

The Gilded Age: Power and Privilege

Directions:

I: For your assigned group (this packet), identify:

1. Who are you? _____
2. Where do you live? _____

II. HOMEWORK

Annolight your packet marking/writing notes that would help to fill in part III below (you will do this in class tomorrow with your group)

III: Classwork (to do with your group in class)

1. How much power does your historical character have during the time? Put a percentage # on the spectrum below.

Amount of Power: 0%-----100%

Provide **four** examples of WHY you put your number where you did.

2. How much agency (power to change their lives) does your historical figure have?

Amount of Agency: 0%-----100%

Provide **four** examples of WHY you put your number where you did.

3. Does your historical figure represent individualism or collectivism?

0%-----100%

Provide four examples of WHY you put your number where you did.

IV: The Gilded Age

gilded – based on pretense; deceptively pleasing

gild

tr.v. gild ed or gilt (glt), gild ing, gilds

1. To cover with or as if with a thin layer of gold.
2. To give an often deceptively attractive or improved appearance to.
3. Archaic: To smear with blood.

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/gilded> 12/4/2006

Read the definition of the Gilded Age above. Does your historical figure or person represent the gold layer or the grittiness underneath?

Provide four examples for your answer.

V: Prepare a group motto for your group based on the **amount of power and privilege** you have. Prepare **three** pieces of evidence to share that prove your motto.

VI: As your classmates present, take notes on the amount of power and privilege they have. Get specific details.

- a) Elite
- b) People living in the West
- c) Union Member
- d) Poor
- e) Chinese Immigrant
- f) Captain of Industry/Robber Barons
- g) European Immigrant
- h) Government Official
- i) Farmer
- j) Women and Child Labor (marginalized laborers)

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In addition to this
packet, please also
annolight pgs 21-22
and 24 in your reader



would have liked. The wealthy could play Follow the Leader, but it was not at all clear that the rest of the nation was ready to follow along. Driven by the industrial revolution, America had grown enormously in territory, population, and wealth in the nineteenth century. The United States was not one nation but several; it was a land divided by region, race, and ethnicity. And it was a land still deeply split by class conflict. The upper class remained a controversial group engineering a wrenching economic transformation, accumulating staggering fortunes, and pursuing notorious private lives. Just three months later another party—this one in New York City—highlighted the precariousness of upper-class authority at the close of the nineteenth century.

While McKinley and Bryan battled for the presidency, Cornelia Bradley Martin had been plotting her own coup in the social wars of New York's rich. She and her husband, Bradley, were no newcomers to the ranks of wealthy Manhattan. Cornelia's father had been a millionaire merchant in New York; Bradley's, a banker from a fine Albany family. Though wealthy, their parents had lived by the old Victorian virtues. Cornelia's father, it was said, had been "domestic in his tastes"; Bradley's father, who early practiced "absolute self-denial," "never lost an opportunity of instilling" in his sons "ideas of the importance of work and one's duty towards others in every-day life." Cornelia and Bradley, married in 1869, had moved away from the old values. One sign of the change was their surname, which somewhere along the line borrowed Bradley's first name, occasionally added a hyphen, and doubled from "Martin" to "Bradley-Martin." Another was Cornelia's collection of jewelry, which included pieces from the French crown jewels, most notably a ruby necklace that had belonged to Marie Antoinette. Never "domestic" in their tastes, the Bradley Martins had become well known in New York social circles, especially for their renowned parties in 1885 and 1890.³

In the depression winter of 1897, Cornelia arranged a costume ball at the Waldorf Hotel that would, she hoped, eclipse not only her previous efforts but also Alva Vanderbilt's famous ball of 1883, widely recognized as the greatest party in the history of the city. Cornelia was not bashful about her intentions. For weeks before the ball, her secretary made sure that the papers got all the details. Yet the publicity was not quite what Cornelia had expected. Across the country, preachers and editorial writers argued over the propriety of a party that would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars amid the worst depression in the nation's history. At the fashionable St. George's

Episcopal Church in New York, rector Dr. William Rainsford urged his congregation, which included financier J. P. Morgan, to forgo the ball. "Never were the lines between the two classes—those who have wealth and those who envy them—more distinctly drawn," Rainsford warned. "[S]uch elaborate and costly manifestations of wealth would only tend to stir up . . . widespread discontent" and "furnish additional texts for sermons by the socialistic agitators." "Every thoughtful man," agreed a parishioner, "must have seen signs of friction between the upper ten and the lower. Whatever tends to increase it, as very elaborate social affairs may, can well be spared now." The pastor of Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, where John D. Rockefeller worshipped, preached that wealth should be used for philanthropy. Undeterred, Cornelia went ahead. Her supporters claimed that the expenditures for the ball would stimulate the economy.⁴

