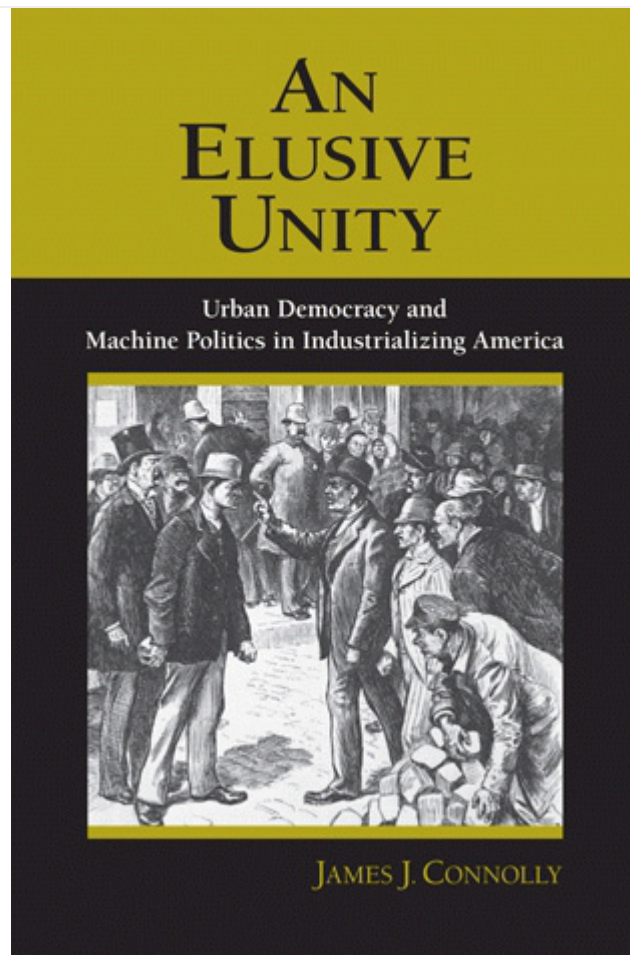


# {essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

## An Elusive Unity: Urban Democracy and Machine Politics in Industrializing America



Volume 44 (2011)

## Reviewed Work(s)

*An Elusive Unity: Urban Democracy and Machine Politics in Industrializing America.* By James J. Connolly (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2010). Pp. 264. Cloth, \$39.95.

James J. Connolly examines urban politics in America during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, emphasizing the pluralistic nature of city interactions among various groups. American cities during this era, according to Connolly, present historians with an ideal environment in which to unearth a metropolitan discourse that focuses on class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and activism. The idea of pluralism provides the framework for analysis in this monograph and allows the author to assert convincingly that the American voting public at this time adhered to “persistent antipartyism,” which made it more difficult for politicians to construct and maintain control over numerous coalitions (5). Due to the wavering loyalties of urban residents, political “bosses” such as Fernando Wood or William Magear Tweed – both of New York City – found it necessary to mix liberal, republican, and Christian ideals in order to assert hegemony for as long as they could over their flock of city residents. By recognizing the importance of guarding “minority culture[s]” in the metropolis, these bosses did not champion the common good but instead held as their model the protection of constituents at the local level (12). In short, bosses recognized that in order to sustain their power they had to appear to voters that they were “good” republicans determined to address and solve urban problems including sanitation, education, food safety, and crime. Connolly concludes, however, that the leaders of urban political machines only paid lip service to republican precepts and were more interested in “winning elections and preserving the status quo” (222). Although Americans held high hopes for pluralism, Connolly argues that this ideal fell short in achieving its goals because too many citizens were left on the periphery and too few at the center of a power-brokering paradigm in a democratic state.

