The sense of conspiracy and secret scheming which transpire is almost uncanny. “Big business,” and its ruthless tentacles, have become the material for the feverish fantasy of illiterate thousands thrown out of kilter by the rack and strain of modern life.

Walter Lippmann, Drift and Mastery (1914)

If, however, we mean by this loose, elastic term “trust” as applied to the concentration of the “money power” that there is a close and well-defined “community of interest” and understanding among the men who dominate the financial destinies of our country and who wield fabulous power over the fortunes of others through their control of corporate funds belonging to other people, our investigators will find a situation confronting us far more serious than is popularly supposed to exist.

Samuel Untermyer, “Is There a Money Trust?” (1911)

The question of who or what controls the market became an increasingly pressing concern in the course of the nineteenth century. With alarming regularity, the United States was beset by financial panics that spread out from Wall Street—as well as State Street in Boston and La Salle Street in Chicago—and derailed the wider national and, often, global economy. These market-induced calamities created lengthy periods of deflation, anxiety, unemployment, bankruptcy, and ruin for ordinary Americans who were far removed from the goings-on of the stock and produce exchanges. Individuals found themselves caught up in inscrutable economic forces that they could neither picture in their mind’s eye nor control. The
cause of these cataclysmic events that seemed to come without warning evaded familiar modes of explanation, in both ordinary and elite circles. The rise and fall of prices had traditionally been explained with reference to the natural fluctuation of harvests, controlled by the unreadable hand of Providence, coupled with a moralized view of individual economic failure. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, many political economists on both sides of the Atlantic followed Adam Smith’s reformulation of the notion of Providence, seeing the work of a benevolent “invisible hand” in the overall financial life of a nation, a vision of coordination that emerged as if it had been planned, but the mysterious and unattributable genius of this lay in the supposed fact that the best outcome could emerge only if there was no central planning, in the form of either governmental regulation or other interference in the market.

Yet the panics of 1873, 1890, and 1907 (in particular)—and the harsh economic times they brought about—challenged both traditional religious accounts and Smithian forms of liberal neoprovidentialism. The rise of large business concentrations, along with a manifestly unjust distribution of goods, undermined a traditional faith in an invisible hand that benevolently provided order in the decentralized laissez-faire economy that privileged the rights of individual proprietors. If the market was like a self-regulating machine, many Americans wondered, why did it periodically seem to implode, causing disaster across the nation on a scale that was out of all proportion with what seemed to be the proximate causes in the intricate financial cogs and mechanisms of the stock exchanges? Many in the emerging profession of economics continued to insist that financial panics were aberrations, occasional interruptions in the otherwise intelligible operation of the economy, whose laws of supply and demand could now be explained by reference to mathematics and physics, rather than theological metaphors. Others, such as Arthur Hadley and Jeremiah Jenks, developed new theories of business cycles to explain how overproduction (and the economic chaos of falling prices it brought about) was not a failure of the normal equilibrium of supply and demand, but a predictable tendency of an economy increasingly dominated by vast corporations with fixed capital costs. The conclusion was often that ruinous overproduction could be avoided by embracing cooperation, and even monopoly, rather than competition. As we saw in chapters 2 and 3, the emerging genre of popular investment advice wavered between exogenous explanations of market movements that needed to be understood by studying trends of fundamental values within the wider economy and society, and endogenous accounts that began to find hidden patterns and rhythms by charting the very prices themselves. Manufacturers blamed excessive labor regulation and overproduction; workers, in turn, pointed to the unjust use
of antitrust legislation against labor, and the fact that mechanization was depressing wages. At the same time, other commentators turned to the emerging social sciences to provide a better explanation of economic panics, with early studies of the psychology and sociology of crowds, for example, accounting for the dizzying rapidity with which financial contagion seemed to spread. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, however, a number of other writers and political agitators claimed to find a hidden hand, rather than an invisible hand, at work in the market. Both Brahmins and farmers alike turned to the language of conspiracy to make sense of the chaotic progress of the financial markets in particular, and the American economy in general. The wild swings of the market were not simply the byproduct of a business cycle in the era of large industrial combinations, they argued, but the direct and deliberate result of secret manipulation by powerful forces in business and government.

