

The impact of big business during the gilded age

[History](#), [American History](#)



It is believed by many that the Gilded Age was a time of great economic growth and advancement in technology for America. At the time, large amounts of immigrants were coming to the United States in seek of new opportunities that big businesses provided like jobs in the railroad, textile factories, and coal mines. However many Americans resented the presence of immigrants because the competition for jobs increased rapidly. And because of these businesses, monopolies became almost unstoppable by using their power to exploit the lower class, meddle with politics, and find any way to benefit their wealth. Despite the belief that industrialization brought forth new technology and economic development, the lives of Americans were made worse by political corruption, discrimination, and poor working and living conditions.

During industrialization, Americans suffered poor and harsh conditions both at work and at home. A collection of photographs shot by Lewis Hines in 1911 depicts the work environment of young boys employed in a Pennsylvania coal mine. According to the title of a photograph, “ A view of the Pennsylvania Breaker. The dust was so dense at times as to obscure the view. This dust penetrates the utmost recess of the boys’ lungs.” In the picture, the boys sit on uneven boards of wood, picking through rocks. This document is reliable because Lewis Hines, a teacher and photographer was hired by the National Child Labor Committee to show the world the reality of child labor. Though he used magnesium flash photography and the boys may have been aware of being photographed, there is enough evidence to know of the cruelties behind the norm of child labor during the Gilded Age. This evidence demonstrates that the children were exposed to toxic substances

and weren't provided safety equipment. These young boys were depleted of their childhood and were worked tirelessly in unfit working conditions. In another collection of photos by Jacob Riis, he captures the living standards of the lower class in New York. The photograph "Five Cents a Spot", shows a group of 12 people in 1890 sleeping in a beat down and cramped room. The 13-foot room contains a stove, pots and pans, objects stacked in towers and people laying on the floor which are all concerns of fire safety and an unsanitary living space. Jacob Riis's photograph is reliable because it is reported that he barged into the peoples' tenement and shot the picture as they were surprised by his intrusion. Cramped tenements in the slums were all many lower class people could afford due to the low salaries provided by big businesses; this lack of money caused children to join the workforce to help provide for their families. These lower classes were forced to bear this lifestyle, a majority were immigrants who also suffered discrimination along with poverty.

My next piece of evidence is of discrimination that came with industrialization and affected Native Americans, African Americans, and immigrants like the Chinese. From an 1882 political cartoon created by Bernhard Gillam, a Chinese man is seen to be being beat up by what we can assume are white men who represent the 47th congress. The captions on the cartoon states, "They Are Pretty Safe There: When Politicians Do Agree, Their Unanimity Is Wonderful." and "Give it to him, He's got no vote, nor no friends." This document is reliable because political cartoons during this time were drawn based off of what was happening in society. There are also autobiographical accounts describing first hand experiences of when the

Chinese immigrants were discriminated against. For example, “ The Biography of a Chinaman” by Lee Chew is an autobiography of a Chinese immigrant written in 1903. “ No one would hire an Irishman, German, Englishman or Italian when he could get a Chinese, because our countrymen are so much more honest, industrious, steady, sober and painstaking. Chinese were persecuted, not for their vices [sins], but for their virtues [good qualities].” This document is reliable because as a Chinese immigrant who has experienced being discriminated against due to his race, he would stand up for his community that has been restrained under plenty of racist laws. And since the Chinese Exclusion Act is still in place during the publishing, Chew would be desperate to cry out to the Americans and be against their reason behind this mistreatment. This evidence demonstrates the struggles of immigrants who were discriminated against often by strict laws applied only toward them and being used as scapegoats by politicians Immigration during this time was because of the demand for workers in America after big businesses created job opportunities. Having always to be kept in check and controlled due to their low social status and lack of wealth, were their lives really made better even if they were exploited and treated like slaves? Because the immigrants could be taken advantage of, political machines/bosses were able to gain power and corrupt local politics.

The rise of political bosses was afterward the boom in big businesses, immigration, and economic growth. Political machines brought corruption and unfair conditions that made life worse for Americans. An excerpt from the book, *The Shame of Cities*, by muckraker Lincoln Steffens quotes a business man. “ My business is sacred,” says the business man in his heart. “

Whatever helps my business, is good; it must be. Whatever hurts it, is wrong; it must be. A bribe is bad, that is, it is a bad thing to take; but it is not so bad to give one, not if it is necessary to my business.” This document is reliable because Lincoln Steffens was a well known author who wrote about child labor, prisons, religion and political machines for magazine articles. As a muckraker, he is doing his part to overthrow the autocracies that political machines have created. Political machines had control over many elements in politics, like “ access to city jobs”, “ business opportunities”, “ rigged local elections”, “ urban entertainment”, and “ powerful industries.” This document is reliable because the textbook bases its content on trustworthy primary and secondary sources including graphs, exercepts, and statistics. This evidence demonstrates the power that political machines attained throughout the Gilded Age and their will to progress with corruption to bring themselves up and push the rest of society down. These two pieces help support my argument that political machines who were created in the industrialization period made life worse for Americans because of their ways of exploiting the lower class for self gain. Their actions increased the wealth gap between the lower, middle, and high class and sunk a great many Americans into poverty.

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Dangerous work environments were normal, and child labor was frequent. Living conditions were cramped and unsanitary, tenements often held large groups of people in one room. Immigrants were discriminated against,

although they were the ones who carried America through industrialization. Political corruption was rampant during the Gilded Age due to political machines and their tactics of exploiting the lower class. With all these detrimental impacts on society, industrialization made life worse for Americans.