**Civilization & Barbarism: Cartoon Commentary & “The White Man's Burden” (1898-1902)**

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PROGRESS & PROFITS

“Auto-Truck of Civilization and Trade”: the Asia Market

Civilization and trade went hand in hand in turn-of-the-century imperialism. Progress

was promoted as an unassailable value that would bring the world’s barbarians into

modern times for their own good and the good of global commerce. As the U.S. moved

into the Pacific, “China’s millions” represented an enticing new market, but the eruption

of the anti-Christian, anti-foreign Boxer movement threatened the civilizing mission

there.

In a striking Judge graphic, an “Auto-Truck of Civilization and Trade” lights a pathway

through the darkness, leading with a gun and the message: “Force if Necessary.”

Overladen with manufactured goods and modern technology, the vehicle is driven by a

resolute Uncle Sam. Blocking its uphill path, the Chinese dragon crawls downhill bearing

a “Boxer” waving a bloody sword and banner reading “400 Million Barbarians.” The

image puts progress and primitivism on a collision course at the edge of a cliff. Fears

that China would descend into chaos and xenophobia justified intervention to

safeguard the spread of modernity, civilization, and trade. The image argues that a

crisis point has been reached and the caption states, “Some One Must Back Up.”

The link between U.S. conquest of the Philippines and the lure of the China market was

widely acknowledged at the time, and no one rendered this more vividly, concisely, and

admiringly than the cartoonist Emil Flohri. One cannot imagine a blunter caption than

the one that accompanied his 1900 cartoon for Judge: “And, after all, the Philippines

Are Only the Stepping-Stone to China.” In Flohri’s image, Uncle Sam—heavily laden

with steel, railroads, bridges, farm equipment, and the like—gives a cursory nod to the

spread of civilization by grasping a book titled "Education" and "Religion.” The confident

giant is greeted with open arms by a diminutive yellow-clad Chinese mandarin.

Anticipated U.S. exports appear on signs that advertise the rich market awaiting

American manufacturers. Each sign is topped by the word “Wanted” and the goods

listed include trolley lines, electric lights, water-works, sewers, paving, asphalt roads,

watches, clocks, wagons, carriages, trucks, 100,000 bridges, 500,000 engines, 2

million cars, 4 million rails, 100,000 RR stations, cotton goods, telegraph, telephone,

stoves, lamps, petroleum, medicines, chemicals, disinfectants, 50 million reaping

machines, 100 million plows, and 50 million sewing machines.

Commercial interests not only drove U.S. policy in Asia, but also shaped public opinion

about it. The artist George Benjamin Luts offered an exceptionally scathing rendering

of the linkage of conquest, commerce, and censorship in an 1899 cartoon titled “The

Way We Get the War News: The Manila Correspondent and the McKinley Censorship.”

Published in a short-lived radical periodical, The Verdict, the cartoon shows a war

correspondent in chains, writing his story under the direction of military brass. Business

and government colluded with the military in silencing press coverage of the poor

conditions suffered by American soldiers, including scandals around tainted supplies,

and the grim realities of the Philippine-American War itself—censorship that

foreshadowed the broader excising of the unpleasant war from national memory. Robert

L. Gambone in his 2009 book, Life on the Press: The Popular Art and Illustrations of

George Benjamin Luks, describes the cartoon as follows:

...The Way We Get Our War News (The Verdict, August 21, 1899, front

cover) excoriates military press censorship, a supremely ironic development

given the appeals to freedom used to justify the war. Within a barred

room, its walls painted blood-red, a cohort of five army officers headed by

a sword-wielding Major General Elwell Stephen Otis (1838-1909), military

governor of the Philippines, forces a manacled war correspondent to write

only approved dispatches. A mound of scribbled papers from an overflowing

wastebasket testifies to the coercion exerted upon him to induce

cooperation. [p. 199]

In the background, the artist placed a large portrait of a large man, Marcus Hanna,

next to a miniature of President William McKinley to show their relative influence on

policy. Hanna was a wealthy businessman with investments in coal and iron who

financed McKinley’s 1896 election campaign with record-breaking fundraising that led

to the defeat of opponent William Jennings Bryan. (In the 1900 elections, Bryan ran on

an anti-imperialist platform and was again defeated by McKinley.) Gambone described

the portraits as, “a testament to the weakness of McKinley, the overarching power of

Hanna, and the Trust interests that supported expansion of American business into the

Pacific.”

The foothold in the Philippines brought China within reach. As the golden goose,

China’s perceived mass market was to be protected for free trade against takeover by

increasingly assertive foreign powers. Boxer attacks on Western infrastructure and the

siege of foreign diplomats in Beijing gave the international powers a pretext for

entering China with military force. Though “carving the Chinese melon” was a popular

metaphor, none of the invaders seriously considered partitioning the large country

under foreign rule. (The exception would be Manchuria, alternating between Russian

and Japanese control in the coming years.) But rivalries for commercial privileges never

abated even when an eight-nation Allied military force was forged between the world

powers in the summer of 1900.