This chapter analyzes a range of conspiracy-minded interpretations of financial capitalism from the 1870s to the early 1900s, viewing them not as merely misguided and erroneous beliefs, but as creative—if also somewhat contradictory—attempts to provide a mapping of Wall Street’s place in the American economy. The turn to what we would now label a conspiracy theory has long been derided as mistaken and delusional, if not actively paranoid. In *Drift and Mastery* (1914), for example, the young Walter Lippmann warned that the excessive fervor of conspiracy-minded muckraking might lead American society into a dangerous, rudderless drift in a world that modernity was making increasingly hard to comprehend:

> The sense of conspiracy and secret scheming which transpire is almost uncanny. ‘Big business,’ and its ruthless tentacles, have become the material for the feverish fantasy of illiterate thousands thrown out of kilter by the rack and strain of modern life. It is possible to work yourself into a state where the world seems a conspiracy and your daily going is beset with an alert and tingling sense of labyrinthine evil. Everything askew—all the frictions of life are readily ascribed to a deliberate evil intelligence, and men like Morgan and Rockefeller take on attributes of omnipotence, that ten minutes of sanity would reduce to a barbarous myth.

Although many historians have tended to follow Lippmann by viewing conspiracy-minded imaginings of the “money power” as the work of those at the intellectual or political fringes of American society, in contrast this chapter will argue that these accounts have much in common with the other emergent, vernacular forms of financial knowledge explored elsewhere in this book. In particular, conspiratorial interpretations of market activity in America’s Gilded Age and Progressive Era share a combination of personal and abstract registers with other genres.
The need to personify abstractions remained, long beyond the disenchantment of modernity. While these forms of lay economic analysis may be guilty of simplifying complex economic processes by reducing them to melodramas in which individual, villainous intention is the root cause of all social effects, they serve, at the same time, as sophisticated transcoding metaphors that rethink the relationship between impersonal structure and personal agency. Often they do so by creating personifications that function as human-scale proxies for the sublime unrepresentability of vast industrial combinations. The situation was complicated by the competing legal debates about corporate personality, combined with the emerging techniques of corporate public relations, which tried to personalize the soulless corporation. Many oppositional voices of different political stripes wanted—in the legal terminology of the period—to “pierce the corporate veil” in order to find out who was really behind the actions of faceless corporations, and to hold them accountable.

Many feared that the rise of the large industrial combinations would mean the demise of the republican promise of individualism, as both the small businessman and the farmer, on the one hand, and the lower-middle-class clerk on the other, were swept aside by the unrivalled power of the corporations and their bureaucratic systems. Others, however, worried that the corporations (and, indeed, the market itself) were the playthings of corrupt robber barons, able to pull the strings of the financial system. The question, for Populist agitators and Brahmin commentators alike, was whether the mass of entangled financial transactions that were increasingly being channeled through Wall Street and the nation’s other stock exchanges constituted a coherent system, and, if so, whether anyone was in control of it. Did the interconnecting network of plutocratic relationships constitute a financial conspiracy against the interests of the nation, or was what might look like a conspiracy to the uninitiated merely the unintentional but not unexpected outcome of a social class pursuing its own vested interests? Was there a plan behind the economic upheavals that beset the United States, or were they simply the result of the blind workings of the market? Was there a hierarchical chain of command, or did financial capitalism constitute a decentered and deterritorialized system—and, if so, how did agency emerge from the interplay of structural forces? Could corporations be thought of as having intentionality and, thus, a legal liability separate from the individuals who owned and directed them? Moreover, if there was something systematic at work, then how could or should it be represented, both in visual diagramming and in dramatic narratives?

