

Capitalism, Dispossession, and the “Global Frontier”

Offenburger, Andrew. *Frontiers in the Gilded Age: Adventure, Capitalism, and Dispossession from Southern Africa to the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands, 1880–1917*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019. xvi + 299 pp. \$45.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780300225877.

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How does our understanding of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands change when we view the region as one stop on a “transnational circuit of romanticized frontiers” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Andrew Offenburger’s new book explores this question by following three families who participated in a series of United States and British expansionist projects across two continents between 1880 and 1917. Tracing the trajectories of American and Boer colonists as they migrated from the U.S. West to southern Africa, northern Mexico and back, *Frontiers in the Gilded Age* demonstrates that the British South Africa Company’s campaigns against the Ndebele in Rhodesia and the designs of American investors on Yaqui territory in northern Mexico operated as two nodes in a global circuit through which the same ideas, strategies, justifications, and people circulated to fuel the rise of industrial capitalism. Offenburger’s discovery of the connections between corporate land grabs in southern Africa and northern Mexico illuminates the role of transnational mercenaries in carrying out the frontier project of capital accumulation through indigenous dispossession—and of narrating its meaning to public audiences.

The book begins by tracing the emergence of a shared frontier ideology grounded in white supremacist ideas and extractive economies that characterized American and British imperialism in the late nineteenth century. Offenburger then explores how this ideology informed the lives of three sets of settlers: Frederick Burnham, an American scout who volunteered his services to suppress indigenous resistance to a British mining company in southern Africa and an American land development corporation in northern Mexico; James and Gertrude Eaton, a missionary couple from New Jersey who attempted to convert the residents of Chihuahua to Protestantism; and Benjamin Viljoen, a Boer general who toured the United States performing his “Boer War Spectacle” before establishing a series of failed agricultural colonies in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. These parallel narratives intersect in the final chapter, when the families each encounter dual challenges to their designs on the lands, people, and resources of northern Mexico: Yaqui resistance and revolutionary nationalism. The Eatons decamp to the United States, while Burnham and Viljoen redouble their efforts to secure control over Yaqui territory—the

American scout by stockpiling rifles and importing bloodhounds, and the Boer general through serving as improbable plenipotentiary for Mexican revolutionary leader Francisco Madero.

Here Offenburger introduces a fourth family—that of Ricarda León Flores—to consider how the indigenous Yaqui responded to increasing Mexican and American incursions into their territory during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing on oral histories and testimonies, Offenburger demonstrates how the strategies deployed by the León Flores family to survive escalating attacks on Yaqui land and resources shed light on broader patterns of Yoemem resilience often dismissed in state archives as mere “depredations.” He argues that the frontier model of accumulation through dispossession that settlers like Burnham and Viljoen sought to reproduce in the Mexican North faltered when these men encountered strategies of Yaqui resistance that they could neither understand nor suppress. Offenburger persuasively suggests that the 1917 Mexican Constitution’s mandate to remove the control of foreign investors over the Mexican economy was first realized not through the wave of expropriations that U.S. investors feared, but instead as a result of demands for Yaqui sovereignty. Although the Yoemem did not receive the full restitution of their lands and removal of settlers that they sought, their strategic combination of violence and diplomacy did prevent U.S. investors from assuming control of their resources during a key moment of political reorganization in Mexico. The Burnhams, Eatons, and Viljoens all abandoned their frontier ventures and ended up living within a twelve-mile radius of Pasadena.

Offenburger draws on several recent trends in studies of borderlands and empire to trace the connections between British imperialism in southern Africa and United States economic expansion into northern Mexico. He adopts a transnational and global lens to make sense of local power struggles, considers the role of non-state actors in shaping the outcome of international conflicts, follows the careers of seemingly iconoclastic individuals to observe broader patterns of historical change, and highlights the centrality of family structures to both settler colonialism and indigenous resistance. While Offenburger’s attention to the role of social Darwinism in justifying imperial projects will be familiar to historians, *Frontiers in the Gilded Age* adds an important contribution by demonstrating not only how frontier ideologies rationalized indigenous dispossession, but also how the concept of a global frontier circuit facilitated the capital investments that underwrote U.S. extractive ventures on Yaqui lands. This dynamic is most evident in the career of Burnham, who we see convince American investors to purchase shares in the land development company he manages in the Yaqui Valley by touting his experience killing Ndebele resistance leaders for the British South Africa Company. But it also comes through as Viljoen’s experience with guerilla warfare in southern Africa qualifies him lead a “peace mission” to the Yaqui, and in the ways the Eatons’ evangelizing efforts intersect with the creation of a Boer agricultural colony in Chihuahua.

It is always easy to say that a book should have done more, and Offenburger is careful to explain how and why he set the parameters of this history. Still, for a study on industrial frontiers in the Gilded Age, it would have been helpful to hear more about how similar extractive zones—Alaska, the Yukon, Australia, Venezuela—mirrored or departed from the dynamic of the frontier circuit that Offenburger identifies. Offenburger argues that the “global frontier” he traces ultimately “closed” in northern Mexico when foreign investors could no longer call upon the particular combination of state power and extralegal violence that had facilitated corporate ventures in previous decades. What did the closure of this particular frontier circuit mean for broader trends toward mass resource nationalization and anti-colonialism in the middle of the twentieth century? But these are really

questions about directions for future research. Offenburger has written a compelling account of frontiers in the Gilded Age that deepens our understanding of the relationship between capitalism and dispossession during a period of global economic transformation.

Beyond Imagination: Injustice and Employee Injury Law During the Progressive Era

Holdren, Nate. *Injury Impoverished: Workplace Accidents, Capitalism, and Law in the Progressive Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xvii + 292 pp. \$59.99 (cloth), ISBN 9781108488709.

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Industrialization brought great opportunity and great peril. One was often easier to see than the other, however, and progressive reformers, comprehending the distance between them as a source of injustice, sought to help all Americans understand what it meant to be part of a population that bore more costs and reaped fewer benefits. Workplace accidents were one key target. Upton Sinclair introduced America to the trials and tribulations of the Rudkus family. Lewis Hine captured the countenances of child laborers. Crystal Eastman studied the bustling manufactures of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, which caused so many deaths she created a calendar to track them all. The human suffering they all saw cried out for some sort of representation, some way to force a broader American public to reckon with the human costs of workplace accidents and the injustices they signified. Historian Nate Holdren examines ideas of justice in employee injury law across two periods—the court-based era that preceded the first compensation laws in 1911 and the first two decades of the compensation era that followed. He argues that the legal system and employers' responses perpetuated injustices rather than solved them, and that one unintended consequence of workers' compensation reform was to further diminish popular understanding of on-the-job injuries and deaths. The result pushed a true recognition of the human costs of the industrial economy beyond reach, leaving injuries to impoverish workers and diminish Americans' understanding of the human costs of production.

Holdren divides his study into two chronological parts. Part I examines employee injury law from the 1842 ruling in *Farwell v. Boston and Worcester R.R. Corp* to the passage of workmen's compensation laws in 1911. Using trial records, legal treatises, and liability reform conference proceedings, Holdren shows how the era of court-based injury law created what he terms the tyranny of the trial. The odds were stacked in employers' favor. Injured workers and their families could seek a justice of recognition through the courts, but they often failed to achieve justice of distribution in the form of adequate compensation for their losses. As workers faced lives of poverty after injuries and