In the West, China was often characterized as befuddled and archaic under the rule of

an inscrutable crone, the Empress Dowager. In Puck’s October 19, 1898 cover,

“Civilization” holds “China” by his queue, labeled “Worn Out Traditions,” ready to cut it

off with the shears of “19th Century Progress.” The helpless mandarin tries to run

away. It was feared that the mystical rituals and xenophobic violence of the Yi He

Tuan (Boxer) secret society would overwhelm China’s ineffectual rulers, cast the

country into chaos, and hinder the trade and profits anticipated by the great powers.

Nearly two years later, in the midst of the Boxer Uprising, Puck was still resorting to

the same sort of stereotyped juxtaposition. On the magazine’s cover for August 8,

1900, the familiar feminized and godlike personification of the West points at a

slavering dragon, labeled “Boxer,” crawling over the wall of the capital city. Now clad in

armor and carrying a spear, she threatens to intervene to stop the anti-foreign, anti-

Christian acts of “anarchy, “murder,” and “riot” that have spread to Beijing. China’s

hapless young Manchu emperor, traditionally and exotically robed, sits passively in the

foreground. The caption, titled “The First Duty,” carries this subtitle: “Civilization (to

China)—That dragon must be killed before our troubles can be adjusted. If you don’t do

it I shall have to.”

“School Begins”: Unfit for Self-Rule

Invading foreign lands was a relatively new experience for the U.S. Given the rhetoric

of civilizing uplift used to justify expansion, training was expected as part of the

incorporation of new territories into the U.S. Uneasiness over the idea of using force to

govern a country was overcome by tracing the issue of consent back through recent

history. An elaborate Puck graphic from early in 1899 called “School Begins”

incorporates all the players in a classroom scene to illustrate the legitimacy of

governing without consent. In the caption, Uncle Sam lectures: “(to his new class in

Civilization): Now, children, you've got to learn these lessons whether you want to or

not! But just take a look at the class ahead of you, and remember that, in a little

while, you will feel as glad to be here as they are!”

The blackboard contains the lessons learned from Great Britain on how to govern a

colony and bring them into the civilized world, stating, “... By not waiting for their

consent she has greatly advanced the world's civilization. — The U.S. must govern its

new territories with or without their consent until they can govern themselves.”

Veneration of Britain’s treatment of colonies as a positive model attests to the

significant shift in the American world view given U.S. origins in relation to the mother

country. Even the Civil War is referenced, in a wall plaque: “The Confederate States

refused their consent to be governed; but the Union was preserved without their

consent.” Refuting the right of indigenous rule was based on demonstrating a

population’s lack of preparation for self-governance.

The image exhibits a racist hierarchy that places a dominant white American male in

the center, and on the fringes, an African-American washing the windows and Native-

American reading a primer upside down. China, shown gripping a schoolbook in the

doorway, has not yet entered the scene. Girls are part of the obedient older class

studying books labeled “California, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.” The only non-

white student in the older group holds the book titled “Alaska” and is neatly coifed in

contrast to the unruly new class made up of the “Philippines, Hawaii, Porto Rico, and

Cuba.” All are depicted as dark-skinned and childish.

Harper’s Weekly later echoed the classroom scene with a cover captioned “Uncle

Sam’s New Class in the Art of Self-Government.” The class is disrupted by

revolutionaries from the new U.S. territories of the Philippines and Cuba, whose vicious

fight brands them as barbarously unfit for self-rule. Model students Hawaii and “Porto”

Rico appear as docile girls learning their lessons. The backdrop to the scene, a large

“Map of the United States and Neighboring Countries,” attests to the new position the

U.S. has taken in the world, with its overseas territories marked by U.S. flags.

In its final issue for 1899—a time when the U.S. suppression of Filipino resistance was

at its peak—Puck turned to a feel-good holiday graphic to reaffirm this theme of the

bounty promised to newly invaded countries and peoples.

The laudatory rhetoric and imagery of a “white man’s burden” and “civilizing mission”

received a sharp rejoinder in a cartoon published by Life in April, 1901 under the title

“March of the Strenuous Civilization.” In this sardonic rendering of the realities of

imperialist expansion, a missionary leads the charge holding a “Missionary Ledger.”

Immediately behind him march a sword-brandishing sailor carrying “loot” and a rifle-

bearing soldier carrying “booty.” “Science” comes next, clutching “lyddite,” a high

explosive first used by the British in the Boer War. “Literature” follows, holding the text

of Kipling’s poem, “The White Man’s Burden.” Music plays an organ labeled “Two Step

Symphony—‘Dollar Mark Forever.’” Behind Music comes “Sculpture,” holding up a

monument to a war hero. “Painting” carried a portfolio inscribed “‘Light. Death to all

Schools but Ours.” The last marcher holds up “Drummer’s Samples,” referring to the

traveling salesmen of business and commerce.

Skulls dot the landscape ahead in Life’s grim rendering. Vultures hover above the

procession, and the artifacts of past civilization are trampled underfoot at the rear.

Even the language of Life’s caption is subversive, for it picks up a famous pro-

imperialist speech by Theodore Roosevelt titled “The Strenuous Life.” Delivered on April

10, 1899, two years before Roosevelt became president, the most famous lines of the

speech were these:

I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the

strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that

highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere

easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger...

...So, if we do our duty aright in the Philippines, we will add to that

national renown which is the highest and finest part of national life, will

greatly benefit the people of the Philippine Islands, and, above all, we will

play our part well in the great work of uplifting mankind.