The problem of a financial conspiracy in the age of the corporation thus presented an ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic problem. In the era of giant
pools, trusts, and corporations, the nature of agency, causality, and responsibility came under increasing scrutiny by legal and economic theorists and novelists, as well as ordinary farmers and political radicals. Looked at in one way, the modes of conspiratorial representation explored in this chapter failed to understand the nature of class privilege in seeking to pin the blame on a few individual, malevolent robber barons. Looked at in another way, however, these popular ways of explaining finance constituted an attempt to combine an understanding of both agency and structure, long before those social scientific terms had gained intellectual purchase. Often they did so by seeing structure as agency, and system as conspiracy, by personalizing the impersonal abstractions of economic theory.

This chapter begins by looking at early Gilded Age accounts of financial skullduggery, focusing in particular on the work of Charles Frances Adams regarding the corruption scandals of the Erie Railroad. It also reexamines some of the classic works of conspiracy-minded Populism from the 1890s, such as William H. “Coin” Harvey’s *Coin’s Financial School* and Sarah Emery’s *Seven Financial Conspiracies*. It contrasts these portrayals of conspiratorial causality with the view from probusiness apologists around the turn of the century, who argued that accounts of individual manipulation of the market were now outdated. The discussion also encompasses the changing meanings of conspiracy in legal and economic debates during that period concerning the regulation of large corporations and financial syndicates. The chapter then turns to the way in which popular and literary novels of the period explored the question of individual agency in the age of the impersonal trust, concentrating in particular on Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901). Finally, the chapter considers the investigation into the so-called money trust by the U.S. House of Representatives’ Pujo Committee in 1912–1913, discussing, in particular, a diagram produced by the investigation as one of a number of early attempts to provide a conspiratorial “cognitive mapping” of the uncharted landscape of financial capitalism.

**Chapters of Conspiracy**

It comes as little surprise that financial capitalism was viewed in the popular imagination through the lens of conspiracy theory in the late nineteenth century, because the years immediately following the Civil War were a golden age of actual Wall Street conspiracy. The corrupting influence of corporate finance over the government and legislatures was widely condemned at the time as the “great barbecue,” a shameful and dangerous moment in the history of the republic. A series of high-profile scandals and financial cataclysms shaped public perceptions of Wall Street for a generation: the gold conspiracy, the Crédit Mobilier,
the collapse of the Northern Pacific Railroad (which led to the implosion of Jay Cooke’s bank), and, the most sordid and long-running saga of them all, the Erie Railroad debacle. The tales of watered stock, bribed judges, and insider dealing carried out by Daniel Drew, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jim Fisk, and Jay Gould disgusted but also fascinated the reading public. The robber-baron directors of the Erie Railroad continually plundered its assets for their own personal gain, all with the connivance of their paid political hirelings. Drew started it off in the 1850s by using inside information gained from his position as a director to wager on the railroad’s stock; indeed, his main reason for buying his way into a directorship seems to have been the profit that could be derived from insider trading, rather than any long-term business interest in the company as such. Likewise, Vanderbilt became involved in the Erie Railroad not because it was a good prospect (it was, in fact, notoriously run down), but because it would help him establish a monopoly over railroads into New York, and thus enable him to corner the market and push up the share prices without hindrance. Drew, now joined by Fisk and Gould, prevented the Vanderbilt takeover by endlessly printing worthless new stock certificates. Both sides then resorted to rampant bribery of the judges and senators in the state capital, Albany. The combatants wanted control of the company, either in order to exploit inside knowledge for their personal gain in the stock market, or to create a stranglehold on railway traffic into New York and thus skew the market.

Although the beginnings of popular involvement in the securities market began with Jay Cooke’s promotion of Union bonds during the Civil War, the flood of revelations about financial corruption in newspapers and popular periodicals in the 1860s and 1870s frightened off many ordinary, would-be investors for a generation. By the 1880s, however, those stories of skullduggery and intrigue had become part of Wall Street lore, constituting the mythological origins of “the Street” that were endlessly recounted in popular compendia and memoirs, such as those published by William Fowler and Henry Clews. While critics saw the entire financial system as immoral, Wall Street insiders often used the tales of past excesses to emphasize, by way of contrast, the professionalism of the current practitioners of speculation. Indeed, as Richard R. John has demonstrated, far from being confined to later and more-radical sources, the term “robber baron” was used within the business community as early as the 1880s, to stigmatize Jay Gould as acting beyond the pale of proper business conduct.

