



Politics as Social History: Political Cartoons in the Gilded Age

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Politics As Social History: Political Cartoons in the Gilded Age

The history of parties and elections has lately had a dull reputation. Lists of presidents and congressional leaders and analyses of shifting electoral majorities seem old-fashioned, far less fresh and exciting than the findings of social historians. The quantitative methods and numbing prose of some political historians haven't helped. Textbooks often separate politics and society into different sections, dutifully outlining events in Washington and then backtracking to cover the history of women, work, religion, literature, music, and everyday life. This approach marginalizes politics (as detached from real people's lives) and contradicts our own experience. Whenever we turn on the television, we see the connections of politics with religious practice, race relations, beliefs about gender and the family, and other aspects of our culture. How do we capture these connections when teaching about the past? How can we place politics *in* society, as a vital part of American life?

The problem is particularly acute in teaching the Gilded Age. The years 1870 to 1900 were sandwiched between the Civil War and the Progressive Era, two periods in which politics "really mattered." In contrast, the intervening decades seem to offer only lessons in disillusionment and cynicism. The end of Reconstruction left a sorry mess in the South; the Homestead Act and railroad grants culminated in a Western bust, followed by a massive depression in the 1890s that failed to evoke a New Deal. The Populist movement collapsed, and Republicans' crowning achievements were a high tariff and maintenance of the gold standard. The very name "Gilded Age" derives from Mark Twain's bitter satire on congressional corruption.

There are, however, other ways to teach Gilded-Age politics, perhaps even to recapture its excitement, while at the same time teaching social history. Political cartoons flourished in these years, partly because of new technologies of mass circulation but also

because of the intensity—even viciousness—of partisan debate. Such cartoons reflected the society that produced them, with references ranging from the Bible to the nationwide bicycle craze. They vividly represent the prejudices of the white, Protestant, middle-class majority, and of regional and partisan factions within that majority. The following analyses of four cartoons suggest approaches to Gilded-Age politics that reveal key issues at stake—issues of gender, religion, and ethnicity, as well as struggles over material resources in an increasingly stratified economy.

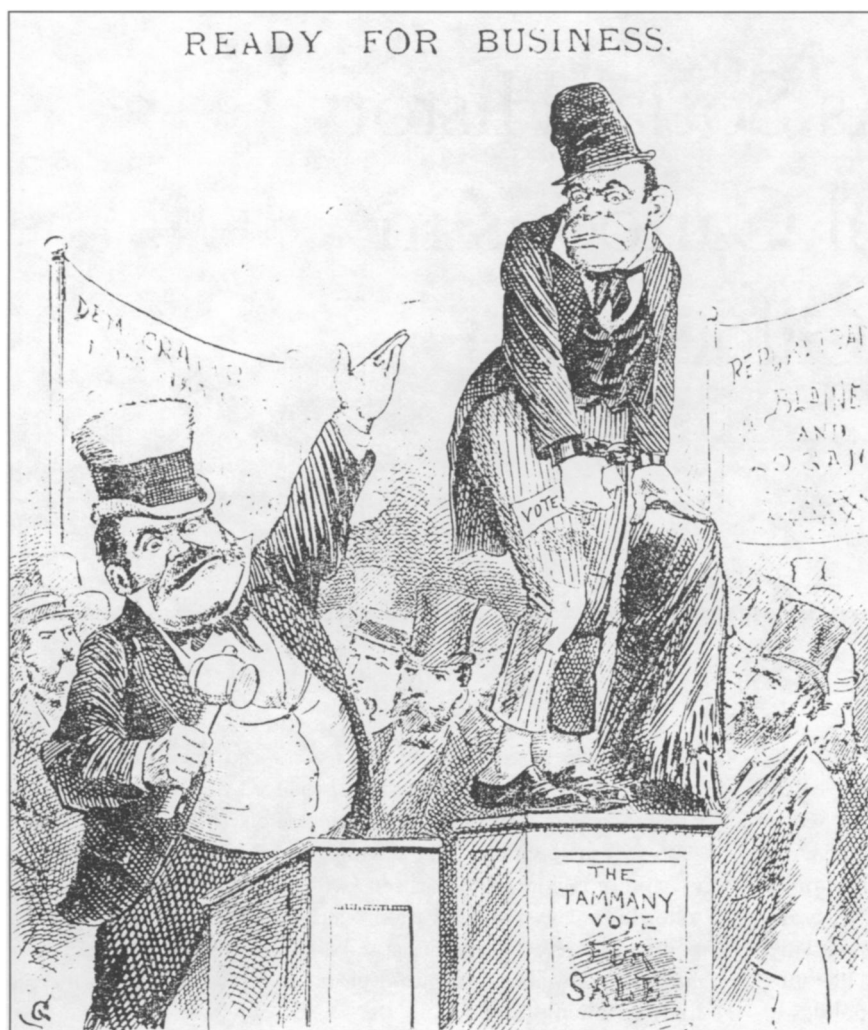
"Ready for Business: To Go to the Highest Bidder,"

