

Industry, Immigrants, and Cities: Industrial Statesmen or Robber Barons?

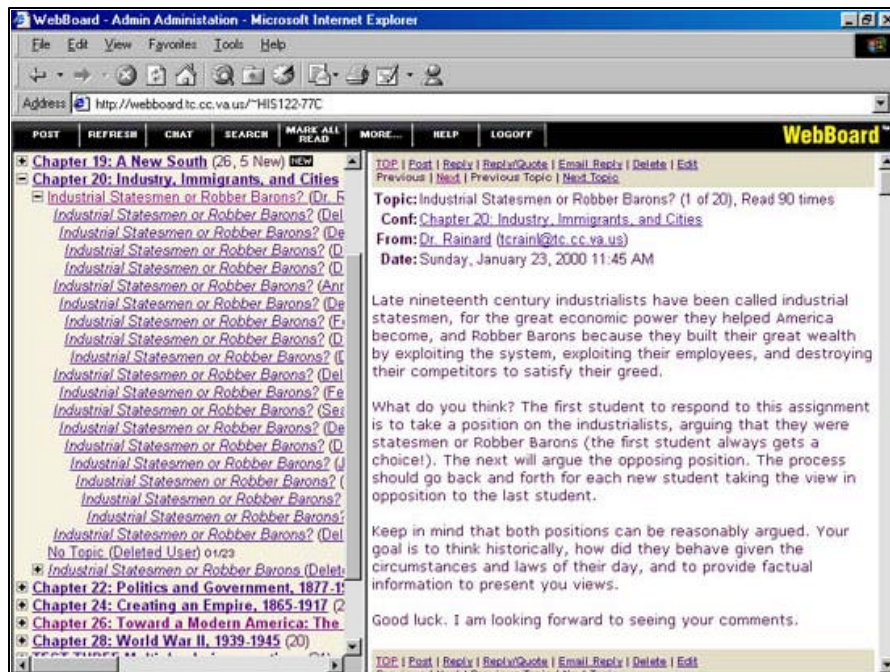
American History 2, L. Rainard, TCC, January 2000 Webboard

From Professor Rainard

Late nineteenth century industrialists have been called industrial statesmen, for the great economic power they helped America become, and Robber Barons because they built their great wealth by exploiting the system, exploiting their employees, and destroying their competitors to satisfy their greed.

What do you think? The first student to respond to this assignment is to take a position on the industrialists, arguing that they were statesmen or Robber Barons (the first student always gets a choice!). The next will argue the opposing position. The process should go back and forth for each new student taking the view in opposition to the last student.

Keep in mind that both positions can be reasonably argued. Your goal is to think historically, how did they behave given the circumstances and laws of their day, and to provide factual information to present you views. Good luck. I am looking forward to seeing your comments.



Selected Student Responses

Hello all. I am responding to Caren. I will take the Robber Barron's position, as she took the statesmen position. I completely feel that the great "statesmen" abused their power. They knew that the skilled and unskilled workers that ran the factories had to work in order to survive. But, they also knew that they could get off cheap and pay them basically pennies because the workers had to work and would work for whatever pay they received. Because of this, every member of the family had to work long, hard, sometimes fatal number of hours just to pay rent, and put food on the table. To make matters worse, these same "statesmen" who had community housing that they rented to their workers close to their factories, charged a high rent in proportion to their low wages. This was true exploitation of the workers, as well as blatant greed on the part of these industrialists.

Whenever it appeared that another factory would become successful or even attempt to possibly sway workers, the incumbent industrialists would find any way, using money, power, law, or force, to crush the competition in order that they can remain strong and wealthy. By paying off the necessary political parties, the industrialists were able to have laws created and passed and enforced that were favorable to their needs, regardless of who it might hurt in the long run. Although the industrialists helped American become a great economic power, the

sacrificed morals, as well as people, in order to achieve their wealth. These industrialists did not concern themselves with hoping to create American economic power, but with their own greed and position.

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I am replying to Margo, which is hard because, this is not my belief. As an Industrial Statesmen, I resent being accused of abusing power. I was not always wealthy, I worked hard to get where I am and no one handed success to me on a silver platter. It's not my fault that all of these immigrants came over and pushed the skilled workers out of their jobs. They worked for pennies, what would you do, pay more for skill, or less for the brainless work of manufacturing. It doesn't take a lot of sense to do this job, you don't even have to speak the same language. I believe that you are just resentful that we industrial statesmen invented the term "work smarter not harder". Would you have done it any differently. Success was ripe for picking in this country and we were there to grab it. You can blame Ellis Island for any of the crimes that you accuse me of, they opened the flood gates. If it hadn't of been us , it would have been someone else, we just took advantage of a good thing. Where would you be without us? This country would not be the great power that it is today if not for us. Would you rather be down on the farm, working your fingers to the bone to sell a few crops, or making a piece of furniture by hand to sell for a few cents, that's ridiculous, you should be thankful for the industrial statesmen that we were! Again, we made this great country what it is today, enjoy!