All the scandals during this period of Wild West lawlessness on Wall Street revolve around the corrupt relationship between government and business, highlighting the fact that the market was far from being the self-regulating realm de-
scribed by laissez-faire economic theorists who argued for the reduction of state interference. Before New Jersey and Delaware changed their laws in the 1890s to make incorporation less restricted, corporations were creatures of the state, granted charters to raise capital for carrying out large, public infrastructure projects (and were thus considered by legal theorists, in the parlance of the day, as “artificial entities”). As the scandals made clear, governmental largesse was at the heart of much corporate activity, either legally, in the form of licensed monopolies, vast land grants, and generous federal subsidies to the railroads, for example, or, illegally, through the repeated buying of legislative and judicial favors. Most of the critical attacks on this system of corruption focused on the individual, whether literally, in the guise of a particular larger-than-life robber baron, or symbolically (as we saw in chapter 3), with the satirical anthropomorphization of corporate officers and political officials as fat cats, bears, octopuses, and so on. The potentially impenetrable activity of corporate finance was turned into a human melodrama, with the Erie Railroad itself popularly dubbed “the Scarlet Woman of Wall Street.”

While many critical commentators at that time saw the wild fluctuations merely as an occasional manipulation of the market by powerful individuals, others considered conspiratorial treachery to be part of a systemic pattern of corruption. For example, in 1871, the brothers Charles Francis Adams and Henry Adams (grandsons of John Quincy Adams) published *Chapters of Erie and Other Essays*, an exhaustive and damning indictment of the Erie Railroad machinations and the gold conspiracy, among other events. As pillars of the Boston establishment, the Adams brothers were not the typical wild-eyed, socially marginal conspiracy theorists later condemned by Lippmann. (Indeed, the Adams brothers feared the erosion of what they saw as the benign, paternalist influence of the gentry class in the face of the rise of the masses from below and the vulgar greed of the new corporate leaders from above.) “The stock exchange revealed itself as a haunt of gamblers and a den of thieves,” Charles Francis Adams acidly noted, and “the offices of our great corporations appeared as the secret chambers in which trustees plotted the spoliation of their wards.” Furthermore, “the law became a ready engine for the furtherance of wrong, and the ermine of the judge did not conceal the eagerness of the partisan; the halls of legislation were transformed into a mart in which the price of votes was higgled over, and laws, made to order, were bought and sold while under all, and through all, the voice of public opinion was silent or was disregarded.” Adams saw the episodes as part of a larger system of corruption, in which the virtues of republican government were in danger of being overwhelmed by the extraordinary influence
that large combinations could exert: “It tends always to development—always to consolidation—it is ever grasping new powers, or insidiously exerting covert influence. Even now the system threatens the government.”

At the same time, however, the system of corporate power was, in their eyes, worryingly concentrated in a few powerful hands. “The belief is common in America,” Adams noted, “that the day is at hand when corporations far greater than the Erie—swaying power such as has never in the world’s history been trusted in the hands of mere private citizens, controlled by single men like Vanderbilt, or by combinations of men like Fisk, Gould, and Lane . . . will ultimately succeed in directing government itself.” This combination of systematic corruption and enormous power in individual hands raised the specter of tyranny in American political and economic life: “As the Erie ring represents the combination of the corporation and the hired proletariat of a great city; as Vanderbilt embodies the autocratic power of Caesarism introduced into corporate life, and as neither alone can obtain complete control of the government of the State, it, perhaps, only remains for the coming man to carry the combination of elements one step in advance, and put Caesarism at once in control of the corporation and of the proletariat.” The pessimistic concern of these Brahmin commentators was that the only way to combat the antirepublican influence of industrial combinations was to grant equally undemocratic powers to the political executive.