Seven chapters comprise this study. Connolly begins with an examination of the Tweed Ring, its actions, and its demise by urban reformers, most notably Thomas Nast of *Harper’s Weekly*. Gilded Age

intellectuals also receive analysis in the first chapter. Men such as E.L. Godkin and Simon Sterne predominate, as well as ideas regarding oversight of society by the “best men” and their take on metropolitan issues stemming from the harmful effects of “industrialization and immigration” (43).

In his second chapter, Connolly dissects the origins of machine politics and how negative connotations associated with this concept developed in the waning decades of the nineteenth century. The strength of this chapter rests upon Connolly’s analysis of how class, race, ethnicity, and gender contributed to the public’s comprehension of machine politics and “bossism”. From the 1870s onward, machine politics and the civic discourse surrounding it arose from ideas that “social and evolutionary” parameters helped to shape perceptions that bosses could control and contain urban discord because they “knew” the needs of their constituency (56).

Chapter three focuses on labor and its relationship to the urban political world. Connolly argues that workingmen’s organizations held initial strength but that these labor institutions failed at transforming city public life because “the majority of workers remained loyal to the mainstream parties,” which led them to occupy a place in society as a “pressure group rather than a third party” (111). Labor, however, did become a key constituency that bosses could not ignore, especially during elections.

The fourth chapter provides an in-depth exploration of women as social activists and the challenges they faced within a masculine-driven political environment. These female reformers supported the expansion of state power to resolve urban problems and, in the process, sanitize city machine-oriented politics to the greatest extent possible. Traditional concepts regarding the role of women during this era – particularly that their “place” was in the home – often created social obstacles for female reformers; Connolly, however, moves beyond this basic archetype and focuses attention on ways that women shaped and influenced their urban surroundings, especially through the activities of clubwomen’s reform work.

Chapters five and six discuss the importance of how the bosses viewed themselves, their quest for legitimacy, the discourse that framed

masculine behavior in cities, and how Progressive Era reformers strove for instituting “deliberative democracy” (166) in their journey to create an inclusive urban environment. In the development of urban political machines, bosses relied on exuding a message linked to simplistic perceptions of republicanism that bound them to the laboring and immigrant classes in cities while simultaneously behaving like autocrats that crushed dissenting voices, especially when it came time to cast one’s ballot. Connolly’s greatest contribution to the historiography falls within his discussion of Progressive reformers: he asserts that historians too often lump together the activities of these reformers and in the process create “a monolithic consensus” that allows little maneuverability for historians in their analysis of these individuals (179); in short, Progressive urban reformers, such as Jane Addams, Edward Ward, and Mary Parker Follett, “constitute a facet, not the whole” of Progressivism (188).

The final chapter, “The Problem With the Public,” concentrates on Lincoln Steffens, his attempts at creating a metropolitan environment concerned with the common good and how his plans inadvertently backfired when new groups emerged with varied agenda that did not work together in the contentious city political climate of early twentieth century America.

Connolly’s research and analysis provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of this era of American history while simultaneously focusing attention on the emergence and consequences of machine politics in an urban industrial environment. The author relies on a myriad of sources that include manuscript and archival collections incorporating the Chicago Women’s Club Records and the Jane Addams Collection, newspapers and journals such as the *Chicago Tribune* and *The International Review*, and numerous other sources. Nearly thirty pages of notes direct readers to other avenues for potential research. Connolly also includes political cartoons from *Harper’s Weekly*, as well as illustrations from other leading newspapers of the period, such as *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* and *Puck*. These images, along with a few photographs, allow readers to absorb visually the flavor of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The text’s index is well constructed and provides ready access to the book’s subjects. In sum, *An Elusive Unity* provides a compelling narrative, appropriate in particular for specialists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries of

United States history, as well as those readers interested in a thoughtful examination of the effects of industrialism on politics, gender, ethnicity, class, and religion.

**Jeffrey O’Leary**

*Kent State University*



Published by

 [View all posts by](#)

**Book Reviews**

19th century, 20th century, Politics, Urban History

**COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.**

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

---

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | **THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