Puck (23 July 1884); and

Frederick Burr Opper, "Gorilla Warfare Under the Protection of the American Flag," *Puck* (19 March 1884).

Historians such as David Roediger (*The Wages of Whiteness*) and Noel Ignatiev (*How the Irish Became White*) have recently explored the "whitening" of Irish immigrants in the United States: seeking Irish working-class votes, Democrats helped define the new immigrants as a white ethnic group rather than a race, in pointed contrast to the status of African Americans. "Ready for Business" and "Gorilla Warfare" suggest the limits of this process. In the postbellum era, images of ape-like Irish people continued to circulate, even in Democratic-leaning journals such as *Puck*. Many native-born Protestants still viewed the Irish as ignorant aliens, easily corrupted, subservient to illegitimate authority (that is, the Pope), and subversive of democracy. Such anxieties were strongest in cities such as New York, where Tammany Hall provided potent leadership for large blocs of immigrant voters.

The references to slavery in "Ready for Business" are intriguing. The equation of a New York Irish ward voter with a slave on the



"Ready for Business: To Go To the Highest Bidder." (*Puck*, 23 July 1884.)

auction block harks back to Civil War denunciations of the evils of slavery. This cartoon appeared, however, at a time when war issues were fading and Northerners were beginning to accept Southern Democrats' claim that blacks were a lower class and race, too ignorant and dependent to deserve the vote. "Ready for Business" echoes both the racial antagonism and the patronizing attitude inherent in such a view of blacks, directing them instead at the Irish man on the block. He is shackled and helpless, suggesting that not he but the boss (fulfilling the role of the slave dealer in anti-Southern cartoons) is the one to blame. The Irish man's ape-like face and dull expression, however, show that his own "unfitness" is a large part of the alleged problem.

"Ready for Business" also reflects the circumstances of the presidential election of 1884. James G. Blaine, the Republican nominee and son of a Catholic mother, sought Irish votes more aggressively than had earlier Republican candidates. In addition,

leaders of Tammany Hall had frequently butted heads with New York Governor Grover Cleveland, who was the Democrats' presidential nominee. National political leaders and commentators were uncertain whom Tammany would support, and how enthusiastically they would do so, adding to anxieties about the potential influence of Irish votes.

The racial implications of "Ready for Business" are even clearer in "Gorilla Warfare," which uses simian feet and a prehensile tail in a nasty attack on Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. O'Donovan Rossa, one of the most radical leaders of the Fenian movement, had been released from prison by British authorities in 1871 on the condition that he leave Ireland. He emigrated to New York where he edited the *United Irishman*. A prominent advocate of violent resistance to British rule, he helped raise funds for various revolutionary organizations in Ireland.