For the Adams brothers, the discovery of a series of individual financial conspiracies was coupled with a tragic sense of the pervasive reach of systematic corruption. Individual acts of criminal activity were revealed to be behind the great affairs of Wall Street, yet, for the Adams brothers, the problem was not merely a case of a few bad apples. In their view, the end result of this betrayal of traditional, republican individualism would be the installation of a dictatorship of impersonal corporate capitalism—which, ironically, would place undue influence in the hands of a single titan. The Wall Street conspiracies they reported on were at one and the same time highly idiosyncratic yet also part of a more systemic reorganization of American political economy: “The stock exchange revealed itself as a haunt of gamblers and a den of thieves; the offices of our great corporations appeared as the secret chambers in which trustees plotted the spoliation of their wards; the law became a ready engine for the furtherance of wrong, and the ermine of the judge did not conceal the eagerness of the partisan.” Their analysis repeatedly combined a focus on individual agency and impersonal structure, and they developed a form of conspiracy rhetoric that went beyond the typical accusation of a hidden hand behind what might otherwise have seemed to be baffling financial events. It is thus not surprising that the Adams brothers were
uncertain as to how to represent what they had uncovered. “It is a new power,” they asserted, “for which our language contains no name. We know what aristocracy, autocracy, democracy are; but we have no word to express government by moneyed corporations.”

Populism and the Paranoid Style

If, from their lofty position, the Adams brothers were not quite able to name the problem, other, more demotic voices a generation later were less circumspect. Many Populist and other radical authors from the 1880s onward (reaching a crescendo in the run up to the presidential election of 1896) denounced what they saw as a conspiracy of the plutocratic class. In *The New Plutocracy*, for example, the Socialist writer John C. Reed warned that “while our people are nominally and seemingly self-governing, they are in reality governed by the private corporations mentioned, who fleece them on a most gigantic scale without their knowing it.” Reed presented a totalizing picture of the power of the plutocracy, asserting that, from the legislature to the press, and from the clergy and the universities, everything is under their control. He was concerned, however, not merely to depict an abstract system of power, but to expose the actual conspirators who, in his view, had been manipulating events behind the scenes. “At the proper place in this work,” he warned, “we must drag these lurking wirepullers into the sunlight.” Like other Populist and radical writers, Reed found the key for much of what was wrong with contemporary America in the convoluted details of postbellum monetary policy. For Reed, as for so many other writers of that period, all present-day woes were ultimately traced back to the “crime of ’73,” in which the forces of plutocracy had supposedly conspired to bring about the demonetization of silver.

The endlessly repeated accusation was that the Coinage Act of 1873—which had uncontroversially confirmed in law the everyday reality that silver coins had dropped out of circulation—had, in fact, been part of a larger, secret plan by the vested interests of eastern capital to return the United States to the gold standard after its temporary experiment with fiat notes (greenbacks) during the Civil War. The story usually revolved around the rumor that British banker Ernest Seyd—in some versions, at the behest of imagined arch-conspirators, such as the Rothschilds, in particular, or the so-called international Jewish banking cabal, in general—had arrived in the United States with a briefcase full of dollars to bribe congressmen into passing this piece of legislation. In the eyes of many Populist commentators, the crime of ’73 ultimately had the effect of promoting the interests of wealthy eastern capitalists at the expense of the debtor class in the west. It
was undoubtedly a conspiracy theory, and a fairly simple-minded one at that, but it was also connected to a wider, political-economic analysis of the relationship between class power and the technocratic details of monetary policy:

Thus did the plutocrats of finance demonetize silver. Now that they have in the last two presidential elections struck down finally, as it seems to them, all serious popular resistance, they but sneer and scoff when one mentions the crime of 1873. That does not wipe it out. It is the blackest forgery, the basest example of crimen falsi in human annals. The perfidy and turpitude of those who deliberately deceived congress and the president in consummation of their plot of years to sell their own countrymen to foreigners are matched only in Benedict Arnold and Iago. It behooves all who love the right and the land of their fathers to keep this most gigantic of all the many monetary treacheries in the unfading and unforgiving memory of the American people.20

For Reed, as for other Populist and radical agitators, bringing to light the details of this supposed primal act of financial conspiracy was vital to any Progressive project. Even if the specific details of the allegation turned out to be false, the conspiratorial focus on individual decisions made by bankers and politicians that shaped the market to benefit a particular class provided an important counter-weight to the laissez-faire insistence that economic arrangements were immutable states of nature.

