

THE IMPACTS OF RAILROADS ON AMERICAN SOCIETY IN FRANK NORRIS'

THE OCTOPUS

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Abstract

*This paper in an attempt to see the impact of railroad as the most effective means of transportation on American society in the last three decades of the 19th century as it is reflected in the American novel entitled *The Octopus*. This is a library research orienting in the relationship between the work and the era in which it is written. Applying a mimetic approach and using available written data sources, this research seeks to raise 2 issues, namely (1) what was the socio-economic impact of the railroad on society in that era, and (2) what was the political impact of the railroad on society in that era. The result shows that the railroad exerts great impacts on the socio-economic and political life of American society in general and farmers in particular. The railroad is abused by the owners, the trusts and their conspirators to be the profitable money-making machine without considering its socio-economic function as public carriers. In their attempt to gain more profit, the owners and the trusts engage in political affairs by purchasing legislatures that accordingly all economic policy will benefit them while victimizing the weak such laborer and farmers.*

Key words : railroad, socio-economic and political impact, farmer, economic policy

Introduction

In three decades after the Civil War the United States was transforming itself from a predominantly rural agrarian society into a highly industrialized and urbanized one (Friedle&Brinkley 3). New inventions and technological advances encouraged the rapid growth of industry and manufactures; and there emerged “the captain of industry” and “the lord of finance.”

Equally lucrative to the development of industrialism was the government's attitude toward business. There were no sweeping investigations of business' practices, no legislation to protect labor and consumers, and no effective regulatory commission or

laws (Santis 239). In fact, the economic system victimized the weak such as farmers and laborers while benefiting industrial, railroad and banking interest (Kerber 210)

As the society became more and more industrialized, the need for effective means of transportation became urgent. Geographical condition placed the railroad to be the most effective means of transportation at the time. The railroad, then, “was the maker of millionaires” (Kennedy& Bailey 510). The effectiveness of the railroad as a means of transportation and a source of fortune, soon exerted great impacts on the society amongst of which in their socio-economic and political lives.

Literary works could serve as mental evidence of what happen in society. *The Octopus* which was written by Frank Norris in 1901 was taken as the primary data. Written in the end of the nineteenth century, *The Octopus* is supposed to mirror the current issue at the time. Norris vividly poses the characters as the representative of the conflicting groups at the time: farmers vs. industrialists. This research seeks to raise 2 issues, namely (1) what was the socio-economic impact of the railroad on society in that era, and (2) what was the political impact of the railroad on society in that era

Method of Research

This is a library research in which all data is obtained from written data sources that are already available, especially those related to the railroad industry and its impact on American society in the last three decades of the 19th century.

The Octopus is taken as the main resources because as it is mentioned by Abrams (1971) literary works have a subject which, directly or deviously, is derived from

existing things - to be about, or signify, or reflect something which either is, or bears some relation to, an objective state of affairs.

In this respect, Michel Zerraffia (1973) said that there is an interrelationship amongst novels, society, and history. The form and the content of the novels derive more closely from social phenomenon and they seem to bound up with particular moments in the history of the society. Meanwhile Horton and Edwards (1974) stated that literature tends to reflect the dominant tendencies of its era. Frank Norris in “The Responsibilities of the Novelists asserted that the novelists must deal with ”elemental forces, motives that stir the whole nations.” Further he expressed that the social tendencies must be expressed by means of an analysis of the characters of the men and women who compose the society... (Qtd in Parrington 329)

Analysis

A. Socio-economic Impacts of the Railroad

While enhancing the success of westward movement, uniting the whole American physically, accelerating the growth of industry and opening the national market for the abundant natural resources of America, the railroad was an octopus the tentacles of which were able to grip firmly and brought about changes in American society. *The Octopus* depicts that the tentacles of the railroad grip nearly all layers of society such as farmers, laborers, members of legislature, judges, journalists, gunmen and marshals, and even artists. Being a representative of the railroad, Behrman involves himself in many wicked deeds:

“If there is dirty work to be done in which the railroad doesn’t wish to appear it is S Behrman who does it. If the freight rates are to be ‘adjusted’ to squeeze us a little harder, it is S Behrman who regulates what we can stand. If there is a judge to be bought, it is S Behrman who does bargaining. If there is a jury to be bribes, it is S Behrman who handles the money. If there is an election to be jobbed, it is S Behrman who manipulates it (82)

