H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Rees. *Industrialization and the Transformation of American Life: A Brief Introduction.* Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2013. xi + 139 pp. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-2255-6; $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-2256-3.

Reviewed by Robert C. Chidester (The Mannik & Smith Group, Inc.)
Published on H-SHGAPE (October, 2013)
Commissioned by Julia Irwin

Reframing the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in the U.S. History Survey

With *Industrialization and the Transformation of American Life*, Jonathan Rees aims to promote a particular approach to the teaching of what is commonly called the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (GAPE) in undergraduate U.S. history survey courses. His approach is defined by two key elements: first, the belief that nearly everything about U.S. history from the 1870s to the 1920s can be explained by reference to large-scale industrialization; and second, that this time period is best approached topically rather than chronologically. Rees's primer for undergraduates is, as the subtitle indicates, brief indeed–an introduction, nine chapters, and an epilogue spanning a mere 128 pages. Nevertheless, in this short introduction to the GAPE, Rees has succeeded in producing a highly engaging account of this period of U.S. history that most modern undergraduates should be able to understand.

All nine of the primary chapters of Rees's book are organized in a similar fashion, beginning with a simple, one-sentence question such as, "How and why did industrialization affect industries differently?" or, "How could manufacturers dispose of their surplus product?" These sometimes deceptively simple questions are used to frame the subsequent discussion of individual topics: varieties of industrialization, labor and the working class, immigration, urbanization, the West, the environmental consequences of industrialization, the development of a national transportation infrastructure, the politics of industrialization, and reform movements such as temperance and Progressivism. While there is some clear overlap between and among several of these topics (for instance, labor, immigration and urbanization, or politics and reform movements), Rees generally steers clear of explicitly discussing these areas of overlap in favor of tying all of the individual topics back to industrialization.

Following two- to three-page introductions to each broad topic that expand on the initial question, Rees explores each of his nine selected topics with three specific examples meant to illustrate the pervasive influence of industrialization. For example, chapter 1, on the varieties of industrialization, includes detailed discussions of the Edgar Thomson Works of the Carnegie Steel Company (illustrating industrialization through mechanization), the Triangle Shirtwaist Company (illustrating industrialization through the division of labor), and the Washburn "A" Flour Mill of Minneapolis (illustrating industrialization through both mechanization and the division of labor). While some of Rees's examples are well-known staples of the U.S. history survey course (e.g., the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the development of railroads, Populism, etc.), others are less common (e.g., the Dillingham Commission, mechanical and engineering innovations leading to the development of skyscrapers, the destruction of the Longleaf Pine by the naval stores industry, etc.).

Rees's prose is fluid and the repetitive internal organization of the chapters will be useful for undergraduate students being exposed to serious history for possibly the first time. Illustrations, while limited to one or two per chapter, are used well to reinforce ideas presented in the text. Rees also successfully avoids taking sides on politically tinged issues such as the labor movement, an effort that some teachers and students will find admirable but that others may occasionally find grating.

Despite his stated desire to explain the entire GAPE by reference to industrialization, professional historians will find several important topics to be sorely underrepresented or even missing entirely from Rees's account of the period. Among such topics are the women's suffrage movement (despite his discussion of women's rights in relation to the temperance movement), the rise of Jim Crow, Native Americans, and U.S. imperialism. Scholars will also find that while Rees does not ignore the importance of chronology altogether, he does not appear

to afford it much explanatory power (at least, within the temporal boundaries of the subject period).

Rees (or his editor[s]) opts for the use of chapter endnotes rather than footnotes, a decision that enhances the visual continuity of the text. However, some teachers may find the rather sparse endnotes a hindrance to teaching undergraduates about the importance of citation and attribution. Rees does not follow the modern trend of using primary source materials as a hook to get students interested in historical "detective work"–the majority of the endnotes reference secondary materials. Furthermore, the one-and-a-half-page selected bibliography following the epilogue includes just a single primary source.

Despite these drawbacks, Rees has written a thoroughly readable and persuasive account of the role of industrialization in shaping the modern United States. Teachers of the undergraduate U.S. history survey course will find *Industrialization and the Transformation of American Life* to be a very useful supplement to other texts, and faculty teaching other U.S. history courses will find many valuable historical case studies as well.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Robert C. Chidester. Review of Rees, Jonathan, *Industrialization and the Transformation of American Life: A Brief Introduction.* H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37630

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.