Comments

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Before engaging the critiques and recommendations that Rebecca Edwards and Richard John have so forcefully and provocatively offered us, we should remind ourselves of what is at stake in this debate. And what is at stake is simultaneously "a little" and "a lot." And that is because periodization schemes are as much a creature of academic sociology as they are intellectual and analytic constructs. As the several references to "textbook chapters" in these essays indicate, nothing is more central to the construction of American history as an intellectual and academic community than the textbook used in undergraduate survey classes. From that perspective, the goal of these critiques is to reconceive the chapter in these surveys now usually dedicated to the period following the Compromise of 1877 up to the end of the nineteenth century. Rebecca would reconceive that chapter by linking the earlier period to what we now commonly regard as the Progressive Era in the early twentieth century. Richard would banish the misleading and rather gaudy adjective "Gilded," replacing it with, as I understand him, something like the Age of Industrialization.

There is much more at stake here than the mere title and boundaries of a chapter in a survey textbook. Titles tell the reader what to expect within the text and, because the author anticipates that expectation from the reader, they become a kind of sieve or filter when the author goes about gathering and synthesizing material for that text. What seems relevant to the title goes in and what appears to be beside the point stays out. Seen this way, Rebecca's recommendation proposes that politics take center stage in the chapter dedicated to this period. From this perspective, she very skillfully contends that the chapter should be dedicated to tracing the linkages between, on the one hand, the reform movements that we know as Greenbackers/Populists /Knights of Labor and the progressives, on the other. She suggests that the present periodization all too easily allows us to assume that "the Populists just up and died" in 1900, conveniently tying up one chapter and allowing the next one, highlighting the progressives, to begin a new theme.[1] In a sense, she

[1]For example, see John Mack Faragher et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, combined ed. (Saddle River, NJ, 1997). Chapter 20 ("Commonwealth and Empire, 1870–1900") devotes a number of pages to the Populist Party and reform movements, but the next chapter ("Urban America and the Progressive Era, 1900–1917") contains almost nothing connecting the politics of the latter period to the former. In fact, the opening line of this chapter reads as if progressives were an entirely new group in American politics and society: "Between the 1890s and World War I, a large and diverse number of Americans claimed the political label 'progressive'" (653). Also see George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America:*

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wants to eliminate the boundary now demarcating the division between the Gilded Age and Progressive Era chapters because it is analytically deceptive. I heartily endorse that conclusion. And I also heartily endorse her more or less explicit suggestion that politics and public policy should play central thematic roles in the chapters dedicated to the period between the end of the Civil War and World War I (possibly continuing, as she notes, into the New Deal).

Richard, for his part, appears comfortable with crafting a period dating from about 1877 to 1900. He would, however, change the narrative content of most textbook accounts of the period by including as central elements the organizational, political, and economic innovations that made rapid industrial development possible. In particular, he would have us focus upon the rise of the immense communication, transportation, and energy systems that provided much of the infrastructure enabling industrialization. In fact, as he notes, these systems, along with the emergence of the modern corporation as an organizational template for coordinating economic production and marketing, comprised much of the substance of industrialization as well.

The problem, from Richard's perspective, is that the now hoary title "Gilded Age" encourages authors and readers to conjure up caricatures of the innovative and enterprising entrepreneurs who put these systems together and founded the corporations that encompassed their operations.[1] Instead of the robber barons who do depressingly animate the national stage in current narratives, he would have us focus upon these systems, corporations, and the theoretical strategies of the people who created them. This revision of the traditional narrative would also stress the rise of the administrative state that imposed a common organizational form upon what was, for the most part,

A Narrative History, 6th ed. (New York, 2004), in which the first sentence to chapter 24 ("The Progressive Era") states: "Theodore Roosevelt's emergence as a national leader coincided with the onset of what historians have labeled the Progressive Era (1900–1917)" (967). We should, however, note that Tindall and Shi do explicitly connect the populist and progressive movements at several points (889, 969). In yet another example, James A. Henretta, David Brody, and Lynn Dumenil's *America: A Concise History*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 2006), "Politics in the Age of Enterprise, 1877–1896" (ch. 19) is immediately followed by "The Progressive Era" (ch. 20). Chapter 19 fully integrates the "Populist Revolt" into a narrative of protest against the excesses of industrialization, while chapter 20 begins with the sentence: "On the face of it, the political tumult of the 1890s ended with William McKinley's election in 1896."

