search for an identity and its growing problem. He spoke in Chicago at White City at the World's Fair in 1893. His speech in Chicago condensed the tension between past and present, old values versus new values in a single event. Chicago was the place where West met commerce. A steer purchased for four dollars in Texas could be sold for forty in Chicago. Rail shipped the cattle and the relationship between East and West was money, always money. The West was a world of open possibility. People could go out west and hit the jackpot. Panhandlers discovered gold and silver. They did not work for it. It was a reward handed out at random. Even gold, considered stable, became destabilized; the ability to stumble upon undiscovered deposits of mineral wealth ended. Soon after, big business swept in, big operations, big machines, financed by big money took over. They extracted everything else, buried deep in the earth. The cowboy, once essential became superfluous, first real later artificial. He evolved from historical actor to stage actor. The frontier ended.

Horatio Alger wrote six novels where his characters appeared in California. All relied on the “get rich” theme. Unlike the city, however, the West had temptations. His

boys “stayed away from the saloons and gambling halls, and they worked.”<sup>37</sup> Alger realized the West was in many ways at odds with his Calvinist philosophy of clean living and hard work. Alger, who never allowed his audience to come to conclusions on their own lest they are the wrong ones, explained, the recipe for the West this way in the introduction to *The Young Miner: Or, Tom Nelson in California*:

Though Tom’s prosperity was chiefly due to his own energy and industry, it is also true that he was exceptionally lucky. Yet his good fortune has been far exceeded by that of numerous spirits in Colorado, within the past twelve months. Some measure of prosperity generally awaits the patient and energetic worker and seldom comes to those idly wait for something to turn up.<sup>38</sup>

Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his frontier thesis at White City in Chicago in 1893. Both White City and Chicago embodied anxieties of the closing frontier. The stages mapped out above, with the embryonic and the romantic scene taking shape simultaneously, was witnessed in Frederick Jackson Turner and the performer Buffalo Bill.

Myths act as “distorted vestiges of wishful phantasies of whole nations. . .nothing but psychology projected onto the external world.”<sup>39</sup> Whether intended this way, the narratives of the West offered a collective fantasy, a pleasant one, capable of overcoming the country’s baggage without betraying its roots. Any number of prominent individuals held these views. Frederick Jackson Turner, for one, believed the western frontier

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<sup>37</sup> Neil J. Smelser, *The Social Edges of Psychoanalysis* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 117.

<sup>38</sup> Horatio Alger, *The Young Miner; Or, Tom Nelson in California* (Philadelphia: Henry T. Coates & Co., 1879), 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> Neil J. Smelser, *The Social Edges of Psychoanalysis* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 111.

embodied American ideals of rugged individualism, democratic institutions, and civilization.

These beliefs appealed to political as well as religious leaders. They made it possible to weld together the euphoria of economic “progress” with long-standing assumptions of America as divinely inspired “mission” or as Theodore Roosevelt understood it in military terms, an evolution struggle between the world’s races.<sup>40</sup> Strangely enough, Roosevelt, a Harvard alum who came from a family of great wealth, became the first president to adopt the persona of the cowboy, a persona enjoyed by and imitated by recent occupants of the Oval Office.

Roosevelt was often photographed on horseback; he liked that this was the dominant way political cartoonists depicted him. The uniform he designed for the Rough Riders in the Spanish American War was patterned on those of the cavalry from the American West. Roosevelt saw the value in associating with the West. Americans have always held it as a special mythical place, and perhaps no period has been more mythologized than the settlement and development of the West. Before taking his place in the Oval Office, Roosevelt wrote books. In 1889, he argued that Americans, an offshoot of Anglo-Saxons were superior in their racial composition because they overcame the unpleasant, hostile challenges that resulted from carving out civilization from nothing. Such feats were physical but also mental, “in obedience to the instincts working half blindly...spurred ever onward by the fierce desires of...eager hearts” where

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<sup>40</sup> Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1885), 225.

men “in the wilderness” made “homes for their children, and by doing so wrought out the destinies of a continental nation.”<sup>41</sup>

In an unsigned review for *The Nation*, Frederick Jackson Turner argued, “American history needed a connected and unified account of the progress of civilization across the continent.”<sup>42</sup> Creation and destruction in myth reflected the action of industrialization. Language mirrored this, transforming “nature” into “natural resources;” empty plains morphed into economic platforms.<sup>43</sup> Untouched landscapes were erased, injected with steel stakes. American civilization meant destroying Indian civilization.

Four hundred years after Christopher Columbus’s arrival, after the U.S. Census declared the frontier closed, Turner delivered his lecture, “The Significance of the Frontier” at Chicago’s World Fair. Turner was born in Wisconsin. He was “bred in the Middle west,” born into a middle-class family, “nurtured by the rural culture of Wisconsin, where his father,” Andrew Jackson Turner, owned a newspaper, invested in railroads, and ran for political office.<sup>44</sup> His mother, Mary Olivia Turner taught school. Unsurprisingly, Turner emphasized the lopsided and outsized role of New England, histories written by New Englanders at the country’s oldest and most elite universities, Harvard and Yale. He also divorced America from any single antecedent influence, whether Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic, rejecting suggestions that Americans were

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<sup>41</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West* Vol. I (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889), 27.

<sup>42</sup> *The Nation*, “Review: Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*” March 28, 1895. This review was published without Turner’s name attached. Impressed by the points raised in the piece, Roosevelt reached out to the editor of the nation to ask for the name of the author, which led to lifelong correspondence between the two men.

<sup>43</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982), 16.

<sup>44</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 14.

appendages, extensions of some latent European germ, just transplanted on the shores, enacting a predetermined destiny.<sup>45</sup>

America's story, its traditions developed in the wilderness, evolved people and institutions politically from "simple colonial government into complex organs," economically from "a primitive industrial society, without the division of labor, up to a manufacturing society."<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the expansion from coast to coast "derived all that became distinctive of America, "democratic institutions, national unity, and rugged individualism."<sup>47</sup> The frontier acted as the "most rapid and effective" method for "Americanization," promoting "the formation of a composite nationality for the people."<sup>48</sup>

Creativity, inventiveness and self-reliance were all essential traits of Americans, who century by century, faced harsh and foreign conditions and dominated nature before it could dominate them. Like industrial growth, social development too was the story of creative destruction. This cycle of "perennial rebirth" and "fluidity of life" from expansion westward offered new opportunities, allowing men to face the continuous touch of simplicity and primitive society, which "furnished the forces dominating American character."<sup>49</sup>

As Richard Hofstadter remarked, "the Turner thesis and the historical profession grew up together." Turner's speech in Chicago went unnoticed at the time, but "within fifteen years or less...his ideas were well on the way to achieving a place in the work of

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<sup>45</sup> Lehan, *Quest West*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 22.

<sup>49</sup> Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 2-3.