The railroad exerts great grievances on both small and big farmers in dealing with the cultivation of the new land, the matters of freight rate and in the ownership of the lands. In cultivating and improving the new lands, the farmers need modern agricultural equipment from the East which should be taken to the West by means of the railroad. The availability of the equipment influences the process of cultivation. If the equipment is not available when it is needed, it will affect the process. This happens to Harran and Magnus. “They had been behindhand all the time.” As a result, the seeding on Los Moertos has to be conducted hastily and they have not yet been able to make up the time lost at the beginning of the season. They have to wait for so long for the arrival of the plows.

The lateness of the delivery of the plows is due to the bureaucratic freight regulation adopted by the railroad. For the interest of the railroad, the freight coming from the eastern which points to the state has to go first to one of their common points and be reshipped from there. In the case of Magnus, even though the plows have already been in Bonneville, he has not been able to get them. They have to go to San Francisco first.

Such practice victimizes the farmers because beside the fact that they have to postpone the cultivation, they have to pay the rate much more than they have to. The following statement shows vividly the situation:

Here we bring our plows from the East over your lines, but you're not content with your long-haul rate between eastern points and Bonneville and San Francisco, and return... Here's a load of stuff for Bonneville, where it is consigned, but has got to go to San Francisco first by the way of Bonneville, at forty cents per ton, and then be reshipped from San Francisco back to Bonneville again at fifty-one cents per ton, the short-haul rate. And we have to pay it all or go out. Here were the plows right here, in sight of the land they have got to be used on, and the season just ready for them, and we can't touch them (56).

The problem of the freight rate occurs not only in the delivery of the equipment from the East but also in the delivery of the product to the East. Believing that the railroad would not tax small business like the hops, Dyke risks his savings in hop growing. When the crop is flourishing, he borrows money from the railroad agent on a mortgage of both his crop and his small house. He begins his business with an unofficial "promise" from the railroad that the freight rate on his hop would be two cents a pound. When Dyke is going to send the hops to the buyers, however, he is told that the rate has been advanced to five cents, ruining his business and life

As for the ownership of the lands, the farmers have to suffer from the power of the railroad. Weaponed with the Government land grant, the Pacific and Southwestern

Railroad distributes circulars throughout the state and invites the settlement. The circular declares that at the time patents have not been issued, but as soon as the land is patented, the railroad will grade it in the value of the land without improvements and offer it for sale with the preference to the first occupants. The price of these lands are not uniform. They are offered from \$2.50 up to \$10.00 per acre. The circulars invite eastern farmers who soon improve the lands, build houses, dig irrigation ditches and cultivate wheat. “Soon everything changes. And California suddenly leaped unheralded into the world’s market as a competitor in wheat production (510).”

The farmers have to wait for the announcement of the fixed price and the patent of the lands for some eight years that owing to his improvement Annixter believes that he will be able to sell the land for fifteen dollars per acre. When the decision comes, however, the price is beyond their reach. It is sold for \$22 up to \$30 and the land is for sale to anyone. This means a ruin for them because’ “ there is no man in Bonneville rich enough to do it (344).”

In desperation the farmers form a league having two objects: first, to resist the attempted grabbing of their land by the railroad and second, to push forward their own secret scheme of electing a Board of Railroad Commissioners who should regulate wheat rates so as to favor the ranchers of San Joaquin (206). Their attempt, however, fails. The railroad creates dummy buyers to buy the land and win the suit to evict the farmers. The effort of the leaders of the league to stop the eviction results in their ruinous lives. The following passage shows the situation vividly:

Yes, the railroad had prevailed. The ranchers had been seized in the tentacles of the octopus; the iniquitous burden of extortionate freight rate had been imposed like a yoke of iron. The monster had killed Harran,... Osterman,... Broderson... It had beggared Magnus and had driven him to a state of semi-insanity after he had wrecked his honor in the vain attempt to do evil that good might come. It had enticed Lyman into its toils to pluck from him his manhood and his honesty, corrupting him and poisoning him beyond redemption. It had hounded Dyke from his legitimate employment and had made him a highwayman and criminal.; it has cast forth Mrs. Hooven to starve to death upon the city streets; it had driven Minna to prostitution...it had widowed Hilma....(457)

