Mark Twain’s famous novel about the follies of late nineteenth century America revealed much about the sentiments of the time period for which he famously named. The Gilded Age was an era of major societal change that left no corner of the nation untouched. The driving force behind this change can be argued from many angles; economic, political, social, and technological themes are all relevant for analyzing this juncture in American history. *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* by Jackson Lears and *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* by Alan Trachtenberg are examples of different ways in which scholars have attempted to illuminate themes of the Gilded Age through cultural analysis. Lears and Trachtenberg have attempted to make sense of the period through themes of cultural rebirth and all-encompassing incorporation. This essay will analyze their respective themes and the conclusions they draw about the Gilded Age.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars began to utilize social and cultural developments as tools of inquiry when examining well interpreted historical periods. Much of the recent literature on the Gilded Age has therefore considered events and themes from this angle. Lears and Trachtenberg both successfully use the lens of culture to draw conclusions about the driving forces behind the major changes during that period. For Lears, the dominating theme is the need for average Americans to assign new meaning to their lives in the wake of Civil War. Trachtenberg on the other hand, looks at the increased connectivity of people, business, and infrastructure during the Gilded Age, which he claims essentially redefined every aspect of how people lived their lives.

The specific time periods chosen by Lears and Jackson for their publications add structure to their respective cultural analyses. Lears is more ambitious in examining a larger time frame, focusing specifically on the time between the conclusion of Southern Reconstruction and the First World War. In *Rebirth of a Nation*, Lears’ strategy of bookending his work with wars is central to the theme of regeneration. Although he opts to begin serious analysis in 1877 and not 1865, his piece relies on American sentiment following the Civil War as the impetus for finding new meaning; he goes on to define that search thematically as a rebirth of the American character. His choice to end with World War I identifies the limits of this new ideal type, and by doing so he seems to argue a cyclical cycle of death and rebirth as a theme not merely constrained to his own area of inquiry, but to topics beyond the scope of his work as well.

Trachtenberg takes an earlier approach. He begins with the westward expansion of the 1840s, and posits that American culture defined in the latter half of the century was a collective desire to seek out, develop, and profit from natural resources. *Incorporation of America* culminates with the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago and Frederick Jackson Turner’s official announcement that the frontier had closed.¹ For Trachtenberg, this chronology best defines the

rise to power of big business and the climactic display at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair of an
America thoroughly and ostentatiously incorporated by big business.

Both *Rebirth of a Nation* and *Incorporation of America* have thematic strengths and
weaknesses. In *Rebirth of a Nation*, Lear’s theme fits nicely with his chronology, and the
cyclical nature of regeneration resonates with the ebb and flow of history as a positive way to
identify trends. His organization of the book into chapters on money, race, urbanization,
business, and imperialism, as well as a concluding section on culture, delineate various ways in
which rebirth happened at all levels of society. Because the Gilded Age was wrought with
vertically integrated change, this choice of organization makes sense, despite the limitations of
the theme of regeneration.

The strength of Trachtenberg’s work lies in his theme of incorporation. His separate
analysis of westward migration, mechanization, labor, urbanization, and politics provide a
logical and well reasoned roadmap to guide the reader through the book’s purpose: an
explanation of the extent to which business and the rise of the corporation influenced all areas of
American culture.  

Trachtenberg’s strength as an English professor also constitutes one of his weaknesses.
In one of the final chapters, Trachtenberg weaves literary works of fiction by Mark Twain,
Herman Melville, and dime novel authors into his narrative. Undeniably, many Americans have
read such works and so can identify with them; yet their applicability to a broader theme of
incorporation is questionable. This is a small trifle for an otherwise well researched and written
publication. The fact that *Incorporation of America* has been republished as a twenty-fifth
anniversary edition is a testament to its relevant themes and continued importance to a broader
understanding of the Gilded Age.

Lear’s analysis of the Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson presidential
administrations is an ideal example of his thematic limitations. Through Roosevelt’s
involvement in the Spanish American War, Latin American imperialistic foreign policy, and
condemnation of Japan’s expansionist agenda, Lear seems to scapegoat him as a wholly
negative manifestation of the regeneration rhetoric. Such a criticism does have legitimacy, but
Lear’s portrayal of Woodrow Wilson undermines his credibility.

For Lear, Woodrow Wilson’s actions in involving America in World War I are well
reasoned and fit nicely into the book’s regenerative theme. President Wilson wanted peace, but
was confronted by a “hawkish cabinet” as well as Teddy Roosevelt; in the end, as Lear
concludes, were his choices not necessarily his own, but rather an outcome of Gilded Age
cultural developments. Roosevelt, on the other hand, was not given the cultural benefit of the
doubt. Once again, this criticism has integrity and is skillfully argued by Lear.

The limitations of *Rebirth of a Nation* are illuminated in the final pages of the book,
when Lear synthesizes the actions of Wilson and compares them to the post 9-11 climate of the
George W. Bush presidential administration:

“The end of the Cold War and the long bull market of the 1990s revived familiar
militarist fears of peace, evoking the false comfort and complacency, the ‘ignoble
ease’ that had enraged TR. But the terrorist attacks September, 11th, 2001,

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2 Trachtenberg, 3.
3 Trachtenberg, 182.
5 Lear, 338.
brought militarism back with a vengeance, providing the idea that a regenerative war with a luster it had not enjoyed (outside fascist circles) for nearly a century. Recalling the nationalist Progressives of the 1910s, Paul Berman, Christopher Hitchens, and other ‘liberal hawks’ sang the praises of war from the safety of their studies. The ghost of Roosevelt returned to haunt the corridors of power. So did the ghost of Wilson, though pundits missed the mark when they called the preemptive unilateralist George W. Bush a ‘Wilsonian.’ Despite Wilson’s failings, his reputation deserved a better fate. He hated war, and was even willing to abridge national sovereignty to avoid it. TR, not Wilson, was Bush’s ideological ancestor.6

This is where Rebirth of a Nation fails as an accurate account of history and falls more into the realm of a presentist interpretation. Lears develops a complicated theme of Gilded Age regeneration and the characters of two presidents with the purpose of arguing a personal bias against the Bush administration. His opinion may resonate with some readers, yet his criticism is more appropriate for a newspaper publication than a scholarly work. Such a hidden agenda taints the work of an otherwise well written and researched work of history.

The ways in which a scholar can identify patterns and themes in a historical era such as the Gilded Age are broad and diverse. The difficulty lies in interpreting the massive cultural, social, societal, economic, industrial, and political changes in a way that can be distilled down to a single publication. Both Rebirth of a Nation and Incorporation of America are positive contributions to the field of Gilded Age American history. Lears and Trachtenberg nicely develop their respective themes and develop them in a cogent way. The difference in approach of these two scholars in interpreting the Gilded Age is a testament to the vibrant and diverse works of cultural history that have recently come to the fore. For better or for worse, they will be weighed, measured, criticized, and remembered by their themes of cultural analysis.

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6 Lears, 353.