Opper's caricature opens several avenues for classroom lecture and discussion, especially on the social construction of racial categories. Today no one considers Irish Americans a separate race, but to many nineteenth-century Americans the Irish appeared to have distinctive physical features. The Anglo-Irish gentry were exempted from such characterizations of the Irish Catholic poor. Conceptions about the Irish "race" were thus influenced by class and religious differences. In this case, the stereotype is specifically used to discredit revolutionaries. More conservative Irish leaders sometimes received flattering portraits in the pages of American magazines.

Puck's depiction of O'Donovan Rossa might lead to a discussion of the impact of Darwinism, but it should be noted that depictions of "ape-like" lower races preceded popular debate on the theory of evolution. Middle- and upper-class Americans were, in part, appalled by the idea that they had descended from "lower" primates because of such longstanding associations. Nonetheless, one can read Opper's caricature as placing O'Donovan Rossa (and by extension all Irish radicals) low on an evolutionary scale.

The viciousness of *Puck's* attack could also lead to a comparison with politics today. Are such attacks accepted now on any "race," religion, or ethnic group? If so, upon whom and under what circumstances? Students might, for example, look at a cross-section of U.S. cartoons depicting Saddam Hussein, especially during the Gulf War. Is the idea of "race" still changing, as in debates over the formulation of racial categories for the 2000 census? Students might also compare "Ready for Business" and "Gorilla Warfare" with Gilded-Age cartoons denigrating African Americans, American Indians, or Jews, in order to consider the racial, ethnic, class, and religious sources of prejudice.

Samuel Ehrhart, "Political Leap-Year—An Attack on the Workingman," *Puck* (26 September 1888).

Based on the leap year tradition of Sadie Hawkins Day, which traditionally permitted a reversal of men's and women's gender roles, this cartoon is an entry point for discussion of both sexual mores and the tariff. The "war widow tariff," as *Puck* calls it here, had been passed by a Republican-majority Congress during the years when the South had withdrawn into the Confederacy. The U.S. charged high import duties on textiles, tin, rubber, sugar, and other products from abroad in order to give an advantage to American industries. High tariffs benefitted manufacturers and were resented by many farmers and laborers, especially those who believed the tariff did not protect their own jobs. Democrats argued, with some justification, that high tariffs allowed U.S. manufacturers to raise prices in the absence of competition from overseas. This was detrimental to consumers, and the benefits to U.S. industry were not always passed on to ordinary working families, as Republicans claimed.

In *Puck's* cartoon, the "tariff reform store" promises fairer prices on clothing if tariffs are lowered. The representative of this reform is a demure young woman who wears a crown, designating her queen of the home. In contrast, the "Widow War Tariff" is older,

unattractive, and has been previously married, as evidenced by the row of chubby boys—her children—who represent influential industrialists lobbying for continued tariff protection.

The gender implications of these caricatures, which implicitly condemn the aggressive woman on the street, are complicated by subtle indicators of class difference. The widow (a stand-in for the Republican party) is dressed more richly than the domestic figure on the doorstep. She also carries a purse full of cash, suggesting that her pursuit of the workingman is based on insatiable avarice. Perhaps the laborer is tempted to throw in his lot with an allegedly wealthy woman; but the look on this man's face as he drops his lunchpail reflects *Puck's* conviction that he will choose tariff reform. When Sadie Hawkins Day is over the workingman will go back to the modest "Miss" who exhibits proper feminine behavior. She may not appear to be as rich, but she is a sensible housekeeper—an appropriate model for the nation's "domestic" policies.

**Herbert George, "The Mashers Called Down,"
Denver New Road (2 July 1892).**

"The Mashers Called Down" offers a counterpoint to "Political Leap-Year," above. Both cartoonists equate political and sexual danger, but in this Populist example the victims are women. Manly "Omaha" represents the convention of the People's Party that met during the week the cartoon appeared. The convention nominated James Baird Weaver for president and adopted the famous Omaha platform, advocating aid to farmers, national ownership of transportation and communication systems, federal coinage of silver, and other measures of economic reform.

