

Editor's Note – JGAPE 19.2

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“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.”

Or so Mark Twain is supposed to have said. And although there is no evidence that the great American humorist ever uttered these words, their truth is undeniable. Even a cursory glance at the newspaper today would reveal that we are awash in claims that history is rhyming, if not in fact repeating itself. The most prominent and, to the readers of this journal, the most relevant example of this temporal doggerel is that our current era is some kind of “Second Gilded Age.” These historical odes tend to be rooted in analyses of economic inequality or political corruption. But how apt is this prosaic and historic analogy? Does it reveal more than it obscures, or are pundits and journalists leading Americans astray with their beguiling paeans to a begone era? This special issue features a series of essays from leading scholars of the “First” Gilded Age to explore, as special guest editors Daniel Wortel-London and Boyd Cothran say, “The promises and perils of an analogy.”

This special issue began its life as a conference in April 2019 at The Gotham Center for New York City History. Organized by Cothran; Wortel-London; and the director of the Gotham Center, Peter-Christian Aigner, the full-day conference featured interdisciplinary panels of experts mostly from the New York City area debating the historical parallels, differences, and lessons to be drawn from comparing these two eras. While that conference focused on the economic and political parallels between the two eras, as well as efforts at reform and resistance, we wanted to expand the conversation for this special issue to bring in voices and perspectives that could not be included in the conference.

The results are the fourteen essays presented here. As is often the case when discussing such complex and thorny issues, there are many points of agreement, but the moments of disjuncture and disagreement are perhaps more revealing. And while there are few definitive conclusions or concrete policy proscriptions contained within these pages, we hope that the perspective these authors bring to the topic will spark many more conversations down the road as we all struggle to understand the very real challenges American society, and the world, face today.

In addition to the essays dedicated to the question of the Second Gilded Age, this issue opens and closes with two fantastic, and also very timely, contributions. We open with Kristin Hoganson’s presidential address, “Mind the GAPE: Globality and the Rural Midwest,” which uses Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign slogan “Make American Great Again” to explore the historical resonances and realities President Trump sought to tap into when he located a purported historical greatness in the American Heartland of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. And we conclude this special issue with an extended review essay of Richard White’s *The Republic for Which It Stands* by Rosanne Currarino, which surveys the recent crop of synthetic treatments of post-Civil War American history and argues that White’s magisterial opus is indeed “a history of the Gilded Age for our time,” warts, sarcasm, and all.

Cite this article: Genetin-Pilawa CJ (2020) Editor’s Note – JGAPE 19.2. *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19, 175–175. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781419000598>

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