

# PBS's *The Gilded Age*: Removing the working class from the stage of history

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*PBS's The Gilded Age, part of "The American Experience" series, directed by Sarah Colt, first aired February 6. It is available for streaming at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).*

During the Gilded Age, in the mere three decades from the close of the Civil War in 1865 to the late 1890s, the United States was transformed into the world's greatest industrial power, with all that that entailed.

Everywhere there was change. Railroads crisscrossed the land, creating a single national market instead of the localized antebellum worlds of the planter, farmer, and small-scale manufacturer. The population doubled in size, drawing in a bewildering mix of European and Asian languages and cultures. The cities, teeming with hundreds of thousands pulled in by burgeoning factories and mills, grew outward and, through the development of structural steel, upward.

A dizzying advance in science and technology brought, among other things, electricity and illumination to the cities, altering the basic rhythms of everyday life; and the telegraph and the telephone, separating for the first time the transfer of information from dependence on being physically carried by human beings.

Great new industrial empires emerged, commanded by the Robber Barons—the likes of Carnegie, Morgan, Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and so on—whose fortunes seemed to dwarf anything the world had ever seen. It was clear that the power of these new industrialists and financiers made a mockery of the principles of equality fought for in the American Revolution and Civil War.

At center of this maelstrom, however, the most potent change of all was discernable soon after the Civil War: the emergence of a powerful working class, locked in intense and often violent conflict with the industrialists, the latter invariably backed by state and national authorities.

This, the central problem of that time—and our own—is largely missed by the new PBS documentary *The Gilded Age*. First airing February 6, the nearly two-hour program presents the Gilded Age in a series of vignettes focusing on more-or-less loosely connected figures and events of the era: the careers of Andrew Carnegie and J.P. Morgan; the social climbing of Alva Belmont Vanderbilt; and the politics of the reformist author Henry George, the Populist movement of embattled farmers, and finally, the McKinley-Bryan presidential election of 1896.

More striking is what is left out of *The Gilded Age*. There is no discussion of the gradual imposition, beginning in the 1880s, of Jim Crow segregation in the South and the stripping from freed slaves and their children of the right to vote—along with the wave of racial violence that accompanied it. There is no mention of the bloody wars against the Plains Indians that raged from the 1860s until the Wounded Knee massacre of the Sioux in 1890. Technological developments are largely ignored, as is American literature—including, astonishingly, Mark Twain, who coined the metaphor “the Gilded Age” in the title of a 1873 novel as a satirical indictment of wealth covering up rot, as gilded décor papers over the baser metals.

By only mentioning the Civil War—as if it were merely a chronological

event that just so happened to precede the period—*The Gilded Age* gets off to confused start. In fact, it was the Civil War that created the conditions for American capitalism's domination of the entire continent. It ended the first great drama of American history—the conflict over slavery between the North and South, which was itself part of a larger struggle for the very survival of the republic and the democratic principles it proclaimed.

The Union victory raised the curtain on actors engaged in a new drama: the modern class struggle. Workers took center stage with the epoch-making Great Uprising of 1877, a series of railroad strikes and citywide general strikes that swept the US from coast to coast at the speed of the locomotive, and which resulted in scores of deaths at the hands of various state authorities. This, together with the disputed Hayes-Tilden election of 1876 and the final withdrawal of federal troops from the South the following year, marked the end of the Civil War era. It gets no mention in *The Gilded Age*.

Nowhere else in the world was the class struggle so violent—not in Great Britain, France, Germany, not even in Russia. Beginning with the Great Uprising, American workers demonstrated an astonishing degree of militancy and solidarity in the face of enormous violence from the corporations and the state, including famous struggles such as the eight-hour day movement and ensuing the Haymarket Affair of 1886, and the Pullman and national coalminers strikes of 1894, among many others.

None of these are covered in the documentary. The lone working class struggles presented are the bitter Homestead Strike of 1892, waged at Andrew Carnegie's principal steel mill outside Pittsburgh, and “Coxey's Army” of unemployed workers seeking relief from the Depression of the 1890s by marching on Washington, D.C., in 1894, where march leaders were arrested for the “crime” of walking on the Capitol building lawn.

Workers today have much to learn from the solidarity and fighting spirit of their predecessors in the Gilded Age. But the biggest lesson of all must be extracted from the tragic failure of that generation of workers to develop a political perspective, program, and party of its own.

The greatest mass labor movement of the era, the Knights of Labor, sought to organize all “producers” in one great union. But the Knights denied the irreconcilability of capital and labor and imagined turning the clock back to a time in history when “harmony” prevailed. They were eventually supplanted by the American Federation of Labor, whose program of organizing based on monopolizing skill in the various trades was, in the great new industries, outdated from its inception, as Carnegie's victimization of the craft unions at Homestead made clear. Socialism was largely confined to groups of German immigrants, and even there, with the waning of the First International, the line with anarchism often blurred.

