


Editor's Note

Brian M. Ingrassia 

As I write this note during the final weeks of 2024, I am reminded of how important the Gilded Age and Progressive Era are for understanding our present political moment. Americans recently witnessed the election of a president who will be the first chief executive since Grover Cleveland to serve two nonconsecutive terms in office. Talking heads daily speculate about the potential impact of tariffs that may be in place by the time this issue is in print, while university students and faculty hourly try to anticipate the next regulations that may be forthcoming from administrators or state assemblies. For the past decade or two, scholars have been discussing the rise of a new Gilded Age, and now with the apparently imminent emergence of the so-called brologarchy, it appears as if we may once again be facing an era of nearly unbridled capitalism. Possibly, our age will be even more openly gilded than the first one, and so we need to understand how we got here and where we may be going. My fervent hope is that Americans turn to historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era more than ever before. The roots of present-day debates over issues such as popular culture, higher education, tariffs, immigration policy, and climate change are plainly visible in the decades to which this journal is dedicated.

In this issue, we see the multifaceted relevance of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. history. In “A Murder among Minstrels: Show Business, Blackface, and Violence in Post-Civil War New York,” K. Stephen Prince analyzes an 1867 shooting in the Big Apple to illustrate how an emergent, post-Civil War “age of capital” shaped a once-prevalent but now disgraced form of popular culture. Alexander Olson’s article, “Securing the Public Trust: Yosemite and the Politics of Higher Education in California, 1868–1900,” exposes how public universities were contested spaces in the late nineteenth century – and, in the case of California, the Yosemite Valley became a space where professors and university leaders tried to establish common ground with their constituencies. Fritz Kusch provides an illuminating perspective on tariffs in “Capital and Labor United: Workers, Wages, and the Tariff in Late Nineteenth-Century Protectionist Agitation,” revealing how American business leaders sought to appeal directly to workers in order to build broad support for protectionist policies. In “Dirty Deals in the Florence Café: The Case of Robert L. Dodd and the Smuggling of Japanese Nationals in Turn-of-the-Century El Paso,” Jose Maria Herrera tells the story of the downfall of an obscure official to illustrate how the federal government extended its power to the border at El Paso, Texas, during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Following these four articles is an outstanding roundtable on climate, in which Lawrence Culver and five other expert contributors – Brian Frehner, Caroline Grego, Dustin Meier, Bryan Paradis, and Karolin Wetjen – help us see how understandings of weather, environment, and climate change developed in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, and how historical actors deployed those ideas for a range of purposes. The climate could be a way to sell places or to build an agricultural society, but it could also be a way to posit the superiority of one racial group over others. If any of us are tempted to think that

awareness of climate originated in the years following the first Earth Day in April 1970, this roundtable should help us comprehend that history in new and eye-opening ways, and stimulate further study.

The book review section, as usual, brims with fascinating topics: from reinterpretations of Reconstruction to the material culture of American imperialism, and from the spanning of the Mississippi River to a twenty-first-century video game that may help its players generate new meanings of the American West. Please join us in reading and learning, and in seeing this journal and this field as a go-to place for understanding our complicated times.