Americans...proportionate to the place the West had long occupied in the American imagination.”<sup>50</sup> Turner mastered, if not the science behind the American frontier, at least the desire deep within the collective imagination.<sup>51</sup>

Turner tapped already-present ubiquitous imagery of folklore, everything from the log cabin to the covered wagon, a symbol of movement and expansion. If Copernicus eliminated man’s central place in the cosmos, and Darwin did the same with his discovery in biology, Turner held his ground on the psychological front, putting the West at the center, giving the frontier an almost cosmic importance. In fact, he persuaded the reader to assume the position of an omnipotent creator, watching “visions that sweep across the horizons of historical possibility like the luminous but unsubstantial aurora of a comet’s train, portentous and fleeting,” from this vantage point, “out of the darkness of the primitive history of the continent.”<sup>52</sup> One witnessed, “[t]he rise and fall of Indian cultures, the migrations through and into the Valley by men of the Stone Age, hinted at in the legends and languages, dimly told in the records of the mounds and artifacts, but waiting still for a complete interpretation.”<sup>53</sup>

Turner’s frontier colonists mastered the wilderness, “echoed throughout American fiction and poetry in recounted excursions into an anarchic wilderness,” characters in James Fenimore Cooper’s tales of Natty Bumppo, or William Faulkner’s “The Bears,” in

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historian* (New York: Random House, 2012), 106.

<sup>51</sup> Strangely enough, Turner reflected the idea that movement equals productivity in his personal life. At the end of his career, after acting as the department chair at the University of Wisconsin, perhaps his academic imagination and personal imagination became one. He mistakenly believed moving would alleviate his inability to produce; outside of the familiar trappings of Wisconsin, he could finally sit down, be productive, get to work. At the same time, it was this very fantasy, understanding others believed in it too, that made the frontier thesis compelling decade after decade.

<sup>52</sup> Turner, *American History*, 179.

<sup>53</sup> Turner, 179.

“The River” and “The Dance” in Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*.”<sup>54</sup> American folklore, literature, art, music, and politics was already saturated with frontier language. In effect, Turner simply needed to explain its significance. Turner avoided visual images in lectures, relying instead on creating imagery in the audiences’ mind. “Stand at the Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file,” he suggested; notice “the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader, and hunter, the cattle raiser, the pioneer farmer,” now “the frontier has passed by.”<sup>55</sup>

Such instruction elicited his beloved representation of the West. Collective imagination likely fell back on overt references, paintings, perhaps the Hudson River School or John Gast’s *American Progress*. The Hudson River School “lent to American terrain an almost mystical power,” its style of painting “depicted nature as the stage of dramas of growth and decay, of aspiration and defeat”—investing it with emotion appropriate for a vision of national destiny.<sup>56</sup>

Gast’s lithograph, *American Progress*, displayed a virginal white angel, wearing a diaphanous gown swooping through the sky, bearing a “common book,” signifying national enlightenment for unenlightened Indian peoples. On the other hand, “she unfolds and stretches the slender wires of the telegraph that are to flash intelligence through the land.”<sup>57</sup> On the painting’s left edge, she cleared the darkness and the figurative darkness symbolized by the wild beast, primitive Indians, the antecedent of simple organisms,

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<sup>54</sup> Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), 208.

<sup>56</sup> Trachtenberg, 16.

<sup>57</sup> George A. Crofutt, *New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide* (Omaha, NE: The Overland Publishing Company, 1880), 251.



superfluous in the coming age of civilization. They all fled somewhere, beyond the recognition of vision, a story ancillary to the forces of light.<sup>58</sup>

At the right half of the painting, enhanced by overwhelming crystal whiteness, one finds the pioneer and farmer, one operating a plow, the other an axe. Behind them, three railroad lines, the transcontinentals, are seen pushing forward, and closer up there are men on horseback, some riding for the Pony express, others, perhaps overseeing darkness slinking off the screen, as more covered wagons pour in situated alongside new log cabins, fashioned by hand from the cleared forest intuited from the extent logs strewn about.

Implicit even in this static painting is the sense of movement, a definite sense that time has elapsed and the past was nothing more than a preamble to present and future progress. Progress, symbolized with technologies, railroads, telegraphs were inevitable in the future; nothing can stand in its way. The fanciful portrayals of Turner worked in concert with the embellished nostalgic elements of art. Fundamentally, this memory, this collective history, is not a real place, a real place people once inhabited by the idealization of the West as it never was. The desire to reach back and add magical properties to the past happening to be true of the location of Turner's speech, dubbed The White City for its alabaster color, created for the World's Fair in Chicago.

"White City" was a propitious setting. An artificially constructed paradise—gated, of course—that converted "700 acres of swampy land," transforming it into "400 buildings inlaid with canals, lagoons, plazas, and promenades."<sup>59</sup> One observer

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<sup>58</sup> John Gast, *American Progress* 1873.

<sup>59</sup> Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 209.

proclaimed it “the greatest event in the history of the country since the Civil War.”<sup>60</sup> William Law Olmstead—the genius behind New York City’s Central Park—created The White City, too. The illumination from strings of incandescent light bulbs washed over the landscape. The exhibit’s opening months marked many American milestones: fairgoers consumed the first commercial cracker jacks, touching American taste buds and becoming a quintessential treat ever since. The Ferris wheel intended to rival the architectural beauty of Eiffel Tower. Judged in its own time, the Ferris wheel garnered more fascination, inspired more awe. The Eiffel Tower had a stationary aesthetic; the Ferris wheel had animation, energy, motorized metal. In the words of Henry Adams, the whole affair was indescribable. He stated that “it delighted me because it was just as chaotic as my own mind, and I found my own preposterous state of consciousness reflected and exaggerated at every turn.”<sup>61</sup>

The temporary city filled with strange sights and unfathomable machines signified change, and perhaps equally disturbing, it sparked a deep underbelly of uncertainty and anxiety about the outcome of such rapid changes. White City was a place to be amused, entertained, but not a place to live. “Never before had so many of history’s brightest lights, including Buffalo Bill, Theodore Dreiser, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Clarence Darrow, George Westinghouse, Thomas Edison, Henry Adams, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, Nikola Tesla, Philip Armour, and Marshall Field, gathered in one place at one time;” everyone that mattered found his or her way to Chicago in 1893.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Harding Davis, *Harper's* October 19, 1893.

<sup>61</sup> Henry Adams, *The Letters of Henry Adams, Vol. IV: 1892-1899* ed., J.C. Levenson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 132-133.

<sup>62</sup> Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 5.

Chicago too was symbolic of the transition. In 1877, it was the sight of the Great Uprising. A year “to remember, impossible to forget,” but not because it was unique, but because it marked the first in a series of battles between the classes and the masses, or the haves and have-nots. At the height of the insurrection, the city’s industrial leaders, George Pullman, Philip Armour, and Marshall Field were “convinced that the communists were in their second heaven, the canaille was at the very summit of its glory,” and perhaps like Paris, only a handful of years earlier Chicago would be in the hands of “the revolution element.”<sup>63</sup>

Right outside The White City, William Frederick Cody, otherwise known as Buffalo Bill the popular entertainer and gunslinger, performed his Wild West reality show. He is most responsible for how the era is remembered, and that begins in 1883, ten years earlier than when Turner delivered his speech and The White City opened. In that year, the last of the Indian Wars was winding down Cody launched an entertainment venture, which he called Wild West. Cody worked in the West as a guide, scout, and a hunter and soon became “Buffalo Bill.” At one point in the late 1870s, Cody discovered writers in New York City were profiting from fanciful stories of his various exploits. He realized he was being exploited. More important for his career, he concluded, correctly, that the American public—most of it living east of the Mississippi—craved heroic stories of the American West. Cody’s solution was the Wild West. Essentially a circus, his entertainment show traveled the country presenting authentic cowboys and Indians, reenacting scenes from history, such as cattle drives, Indian attacks on trains, Custer’s Last Stand, and the Pony Express.

