**Weekly #12: The Gilded Age**

The “Gilded Age” refers to the period following Reconstruction, when the American economy grew at its fastest rate in history.

The period in United States history following the Civil War and Reconstruction, lasting from the late 1860s to 1896, is referred to as the “Gilded Age.” This term was coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their book *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, published in 1873. The term refers to the gilding of a cheaper metal with a thin layer of gold. Many critics complained that the era was marked by bad manners, corruption, and poor ethics.

Historians view the Gilded Age as a period of rapid economic, technological, political, and social transformation. This transformation created a modern, national industrial society out of what had been small regional communities. By the end of the Gilded Age, the United States was at the top end of the world’s leading industrial nations. In the Progressive Era that followed the Gilded Age, the United States became a world power. Despite the successes, there were many negative impacts, including the destruction of the Plains Indians, hardening discrimination against African Americans, and environmental destruction.

**Economic and Political Innovations**

The Gilded Age saw **impressive economic growth and the expansion of major cities**. Chicago’s population increased tenfold from 1870 to 1900. Technological innovations of the time included the telephone, skyscraper, refrigerator, car, electric lightbulb, typewriter, and electric motor, as well as advances in steel production and many other industries. These inventions provided the bases for modern consumerism and industrialization.

During the 1870s and 1880s, the U.S. economy rose at the fastest rate in its history, with wealth increasing rapidly. By the beginning of the twentieth century (1900s), industrial production in the United States led the world. The businessmen of the Second Industrial Revolution created industrial towns and cities in the Northeast with new factories and hired an ethnically diverse group of workers, many of them new immigrants from Europe. The **corporation** became the dominant form of business.

The super-rich industrialists and financiers such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and Cornelius Vanderbilt were labeled as “**robber barons**” by the public, who felt they cheated to get their money and lorded it over the common people.

Their admirers argued that they were “**captains of industry**” who built the American economy and also gave money to **philanthropy (helping others)**. For instance, Andrew Carnegie donated more than 90 percent of his fortune and said that philanthropy was an upper-class duty—the “**Gospel of Wealth**.” Private money created thousands of colleges, hospitals, museums, academies, schools, opera houses, public libraries, and charities. John D. Rockefeller donated more than $500 million to various charities, slightly more than half his entire net worth. Nevertheless, many business leaders were influenced by Herbert Spencer ‘s theory of **Social Darwinism**, which justified ruthless competition.

Socially, the period was marked by large-scale immigration from Germany and Scandinavia to cities and to western farmlands. In terms of immigration, after 1880, the old immigration of Germans, British, Irish, and Scandinavians lessened. The United States was producing large numbers of new unskilled jobs every year, and to fill them came **new immigrants** from Italy, Poland, Austria, Hungary, Russia, Greece and other points in southern and central Europe, as well as from French Canada.

**End of the Gilded Age**

The end of the Gilded Age coincided with the Panic of 1893, a deep depression, which lasted until 1897 and marked a major political realignment in the election of 1896. This productive but divisive era was followed by the Progressive Era.

**Key Points**

* The period after Reconstruction, the last few decades of the nineteenth century, was known as the “Gilded Age,” a term coined by Mark Twain in 1873.
* The Gilded Age was a period of transformation in the economy, technology, government, and social customs of America.
* This transformation forged a modern, national industrial society that created large cities
* The wealth of the period is highlighted by the American upper class’s luxurious lifestyles, along with the rise of American philanthropy, which Andrew Carnegie referred to as the “Gospel of Wealth.”
* Many new corporations and businesses gave rise to ultra-rich individuals.
* During the Gilded Age, the wealthy provided private money to create thousands of colleges, hospitals, museums, academies, schools, opera houses, public libraries, symphony orchestras, and charities.
* This period also is referred to as the “nadir of American race relations,” a time when racism in the country is deemed to have been worse than in any other period after the American Civil War.

**Key Terms**

* **Robber baron**: Especially in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, a business tycoon who had great wealth and influence but whose methods were morally questionable.
* **Social Darwinism**: The application of “survival of the fittest” to society. Poor people are poor because they don’t work hard; rich people are rich because they’re smarter and more hard working
* **Philanthropy:** The belief that wealthy people should help society by creating social institutions (schools, libraries, museums, etc.)
* **Gospel of Wealth**: An article written by Andrew Carnegie that describes the responsibility of the new upper class of self-made rich to engage in philanthropy.
* **New Immigrants**: Immigrants that came to the USA from Eastern Europe

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**Directions:** Respond to the following questions in complete sentences (TTQA) after reading the provided summary of the Gilded Age. Your responses should be typed or written on a separate sheet of paper. Be sure to respond to EVERY part of each question.

* 1. When did the Gilded Age take place? What were the positive impacts of the Gilded Age? What were the negative impacts? Do you think the positive impacts or the negative impacts outweigh the other? Justify your response.
	2. What new technologies developed during the Gilded Age? Why do you think these were important for the economy?
	3. Why did some people feel people like Rockefeller and Carnegie were “robber barons?” Why did some people feel they were “captains of industry?” Which do you feel they were? (think about both the reading and what we’ve discussed in class)
	4. Describe philanthropy
	5. Who were “new immigrants?” Why did they come to the United States?