Chicago and Minneapolis appear here as "mashers," contemporary slang for men who made unwelcome advances on virtuous maids. They were venues for the 1892 national conventions of, respectively, the Democratic and Republican parties, who had recently nominated Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison for the presidency. Harrison wears an oversized top hat, symbolic of his failure to measure up to the stature of his grandfather, William Henry Harrison. Cleveland is grossly rotund. Chicago and Minneapolis may represent not only the major parties, but in a broader sense the urban economic players—grain-elevator operators, bankers, and middlemen—who bought western products and sent them on to eastern and world markets.

Herbert George, who edited the *Populist New Road*, shows conflicting regional interests through class and gender imagery. Cleveland and Harrison are prosperous "dudes" dressed in fashionable (if slightly ludicrous)



"Gorilla Warfare Under the Protection of the American Flag," by Frederick Burr Opper. (*Puck*, 19 March 1884.)

outfits. The mashers' potential targets—West, South, and Silver—appear in classical garb, perhaps in an implied reference to Botticelli's *Three Graces*. These figures offer a contrast to the women in "Political Leap-Year," dressed in contemporary style. By placing the West, the South, and Silver in a distant historical era, George renders them more symbolic, their virtues perhaps purer and more universal—and makes the idea of their rough treatment at the hands of the "dudes" more shocking.

The women need Omaha's masculine protection: despite the activities of Populist women as stump speakers, organizers, and convention delegates, most Populist men felt the need to stress their own role as protectors of home and family. Male Populist cartoonists often, as here, depicted women as pitiful victims of the Eastern "money power." Omaha wears the hat, boots, and workshirt of the Western farmer. He may also represent the mining industry, which was central to Denver's prosperity and provided strong backing for the cause of silver coinage. If so, Omaha is a modest claim-staker rather than one of the captains of finance who were making huge fortunes in corporate mining operations.

"The Mashers Called Down" makes a lively starting point for a discussion of the Populist agenda and the election of 1892. What platforms were adopted in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Omaha? On what points did they differ or agree? How did Populists propose to "protect" themselves? Why did many farmers and miners believe they shared common interests? Why were those interests cast in regional terms, despite the large numbers of farmers and miners who lived in, for example, Pennsylvania?

In history textbooks, cartoons often appear as simple illustrations, with a one-sentence caption identifying the politician who is caricatured or the cartoonist's party affiliation. In-depth readings of cartoons can offer much more. At best, a series of cartoons can help students look through the eyes of past Americans, capturing the beliefs, priorities, prejudices, and even the slang of another era. In the classroom, I have presented cartoons as slides and printed handouts. They make an excellent break in the middle of a lecture, and a fun starting point for discussions or accompaniments for primary readings (such as the Omaha platform or an anti-Tammany speech). To start off I usually present the image, read the caption, and ask students to explain the issue at stake, the cartoonist's point of view, and the probable audience(s). This approach

seems to spark interest in issues like the tariff that might otherwise provoke yawns. The rawness of nineteenth-century prejudices is captured more brutally in one cartoon than in an hour of explanation. Discussion of a particularly complicated image (like "Political Leap-Year") is often lengthy and offers students new ideas for research papers and independent reading. Cartoons reveal the high stakes that made politics so central to American life in the Gilded Age, persuading millions of Americans to mobilize in high-turnout, bitterly contested elections. The immediacy of these images can engage today's students, too, in these past struggles. □

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"The Mashers Called Down. Omaha 'Say! Look here, You pie-faced dudes, Stop where you are! You have followed these poor unfortunates and insulted them long enough. Now run along, little boys, and attend to your own business—for I propose to protect them hereafter.'" (*Denver New Road*, 2 July 1892.)