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<sup>63</sup> Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance* (New York: Little, Brown, Co., 2015), 17.

Cody added celebrities such as the Indian Chief Sitting Bull and sharpshooting cowgirl Annie Oakley, who could wield a rifle with extraordinary accuracy, performing all manner of marksmanship and trick shots. Buffalo Bill's Wild West became a sensation, not only in the United States but also around the nation and the world. There are even photographs of Bill seated in a gondola in Venice, Italy with four Native Americans in full Indian attire. Buffalo Bill played a key role in shaping a mythical West in the American imagination, a place of heroism, individualism, and success. Hollywood, television executives, and advertisers later picked up these themes. It was not that these motifs are inaccurate per se, it is just that they are selective and contributed to the skewed way people viewed the west.

Cody offered American Historical Association members tickets to attend his outdoor western, outside the gates of White City. Turner, who was a member, did not attend.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, the two men most responsible for creating the West, translating its symbols and stories, never met. In a way, it was fitting given that Turner and Cody had two distinct and contradictory stories about the origins and importance of American life. Even the images they extracted were at odds. For Turner, the pioneer was the main protagonist, and the pioneer was synonymous with the figure of the farmer. His tools were simple: a plow and an ax.

Turner's version was idyllic and peaceful. People lived in harmony with nature. Life was hard, but honest people prospered. For Buffalo Bill, it was the scout who distinguished himself by his knowledge of the habits and language of Indians; the scout

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<sup>64</sup> Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," in James R. Grossman ed., *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 7-67.

was familiar with the hunt, “and trustworthy in the hour of extreme danger.”<sup>65</sup> A scout’s world was rife with danger; a rifle and bullets were preferable to a plow and ax.<sup>66</sup> The simplification of each man’s interpretation created a straightforward, linear narrative, where the farmer, with plow in hand, and unclaimed land could reside in harmony. The scout, the man of action, faced danger head-on and lived in a world without rest. The scout was always armed with a rifle.

Both shared a talent for showmanship, finding purpose in performative acts. In the Buffalo Bill version, the west was won in conflict, fueling “the public’s imagination for a violent frontier filled with merciless savages and brutal outlaws, and then fed its desire for a hero to tame it.”<sup>67</sup> The Wild West was a product of the communications and advertising revolution and achieved something close to diplomatic recognition by “Governments, Armies, and Nations.”<sup>68</sup> This widespread perception of the West was composed of alchemy. It was a willful blindness, where “the Indian Wars faded into the past.” The Great Plains began to open for settlement and tourism, always understood by its audience as a nostalgic recreation rather than a representation of the world of the present.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, “it created a special kind of memory landscape,” which “had the ability to persuade viewers that the past it depicted was their past, something they had viewed with their own eyes.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World* (Chicago, 1893), 4.

<sup>66</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 75.

<sup>67</sup> Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood’s Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>68</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 82.

<sup>69</sup> Carter, *Myth of the Western*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> Joy S. Kasson, “Life-like, Vivid and Thrilling Pictures: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Early Cinema,” in Janet Walker ed., *Westerns: Films through History* (London: Routledge, 2001), 116-117.

Each man seized a general unease about the closing of the frontier. America found itself trapped from east to west by the ocean. Turner, an academic who gave educational lectures, derived his success from an uncanny ability to tap into the iconography of the West. Buffalo Bill was an icon in action whose flyers and newspaper endorsements described the “Wild West Reality...a correct representation of life on the plains...brought to the East for the inspection and education of the public.”<sup>71</sup> Perhaps their real talent was not in education or performance, but rather their genius to create “mass-produced imitations of [the] original” frontier experience.<sup>72</sup>

The nation found stories based on nostalgia preferable to stories based in fact. The myth of the West offered a white hero, the cowboy, disconnected from eastern affluence and effete lifestyles like the grasping moneymen and financial wizards on Wall Street. Nostalgia like the morphine sold over-the-counter, only masked, dulled and obscured contradictions lying dormant underneath. Frederick Jackson Turner created coherence from multiplicity. One story, one nation, one people never claimed to resolve contradictions, but like Harry Houdini, the sleight of hand showed genius and a captive audience willing to watch. The West circumvented problems inherent in America’s regional divisions and identities of the North and South. The West lacked the racial antagonisms of other regions. A white man in the West did not have to conform to standard archetypes, neither an effete aristocrat, or an overbearing plantation owner, nor a demoralized low-paid laborer, or a degraded former slave.

Instead, the West offered a fantasy for white America. Creation came through destruction. America annexed western territories at the expense of Native populations. It

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<sup>71</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 1893.

<sup>72</sup> Richard White, *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1994), 11.

established law through lawlessness. It brought peace through violence. As always, the real story was violent, contradictory, and at times unjust, its moral universe ambiguous and often unclear. However, like the personal myths of “the Robber Barons” elaborated in the last chapter, people realized this was not how to tell a story. They wanted a just world, a righteous world where good and bad are clearly defined, where the moral universe is unambiguous and obvious. The West was a retroactive justification for America’s past and future. It was not an apology. Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody presented and marketed the peaceful West, one consistent with older values. The myth was simple and soaked in by Americans, the “genuine” ones not “the rabble.”

### **Chapter IV: Myth to a Market Society**

“The whole idea of people failing with us is that they can no longer be loved. You haven’t created a persona which people will pay for, see, experience, or come close to. It’s almost like death. It’s the most brutal way of looking at life that one can imagine, because it discards anyone who does not measure up.” –Arthur Miller.

Before the Civil War Americans had believed industrial technology and the factory system would serve as historical instruments of republican values, “diffusing civic virtue and enlightenment along with material progress.”<sup>1</sup> The evolution of America to a market society was unstoppable, industrial life and mechanization “like one of our mighty rivers, was beyond control,” as David A. Well wrote in 1876.<sup>2</sup> The World Fair’s in Philadelphia illustrated the promise and the failure of a promise to pay off. People believed that telegraph wires, railroad lines, and factories would become the very engine of a democratic future. In *Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx “fastened on the image of a mechanical intrusion on a pastoral setting as a characteristic of a deeply troubled society.”<sup>3</sup>

In July 1877, “fears of a new Civil War spread across the country,” when two major railroads announced, a ten percent cut in wages in the midst of a depression. Workers across the country joined the strike in solidarity with the railroad workers, displaying an “anger and wrath against the railroad companies.”<sup>4</sup> The strike spread. Big business and the national government responded by mobilizing local police and town

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 38.

<sup>2</sup> David A. Well, “Progress in Manufacture,” in *The First Century of the Republic* (1876), 173.