As Reed’s diatribe makes clear, those who would expose what they believed to be a conspiracy were well aware that their critics would “sneer and scoff” at them. In his seminal analysis of the “paranoid style in American politics,” Richard Hofstadter famously viewed such Populist denunciations of conspiracy as the sign of a delusional mindset that crops up repeatedly in American history, albeit only among the poorly educated and ill-informed on the margins of power, who fail to understand what he regarded as the strength of the American political system’s “usual methods of political give-and-take,” in contrast to the more bitter and bloody ideological conflicts in Europe.21 For Hofstadter, conspiracy theorists are prone to seeing the world in Manichean, apocalyptic, suspicious terms, convinced that grand conspiracies provide the “motive force” of historical causation. At the same time, however, the heated rhetoric and lurid psychosexual projections of imagined enemies are, in this analysis, wedded to a pedantic obsession with the minutiae of spuriously footnoted evidence. According to Hofstadter, the tendency of the paranoid style to see individual causes behind impersonal historical processes means that conspiracy theorists are guilty of creating a simplistic and seductive appeal to the masses. Even allowing for the fact that conspiracism oc-
curs repeatedly throughout American history, Hofstadter noted that “it remains true that Populist thought showed an unusually strong tendency to account for relatively impersonal events in highly personal terms.” There was “something about the Populist imagination,” Hofstadter noted, “that loved the secret plot and the conspiratorial meeting. There was in fact a widespread Populist idea that all American history since the Civil War could be understood as a sustained conspiracy of the international money power.” If only intellectuals are familiar with “impersonal explanations” for troubling events, then, for Hofstadter, it follows that the paranoid style will be popular among uneducated and suspicious farmers who are far from the centers of power: “Populist thought often carries one into a world in which the simple virtues and unmitigated villainies of a rural melodrama have been projected on a national and even an international scale.”

Most controversially, Hofstadter saw in Populism the potential roots of modern mass political demagoguery, which had, at the time he first began to formulate these ideas in the mid-1950s, recently manifested itself in the form of McCarthyism. In making the implicit connection between Populism and McCarthyism (and, later, the rise of Goldwater conservatism), Hofstadter’s analysis of the paranoid style served to delegitimize forms of radical dissent by tarring them with the brush of irrational—and mainly right-wing—extremism. Significantly, Hofstadter also found many Populist exponents of the paranoid style guilty of knee-jerk “rhetorical antisemitism.” In sum, Hofstadter argued that the Populist and radical writers of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era were too eager to blame easy scapegoats for economic woes that were more complex. And yet, before the emergence of the professional social sciences around the turn of the twentieth century, alternative explanations for financial calamities were not necessarily any more sophisticated or accurate than the Populist conspiracy theories.

Nevertheless, Hofstadter’s focus on the symbolic dimensions of political rhetoric still has much to commend it, especially when reading classic texts such as the Omaha Platform of the Populist Party, written by Ignatius Donnelly, with its accusation that, with the demonetization of silver, a “vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world.” Hofstadter’s implicit dismissal of much of the Populist rhetoric as merely delusional, however, fails to understand the wider significance of conspiracy theory as a form of economic analysis during that period. As we have seen, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, conspiracist interpretations of corporate malfeasance that accounted for “relatively impersonal events in highly personal terms” were not confined to those from the backwaters, but were also deployed by Brahmin commentators such as the Adams brothers, whose genteel
way of life and traditional sense of noblesse oblige seemed equally redundant in the brave new world of corporate conglomerations. Furthermore, it is arguable that conspiratorial antisemitism, although pervasive in much Populist writing, did not greatly influence American policy or action; it was often merely an unthinking evocation of centuries-old diatribes against usury. In many cases, the ultimate enemy is identified as the antidemocratic forces of the aristocracy in general and often, specifically, the British—with the Rothschilds scoring the trifecta of being Jewish, British, and aristocratic.28

