

## Review Essay

The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896. *By Richard White*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 968 pp. Maps, photographs, figures, tables, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-973581-5.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Sklansky

The sprawling volumes in the long-running Oxford History of the United States series are intended to serve as comprehensive surveys for a general audience, a task at which Richard White's nearly thousand-page chronicle of the postbellum decades admirably succeeds. But the main interest of such syntheses for historians lies in their reconsideration of the master narratives that organize divergent developments at multiple levels into a cohesive account of American society as a whole in a pivotal period, constructing a framework for past scholarship and a platform for future work. The author's previous field-shaping studies of Native American history, Western history, environmental history, and business history make him well-suited to offer an overarching understanding of an era of climactic upheavals in all of these realms: the age of the last Indian wars and the extensive development of the Great Plains, the slaughter of the buffalo and the industrialization of agriculture, unprecedented class warfare, and the ascendance of big business, along with the meteoric career of Reconstruction and the violent restoration of white supremacy in the New South.

*The Republic for Which It Stands* sets these struggles in an illuminating explanatory frame. White's earlier works challenged conventional story lines predicated on the inexorable clash of inherently opposed forces, such as European colonists versus native peoples, industrial East versus wild West, technological progress versus environmental protection, and big business versus small farmers and workers. He posited instead a series of versatile models of mutuality, conceiving the colonial Great Lakes as a "middle ground" of cross-cultural exchange (*The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* [1991]), the nineteenth-century West as the "kindergarten of the American state" (*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* [1991]), the development of the

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Columbia River as a “failed marriage” of technology and natural resources (*The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* [1995]), and the rise of the transcontinental railroads as the offspring of a corrupt “friendship” between politicians and plutocrats (*Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* [2011]). He follows a similar approach in finding the common theme underlying the epochal conflicts of the late nineteenth century.

At the heart of White’s new work is a metaphorical family drama, originating in the wartime wedding of the emancipation of labor to the development of industry under the auspices of the Republican Party. His is the story of that union’s twin postbellum progeny. The party of Abraham Lincoln fostered an egalitarian vision of a nation of independent producers expanding across the continent, exercising equal rights under the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, and enjoying economic opportunities made possible by the muscular efforts of the newly powerful national government. But along with that vaunted ideal, the Republican program gave birth to a darker reality, a nation of impoverished workers and debt-driven households, of dispossessed Indians, disfranchised African Americans, and persecuted immigrants, of recurrent panics and depressions, and of fraudulent financiers and rapacious corporations in league with self-serving politicians—recognizably like America today. In linking Reconstruction to the Gilded Age as a single story, White eloquently envisions the promise of freedom and equality for working people as the stillborn sibling of corporate capitalism, like a spirit haunting its survivor.

The journey from free labor to corporate capital begins with what Western historian Elliott West dubbed the “Greater Reconstruction” (“Reconstructing Race,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 3 [Spring 2003]): the postwar effort to remake the Indian West as well as the Confederate South in the image of the Republican North. More precisely, White contends, the architects of Reconstruction aimed to reproduce on a national scale the homogeneity and harmony of Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield, Illinois, with its small shops, family farms, and, most importantly, pious Protestant homes. The production and protection of stable single-family households, with paternal breadwinners and maternal caretakers, became the lodestar of Republican policies and the focus of ensuing conflicts over everything from taxes, tariffs, and temperance laws to land distribution, Indian assimilation, immigration restriction, and urban sanitation. To convey this domestic ideal across the country, the victors in the Civil War called into service the formidable new forces of big government and big business, which swiftly outgrew the wagon of free labor to which they were harnessed. The vision of a republic of independent households endured in the political imagination long

after the social reality it described was radically transformed by the juggernaut of continental conquest and industrial enterprise.

Though it was born of the war against the Confederacy, White argues that the union of the national government and northern capital went much further in reconstructing the West than the South. As the dominant branch of the burgeoning warfare state, the U.S. Army brutally defeated resistance from Cheyenne, Comanche, Lakota, and Nez Perce, but the national government held back from suppressing the resurgence of Confederate rebels and white-supremacist terror. With the Homestead Act, the Morrill Act authorizing the creation of land-grant colleges, and the Pacific Railway Acts, the wartime Congress launched a sustained transformation of nearly two-thirds of the nation's territory, funded with massive federal subsidies for western railroads and river and harbor improvements. Meanwhile, land redistribution became the great road not taken in the Cotton Kingdom, where public sponsorship and private investment remained comparatively thin.

The federal government's power to conquer and carve up the West, however, proved greater than its ability to govern it, let alone to deliver on its promise for small producers. White describes much of the region's rushed industrialization as a "runaway train" careening from the arid Great Plains through the Rocky Mountains and the vast desert of the Great Basin in the Southwest, creating a landscape of "bankrupt railroads, wasted capital, and angry workers and farmers" instead of a "pastoral paradise" (p. 590). He finds the real testing ground of the free-labor ideal in its fertile Midwestern homeland east of the 100th meridian, where it met the least indigenous resistance and enjoyed the most success in promoting actual settlement and development as opposed to quasi-colonial extraction and speculation. Yet as in the novels of Hamlin Garland on which White draws, countless little houses on the prairie were overwhelmed by the intensifying pressures of competition and productivity, making the Middle Border the new "heartland" of agrarian unrest as well as industrial agriculture.