<sup>3</sup> Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Trachtenberg, 40.



militias, and many militia members sympathized with labor over capital. President Rutherford B. Hayes “invoked his powers of military intervention and called out federal troops to protect by force the property of the railroad companies, among whose leaders he counted many of his closest friends.” With the federal government’s overt hostility to unions, plans were to prevent this from happening again. The War Department constructed “a system of armories in major cities to house a standing national guard.”<sup>5</sup>

Mythologies that hold societies together often come unglued. It often happens when people have a deep sense they have received a bad deal, been sold a bill of goods. At first, this takes the form of a general unwillingness to obey. As early as the late 1870s, the labor movement offered a “wide array of programs,” inspiring different -isms, “socialism and anarchism,” even creating some “vaguely defined” understanding of a “cooperative commonwealth.”<sup>6</sup>

Identity before the Civil War was straightforward: a man was free or enslaved. Afterward, identity wedded itself to economic status, dividing on a clear line; a person was a success or failure. Narratives of personal improvement languished, lost credibility, and became less defensible in the midst of two successive depressions that left millions hungry and homeless. Even the remaining holdouts, those ebullient men and a few women who clutched dog-eared success pamphlets, promising elusive diamonds concealed somewhere in the shallow dirt, started to teeter and began to feel a tinge of unease and discomfort as economic realities outweighed fantasies. Moreover, “if a man could fail simply by not succeeding or not striving, then ambition was not an opportunity

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<sup>5</sup> Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Foner, *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History* vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 40.

but an obligation.”<sup>7</sup> Popular publications cheered the entrepreneur and regularly cycled headlines such as “Frank Confession From Men and Women Who Missed Success” to make sure freedom was freedom in a narrowly constructed sense of business success.<sup>8</sup> *Cosmopolitan* ran “The Fear of Failure,” noting how many young men women were frightened at the thought of failure, where they might be forgotten, end up like laborers, who never escaped “the treadmill position of life.”<sup>9</sup> Myths or models only work when the middle holds, not exactly a majority, but not a lot less than that either. Without a center, things collapse, people are left to find order in chaos.

The mental state of those down the economic ladder worsened. Many members of the working class, unemployed, those in abject poverty suffered from severe mental illness. While some thought such conditions were natural and not worth a shrug, growing psychological problems infiltrated the ranks of the professional class. Physicians rang alarm bells. Of particular concern was a pathology that synchronized with the growth of cities, the birth of modern civilization, or what the neurologist George M. Beard coined and diagnosed as “American nervousness,” brought on by “nervous bankruptcy.”<sup>10</sup> These new pathologies and “chronic stress” became “a mark of middle-class status, proof of one’s relentless drive to succeed.”<sup>11</sup> Theodore Dreiser and John D. Rockefeller Jr. suffered. The condition was not restricted to men; *neurasthenia* was its gendered

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<sup>7</sup> Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Success*, “Why They Failed: A Budget of Frank Confessions from Men and Women Who Missed Success,” November 1898, 24.

<sup>9</sup> *The Cosmopolitan*, “The Fear of Failure” June 1903.

<sup>10</sup> George M. Beard, *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Putnam, 1881), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Sandage, *Born Losers*, 234.

counterpart. Charlotte Perkins, treated clinically in 1887, explored her experience of failure brought on by “nervous bankruptcy” in *The Yellow Wall Paper*.<sup>12</sup>

Other factors helped precipitate the nation’s declining mental state. Success and failure as an indelible part of a person’s identity coincided with the ubiquity of business language. Before the second wave of industrial development “failure” denoted “breaking in business,” or going broke.<sup>13</sup> The term changed from an account deficit into a deficit deep within one’s soul. It had already been modified from its usage in the first half of the nineteenth century. When individuals spoke of “failure” it was something someone made or created, or it implied that an external event acted on an individual.<sup>14</sup>

Failure was once more often aligned with men who were overly ambitious. Later failure was attributed to the opposite, to the lack of overt ambition or inability to take on risk. The language of business became the everyday language of success and failure. Credit rating agencies, formalized their practice, creating endorsement volumes, each about six hundred pages in length, documenting not with numbers, but with personal stories, anecdotes about the personal lives of individuals.

The language of the reports soon circulated and became a part of the broad American lexicon: “third rate,” initially meant a person’s credit was good enough to receive the third-best rate among available options; “good for nothing” meant a person was not good enough to borrow any amount of money,” and “deadbeat,” a description that meant that making a creditor of this status pay back a loan would result in the same outcome as beating a dead horse.<sup>15</sup> Even the likes of Abraham Lincoln found their way

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<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wall Paper* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1899).

<sup>13</sup> Sandage, *Born Losers*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Sandage, *Born Losers*, 4-9.

<sup>15</sup> Sandage, 134.

into these first professional reports in 1856, around the time Lincoln began his practice as a lawyer. He fretted about his shortcomings, “With me, the race of ambition has been a failure—a flat failure.”<sup>16</sup> Implicit in his statement was a peripheral understanding that failure and identity had become identical, indistinguishable, which meant a constant need to worry about other people’s perceptions.

Sometimes ideas cannot be confronted or resolved through concessions or a mutual perpetuation of the existing order. In the Gilded Age mass movements enacted violence to produce peace. Today, violence, especially in a political context or as a form of protest, is considered unacceptable. The will of the people without the threat of violence, perpetuated systems of inequality and eroded the lives of the many to benefit the few. Civilization was founded on uncivilized acts. Knowing the difference is the difference in shaping the future, and changing the meaning of the past.

Like Frederick Jackson Turner’s ideal of overcoming barriers through grueling conflicts, both physical and mental, George Beard revealed that this “disease of the nervous system” had “taken root under an American sky,” and “no age, no country, and no form of civilization...possessed such maladies.” He confidently asserted that Americans could overcome the obstacle.<sup>17</sup> He also noted that despite its insidious nature, the reality was that the blinding pace of modern life made the disease inescapable. It was inescapable because Americans could not help it, “the nerves that worry them so are a part of their American heritage as American freemen.”<sup>18</sup> One socially performative act, the begging letter illustrates the tension between those that wanted to hold onto to the

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 245.

<sup>17</sup> George Beard, *American Nervousness*, vii.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), June 23, 1881, 3.

ideal of the self-made man, while simultaneously abandoned by those embodied the ideal, where business and sentimental values worked in concert.<sup>19</sup>

Beard used man as machine as the central metaphor; “the nervous system of man is the center of the nerve-force supplying all the organs of the body,” and modern nervousness, Beard revealed, “is the cry of the system struggling with its environment,” with the ups and downs of the markets, the new technologies that refine space and time, the telegraph and railroads, even the factory system, which standardized time in the workplace.<sup>20</sup>

Begging letters were private requests from unemployed men or women tasked with keeping the household afloat in desperate times. Boom and bust cycles, typical during the three decades leading to the twentieth century, expressed sentimental and middle-class morality, qualities that valued honesty, sincerity, and trustworthiness, traits the literary historian Nina Baym cited as “a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society.”<sup>21</sup> These letters ordinarily followed straightforward templates, often cribbing from P.T. Barnum’s popular memoir documenting his “struggles and triumphs.”<sup>22</sup>

Begging letters also offered an outlet for people to understand how to “make sense of the tragedies of their lives.”<sup>23</sup> A national market and the abstraction of exchange

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<sup>19</sup> Sandage, *Born Losers*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> George M. Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1881), 138.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 6.

<sup>22</sup> P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs; or Sixty Years’ Recollections of P.T. Barnum, Including His Golden Rules for Money-Making* (Buffalo: Courier Co., 1889).