Even some of the texts that serve as Hofstadter’s main examples, such as Sarah Emery’s Seven Financial Conspiracies and William H. Harvey’s Coin’s Financial School, are not as delusional as Hofstadter—and critics from their own era—accused them of being. Although Emery, for example, rehashes the old canard about Seyd’s supposed plan to influence the passage of the Coinage Act of 1873, her analysis focuses more squarely on the underlying historical pattern of laws passed in the interests of the financial elite, underpinned by her conviction that the evidence is hidden in plain sight in the public record—if you know what you are looking for. In focusing on the broader legislative framework, rather than condemning individual bankers, her pamphlet thus constitutes more of a hybrid form of conspiratorial political economy than simply the delusional scapegoating of Jewish financiers and their stooges in Congress. Emery’s starting point is the economic misery and increasing inequality that devastated the lives of many ordinary Americans in the 1870s and again in the 1890s, each time as a result of a financial collapse that began among the elite on Wall Street. For Emery, traditional explanations of hard times in terms of natural disaster, or the will of Providence, or immoral greed on the part of the bankrupt are inadequate, but so, too, is the emerging social scientific view of impersonal economic forces, such as overproduction or excessive competition. Instead, she traces the deep historical causation of class divisions to a systematic pattern of political corruption.29 Unlike the incendiary accusations of the Omaha Platform, Emery’s widely distributed and much reprinted pamphlet (at least 400,000 copies were produced) provides an account that is enormously detailed in its financial and legislative analysis, even if the ultimate conclusion readers took from it was that the nation’s recent economic policies had served to promote the vested interests of the moneyed elite.30 “Murder, insanity, suicide, divorce, drunkenness, and all forms of immorality and crime have increased from that day to this in the most appalling ratio,” Emery insisted. “Every result is produced from certain causes, and it is certain that no more like begets like than that the increase of misery and crime in our country are the direct results of evil legislation.”31
Like Emery’s tract, Coin’s Financial School (1894) is remarkably detailed in its discussion of technical monetary policy, which is somewhat surprising, given that this pamphlet was a wildly popular success, selling over a million copies. A Mississippi congressman noted that “a little free silver book called ‘Coin’s Financial School’ is being sold on every railroad train by the newsboys and at every cigar store.” Although the book is structured as a public lecture, with personalized, ad hominem ripostes to his audience, it is not a simple-minded attack on individual bankers per se, but on the system of capitalism that promoted greed and hard-wired economic injustice into society. Even if “Coin” Harvey’s interpretations of monetary theory are idiosyncratic at best, he provided a welcome rejoinder to the conventional laissez-faire wisdom that the market is a neutral and self-regulating ecosystem governed by the impersonal laws of economic competition. He insisted instead that the financial arrangements of a nation are always connected to class interests. Furthermore, his faith in the intrinsic value of silver is not, in itself, ultimately any more irrational than the goldbugs’ unswerving addiction to the gold standard. In any case, his position on silver is based less on a metaphysical credo in the inherent properties of the metal than on a strategic recognition of its current political utility. Although a bimetallist at heart, he is willing to countenance the adoption of greenbacks.

Even if the details of some of Harvey’s economic interpretation are ultimately misguided, what remains striking about the work is the way in which it brings together abstract analysis with a variety of representational modes aimed at making his points more concrete, personal, and, thus, comprehensible to a lay audience. For example, Harvey includes in his lecture a handy illustration of how many gold and silver coins fit into one cubic foot, to give his audience a rough handle on large numbers and thus make the financial abstraction imaginable on a human scale. In addition to the dialogical and dramatic nature of the imaginary lectures, the inclusion of cartoons is, as we saw in chapter 3, in keeping with many other popular attempts from that period to make finance intelligible to a nonspecialist audience. The metaphor of the invisible hand, for example, is given a literal twist in a cartoon depicting the hand of a banker pulling the string that winds up the mental cogs within the mind of the “average business man.” Although this satirical drawing provides a crude and conspiratorial suggestion that bankers control business, it also evokes a model of ideological influence and coordination that questions the naive faith in an invisible hand providing benevolent order to the selfish chaos of business activity.