Some invited guests decided not to attend. But about six or seven hundred turned up, in costume, when the great night came on February 10. Bradley dressed as a member of the court of Louis XV. Cornelia, despite her Marie Antoinette necklace, dressed as another luckless queen, Mary Stuart. Like a queen, the hostess greeted her guests from a raised dais "beneath a canopy of rare tapestries." There were mirrors, tables laden with food, "a wild riot of roses," and "mimic woodland bowers." The scene "reproduced the splendour of Versailles in New York, and I doubt if even the Roi Soleil himself ever witnessed a more dazzling sight," Bradley's brother, Frederick Townsend Martin, remembered. "The power of wealth with its refinement and vulgarity was everywhere. It gleamed from countless jewels, and it was proclaimed by the thousands of orchids and roses, whose fragrance that night was like incense burnt on the altar of the Golden Calf." Royalty was everywhere, too—"perhaps a dozen" Marie Antoinettes came to the ball. Amid all the bewigged and bejeweled royalty, a reporter noted, there were hardly any American costumes. Only one or two George Washingtons reminded the guests of their republican origins. Outside, about 250 police closed the sidewalks to pedestrians and braced for trouble. While his wife danced inside, Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt directed his men as they watched for anyone "likely to prove dangerous from an anarchistic viewpoint."⁵

The revolutionary moment never came, but Cornelia's triumph turned into disaster anyway. Across the country, elite opinion condemned the Bradley Martins. The *Chicago Tribune* gave its verdict by quoting Shakespeare's

Puck: "What fools these mortals be." Worse, New York City itself suddenly became inhospitable. Municipal officials, noting Bradley's opulence, raised his property taxes. The members of the city's elite clubs pronounced the Bradley Martins' ball "magnificent" but "stupid." Unlike Marie Antoinette and Mary Stuart, Cornelia kept her head, but she and Bradley soon left the United States to begin a self-imposed exile. Selling their mansion in Manhattan, the Bradley Martins bought a new place in London, where their daughter had married Lord Craven a few years before. In 1899, they returned briefly to New York to give a defiant farewell dinner party at the Waldorf at the cost of \$116 a plate. From then on, the Bradley Martins divided their time between London and Balmacaan, Bradley's estate in Scotland. They left behind a bemused Frederick Townsend Martin. Years later he still could not understand why all this had happened. After all, the ball had helped the economy because "many New York shops sold out brocades and silks which had been lying in their stock-rooms for years." "I cannot conceive," Frederick wrote sadly, "why this entertainment should have been condemned."⁶

If McKinley's victory emphasized the strength of the "upper ten," the Bradley Martins' ball epitomized their weakness. Absurd as it was, the affair highlighted the cultural isolation and internal division that plagued the wealthy. The industrial upper class upheld a set of values at odds with those of other classes. Approaching life so differently from the rest of America, the rich could not command respect from farmers and workers. Even among themselves, the "upper ten" disagreed how best to live their lives and secure their future. The party did not last very long at all.



Cornelia Bradley Martin staged her costume ball when class differences were more pronounced than at any time in the history of industrial America. The end of the nineteenth century saw more than just "signs of friction between the upper ten and the lower": wage workers, farmers, and the rich were alien to one another. That sense of strangeness was not only a matter of obvious differences in material circumstances. By choice and by necessity, America's social classes lived starkly divergent daily lives and invoked different and often conflicting values to guide, explain, and justify their ways of life. The classes held distinctive views on fundamental issues of human existence: on the nature of the individual; on the relationship between the individual and

society; on the roles of men, women, children, and the family; and on the relative importance of work and pleasure. What would become the Progressive Era—an extraordinary explosion of middle-class activism—began as an unprecedented crisis of alienation amid the extremes of wealth and poverty in America.

In a land of some 76 million people, the "upper ten" were no more than a tiny minority, a mere sliver of the nation. Wealthy capitalists, manufacturers, merchants, landowners, executives, professionals, and their families made up not "ten," but only 1 or 2 percent of the population. These were the people who owned the majority of the nation's resources and expected to make the majority of its key decisions. They could be found in cities, towns, and rural estates across the country. Their ranks included the nation's roughly four thousand millionaires, fabulously rich by almost any standard. Their most visible and most powerful members were the two hundred or so families worth at least \$20 million, fortunes with few parallels in history. Concentrated in the Northeast and especially New York State, theirs were the famous names of American capitalism—Vanderbilt, Whitney, Carnegie, Harriman, and Morgan. Probably the greatest fortune of them all—a billion dollars by 1913—belonged to John D. Rockefeller, the leader of Standard Oil.⁷