<sup>23</sup> Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 183.

with strangers was hard to comprehend because people believed that economic life was governed by rationality and sentiment especially when severe depressions wrecked the domestic economy, and people had to grapple “with emerging market-based identities like failure and success.”<sup>24</sup> People perceived that Wall Street, a place far away, composed of men they did not know, total strangers, somehow could affect their business, ruin their lives without even a simple hello or informal greeting. People could not explain why the economy shifted, almost arbitrarily, but as Ralph Waldo Emerson noted, “The merchant evidently believes the...proverb that nobody fails who ought not fail [;] there is always a reason, in the man, for his good or bad fortunes, and so in making money.”<sup>25</sup> At a time of economic interdependence the dominant voices continued to preach self-reliance and individualism.

Modern life was exciting and overwhelming. It was manifested in mania paired with depression, sometimes causing life to feel psychologically deadening, so much so, that simply to be on time, took a toll, felt exhausting. Historian Steve Fraser noted the power in memory. With industrialization and all the manifest changes, there was still a portion of the public that could remember the world before these changes, so they knew society could be organized differently, and everything that happened was not preordained or destined. It had the potential to be changed and reordered if people could articulate and imagine that alternative.

People held on to comfortable social myths because changes were rapid and maybe, waiting long enough, things would change for everyone’s benefit. Technology as

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<sup>24</sup> Chapman, *Sentimental Men*, 183.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Complete Works: Conduct of Life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1888), 99.

a kind of social promise had been in the background, but many people saw its potential power. It was supposed to act as a kind of salvation that would alleviate people from dull everyday grudges that came with factory labor. Some predicted that machines could ease the burden of labor. In fact, the opposite occurred; labor became more machine-life. Frederick Winslow Taylor developed an entire branch of pseudoscientific jargon to prove its validity. It was now called business management.

On the one hand, people wanted their work lives to have meaning, purpose, a sense of identity. If they could not achieve those ends, a decent paycheck, enough for food and housing would suffice. On the other hand, Oscar Wilde, perhaps more utopian than most, raised a fundamental question about the meaning of work. Why should jobs exist that did not fulfill a purpose in a person's life? Without purpose or a sense of accomplishment, life seemed meaningless, petty, and even cruel.

Frederick Taylor exemplified another compulsion, to radically alter and implant an entirely new psychology into the minds of workers, marrying the desires of the employers with the workers. In fact, the entire field of business management originated with Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*, despite the fact it was neither scientific nor principled in the sense of divining universal principles from his experiments. The results of his pig iron experiments were not reproducible, and the only figures that went into his calculation of the amount of pig iron a worker could unload, came from samples of a couple of men working over fourteen minutes and then extrapolating from there.

Testing out his ideas, Frederick Taylor recounted in *Principles of Scientific Management*, the purpose of his system: "The task before us, then, narrowed itself down

to Schmidt to handle 47 tons of pig iron per day and making him glad to do it... done as follows.”<sup>26</sup> Taylor then provided a rough transcript of his encounter with the Dutchman named Schmidt. After selecting Schmidt from a gang of pig-iron workers, the conversation proceeded like this:

“Schmidt, are you a high-priced man?”

“Vell, I don’t know vat you mean.”

“Oh yes, you do. What I want to know is whether you are a high-priced man or not.

“Vell, I don’t know vat you mean.”<sup>27</sup>

Angered that Schmidt did not answer the question as he wished, Taylor tried to elicit the correct response, reiterating that there were two types of men, “those cheap fellows” and the “high-priced men” that he assumed Schmidt wanted to be. Taylor noted that high-priced men were men that work harder and in return for putting in the extra effort might be able to increase their wages from \$1.15 a day to \$1.85 a day. The conversation wavered on the question of whether Schmidt considered himself to be a high-priced man, before Taylor interrupted, “Oh, you’re aggravating me. Of course, you want \$1.85 a day—everyone wants it! You know perfectly well that has very little to do with your being a high-priced man. For goodness’ sake answer my questions, and don’t waste any more of my time.”<sup>28</sup> Then Taylor asked Schmidt whether he saw the car filled with pig iron. Taylor told him if he was a high-priced man then he would unload the car in the morning.

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<sup>26</sup> Frederick Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1913), 47.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, 45.



While this seemed like a funny anecdote that could be condensed into a cartoon, in reality, there was a bigger battle being waged. That can be seen in how Taylor conceived of the high-priced man, what his role was to the company. Taylor summarized the responsibility of a high-priced man this way:

...if you are a high-priced man, you will do exactly as this man [work site boss] tells you to-morrow, from morning till night. When he tells you to pick up a pig and walk, you pick it up and you walk, and when he tells you to sit down and rest, you sit down. You do that straight through the day. And what's more, no back talk. Now a high-priced man does just what he's told to do, and no back talk. Do you understand that? When this man tells you to walk, you walk; when he tells you to sit down, you sit down, and you don't talk back at him. Now you come on to work here to-morrow morning and I'll know before night whether you are really a high-priced man or not.<sup>29</sup>

Uncertainty dominated the Gilded Age. There was quite a bit to be uncertain about. Mythologies break down and erode when they lose any meaningful attachment to reality. This was what happened at the end of the nineteenth century. The stories that were supposed to govern people's lives lost any tangible connection to real life. Myths can handle contradiction, but contradictions do not negate. Negation is a form of denial. Fundamentally, individualism could not express what it meant to be a nation. A nation is not simply made up of autonomous individuals with autonomous institutions, all pursuing self-interest, although, society can behave as though that were the case. The major problems of the Gilded Age centered on whether the nation would be a society or individuals. Changes in the market in the 1870s and 1880s made the mythologies at first sustainable, but later untenable. Eventually, the mythologies evolved from benign to malignant, creating a "market society," a society where wealth governed worth; those

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<sup>29</sup> Taylor, 45-46.

without wealth lack worth. The difference between a market economy and a market society is immense: “A market economy is a tool—a valuable and effective tool—for organizing productive activity. A market society is a way of life in which market values seep into every aspect of human endeavor. It’s a place where social relations are made in the image of the market.”<sup>30</sup>

Walt Whitman summed up the conflict when he conceded that “a practical stirring, worldly, moneymaking, even materialistic character” has a place within the economic sphere that encourages productivity; this “earnest” and actively pursued” endeavor benefitted “farms, stores, offices...traders” and the rest.<sup>31</sup> He identified a creeping sense, a sort of “practical stirring” that became a “great success,” while the “great cities reek[ed] with respectable as much as nonrespectable robbery.” The outcome was evident enough to Whitman: “our New World democracy, however great a success...in materialistic development...is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and aesthetic result.”<sup>32</sup> This sentiment even found its way in famed political strategist Mark Hanna’s theory of political success. Hanna joked, “There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can’t remember what the second is.”<sup>33</sup>

The self-made man told people hard work paid off. Wages did not keep up with the cost of living, however. While the average workweek was six days, twelve hours a day, the annual income hovered around \$400-500 per year, when \$600-800 was needed

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<sup>30</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” in Floyd Stovall, ed., *Prose Works 1892*, 2 vols. (New York, 1963-1964), vol. 2, 370.

<sup>32</sup> Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” 370.

