

Note from the Editor

I am drafting this on October 11, 2012, though it will not appear until January 2013, when the election will have a result. For months, I have been checking internet polling aggregators every day. I will not confess how often every day, since readers would worry about my mental health. For the last week, since one candidate channeled his salesman self to great effect in the first presidential debate, while the other countered with his inner law professor, I have been in a tizzy over each new survey. This means that I have been in a tizzy a lot, since Americans have had little to do lately other than poll one another.

Through the months of compulsively monitoring “RealClearPolitics,” “Pollster,” and so on—hopeful in the morning, despairing by afternoon—I am aware of the intellectual failure this behavior represents. Anyone with halfway decent training in the study of politics should have the presence of mind to read polls maybe once every week; at best they matter as secular trends. A greater intellectual failure begins with my acquiescence in the depressing emphasis that our electoral system places on the ability of two politicians subtly to manage their images under an inhuman level of pressure over ninety minutes in front of a television audience of sixty-five million people, with a billion dollars riding on each campaign. Good grief. It is a commonplace of modern political thought that in a presidential system, the leader’s responsibilities do by rights include symbolizing values and projecting an image. The nineteenth-century, party-based electoral system did not, to be sure, produce better presidents or governors, but it did afford candidates for executive office some protection from having to manage their campaigns and images under ceaseless public scrutiny. In his case study of the hollowing out of California party conventions as deliberative gatherings, John Reynolds explains that the candidate-centered system that the country has come to take for granted was pushed and shaped by politicians themselves for reasons that made sense at the time.

By our era, no deliberation, either within parties or between them, takes place in the gatherings and events that mark political campaigns, and no one expects information to be exchanged. We embrace our pseudo-events and react with indignation when our side’s management of its image goes awry. This could involve an empty chair at one party’s convention or a lectern that might as

well have been empty for the other party at a subsequent debate. Many readers will notice that the term “pseudo-event” evokes Daniel Boorstin’s prophetic 1962 book, *The Image*, which bore the subtitle: “What Happened to the American Dream?” As an epigraph, Boorstin selected Max Frisch’s definition of “technology”: “the knack of so arranging the world so that we don’t have to experience it.” That is why my compulsive poll checking has seemed mentally ill. I feel engaged intensely but am at best marginally so.

Back in the tangible world, we historians cultivate our gardens all the while and intend to do so no matter who runs the country for the next four years. Two essays in this issue illustrate the condition and possible direction of a central preoccupation of Gilded Age and Progressive Era historians in recent decades: the myriad ways that incorporating women’s perspectives reshuffle historical analysis. Maureen Flanagan’s revised SHGAPE presidential address from April 2012 recalls why her writings on gender, cities, and reform have exerted influence and won admirers. Readers should appreciate the distinctive way she weaves together a heartfelt argument that assails received wisdom concerning city planning and housing reform with a crystal-clear demonstration of the practical application of feminist theories of urban planning.

Jessica Pliley is also admirably clear in her explanation of why a seemingly unexceptional 1903 proposal to add women to immigration inspection crews generated an enormous amount of newspaper, legislative, and bureaucratic attention. In the gender psychology of the time, women were to provide assistance, but only men could embody protection and authority. Well-supported arguments of unassailable logic for the assigning of police power to women immigration inspectors could not shake archetypal attitudes concerning gender, respectability, power, and the public sphere, the themes at the center of Flanagan’s new research as well.

These quarterly notes from the editor are supposed to strike a personal tone, but each issue I worry about crossing from idiosyncrasy into crankdom. Modern academic professions trust the processes of peer-reviewed publication to save us from our crank tendencies. One’s trust is shaken by Jeremy Rich’s account of the naturalist Richard Lynch Garner, who found numerous outlets for his theories concerning ape languages (though admittedly these were denounced as crackpot at the time). Meanwhile, for reasons of region, reputation, and discretion, he kept private his copious writings that wove together Robert Ingersoll-style agnosticism with

social Darwinism. In his published writings, he was a singular crank, while writings that festered unpublished manifested a major intellectual tendency of the era. This applies as well to the incipient cultural relativism of Garner's antireligious essays, along with the racist twists that he gave to evolutionary theory. So, which aspects of our thought should we fear more: those that participate in present-day discourse, including its errors, or those that we hide from reluctance to alienate our contemporaries?

Alan Lessoff