[1]Tindall and Shi, for example, entitle their chapter 22 "Gilded Age Politics and Agrarian Revolt." At the same time, chapter 20 ("Big Business and Organized Labor") in their volume nominates Jay Gould as the "prince of the railroad robber barons," yet does not stress corruption and fraud, while describing the entrepreneurial and organizational achievements of Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J. P. Morgan. In Henretta et al., *America,* there are references in several chapters to the "Gilded Age," but these neither dominate the narrative nor do they stress corporate greed and fraud as an underlying theme. Yet the authors also do not devote much space to industrialization as organizational innovation or economic expansion. They prefer, instead, to focus on the social history of the period, particularly workers and labor unions.

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private enterprise. In some cases, the robber barons that populate current narratives would reappear in his revision—but as economic innovators as opposed to corrupt speculators. But the thrust of his critique is that we should narrate the now largely overlooked story of how the United States became one of the leading industrial powers of the world, as opposed to the scandalous excesses of fraud and corruption that were merely incidental to that achievement. And I heartily concur with both this critique and the recommended revision.

In short, Rebecca would stress politics when narrating the last quarter of the nineteenth century. She would particularly emphasize the continuity of reform movements and their claimants in that period with those that now populate accounts of the decades immediately following the turn of the century. Richard would stress what we might call the "mechanics" (in both senses of that word) of industrial expansion, including some of the administrative effects of the reform movements that Rebecca would privilege. As I have already said, I like both of these recommendations and the critiques upon which they rest. Furthermore, I believe that they can be combined to their mutual benefit. In order to see how we might do this, we must first return to the main reason why we must have periods at all.

The standard survey is, in large part, the product of the several interpretive communities that have divided up American history into separate periods. To a large extent, these communities go their own separate ways as they pursue themes and problems peculiar to their own practitioners and the periods in which they work. While the standard survey almost always has an overarching theme of some sort (lodged securely in the title of the textbook), the separate chapters also at least nod in the direction of the distinct and separate preoccupations of these separate interpretive communities. And there are good reasons for this. For one thing, those who teach the undergraduate survey (and will thus be adopting the text) would like to see their own period treated in a way that agrees with their own approach. In addition, the scholarship upon which the chapter rests will be freshest and deepest if the period is treated from the same perspective as that taken by the resident interpretive community. But the result, if the textbook is considered as a whole, is often a bit of a hodgepodge or potpourri in that these communities (and their periods) are preoccupied by distinctly different problems. That is why, in so many surveys, "the Populists just up and died" after 1900. Those historians who call the Progressive Era their home have had no use for the Populists. In fact, making a firm distinction between the Populists and the progressives has been a strategy in which they have defended the integrity of their own turf. And all of this also suggests that Rebecca and Richard, however much I agree with them (and that is a lot), could be accused of a bit

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of special pleading themselves.

The problem, as I see it, is the standard American survey itself. One possible solution would be to craft surveys along interpretive lines that cross the separate periods. And such surveys, of course, exist with respect to American economic history, to take but one example. But this merely replicates the disjunctive influence of the interpretive communities that preside over the separate periods, albeit within one narrower, more focused range of the American experience. What we need, instead, is a solution that liberates the focus of each period from the interpretive community that produces the scholarship. We could, for example, ask what Americans (in particular, American undergraduates) most want to know about each of the periods and let their interests determine the content and approach. While this, in fact, does influence textbook adoption (via sales), there would probably be something a little incestuous in this strategy in that many undergraduates would not know what most interested them about a period before they were exposed to it and the selective presentation of a theme by the textbook and the professor would, in many cases, merely be self-confirming.

What I would suggest, instead, is that we let scholars outside the United States tell us what they would most want to know about this country's history. This would largely free each chapter, however defined, from the possession of its interpretive community while, I would guess, providing a question around which to organize what that interpretive community can tell us about that period. For instance, I would wager and wager strongly that what scholars outside the United States would most want to know about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is how this country managed to combine a rather robust democratic politics with comparatively rapid industrialization. The compatibility of democracy and development is, for example, a central question in many rapidly developing nations, nowhere more so than in China. And answering that question would necessarily entail combining and integrating Rebecca's and Richard's critiques into a single narrative that would, also and not at all incidentally, significantly revise what we now relate to readers under the rubric Gilded Age. This would probably not solve most disjunctive problems, because foreign readers would likely have very different questions that they would pose to each of the separate periods. But it would address some of the rather incestuous qualities of contestation over the interpretive themes that are applied to them.

I am, of course, skeptical that this strategy would, in fact, achieve the result that we all want to see because, in the first place, the survey textbook is an industry (and a powerful industrial product) that operates on sales, and the sales of a textbook written from the cosmopolitan perspective of foreign interests and questions would probably not compete well with

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more parochial alternatives. In fact, the complex of academic sociology and publishing economics will probably trump even the strongest intellectual critiques favoring alternative interpretive themes. So I am rather pessimistic that things are going to change soon.

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