The tentacle of the railroad grips cruelly not only the farmers' lives but also their laborers. The position of the laborers in giant corporations is fragile. Individual workers are powerless to battle single-handedly against the giant industry. Yet, the idea to join a labor union will make them more powerless. The employers are able to lock their doors against rebellious workers and starve them to submission. They are also able to compel the rebellious workers to sign "ironclad oaths" or "yellow dog contracts" both of which serve as solemn agreements not to join a labor union. Furthermore, the employers are able to put the name of agitators on a "blacklist" and circulate it among fellow employers (Kennedy & Bailey 523).

Any attempt of the laborers to gain protection from the government would be in vain, because businessmen would bitterly oppose any attempt to improve the conditions of labor by legislation on the ground that it would interfere the economic system.

“Businessmen believed that they had alone had the right to determine terms and conditions of employment (Santis 250).

The Octopus depicts that laborers are subjugated to any policy of the railroad and any protests will result in their discharge. This happens to Dyke. He has worked for the railroad for over ten years and he always stands by the railroad whenever the labor strike occurs; yet, when the railroad experiences hard time and has a policy to cut the labor’s wages, the railroad cuts Dyke’s wage along with “men they had blacklisted.” When Dyke reminds them of his service during the strike, the company fires him. Upon Parsley’s remark that he could find other job in other railroad company, Dyke responds:” name one,” implying that all railroad companies will do the same.

Another example of the impact of the railroad on the society is the practice of the agent of the railroad to utilize certain fairs or festivals that are able to bring about benefit. Million-Dollar Fair and Flower Festival are projected by some artists to amuse people and at the same time to attract capitalists to be investors. The budget is presumed to be a million dollars. To attract the visitors there will be erected certain statues, and performed entertainments, amateur theatricals, and gingerbread fetes. While other capitalist like Cedarquist believes that such festivals will benefit only the artists and ruin the image of San Francisco businessmen in front of eastern capitalists, Shelgrim, in the name of the Pacific and Southwestern donates five thousand dollars in the hope that it will bring people to the city on the railroad and amuse people and by so doing, it will “distract their attention from the doing of his railroad (224).”

B. Political Impacts of the Railroad

The railroad exerts great impact not only on the socio-economic lives of the society but also on their political lives. Laissez faire demands the reduction of the role of the state in economic affairs and of the arbitrary power of the state; and it means that it will enlarge the role of individuals, enforce the private enterprises, and fostering competitive markets. Consequently, the private sector is able to serve as “ a check on the power of governmental sector (Freidman 3).”

Charles E. Lindblom in *The Policy-Making Process* (1980) gives a vivid example of such a consequence. He wrote that business sector has a particular position in the process of policy making of the government. Private enterprises have several important social functions such as the provider of means of transportation, housing, food and electricity; as the organizer of employment and free market; and as the runner of natural resources. Those functions are very important for the government. The failure of the private enterprises to execute their roles will undoubtedly influence the government. Economic chaos, for instance, will destroy the government. In making the policy, therefore, the government will inevitably consider the position and the interest of the private sector. Sometimes the government needs to give a special and official authority to certain corporations to carry out their roles. Realizing the significance of the transcontinental railroad as the most effective transportation at the time, for instance, the U.S. Congress was forced in 1862 and 1864 to make land grants and long-term loan available and appoint the Central Pacific as the corporation responsible for the western portion of the proposed rail line (Culver&Syer 26).

In *the Octopus*, Norris points out that as a bonus of the construction of the road, the national government had granted for the Pacific and Southern Railroad company the odd-numbered sections of land on either sides of the proposed line of route for a distance of twenty miles (73).

Lindblom further asserted that as the enterprises become more powerful, they tend to utilize their peculiar position to dominate the political affairs of the government. They realize that they are not the only power able to influence the government policy. The control of the regular vote-getting is another power. In order to reduce the control power of the vote-getting over the government policy, the private enterprises interfere and exert their influence on the voter. Sometimes they need to purchase the voters.