<sup>33</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of American Quotations*, ed., Hugh Rawson and Margaret Miner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 526.

to eke out an existence beyond abject poverty. The self-made man had been premised on the notion of the individual with some degree of freedom in the workplace. In reality, the workplace was more authoritarian than libertarian. Men found they could be terminated for taking unauthorized breaks, talking, or arriving late. Factory life was a sharp break with work life in the past when men worked on farms. People could stop when they felt the need. They decided their hours, governed by seasons rather than the ticking of a factory clock. Moreover, the pace of factory life made men prone to injury. From 1880-1900, annual work-related deaths averaged 35,000 with 500,000 workplace-related injuries. On top of that, a child working in factories was clearly different from the children working on the farm.

A Boston man describes the uncertainty that came with the multiple boom and bust cycles of the Gilded Age, as well as the technological change. Thomas O'Donnell provided testimony to a traveling Senate committee that wanted to understand the strained relations between labor and capital. O'Donnell stated he had been working in the cotton business as a mule-spinner, but the factory only wanted to hire pairs, a man, and a younger boy, because adolescent boys proved ideal for ring-spinning. O'Donnell said that while men who bring boys them to the mill would be hired, men like him were turned away. Moreover, because of sporadic work his two children, who were three years old and one-year-old, were constantly hungry, sick, and needed clothing to help them bear the harsh winter. He said that the hardships had taken a toll on the whole family.

The previous year his total income from all the work he managed to obtain came to \$133. However, his oldest son died and the burial cost alone came to \$100. Plus, he had to pay the doctor back for coming to evaluate his son, which also placed a heavy

burden on the family. The chairman of the Senate committee summarized the obvious: “It is clear that nobody can afford either to get sick or to die.”<sup>34</sup> In another section of the Senate testimony by Jennie Cunningham Croly, the story of a female cigar maker and her daily life and her working conditions was told.

On a good day, Croly started rolling cigars at 7 a.m. and stopped about 5 p.m. She managed to make 2,000 cigars. On busy days, the workday might extend to 9 p.m.; the result closer to 2,500. She lamented the fact that the new inspector was verbally abusive to women. He cut wages in half and demanded that they work longer. While this was a recent change, the woman said she would have to “give it up...for I can’t earn enough to keep myself in a home of my own, and I don’t like boarding.” Croly was twenty-six and lived alone and had helped support her mother before her mother died. Croly remained optimistic. She noted that it could be worse; she could be married, or have a child. It could be worse; she could be married to an abusive husband like other girls she knew.<sup>35</sup>

Anarchists celebrated an opposite model, how technology could be dystopian for those at the top of the ladder. An anonymous anarchist’s description of the “rich loafers, who live by the sweat of other people’s brows,” was the same description used by Conwell, Sumner, and Spencer to describe the poor. By “giving dynamite to the downtrodden millions of the globe, science has done its best work,” said the writer.<sup>36</sup>

While the author did not labor over the irony that Congress and State legislatures tried to ban the manufacture and sale of dynamite, it was obvious for anyone aware of

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<sup>34</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Report on the Relations Between Labor and Capital*, Vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1885), 451-457.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Report on the Relations Between Labor and Capital*, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1885), 609.

<sup>36</sup> Michael J. Schaack, *Anarchy and Anarchists: A History of the Red Terror and the Social Revolution in America and Europe* (New York: W.A. Houghton, 1889), 88.

basic facts about the Gilded Age. The courts and the government did not intervene in the manufacture or sale of any products, whatsoever, but when dynamite proved to be a weapon of the poor against the rich, this basic tenet withered away. No one objected on the grounds of laissez-faire. Other anarchist writers, including Albert Parsons, summed up the situation accurately, writing in *The Alarm*, a Chicago newspaper, that economic power had captured the political and legal system, thereby, leaving the people helpless to whatever justice the police dished out on the streets:

According to “law” there is no violence employed when employers starve the workmen into subjection, but it is “unlawful and disorderly” for the worker to resist the starvation process known as the lock-out, discharge, etc. To resist these compulsory methods is what the law terms “violence,” and the authorities are called upon by employers to suppress it. The police, guardians of law and order, are set upon the unarmed people to quell the disturbance, the militia being held as a reserve to reinforce them when necessary. Workingmen are thus driven to the choice of quiet submission or cracked heads, broken bones and slaughter. In such cases arms become a necessity.<sup>37</sup>

While there were myths about ideals, there were also ideals about what Americans were not. Gilded Age Americans knew one thing they were not was a country with an entrenched aristocratic class. Aristocracy was a European institution, arguably the main catalyst for breaking away from the old continent to forge a new one. Of course, the European aristocracy was based on noble birth, and it was applicable in that way. The so-called American plutocrats not only desired to be aristocrats but became wealthy enough that bankrupt royals throughout Europe offered to hand over titles and trappings of nobility in exchange for money to keep their families and their estates afloat.

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<sup>37</sup> “The Police” *The Alarm*, Chicago, Vol. 2, No. 1, August 22, 1885.

The desire of wealthy families to be aristocrats went from creating a fictional coat of arms and other trappings for parties and gala balls to the next logical step, purchasing the titles to the financially eroding wealth of actual European aristocrats who were badly in need of money to maintain their standard of living. *Downton Abbey*, if one knows the series, has Cora Crawley, a “dollar princess,” meaning the exchange of marriage and money for ancient names and titles.<sup>38</sup> The Gilded Age was filled with young heiresses that used their fortunes to attract male suitors from all over Europe.

May Goelet, later Duchess of Roxburghe, inherited a fortune of \$30,000,000 worth of New York real estate at the age of twenty-five. Apparently, she had turned down many men in New York’s high society. Some were cynical about her eventual engagement because when asked by a reporter, “Would you call her face handsome?” one man scoffed, “Not exactly—but her fortune is.”<sup>39</sup> Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, a woman of New York’s high society, remarked that when Goelet had been courted by Grand Duke Boris, the first cousin of the Czar of Russia, “everybody knew he was there to marry Miss Goelet to pay off his debts.”<sup>40</sup> These aristocrat marriages were perhaps the least insidious development, the most benign. In politics, money and markets utterly destroyed the democratic process, and many of the critiques rested on the idea of a silent aristocratic coup.

At the same time, the wealthiest families and individuals were beyond wealthy. For example, Mamie Fish threw a birthday party for her dog, who arrived wearing a

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<sup>38</sup> Amy Henderson: “*Downton Abbey*” and the Dollar Princesses, *Smithsonian Magazine* (March 14, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> *The Evening Statesman*, November 10, 1903.

<sup>40</sup> “The Duke of Roxburghe Gets His Heiress-Bride,” *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, November 11, 1903.