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I am responding to Teresa. I will take the Robber Barron's position, as she took the statesman position....please be reminded that these are NOT my views. "Survival of the Fittest"...that is the name of the game. I am proud to be in the company of men like J.P Morgan, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. Their drive, determination and competitive spirt help make this nation what it is today. Please understand that the rational behind modern capitalism rest squarely on the ideology of individualism. This new capitalist industry of ours is not reducing opportunities for advancments, it is expanding them. It is providing every able bodied individual with a chance to succeed and attain great wealth. Such wealth and power can only be achieved through hard work, acquisitiveness, competition and thriftiness - the traditional virtues of Protestant America. Those who succeed, deserve their success, and those who fail owe their failure to their own laziness, stupidity or carelessness. I will end with this quote form a prominent Protestant minister "let us remember...that there is not a poor person in the United States of America who was not made poor by his own shortcoming"

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As a widowed working mother, I deeply resent the implication that "there is not a poor person in the United States of America who was not made poor by his own shortcoming." When my parents brought me and my brother over from Europe, they believed America to be a land of opportunity, a place where we would not be oppressed and taken advantage of. My parents worked hard and so did my late husband. He was supporting us when he was killed at the steel plant. Why was he killed? Because of the Robber Baron boss who let his employees labor day after day, hour after hour, in an environment that was not safe. After his death, I was forced to find a job to support my small children. I found a job in the textile industry but I only make a fourth of what my male counterpart makes. Is this fair? Of course not but some Robber Baron continues to oppress others for his own gain. My poor children may soon have to work because I am struggling to pay the rent. Our rent is very high and is controlled by another Robber Baron. I am sure he realizes that I barely make enough to pay the rent but he has no mercy. The federal government says a family needs \$15 dollars a week to survive. If only I made even \$14! I dread the day my children have to go work in some sweatshop. They are likely to face the same fate as their father, slaughtered by a Robber Baron who doesn't care about our welfare and only wants to make as much money as he can. I suppose, while I may not be wealthy, at least I can live with a clean conscience that I have not gotten my wealth by exploiting others and am not fueled by greed.

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Since Jon took the view of both sides, does that mean I can pick which side to respond too?? If so I pick Robber Barons! The corporations did absolutely nothing with their fortunes to improve working conditions for their employees. The Immigrants who came looking for jobs were immediately deskilled into thoughtless repetitive jobs such as coal mining, canning, sewing. Death rates were high with on-the-job accidents, there was no "quality improvements". It was pure monarchy! Any man with a skill who attempted to open their own business was immediately squashed by the surrounding corporations. The hours were endless, the pay as low as could get away with, and the workers worked 6 days a week. Because families were so poor,

their children were forced to work alongside their parents under these same poor work conditions. Did these people have any restitution? No! Going on strike was useless, quitting meant starving. The corporations had control with money, support from each other, and political backing. As Immigrants, what option did they have? Not much!

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Jon,
Good job. Not only did you not have to "take sides" but you allowed someone to choose who they wanted to be. (Smile) Anyway, I happen to agree with you, they should be considered a combination of both. Once again, you have hit on an area that I had not thought about. Did you already take this course, or are you just a history Genius???(Smile)

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EDITORIAL to the Chicago Tribune on 28 January, 1898, in response to editorial of Saturday Last by Dr. Samuel Alger, sociologist and lecturer, condemning the so called "Baron Robbers" of Modern Industry)

I recently had Privilege to read a most interesting work - the views and suppositions of a man of my father's generation, a Mr. Charles Darwin. Although I cannot subscribe to his implications negating the accuracy of the Bible, I certainly can state with all conviction that his theories of "natural selection" and "survival of the fittest" are entirely on the mark, and directly Relevant, in contradiction to Mr. Alger's pathetic whinings about fairness and social injustice! God bless Mr. Darwin for having had the courage to come right out and state in bold print what we "winners" in society have known all along - that a man gets exactly what he gives, and that success in life comes from the fortitude it takes to climb over the man in front of you sitting on the fence!

