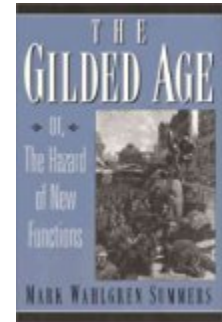


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Wahlgren Summers. *The Gilded Age: Or, The Hazard of New Functions*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997. xv + 336 pp. \$27.80 (paper), ISBN 978-0-13-576679-8.

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## The Age of Energy?

Over the past fifteen years, Professor Summers has become one of the leading historians of nineteenth-century politics. His books on what was once commonly called “the middle period” have focused on aid to railroads in the postwar South, Civil War causation, the failure of Reconstruction, and the rise of the independent press. An abiding interest in corruption has underlaid each of Summers’ subjects. In his introduction to *The Plundering Generation*, an homage to Randall and the reigning heir in antebellum historiography to Nichols’ *Disruption of American Democracy*, Summers explained his deep-seated concern best when he declared corruption “more than a sideshow.”[1] What better match of historian and subject, then, if Summers were to tackle the Gilded Age, a period named after a best-seller satirizing corruption in the 1870s?

Against the backdrop of its distinguished namesake, it is fair to say that Summers’ textbook is no “tale of today,” though it shares part of a title and does approach its predecessor literally and figuratively. The undergraduates for whom it is intended will undoubtedly discover much of relevance to contemporary Americans. Sure to be as entertaining for students is Summers’ oft-breezy, ever-telling prose. One example need suffice: In describing the Compromise of 1877, Summers caustically notes that “Democrats were properly enraged. Having cheated, frightened, and ‘bull-dozed’ Republicans’ natural majority away from the polls in most Southern states, they now lost a ‘reform’ victory they had stolen fair and square” (pp. 35-36). Mark Twain (or, for that matter, Charles Dudley Warner) could not have said it better.

Ostensibly linking the twenty chapters in Summers’ book is his thesis that the Gilded Age in reality was an “Age of Energy” (p. xv). Summers characteristically does not browbeat readers with his contentions, although support for his view can be found throughout the text; instead, he allows the reader to marshal evidence from the wealth of detail included. In its most literal sense, Summers’ cognomen, while not original, is appropriate.[2] The development and importance of the oil industry—the creation of Standard Oil and all that the Rockefeller fortune represented in terms of economic growth, scientific management, horizontal integration, conspicuous consumption, and philanthropy—is well restated here. But Summers’ term becomes more useful in its figurative, or more symbolic sense. How else to adequately describe an era during which “Buffalo Bill” Cody killed 4280 bison in one year (p. 56), one black Southern farmer in five gained ownership of land (p. 46), and America had its first “Billion-Dollar Congress” (p. 214)?

To illuminate the details of this Age of Energy, Summers’ fuel of choice is the paradox. Several paradoxical themes—in particular what Summers calls “the conservatism of thought and the radicalism of technological change” that characterized the period—are developed throughout the text (p. xv). Moreover, within most chapters, Summers poses evidence for and against conventional interpretations of the Gilded Age. Thus, for example, in “Main Line to *E Pluribus Unum*,” Summers weighs the intrigues of the Credit Mobilier’s directors against the achievements of the transcontinental railroad’s builders, the Union Pacific’s Irish and the Central Pacific’s Chi-

nese laborers (pp. 77-79). Summers pits favorable views of certain aspects of the Gilded Age against unfavorable views of others within the book's five sections to boot. Consequently, on those occasions when his heart is not in one side of his argument, as in his negative take on Social Darwinism in his chapter entitled "Opportunity?," Summers counterbalances such positions with positive ones—in this case, with "Salvation Armies: Self-Help and Virtue's Legions," a chapter on the era's many reform movements.

Not unlike Zeno, Summers finds a surprising number of commonalities flowing from his juxtapositions. For example, in a chapter entitled "Anarchy with Police," the author links Haymarket Square, Western gunfighters, urban crime, divorce laws, and Southern lynching in an innovative essay on the prevalence of violence in the Gilded Age. Likewise, in part of another chapter, Summers explores the relationship between the decline in voter turnout, reforms in election laws, including the widespread adoption of the Australian ballot, and the rise of organized sports (pp. 259-62). No doubt such illuminations will enlighten his target audience.

Throughout the text, students will also find a steady diet of politics served with the author's food-for-thought paradoxes. As Summers states, his hope is "that this story will restore politics in its larger sense to its rightful place, as the shaping force on people's lives" (p. xv). This approach works on multiple levels. For faculty who have little interest in emphasizing politics in their classes, use of Summers' text will allow instructors to feel as if they have presented their students with a full discussion of the period. On the other hand, faculty who do emphasize politics need not fear that the author leaves little room for further discussion. In his description of Populism, for example, Summers sidesteps questions of shadow movements and claims of regional preeminence in "Vox Pop"

and "Cross of Gold," his chapters on the subject, in favor of pointing out what is often overlooked in such debates—that the Democracy was more than flexible enough to outmaneuver and outpoll the People's party (pp. 256-58).

Summers' phraseology will not gain the currency of Twain and Warner's appellation, but it should catch on like Ginger's *Age of Excess*, a book (and title) that separates from *The Gilded Age's* in tone and spirit. Unlike Ginger, Summers does not let the era's endemic corruption—corruption that did not weaken faith in popular government to the degree rot in the body politic did prior to the Civil War or thereafter during Reconstruction—override due respect for the period. As he notes in his introduction, "It is not with contempt or in criticism alone, but also with admiration, that historians should approach the Age of Energy" (p. xv). In this final sense, *The Gilded Age: or, The Hazard of New Functions* fits with the author's studies on Southern railroads and the press corps, in which achievement was valued as often as failure was emphasized. Against this backdrop of fine scholarship, historians as well as students will find much of worth in Summers' text.

Notes:

[1]. Mark W. Summers, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, xiii.

[2]. Those looking for a disquisition on the intellectual underpinnings of this catch-phrase must go to Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915*, New York: Viking Press, 1971.

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