\$15,000 diamond collar.<sup>41</sup> The most ostentatious instance was the Bradley Martin gala. It cost \$400,000 (in the ballpark of \$12 million today) and caused outrage across the country, receiving condemnation from religious leaders, politicians, and even those few who were sympathetic failed to construct a solid defense.<sup>42</sup> *The Literary Digest* published compilations of the commentary across the country; one paper offered an argument made by economists today, rationalizing that however outrageous the party seemed on the outside, some portion of the money would theoretically trickle down to “the caterers and florists...the cabmen and footmen,” who will be “glad...some of [the] bounty will pass into their pockets.” Another newspaper took a different approach, dismissing that the idea the topic itself was worth debate: “It is nobody’s business what a man does with his money so long as he behaves himself and respects the rights of others.”<sup>43</sup>

While the economy expanded, the standard of living did not. Critical voices popped up all across the country. It was one of the most tumultuous times in the country’s history. People feared a second Civil War, this time between capital and labor. There were 37,000 strikes, violent confrontations between capital and labor during the Gilded Age.<sup>44</sup> Failure, however, did not mean the absence of hope, but it often meant disappointment, misery, and pain. Mythologies that structure life are not meant for the naive, for rubes, but rather can have a positive function, creating a cohesive way for people to understand themselves and those around them. That does not mean they always

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<sup>41</sup> Esther Crain, *The Gilded Age in New York, 1870-1910* (New York: Hachette Books, 2016), 85.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Times*, “Echoes of the Big Ball” February 12, 1897.

<sup>43</sup> *The Literary Digest*, “Topics of the Day,” February 6, 1897.

<sup>44</sup> Edward O'Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality: Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), xix.

work. That does not mean people stop wanting them to be true. Failure myths create new opportunities for new stories. Often they take the form of simple resistance, a simple no to the existing system. There was a fundamental breakdown at all levels of society.

Like Russell Conwell or Buffalo Bill's popularity, which gave credence to the idea of the currency of their ideas, competing ones soon emerged to challenge the dominant narratives. For a time, there was a myth gap, a gap in the stories that structure society. One of the most prominent voices to fill the gap was Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. By imagining the future, Bellamy hoped to change the past. In future Boston in the new millennium, crime and poverty were absent. People through their collective effort had been able to rid the community of its worst abuses and impulses along with all of its social ills.

A journalist by trade, Bellamy turned to fiction to flesh out his idea of economic nationalism. His understanding of "Nationalism [was] economic democracy. It promises to deliver society from the rule of the rich and to establish economic equality by the application of the democratic formula to the production and distribution of wealth....It aims to put an end to the present irresponsible control of the economic interests of the country by capitalists pursuing their private ends."<sup>45</sup> As neuroscientists have confirmed, Bellamy understood that powerful metaphors have the ability to change not only the way people think of how they approach social issues. Julian West, the protagonist of the book, interacted with people from the future and learned through language and powerful metaphors that the problems of his own time and society could be overcome.

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<sup>45</sup> Edward Bellamy, "What Nationalism Means," *The Contemporary Review*, July 1890.



One man compared the late nineteenth century to the plight of a “rosebush in a swamp,” useless and meaningless in one context, but if extracted and placed under the right conditions the rose bush could flourish on its own.<sup>46</sup> Humanity is like a rose bush, many tried to make it bloom, beyond an occasional half-opened bud with a worm at the heart; their efforts had been unsuccessful. Many, indeed, claimed that the bush was no rosebud at all, but a noxious shrub, fit only to be uprooted and burned. Gardeners in this metaphor, the moral philosophers, struggled with this rosebush for a very long time, until there came a period of general despondency, and then with it, the idea of transplanting the bush from the swamp. When this happened, putting the plant in better soil with sunlight, it flourished and bloomed. Bellamy’s response to individualism was the idea of a “private umbrella.”<sup>47</sup>

In his future Boston, when it rained, a giant dome covered everyone, and no one needed to worry about forgetting his or her individual umbrellas. "In the nineteenth century, when it rained, the people of Boston put up three hundred thousand umbrellas over as many heads, and in the twentieth century they put up one umbrella over all the heads."<sup>48</sup> The language of the Gilded Age, the ultimate political correctness, questioned the language of class “wage slavery, “starvation wage,” “plutocracy,” and “oligarchy.”<sup>49</sup>

The corporation, the West and technology all explained the rapid changes of the period. The Gilded Age saw a fundamental rift within society, in the psyche of America, and it had a real impact on the world. It is easy to dismiss mythologies as fictional, not

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<sup>46</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888), 405.

<sup>47</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 205.

<sup>48</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 205.

<sup>49</sup> Francine Cary, *Shaping the Future in the Gilded Age: A Study of Utopian Thought, 1888-1900*, Volume 2 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 294.

worth considering as a matter of historical inquiry, but people believed in them, or in their social roles and practices of belief through rituals. It created a fractured society. These myths served power. Most of these myths relied on individualism even when they were antithetical to the idea of individualism. So far, the emphasis has been on mythologies, stories, folklore, and the narrative structures that gave the country social meaning. The stories differed very little from utopian fiction, but utopian literature was aspirational, where the personal mythologies of the Gilded explained success and failure for the individual and how business at large succeeded.

Cultural myths and new economic narratives were more than explanations, more than the fictions; they had played a major role in the changes in society. Real life reflected the larger division between fantasy and reality. Perhaps the largest division was the gap between progress and poverty, as Henry George articulated. The rich could afford to dwell in fantasy, apart from everyone else. It was the economic changes that dictated the changes in lives of real people. It also had a direct and dramatic effect on the rich and poor, influencing their attitudes toward one another, and creating a distance between the two, to the point where the gap proved detrimental to the fabric of society itself. It is important to look at how people understood themselves as a result of these dominant stories, and how the domination of corporations became a normal part of American life.

## **Chapter V: Conclusion and Continuation**

“The past is never dead. It’s not even the past.”—William Faulkner

Myths are powerful. They are immortal. Myths are not facts though the two often work like a choreographed dance. Myth, like God, is everywhere and everything. Like dark energy, it is unseen but determines the shape of gravity. Hegel and Marx are helpful. Hegel believed “the world is ruled by ideas, that ideas and concepts are its determining principles.” What about material change? That is where Marx acts as a supplement. Marx held “ideas and concepts are the product of human beings in a specific system of production.”<sup>1</sup> The material and the immaterial explain myth and the Gilded Age. Historians need a third, category, and psychology, desire and fantasy, inherent in myth, shaped actual and individual realities.

Society works like a control knob. When it functions well, it stays within the Goldilocks zone, avoiding extremes. The Gilded Age failed on that front. It embodied extremes and rapid change. The pace was unsustainable. People with power kept power by appealing to myth. Individualism prevented collective action and collaboration. At the tail end of the 1880s, though, people developed “a wide-spread consciousness....that there [was] something radically wrong in the present social organization.”<sup>2</sup>

The working class wanted to replace individualism with a cooperative commonwealth. They recognized society had interrelated interests. Individualism taken

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick C. Beiser, *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 278.