Culver&Syer, for instance, pointed out that the Big Four consisting of Leland Stanford, California Governor, U.S Senator, Collin P. Huntington, an adept lobbyist Mark Hopkins and Charles Crocker were thoroughly involved in politics at all levels of government. While Huntington sought favorable treatment for the corporation from the federal government, the political agents of the railroad were active at the state capitol of Sacramento and in county courthouses throughout the state. State party conventions were attended by delegates from localities; the agents, therefore, made any efforts to get the representatives supporting the Southern Pacific nominated to run for state offices (37). Responding to the vote of approval to add to the Constitution of 1879 a particular article dealing with corporations and railroads, the Big Four managed to urge the voters to deny ratification of the finished document and influence two of the three members of the state railroad commission. As a result the vote-getting turns to strengthen the peculiar position of the private enterprises; and “the entire machinery of regulation collapsed (41).

The purchase of railroad commission is reflected clearly in *The Octopus*. In order to counter the cruelty of the railroad, the farmers appoint Lyman Derrick to be a railroad commissioner who is able to help the farmers in the rate matter. At the same time, the railroad has chosen him as the chosen commissioner. Being an ambitious person Lyman eventually chooses to stand by the railroad which promises him to support his dream to be the governor: "...all that the railroad had done for Lyman, in order to attach him to their interests, is to promise to back him politically in the next campaign for Governor (321).

The influence of the railroad on political matters is also seen in the establishment of the Interstate Commerce Commission Act. This commission was established in 1887 to prohibit rebates and pools and require the railroad to publish their rate openly. It also forbade unfair discrimination against shippers and outlawed charging more for a short haul than for a long one over the same line. The most important thing is that it was set up to enforce and administer the new legislation. The commission, however, was judged by Rixhard Olney, one of the leading corporation lawyers, as one that "can be made of great use to the railroad... the part of the wisdom is not to destroy the Commission but to utilize in (Qtd in Kennedy&Bailey 512)."

Meanwhile Morrison in *The Oxford History of the American People* (1965) sees the court as the key. He asserted that administrative regulations were so foreign to the American conception of government that the federal courts insisted on their right to review orders of the Commission, and by denying its power to fix rate, emasculated the Act. So, the railroad continued to charge "all the traffic would bear."

In this respect *The Octopus* shows the combination of the two opinions above. It shows that the railroad utilizes both the Commission and the courts. The railroad purchases Lyman, providing that he could win the battle. In other occasion when Dyke finds out the rise of the freight rate on hops from two cents to five, he asks furiously, “What’s your basis of applying freight rate anyhow?” “What are you guided by?” In response to Dyke’s questions Behrman replies confidently: “All-traffic-will-bear (274).”

Another example is upon his friends’ idea to act against the railroad quickly, Annixter responds that they “can’t buck against the railroad” because “the railroad owns the courts and the Railroad Commission as well”. When Broderson mentions the existence of the Interstate Commerce Commission Annixters says: “Hoh, yes, the Interstate Commerce Commission,”...”That’s great, aintn’t it? The greatest Punch and Judy show on earth. It’s almost as good as the Railroad Commission. There never was and there never will be Californian Railroad Commission not in the pay of P. and S.W(79).”

Thus, any attempts to pose the railroad commissioners who are really concerned with the abuse of the railroad are hard to ferret out. The following passage shows such difficulty:

Yes, we will cut the rates... But... don’t expect too much. The man who, even after twenty years’ training in the operation of railroads, can draw an equitable, smoothly working schedule of freight rates between shipping point and common point, is capable of governing the United States. What with the main lines, and leased lines, and points of transfer, and the laws governing common carriers, and the rulings of Interstate Commerce Commission...And how can it be

expected that the railroad commissions who are chosen... from out of number of men who don't know the difference between a switching charge and a differential are going to regulate the whole business in six months' time (210-211)

III. Conclusion

Written at the fall of the nineteenth century, *The Octopus* depicts Norris's witness of the great impact of the most effective means of transportation-the railroad-on the socio-economic and political lives of American society. The concept of laissez faire enables the railroad corporations represented by their trusts to have monopoly forces that they are able to execute their domination easily. This concept reduces the government's power to rule the world of economy, industry and politics but makes the industrialists enable to dominate the social, economic and political affairs on American society.

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