

Assembling the Dinosaur: Fossil Hunters, Tycoons, and the Making of a Spectacle. By Lukas Rieppel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019). Pp. 325. Cloth, \$29.95.

Dinosaurs are as much a human invention as they are a scientific fact. Their posture, skin color, and iconic roar are estimations, best guesses, and sometimes sheer embellishments. For more than a century, Americans have been fascinated by the fantastic reimaginings of the prehistoric beasts. Long before Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) broke domestic box office records, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle inked into existence another isolated haven of the prehistoric creatures in his international best-seller, *The Lost World* (1912). Though separated by nearly one hundred years, both stories used dinosaurs to explore human desires and faults—a creative approach that still captivates American audiences. Doyle's protagonist ventured to a land before time to woo a love interest, while visitors to *Jurassic Park* traumatically learned the limits of ingenuity for profit. If, as these two works reveal, people project their sentiments and motivations onto the bones of prehistoric creatures, then dinosaurs in museums also have a history. In *Assembling the Dinosaur: Fossil Hunters, Tycoons, and the Making of a Spectacle*, Lukas Rieppel transports readers back to the Long Gilded Age to explore the first major excavation of dinosaur bones in the American West. He demonstrates how the discovery of the behemoths coincided with the rise of capital-rich industrialists searching for ways to entrench themselves and their monopolistic ventures in an unequal but economically booming society. Capitalism and science overlapped as wealthy benefactors funded paleontologists' work and the erection of natural history museums, transforming dinosaurs into popular symbols of American economic might in the process.

Rieppel's source-rich text is at its best when foregrounding the role of human imagination in the capitalist-backed study and display of dinosaurs. In each chapter, he explores how relationships between industrial benefactors, paleontologists, and museum directors informed persistent cultural representations of dinosaurs. Patrons of every social station found entertainment in newly-erected dinosaur halls. However, these exhibits also deeply engaged expressions of American national pride. In the five decades after Reconstruction, the United States' "industrial elite were quick to embrace dinosaurs as their nation's most iconic extinct creatures" (6). The excavated fossils of dinosaurs from the continental U.S. dwarfed their international peers. The American reptiles' towering stature—which was often exaggerated in museum displays—mirrored the country's newfound place in the global economic order of the late nineteenth century. The Second Industrial Revolution catapulted the United States' production of textiles and other goods above those of the world powers, including Great Britain. While new-money names like Rockefeller and Carnegie commanded respect beyond the young nation's shores, budding elites felt the need to justify their meteoric accumulation of wealth at home and abroad. Funding the display of eye-catching, but scientifically informed, prehistoric beasts in the United States ensured the positive attention of privileged and pedestrian audiences alike. Upper-class Americans welcomed the erection of cultural and academic institutions that rivaled competitors in Europe. Capitalists also used fossils to project American economic power overseas. Industrialists, including America's most "famous steel magnate," bankrolled and donated cast-copies of rare and valuable fossils to exhibit in galleries around the world (73). Rieppel effectively demonstrates how *Diplodocus carnegii* and other

extinct species broadcast the towering success of American capitalism in the grand, respectable halls of museums.

Centering the imaginative construction of dinosaurs also earns Rieppel a significant contribution to the historiography of American capitalism. In contrast to scholars who mostly characterized capitalist economies as “especially future-oriented,” Rieppel argues that Gilded-Age industrialists latched onto dinosaurs as ancient “tool[s] to help naturalize the evolution of capitalism” (10-12). While paleontologists and archeologists invented the concept of “deep time” to “begin writing a history of the earth itself,” capitalists posited their own “evolutionary narrative” to explain how “cutthroat competition of the deep past gave way to more enlightened modernity, as intelligent mammals—including early hominids—put the struggle for existence behind them and began to cooperate for the greater good” (10). In their own time, philanthropy signified the next stage of American capitalism as turn-of-the-century capitalists funded universities, libraries, and the very natural history museums that housed dinosaur displays, which became as much products of capitalism as futuristic technologies and economic inequalities. In each of his roughly-chronological chapters, Rieppel shows how defenders of American capitalism grounded their ideas in remains of the deep past and promises for the distant future.

By its conclusion, *Assembling the Dinosaur* leaves readers wondering what other scientific fields and discoveries are touched by capitalism, particularly those that historically centered around another symbol of the United States’ West: Native Americans. Anthropology is largely absent from Rieppel’s book; however, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century contributors to the field also excavated ancient indigenous artifacts and human remains for wealthy benefactors. These scholars and their supporters situated Native Americans within a long narrative that culminates with the ascendancy of superior and industrious white men.¹ Comparing Rieppel’s history with the collection and exhibition of Native American artifacts and remains could reveal connections between race, imperialism, science, and capitalism in the Long Gilded Age. Regardless of the studies that may follow *Assembling the Dinosaur*, Rieppel’s book offers a new perspective on American capitalism by examining the world’s oldest, and possibly most mesmerizing, giants.

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¹ For a larger discussion of progress narratives in the work of nineteenth-century anthropologists, see John S. Haller, Jr., “Race and the Concept of Progress in Nineteenth Century American Ethnology,” *American Anthropologist* 73, no. 3 (1971): 710-724. By the early twentieth century, most American anthropologists continued describing non-white subjects as inferiors despite attempts to ground their analyses in more scientific approaches. For an example, see Rose A. Palmer, *The North American Indians: An Account of the American Indians North of Mexico, Compiled from the Original Sources*, vol. 4 of 12 in the *Smithsonian Scientific Series*, ed. Charles Greeley Abbot (New York: Smithsonian Institution Series, Inc., 1929). This tendency was not unique to American Anthropology. Anthropologists in Europe also situated white men at the top of a racialized and gendered hierarchy of human civilization. For an example of scholarship on European progress narratives in Anthropology, see H. Glen Penny, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).