



November 15, 2024

Dear Colleagues,

We are delighted to introduce you to the 2025 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Institute on “Rethinking the Gilded Age and Progressivisms: Race, Capitalism, and Democracy, 1877 to 1920.”

Set in one of the most important locations for Gilded Age social conflict and Progressive Era reform, our institute will provide a forum for teachers to explore the most recent thinking about (which involves a profound rethinking of) the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Our historiographical reflections will take place in the context of a seminar that will be rich in the humanities generally, with significant exploration of art, architecture, music, film, and literature.

Intriguing and important debates about the fundamental nature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century politics, for example, have reinvigorated the scholarship of the period over the past two decades. On the front end, historians such as Rebecca Edwards (author of the pathbreaking textbook *New Spirits: Americans in the “Gilded Age,” 1865-1905*) have argued that the label “Gilded Age” is an irresponsible caricature that offers a one-dimensional perspective on an age that, despite its extremes of wealth and poverty and corrupt politics, witnessed plenty of vigorous efforts at political reform. Better, Edwards has contended, to view the late nineteenth century as part of a “long Progressive Era.”

In turn, other scholars have pushed back against Edwards's attempt at revision, contending that the concept of “Gilded Age” not only well captures the inequalities and corruptions of the era, but also provides a useful comparison with other possible Gilded Ages (including, perhaps, our own). One of our presenters, Leon Fink, indeed argues that we must consider the utility of the concept “The Long Gilded Age.”

On the back end, historian Maureen Flanagan has argued in her influential text *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s to 1920s* that scholars must put to rest the idea that “progressivism” was a unitary entity. Rather, the reform impulse of the early twentieth century brought about a profusion of reform activities, many of which contended with and even contradicted each other. A woman suffragist chaining herself to the White House gates, and the occupant of that White House, were both “progressives” fighting for their different visions of justice and democracy—as was the Black suffragist who challenged the racism of both the president and the activists. Such a pluralization of progressivism invites us to look well beyond the standard concept of a middle-aged, middle-class white man as the quintessential Progressive, allowing us to see a much broader range of people as full actors in the dramas of progressivisms.



Yet, at the same time: scholars such as Michael McGerr in *A Fierce Discontent* have continued to argue for the utility of a singular, cohesive (and repressive) middle-class progressivism. The historiographical battle is far from over; indeed, delightfully, it never will be.

This seminar will build on these insights and debates in two fundamental ways. First, it will present these historiographical ideas as interpretations to be explored, argued about, challenged, reworked, and thought through. In other words, the seminar will take seriously the idea that historiographical arguments are critically important for teachers to wrestle with—and, even, to bring into their classrooms. Using this intellectual method, historiographical debate becomes not just a window into what actually happened in the past, but also a way for the participants in the seminar to see how scholars debate and how they connect the past with the present.

Second, the seminar will extend the traditional chronology and set of actors usually examined in conjunction with the Progressive Era. To be sure, teachers in this seminar will explore Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and antitrust policies. We will, however, also go well beyond these traditional middle-class and elite subjects to bring people of color, women, immigrants, and working-class people into considerations of progressivism not just as subjects, but as agents of progressive reform themselves. In particular, we will critically explore the long and conflictual history of race relations in Chicago and the nation and work to desegregate the histories of progressivism and race (so often told in separate textbook chapters).

Chicago is indeed the perfect place to hold such an institute. A multitude of the central public events, dramas, and personalities of the era were inseparable from the Second City: Haymarket, the Columbian Exposition, Pullman, mass immigration, corrupt politics, Jane Addams and Hull-House, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, John Dewey, *The Jungle*. Any serious intellectual reflections on progressivism must confront the Chicago experience, and teachers in this seminar will have the opportunity to explore Chicago both in books and on the ground.

The institute will have three foci: capitalism, democracy, and race. Not meant to be limiting, these interrelated ideas will serve as robust conceptual organizers to help ensure the intellectual coherence of the many different themes that will be part of the seminar.