Membership in the upper ten was never only a matter of precise calculation in dollars; it was also a matter of origins, experience, and outlook. Wealthy Americans shared several attributes that made them a homogenous and distinctive group, similar to one another and different from the rest of the population. In an increasingly diverse nation of new and old immigrants, the upper class came mostly from English stock, from families long in America. In a largely Protestant land, they belonged, by birth or conversion, to the smaller, most fashionable Protestant denominations—Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational. With only occasional exceptions, they came from middle- and upper-class origins. Hardly any matched Andrew Carnegie's storied rise from rags to riches, from working-class bobbin boy in a textile factory to multimillionaire steel baron. While fewer than 10 percent of the population had even graduated from high school, many of the upper ten had gone to college or professional school.⁸

Above all, the upper ten shared a fundamental understanding about the nature of the individual. Glorifying the power of individual will, the wealthy held to an uncompromising belief in the necessity of individual freedom. To

Andrew Carnegie, "Individualism" was the very "foundation" of the human race. "Only through exceptional individuals, the leaders, man has been able to ascend," Carnegie explained. "[It] is the leaders who do the new things that count, all these have been Individualistic to a degree beyond ordinary men and worked in perfect freedom; each and every one a character unlike anybody else; an original, gifted beyond most others of his kind, hence his leadership." It was just this strong-willed sense of her "exceptional" individuality that inspired Cornelia Bradley Martin's idea for a ball; and it was just this sense of her right to "perfect freedom" that enabled her to stick to her plans in the face of so much condemnation.⁹

The upper ten attributed the hardships of the poor not to an unfair economic system but to individual shortcomings. The remedy was individual regeneration rather than government action. "[The] failures which a man makes in his life are due almost always to some defect in his personality, some weakness of body, or mind, or character, will, or temperament," wrote John D. Rockefeller. "The only way to overcome these failings is to build up his personality from within, so that he, by virtue of what is within him, may overcome the weakness which was the cause of the failure." Individualism, moreover, helped the wealthy resolutely deny the existence of social classes, despite all the signs of friction around them. "The American Commonwealth is built upon the individual," explained the renowned corporate lawyer and U.S. Senator Chauncey Depew of New York. "It recognizes neither classes nor masses."¹⁰

Upper-class individualism was more than just a crude version of "might makes right." These men and women had grown up in a land dedicated to individualism. In the Revolutionary era, the nation's sacred documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—proclaimed the dignity and worth of the individual. By the nineteenth century, that notion was so powerful and so distinctively American that the visiting French observer Alexis de Tocqueville coined the term *individualism* to describe it. The relentless spread of capitalism reaffirmed the individualist creed, but with a new emphasis on each person's ownership of his or her labor. By midcentury, this reworked individualism drove the abolitionist assault on slavery and spurred the Northern war against the South. Individualism justified the emerging factory system, built on individual workers' free exchange of their labor for wages. Individualism provided the core of the

Victorian culture that taught middle-class men self-discipline and self-reliance in the struggle for success. "Take away the spirit of Individualism from the people," warned Wall Street veteran Henry Clews, "and you at once eliminate the American spirit—the love of freedom,—of free industry,—free and unfettered opportunity,—you take away freedom itself."¹¹

Ironically, the wealthy themselves challenged freedom and individualism by creating the nation's pioneering big businesses, the giant trusts and corporations that employed the first white-collar "organization men." There were even a few "organization men" among the upper ten. William Ellis Corey, the second president of United States Steel, "is part of the mechanism itself," wrote an observer early in the twentieth century. "He feels himself to be a fraction, rather than a unit. His corporation is an organism like a human body, and he is the co-ordinating function of its brain."¹²

Yet, men like Corey were unusual. For one thing, many of the wealthy did not share his familiarity with corporate life. In the industrial city of Baltimore, sixth largest in the nation in 1900, only about one-fifth of leading businessmen had made their careers as bureaucrats. Of the 185 leaders of the largest American firms between 1901 and 1910, just under half were career bureaucrats, men who had never had their own businesses. But even business leaders accustomed to bureaucracy tended to see themselves as individual units rather than fractions of some larger whole. Railroad executives, members of the nation's pioneering corporate hierarchies, still rejoiced in "competitive individualism" after decades of collective enterprise. Such people may have felt a special tie to their organizations, but that did not prevent them from feeling superior to everybody else. William Ellis Corey was, after all, United States Steel's "brain," rather than one of its lesser organs. James Stillman, the leader of New York's National City Bank, thought of his firm as a god and sometimes as "our mother." Yet, the obedience Stillman owed his god and his mother did not keep him from being "lordly in his manner."¹³

The aristocratic and even regal bearing, with its assumption of individual prerogative, came easily for the men and women of the upper ten. There were all those kings and queens at the Bradley Martin ball. There was the financier E. H. Harriman, who "had the philosophy, the methods of an Oriental monarch." His niece, Daisy Harriman, recalled visiting him in his library one evening. "Daisy, I have a new plaything," he told her. "I have just bought the Erie [railroad] for five million dollars. I think I will call them up now."¹⁴