Given this, and in the absence of any attempt to place American history within global developments—including the Paris Commune of 1871, which attracted great attention in the US—it is perhaps unsurprising then that *The Gilded Age* ignores socialism altogether.

The emphasis is on efforts to reform capitalism, not put an end to it, starting with Henry George's third-party campaign for the New York City mayor in 1886, which was supported by labor unions and some American socialists, including the young Daniel De Leon. George was the author of the immensely popular *Poverty and Progress*, which decried and sought to explain, as its title suggests, the glaring contradiction between fabulous wealth and appalling human misery that emerged in Gilded Age America. He shocked the political system by coming in second in the vote that year. But George's politics and his political economy—centered on a tax on land ownership—were “utterly backward,” as Marx observed:

He ought to have put the question to himself in just the opposite way: How did it happen that in the United States, where, relatively, that is in comparison with civilized Europe, the land was accessible to the great mass of the people and to a certain degree (again relatively) still is, capitalist economy and the corresponding enslavement of the working class have developed more rapidly and shamelessly than in any other country! Letter from Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, June 21, 1881.  
*Additional text from Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Correspondence, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975;*

The documentary moves from George to another third-party movement, the People's Party (or the “Populist movement” of farmers), focusing on the role of Kansas agitator Mary Elizabeth Lease. The narrative then follows the Populists into their “fusion” with the Democratic Party and its 1896 presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan, who is presented as a tribune of workers and farmers, as opposed to the candidate of corporate America, Republican William McKinley.

The election was indeed historically significant. There is no doubt that the great capitalist interests coalesced around McKinley in 1896, with railway, factory, mine, and mill owners warning their workers of layoffs in the event of a Bryan administration, and, as the documentary portrays, investing millions of dollars in a Republican victory. Behind McKinley, American capitalism was preparing to project itself onto the world stage as an imperial power; it would do so shortly in the predatory Spanish-American War of 1898.

But in its laudatory sketch of Bryan, the documentary and the interviewed historians miss the fundamental political problem posed by his campaign. Bryan was never likely to win the presidency in 1896, following as he did a sitting Democrat, Grover Cleveland, who was widely hated for his indifference to working class suffering in what was called, until the calamity of the 1930s, “the Great Depression.” Workers also reviled Cleveland for arresting Coxey and for deploying the US Army against the Pullman Strike in Chicago in 1894 and imprisoning its leaders, including Eugene Debs, president of the American Railway Union.

But Bryan had a very specific role: to absorb and declaw the Populist movement by rhetorically usurping a small part of its platform—especially the demand for an inflationary policy of silver backing for the dollar—which he most famously did in his “Cross of Gold” speech to the 1896 Democratic Party Convention in Chicago.

Bryan was not trying to create a party of the working class, as historian H. W. Brands suggests in the documentary. Instead, he was giving the first presentation of the cynical role the Democratic Party would play throughout the twentieth century: to divert, absorb, and destroy any mass social movement that emerged outside the bounds of the two major parties. In other words, Bryan was doing to embattled farmers—with the most tragic and bloody consequences for African American sharecroppers in the South—what later Democrats would do the mass industrial union movement of the 1930s, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and

1960s, and the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

The politics of Bryan—who was aptly mocked as the Cowardly Lion in L. Frank Baum's 1901 political allegory, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—were one anticipation of the future. At the same time, another was emerging in a federal prison cell at Woodstock, Illinois. There Eugene Debs, jailed for his leadership of the Pullman Strike, began reading *Das Kapital* and the writings of German Marxist Karl Kautsky. Debs wrote of Pullman, and his time at Woodstock:

[T]he Pullman strike—and the American Railway Union again won, clear and complete. The combined corporations were paralyzed and helpless. At this juncture there were delivered, from wholly unexpected quarters, a swift succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes—and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed. This was my first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name. ...

The Chicago jail sentences were followed by six months at Woodstock and it was here that Socialism gradually laid hold of me in its own irresistible fashion. Books and pamphlets and letters from socialists came by every mail and I began to read and think and dissect the anatomy of the system in which workingmen, however organized, could be shattered and battered and splintered at a single stroke. *Selected from Eugene V. Debs, “How I Became a Socialist.” The Comrade, April 1902.*

The historical and political lessons that Debs and other drew from the shattering experiences of the decades following the Civil War are a closed book for *The Gilded Age*, which spends most of its time on the life and times of the tiny privileged layer at the top, while ignoring the deeper social processes that moved millions.



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