The idea of “capitalism” is, of course, one of the most important throughout American history, and we will explore some of the general issues originally laid out by such theorists as Alexis de Tocqueville about whether the United States has always been a distinctively market-based society. Even more, though, we will investigate the particular trends and conflicts that led to the birth of a modern capitalist society from the 1870s to the 1910s. We will attempt to reconcile the simultaneous explosion of economic growth, consumer goods, and material well-being of the period with the era's systematic inequality, exploitation of workers, and immigrant misery. We will examine the rise of corporations—ranging from George Pullman's railcar manufactory to the meat trust pilloried in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*—not just for what they meant in terms of material goods but also for the ways in which they reconfigured



classical American ideals of personhood and politics. At stake, ultimately, in the era's battles over capitalism was whether the nation was best served by a set of elite captains of industry who, through their innovation, would bring prosperity to the country, or whether the new capitalist order was a troubling departure from the country's previous traditions of equality. We continue to live with many of the questions first raised by this American encounter with corporate capitalism.

Closely related to the question of capitalism during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era was the issue of democracy. Could the nation's democratic traditions survive—and even thrive—in the new era, or did the transformed political economy represent a fundamental threat to the rule of the people? A dramatically varied set of actors attempted to answer this question: corporate chieftains and political elites, to be sure, as well as the middle-class reformers who have served as the traditional focus of scholars of progressivism. Yet the era's multitude of social movements, from the Knights of Labor to the Populists to the National American Woman Suffrage Association to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, brought workers, immigrants, Blacks, and Native Americans into the conversation about democracy in ways that were fundamentally new. At stake, ultimately, would be the biggest question of democracy: How would the people truly rule? Would it be through a renewal of a cleaner and less corrupt system of political representation, or through a more direct democracy? Would it be through a much more active government—one prepared to intervene in a greatly expanded set of areas of life, ranging from the economy to public health to moral affairs, or through a government that sought above all to expand individual personal liberty? How would the country's civic realms accommodate the rising claims for equality on behalf of groups that had long been excluded, such as women and racial minorities?

And indeed, scholars and teachers cannot possibly untangle the issues of capitalism and democracy from the tortured history of race in the United States. Race will serve as the focus of several sessions and will significantly inform most of the rest. We will tackle old traditional chestnuts, such as the debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, in new ways. We will also explore more recent historical interpretations, such as the power of whiteness among European immigrants. Chicago's Black history during this period—from Ida B. Wells-Barnett to Jack Johnson, from the Great Migration to the 1919 Race Riot—will serve as local points of entrance into a rich and contested history.

The discipline of history will serve as the foundation for our explorations of these themes, but we will also show the richness of the past, and the many different ways we can approach the past, through significant connections with other realms within the humanities. We will read literature (poetry and *The Jungle*), explore music (Ken Burns's *Jazz*), and examine art and architecture (in several different realms). We will actively connect these different modes of thinking and representation in the context of the institute's major themes. For example, can we argue that jazz represents part of the era's democratization, or, instead, that it revealed continued patterns of oppression? To what extent does Chicago's monumental architecture



of the period represent an astounding burst of creativity and innovation—or/and in what ways does it exhibit the period's power relations and inequality?

Ultimately, this institute offers the opportunity to explore one of the most transformative moments in American history in an intellectually and pedagogically compelling fashion. The Gilded Age and Progressive Era represented the time when America became truly modern. So many of the nation's fundamental institutions originated or were consolidated during this era, and its intellectual and political legacies remain alive today. The fruits of exploring this period include not just a more complex humanistic appreciation of the era, but, we hope, possibly even lessons in civic engagement for you as teachers—and, of course, for your students—that might carry forward from that intriguing past to our contentious present.

The "Applications to Teaching" sessions will focus on ways that you can bring the rich conversation of the institute to your students. We will work with teachers to develop "inquiry arcs" to use in their classrooms. Inquiry arcs are based on engaging students in compelling questions, investigating a variety of sources, and then communicating responses to those questions. Teachers are encouraged to develop inquiry arcs that connect best to their learning contexts. To support each teacher in developing an inquiry arc with plans and resources, we will provide differentiated resources and feedback over the course of the institute along with collaboration with colleagues. At the end of the institute, teachers will present their arcs and archive them online to facilitate sharing.