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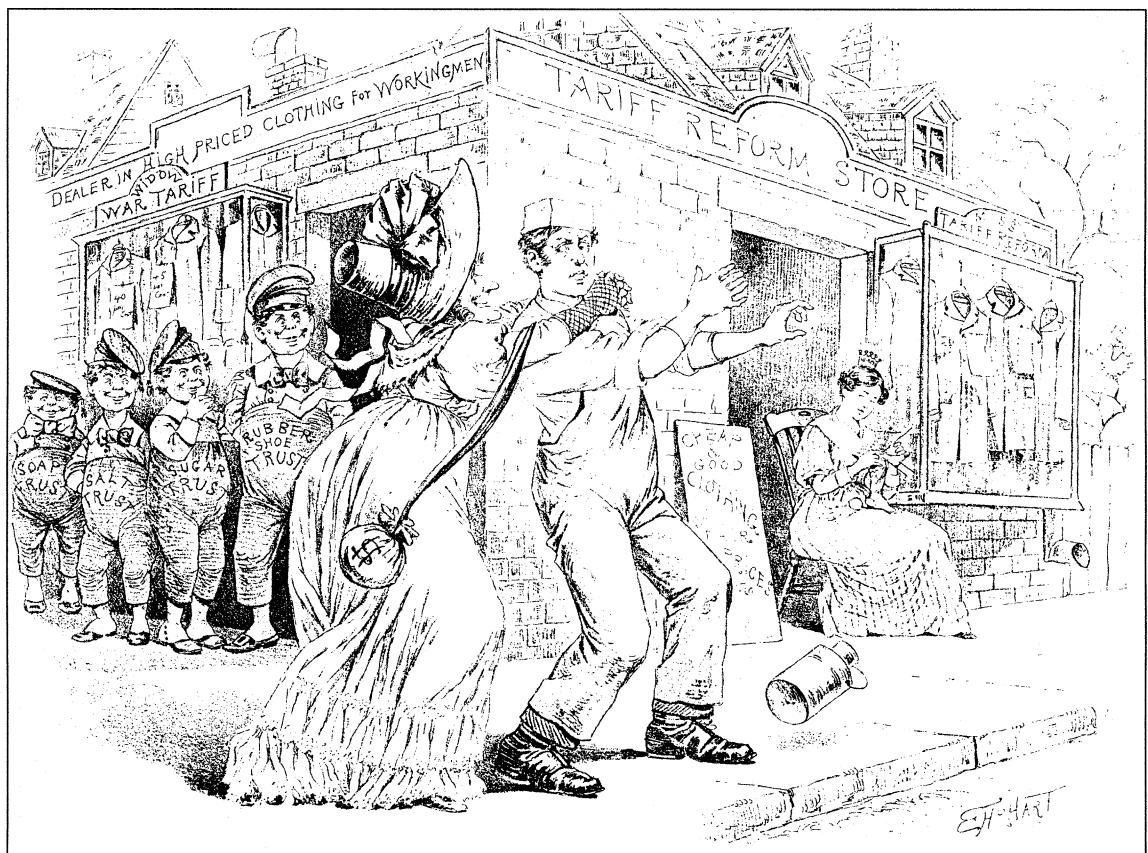
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"Political Leap-Year: An Attack on the Workingman. But he had better look out, for she is a clinger, and she has a large and growing family to support. What's the matter with the little girl around the corner?" by Samuel Ehrhart. (*Puck*, 26 September 1884.)

small-town papers employed an artist or reprinted cartoons by agreement with larger journals.

Cartoons were a measure of a newspaper's financial success and, indirectly, the size and prosperity of its audience. They therefore tend to represent mainstream and conservative viewpoints. Cartoons exist from the African-American, Populist, Socialist, and foreign-language press, but they require a search. City and state historical societies may hold sources of this kind, and an increasing variety of cartoons can be found on the World Wide Web. Ohio State University, for example, has posted a series of color cartoons from the Chicago-based Social Gospel magazine *The Ram's Horn*. The same site contains a series of cartoons from the *Verdict* and cartoons and primary documents on William McKinley. This site is located at <http://www.history.ohio-state.edu/projects/USCartoons/SpecCollCartoons.htm>.

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