Make no mistake about my sentiments...I would say not one disparaging word about the lower class blue collar worker, who struggles from pay check to pay check, hand to mouth, to feed his family. Poverty, in and of itself, is not a failing...it may only be a stepping stone to riches - "dues" that must be paid, if you will. But the man who would cry pitifully for his inability to get ahead...who gives up and gives in, in favor of fruitless fist-shaking at his betters and wallowing in self pity at his inability to rise above his station...that man is no more than a coward and an animal, and all the Sam Alger's in the world cannot convince me otherwise!

I worked, scraped and fought for where I am today...I earned every piece of silver in my dining room, built every factory I own from the ground up with sweat, cunning, planning and strain. It took a lifetime for me to become what I am...did others pay for my success? I should hope so! What good would victory be, without winners to best the losers?! My father did not give up all that he knew to bring me to this "land of opportunity" so that I could content myself with mediocrity. He gave his life so that I might have this chance, and he would be filled with pride, should he know all that I have become because I honored his sacrifice!

Mr. Alger, to you, who would begrudge my fortune and wealth, who would make up for his own shortcomings by lodging "sour grapes" complaints of "not fair!"...to you, sir, who would take everything from me in favor of dividing my hard-earned wealth evenly among all, as if reward were merely butter to be spread thin over the loaf (and I use that word intentionally) of society...I say "Study your Darwin, sir!". Study it well, for what is true of the beasts in the wild is true for we more civilized animals...those who cannot compete are destined to be only prey for those of us who have the will to prevail!

Sincerely,

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Nice job Carol!

We sure have some creative people in our class! and I am not one of them! I have enjoyed everyone's views so far...

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In response to the industrialist, Mr. Roschen, I write to you today in outrage to the hypocrisy of Mr. Roschen opinions. The monopoly which has been formed by the Rockefellers, Morgans, Dukes, Roschens and other such industrialists has limited the economic and social development of our great nation. Within each of their industries, their corporations have merged and taken over all of their competitors. They do not value their

workers and only look at their profit margins. These "robber barons" have used and abused women and children in their factories. They require all workers to work far too many hours and do not compensate them properly for their time.

These men agreeing with the ideas of Mr. Charles Darwin as to survival of the fittest. They look at this as justification for their terrible treatment of the poor workers in their factories. These men also have the government in their pocket and when any laborers in our country organize to oppose them, they get the President to send in federal troops to support their ideals. They have also taken advantage of the immigrants coming into our country now seeking the American dream. They take advantage of these immigrants and give them jobs belonging to our current workers.

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Why you poor pathetic ingrates! I provide you with work so you can support your families! After the war you people had nothing. Your farms, commerce, and current way of life have proved failing! I brought trains to your backyards, plants to your cities, and food to your tables. If it were not for me you would be starving. My ideas and struggles to the top of this heap have brought commerce to our country! People like me have turned our nation into a great power of which the world has never seen! Why just look, other countries are turning to us for leadership and ideas. We are no longer the followers, but the leaders! Stop your whining and get back to work!
Wylee

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You call us pathetic ingrates, why without out our hard work you would have nothing. I work from sun up to sun down. Ten hours a day, six days a week. I barely have time to eat and sleep just to keep money coming your way. I not saying I don't appreciate the new ideas and technologies but I feel worthless. When will it be our turn to reap the rewards of all this hard work. My family is barely surviving including myself. It is time us workers get some recognition or just appreciation for all that we do!!!

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You might provided us with jobs by increasing industries but look at our working conditions and salaries. Who can live off of this salary. You pay the workers less as possible per week. We are the ones helping you and your industries to grow. You pull a strong man down by working him far too many hours a day. You also abuse our women and children by working them in small cramped, poorly ventilated places in order for us to try to make ends meet and you are saying, "You are helping us". Well let start with this question. Have you Corporation ever put profit back to improve the working conditions for your employees? No. You never think about the people that are killed or accidently maimed working at your company. Nor did you think of the people that have lost fingers working at your company in unsuitable conditions. I dare you, paying women less money when they are doing the same jobs as a man. All you think about is your profit and getting ahead. You say "Let the poor stay poor and the rich get richer".

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We the Industrial Statesmen salute you. You are free to go and choose as you please. I have provided you with means to live and I have built homes and communities in which you live. Look I don't live in excess, I give to support the finer things in life, those things which enrich your lives, learning, reading, the natural parks and the recreation that enriches your lives. How can you say I rob you? I give you all that I don't use. My trips are for your Benefit. They increase my success and bring you more prosperity. Do you think I only work on prosperity when I am in the office? I work on contacts and community and political issues that enhance your employment opportunities.

Yours in Cooperation,
Andrea Aumick

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As a young single women with siblings to feed. I am forced into prostitution. If this is the way Industrial Statesmen want to play their game, then I say bring it on! I will make more money one way or the other. So, how's that for "Survival of the Fittest"!!