The central target of popular protest was *corruption*, White's enduringly relevant diagnosis of the postbellum political economy and its discontents. As in his prior study of the transcontinental railroads, corruption in the Gilded Age means the betrayal by big government and big business of the people they were supposed to serve. More broadly, it signifies the degeneration of the partnership of new forms of public authority and private profit from the means of securing resources and rights for the "producing classes" into an end in itself, supporting an ascendant ruling class of profiteering federal officials and financiers. Investment banks that were created to finance the Union war effort became engines of accumulation for capitalists instead of

agents of opportunity for black and white farmers after the war. The Mining Act of 1872, designed with the needs of small prospectors in mind, came to serve speculators in mining and smelting companies devoted to large-scale gambling and graft. Along similar lines, White recounts the depressingly familiar stories of how absentee investors in railroads, mines, factories, and refineries supplanted former slaves and family farmers as the ultimate beneficiaries of the Fourteenth Amendment and the Homestead Act.

On the one hand, government at all levels came to operate largely as a money-making business for elected and appointed officials, funneling fees, fines, bribes, and kickbacks to politicians and party machines while delegating public services to private institutions granted lavish bounties and subsidies. On the other hand, the owners of the nation's biggest businesses made their fortunes primarily from cushy government contracts, from the "tariff Christmas tree" for protected industries, and from new methods of corporate governance enabling directors to manipulate the value of financial assets, divert borrowed money into dividends, and drain income from one company into others they controlled, instead of deriving their profits principally from the provision of goods and services to their customers (p. 372). White extends his earlier indictment of unproductive wealth and waste from railroad executives and bankers like Tom Scott and Jay Cooke to manufacturing moguls like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie and the nascent "corporate class" of the 1890s (p. 248).

White acknowledges the persistence of local pockets of small-scale specialized manufacturing in which profits depended mainly on heightened productivity and on the quality of what was produced. But he emphasizes the growing importance of larger firms in capital-intensive, mass-production industries that sought to stay afloat not chiefly through economies of scope and scale—contra Alfred Chandler—but by means of mergers and acquisitions aimed at controlling prices and costs instead of competing for customers. The result, according to White, was a surprisingly lackluster record of real economic growth as opposed to the proliferation of paper wealth before the turn of the century. Much of the increased output celebrated by contemporaries and subsequent historians was invested in capital goods instead of feeding on or fueling consumer demand. And what gains there were came largely from the prodigious growth of the workforce, which experienced declining per capita income and rising morbidity and mortality for much of the period.

In contrast to the elusive ideal of a producers' republic, the fundamental economic feature of the era emerges in this scathing survey as rent-seeking: an increasingly systemic mode of plunder rather than production, predicated on the power to monopolize markets in the interests

of “insiders,” whether by securing protective tariffs, government subsidies, sinecures, and contracts, or by exploiting exclusive access to information about investments, Ponzi schemes, and other forms of financial fraud. The paramount countervailing response here comes from a host of campaigns for political reform, ranging from evangelical crusades for moral “purity” to liberal efforts to replace “fee-based governance” with ostensibly impartial salaried officials, administrative procedures, and judicial proceedings, as recently described by Nicholas R. Parrillo (*Against the Profit Motive: The Salary Revolution in American Government, 1780–1940* [2013]). But White finds the essence of Gilded Age reform in the eclectic ranks of the antimonopoly cause, launched by Greenbackers and Grangers in the 1860s and 1870s, broadened by the Knights of Labor and allied reformers inspired by Henry George in the 1880s, lofted into national politics by the Populists in the 1890s, and paving the path for Progressivism at the turn of the century. White focuses on the West as the widest arena for reform and the birthplace of federal bureaucracies like the National Forest Service and the U.S. Geological Survey. He accords less attention to African-American resistance and Southern Populism, and generally attributes less lasting significance to the radicalism of workers and farmers, profoundly compromised by white racism, than to the liberal reforms that arose in response, including legislation regulating railroad rates, workers’ wages and working conditions, and establishing public utilities.

Much as the instruments of emancipation were transformed into tools of exploitation in the postwar years, White shows how the achievements of antimonopoly agitation were often turned against those they were meant to help. The strongest branch of government to emerge from the Gilded Age was in many respects the judiciary, which invoked the legacy of free labor and contractual freedom in overturning many protective labor laws as violations of property rights, while increasingly wielding antitrust laws against striking workers instead of their employers. Municipal water and sewage systems like Chicago’s Department of Public Works became means of subsidizing businesses and politicians at middle-class taxpayers’ expense while providing the least benefit to poor residents who could not afford access to city services.

Politically, White’s work bears comparison with a line of recent critiques of rent-seeking and monopoly in America’s new Gilded Age, such as Barry C. Lynn, *Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction* (2009); Dean Baker, *Rigged: How Globalization and the Rules of the Modern Economy Were Structured* (2016); and Brink Lindsey and Steven M. Teles, *The Captured Economy: How the Powerful Enrich Themselves, Slow Down Growth, and Increase Inequality* (2017). By the turn of the twentieth century, White concludes,

the United States was less democratic and more unequal than at the end of the Civil War, and further than ever from the single-class society of postbellum Republican ideology. But while offering a sobering assessment of the pervasive corruption and cupidity of the late nineteenth century, this bracing volume also recovers the expansively egalitarian vision that arose alongside the new industrial order, “the republic for which it stands.”

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