<sup>2</sup> Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry Into The Cause of Industrial Depressions, And Of Increase Want With Increase of Wealth: The Remedy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886), 489.

to its extreme led to maldistributions of wealth and power. Many believed individuals were not the sum of their accounts but possessed intrinsic worth. Moreover, success and failure did not come from a Darwinian struggle, but something else, a system. Ira Steward, an outspoken union leader, stated during a July Fourth ceremony that the fundamental division in society is no longer “between freedom and slavery, but between wealth and poverty.” Seward explained, “if it is true that laborers ought to have as little as possible of the wealth they produce, South Carolina slaveholders were right, and the Massachusetts abolitionists were wrong.”<sup>3</sup>

In essence, according to this argument, the Civil War was fought in vain. It did not liberate but degraded. “When the working classes are denied everything but the barest necessities,” Steward added, “they have no use for liberty.”<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of laissez-faire and self-made men preached of immutable wealth. Henry George argued that these myths were not “laws of nature.” He explained, “these evils are not imposed by natural laws;” quite the opposite, “they spring...from social maladjustments.” Once these “maladjustments,” he thought, provided “an enormous impetus to progress.”<sup>5</sup> Poverty remained. The economic growth of the era, especially for oil and steel, went upward. Wages stagnated or went down. Whatever wealth existed at the bottom evaporated, absorbed by those living in the stratosphere. Horatio Alger, although a sexual predator, did not endorse the unbridled exploitation of a Social Darwinian universe. Wealth

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<sup>3</sup> Philip S. Foner, *We, the Other People: Alternative Declarations of Independence by Labor Groups, Farmers, Woman's Rights Advocates, Socialists, and Blacks, 1829-1975* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press 1976), 117-118.

<sup>4</sup> Foner, *We, the Other People*, 117-118.

<sup>5</sup> George, *Progress and Poverty*, 489.

became a justification for all imaginable cruelties. Sumner, Spencer, and other prosperity gospel sophists spoke of Christ as a pre-modern capitalist.

Money provided material distance and distinction, along Fifth Avenue could be found "Millionaires Row." Even the United States Senate joined the "Millionaires' Club."<sup>6</sup> Money also proved to be schizophrenic. Myths said it came from hard work, but many of the self-made men became millionaires through money manipulations. Wall Street knew how to do abracadabra, poof money. The West simply "discovered" wealth, ripping it right out of the ground. It is hard to claim self-made status when stumbling over mineral deposits, an orgy of wealth that created overnight fortunes. The stock market was a strange thing, possessed of supernatural powers, demonic, not angelic. America faced two depressions during the Gilded Age. The first began in 1873 and lasted a decade. Another one followed in 1893 and ended with the century. Myth demystified money, men, markets. They operated in an environment of immutable laws, laws of nature. Even gold that shining metal believed to have some eternal value, fluctuated. The value of gold was also like a myth and like markets, like men, veered up and down without explanation.

Myths could not conceal the system forever, a system where economic power purchased politicians, gained control; the process snowballed. The privileged became a small club, a tiny but powerful cabal. The Courts, the place of last resort in a democracy, came down with a decade's long case of Stockholm syndrome, although it was hard to tell hostage from the captor. The Gilded Age Court (Lochner Court) preferred Spencer to Madison, liberty of contract over Republican values. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

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<sup>6</sup> James Burton Reynolds, The Senate Vaudeville, *Godey's Magazine*. (March 1894).

went as far as to chide his colleagues on this point, writing in a dissent that the majority had “decided upon an economic theory, which a large part of the country does not entertain.” He bluntly added, “[t]he Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer’s Statics.”<sup>7</sup>

The powerful grew oblivious to suffering, oblivious to everyday life. They floated elsewhere, in the ether world—like gated communities. But the powerful still preached that hard work paid off. Social conditions were a bug not a feature of the system. In theory, democracy opened the door to all, denying none. The deserving would accept the challenge and rise through the ranks. The poor would remain parasites, siphoning the resources of those that worked hard. Technology certainly had changed the country, connected it. At the same time, it enslaved workers; its productivity went into the coffers of capital. Technology was a novelty most could not afford.

The working class labored six or seven days a week. Still, they lacked enough for basic necessities. Work without recreation, a life without living. When life becomes a waking suicide, people resist. Resistance is negation, a negative, a no. It is anger and adrenaline. It is a reaction, a response. This feeling brought the first impetus heading into the age of reform, the Progressive Age. Unrest and uprising defined the Gilded Age. Life was a constant battle. Labor Day, the eight-hour, came at an expense; such advances only came with blood and battle; most have forgotten the struggle.

This thesis reveals a more expansive and pervasive violence, unacknowledged or acknowledged, not just as a category of violence, but instead as unfairness of a less insidious nature. The psychological degradation paired with constant demands to be

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<sup>7</sup> *Lochner v. New York*, 198 US 45 (1905).

happy, to celebrate freedom and liberty, came despite the suffering. It is violence without an actor, at least a clear, discernable agent harming another person. The pathologies described other descriptions of madness, anxiety, concern, and worry indicating a mental breakdown for individuals and on a large scale, the collective health of the country.

Manic-depression, the highs and lows of life translated into action. First came depression, a realization that life is no good and in all likelihood will not be better tomorrow or the next day, maybe much worse. This depression inspires “no” as a response, but “no” is always a “no” addressed to someone, and in this sense, it was directed at a system of abstraction, an abstraction based on wealth, power, and capable of wielding great violence, without participating. Next came mania, the onset of a bubbly, psychotic state. This is not reality, the category every form of progress took until it transitioned to something possible. Then utopianism of Edward Bellamy offered advice, via a literary venture into a future Boston existing as a solution his world. Anarchism, socialism, Marxism—all experiments in organizing the world differently from the existing one, had potential for some. A central irony in Gilded Age America that offers insight into the present world came from what made an idea “utopian,” “nice ideas like communism” that never worked in the real world. It seemed such selectivity never applied to existing utopias: the self-made ideal, social Darwinism, bootstrapping, and on a larger scale laissez-faire economics embraced by the intellectual, economic, and a political elite. Yet, markets turned out to be incompetent to distribute resources reasonably, operating in a manner harmful to stakeholders, individual employees, communities, and the nation.

Hard work did not mean success, upward mobility rarely occurred, yet the fairy tale responded with an insistence on accepting all these dogmas on faith. And it is safe to say the myths discussed in this thesis were a form a secular religion, ways of understanding yourself and people around you in a coherent form that extended to work life and family life and whatever other addition to life that exists. The Knights of Labor demonstrated the impossibility, all the excuses of why change cannot happen; money, law, nature that parade of excuses trotted out by elites to stop everyone else.

In the Knight's platform written over a hundred years ago, they made demands for social and economic justice, a portion of them too radical for the world today, things like equal pay for equal work between the sexes. Such demands really represented nothing more than decency or some concession to allow for democracy in economic life, a concept unappealing then as now for the elite and privileged. As stated at the beginning of the introduction, myths provide both questions and answers. What distinguished Gilded Age myths from other periods in history was their functional role, after the Civil War, when it made sense to have overarching stories or theories about why things were changing and where they were headed.

Oscar Wilde made a sophisticated observation that condensed the problems quite well. In an essay on socialism, he summarized the variety of technological and economic changes he witnessed in his life. Yet with technology, genius translated from mind to machine, people remained employed, spending their entire life tucked away in big warehouses otherwise known as factories engaged in pointless repetitive motions. He asked what we should all ask, "what kind of life is this, what kind of satisfaction could it possibly bring to anyone?" His honest answer was none.



If industrialization, technology, and economic growth meant anything, anything at all, maybe the primary goal should be to end bad jobs, bad workplaces, and let machines do the work instead. Wilde believed the purpose of capitalism, economics, and politics was the creation of meaningful forms of existence for people; otherwise, no progress was worth much to anyone. These new ideas, seemingly far outside the mainstream of ideas that failed at first, persisted because new stories mean new ways of imagining the world, the changing the world.

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