Important Logistical Information

The institute will run July 6-25, 2025, with arrival on July 5. Our headquarters and accommodations will be on the University of Illinois Chicago campus, although we will take frequent excursions off-site. Participants should plan to spend at least four hours a day Monday-Friday in formal group settings, along with some evening and weekend events. Teachers are expected to participate in all scheduled events and complete all assignments. All participants should be aware that the institute is a full-time commitment; local candidates, in particular, should preview the [Chicago area applicants](#) portion of the website. The heart of the institute will involve vigorous discussion of readings with a set of scholars who have been chosen both for their scholarly expertise and their pedagogical talents. Applicants should carefully read the attached information about project [faculty](#) and the tentative [schedule](#). **The institute will require 250-375 pages of scholarly reading a week. This reading is central to ensure that discussions are intellectually stimulating and provide a solid base for participants' inquiry arcs. We strongly encourage participants to do a substantial amount of this reading before the start of the institute.** Participants will also prepare a final project suitable for classroom use. Participants are encouraged to make use of the several Chicago area research facilities with relevant Gilded Age and Progressive Era collections for their final projects. Project staff will advise participants on collections that may be likely to support inquiry on their topics. Time will be provided during the institute for reading and project preparation,



although participants may enjoy the benefits gained by reading in advance. Project staff will be available by appointment to confer with participants throughout the institute.

Participants receive stipends of \$2,850 (payable in installments) intended to help cover travel, research, and living expenses for the period spent in residence. Stipends are taxable. Applicants should note the NEH policy regarding stipends: Supplements will not be given in cases where the stipend is insufficient to cover all expenses. Lodging will be provided on the University of Illinois Chicago campus at varying rates. To build a community of scholars among the participants, teachers are strongly encouraged to stay with their peers on campus. A [university credit](#) option will be available through Loyola University Chicago for an extra fee. Teachers who complete the institute will also receive a Certificate of Completion that they may use to request continuing education credit in their home districts. Illinois participants will receive professional development credit hours.

Application and Selection Process

Applications are due on March 5, 2025. Use the [online application form](#) if you are able. If you need an alternate way to apply, email cjohnson@chicagohistory.org for appropriate accommodations. The application requires basic personal and professional information, as well as a current résumé and application essay (see [essay requirements](#)). Individuals may only attend one NEH Summer Institute or Landmarks workshop each year.

Eligibility: Applicants may be full- or part-time K-12 educators who teach in public, charter, independent, and religiously affiliated schools or home-schooling educators. Educators who work outside the K-12 classroom who can demonstrate the connection to their professional goals may also apply. J1 and F1 visa holders should confer with their sponsoring institution regarding their eligibility to receive a stipend from another institution. At least 20% of institute spaces will be reserved for teachers who are new to the profession (those who have been teaching for five years or fewer).

You are eligible to apply if you are a:

- United States citizen, including those teaching abroad at U.S. chartered institutions and schools operated by the federal government;
- resident of U.S. jurisdictions; or
- foreign national who has been residing in the United States or its jurisdictions for at least the three years immediately preceding the application deadline.

You are not eligible to apply if you:

- are a foreign national teaching abroad;
- are related to the project director(s);
- are affiliated with the applicant institution (employees, currently enrolled students, etc.);



- have been taught or advised in an academic capacity by the project director(s);
- are delinquent in the repayment of federal debt (taxes, student loans, child support; payments, and delinquent payroll taxes for household or other employees);
- have been debarred or suspended by any federal department or agency; or
- have attended a previous NEH professional development project (Seminars, Landmarks, or Institutes) led by the project director(s).

Participants will be selected by a committee composed of the project co-director for academic content, project co-director for teaching content, director of teacher support, master teacher, and a guest history education professional. Committee members are seeking a variety of backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences in building the participant cohort. The selection committee will assess candidates' effectiveness and commitment as an educator; intellectual interests; ability to bring institute content into the classroom; unique perspectives, skills, or experiences; commitment to participate fully; and goals for what the applicant hopes to gain from the institute experience. The project website contains the full [selection criteria](#). Selected candidates will be notified on April 2, 2025, with participant acceptances due by April 16.

We believe that this institute will be an immensely rich intellectual experience and a chance to grow professionally. To make sure that this institute is right for you, we encourage potential applicants to review the tentative [syllabus](#) available on our website. The attached documents and our website provide more detailed information about program application requirements, faculty and presenters, and program content.

We look forward to welcoming you to Chicago in 2025!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert D. Johnston".

Robert Johnston, Ph.D.
University Illinois Chicago

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles A. Tocci".

Charles Tocci, Ed.D.
Loyola University Chicago

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Crystal Johnson".

Crystal Johnson
Chicago History Museum