The book contains other literalizations of economic metaphors, such as a cartoon personifying the assassination of silver; or a depiction of a massive hand
with a sponge of debt soaking up the productive money of the west; or a drawing in which the invisible hand of supply and demand is made visible and tangible as it manipulates the ratio between gold and silver. Following in the footsteps of Irving Fisher’s 1892 dissertation on economics (though it is highly unlikely that Harvey was aware of it), *Coin’s Financial School* also includes a diagram of free coinage as a pipe connecting two reservoirs of gold and silver, providing a hydraulic analogy for financial movements, albeit vastly less complex than Fisher’s machine. If Harvey’s cartoon of the Rothschilds—as an octopus spanning the world—at first sight merely repeats the familiar anthropomorphmatic and antisemitic image of Jewish financial influence, it also suggests a slightly more nuanced interpretation of global economics in its depiction of the octopus’s tentacles as arteries through which capital flows from the core to the periphery in the British Empire. *Coin’s Financial School* thus makes finance seem personal and homely, and yet, at the same time, presents it as an entire system. The book struggles to create a mode of presentation that can hold these two seemingly incompatible perspectives in one single view. This enormously influential tract therefore cannot be dismissed as merely delusional, not least because many of Harvey’s opponents emulated his innovative approach to popular financial literacy.

**The Impossibility of Conspiracy**

It was not only later commentators, such as Lippmann and Hofstadter, who dismissed the conspiratorial turn in popular accounts of the market. By the 1880s, Wall Street apologists and the emerging profession of economics had begun to insist that the vernacular view of market manipulation was outdated, because simple conspiracies were no longer possible. For example, in an article in the middle-class magazine *Arena*, which was more a public relations exercise than an objective portrait, the Wall Street grandee Henry Clews looked back with a certain nostalgia on the days of the daring exploits of the robber barons:

> The corners in Harlem, Hudson, Erie, and Northwest, in which Vanderbilt, Drew, and Gould achieved such successes for themselves and their associates, have passed into history as a conspicuous portion of the great events of Wall Street. Their interest is chiefly historical, because of late years no comprehensive corners have been organized. Share capitals are so large that it is difficult for one man to control any one of them, and a divided corner is apt to fail. But in their day and generation they have offered brilliant illustrations of genius and strategic skill in financial warfare.

While conceding that market-manipulating conspiracies might have played a part in the more lawless era of Wall Street chicanery, Clews is keen to suggest
that they are no longer even possible, because the market has now reached a high degree of complexity and professionalism. This position was, no doubt, self-serving and not a little hypocritical (Clews himself was accused of contravening NYSE rules by advertising for customers), but it captures an increasingly influential idea: the market was becoming too big to be moved by a lone trader or a small cabal, whether in secret or out in the open. In another editorial, Clews insists that it is impossible for such a large group of men to deal with one another on Wall Street on anything other than “principles of fair dealing and equity”; he observes that a “conspiracy to cheat must always be confined to a small number” (416), suggesting that popular fears that the entire financial system is to blame are misguided. The stock exchange apologist William C. Van Antwerp likewise asserted sanguinely that the era of robber-baron skullduggery was long since gone, leaving the market to the “way of natural supply and demand”:

The questionable practices in Wall Street which started all this hubbub, and which were a natural and human accompaniment of the slowly developed technique of this or any other business, have now been effectually stopped. It has been a very long time, for example, since Jay Gould ran his printing-press for Erie certificates, and that incident cannot possibly happen again. The Keene type of manipulator has gone, never to return. “Corners,” too, have seen their last day on ’Change, and so have other artificial impediments in the way of natural supply and demand. It has been years since the Cordage scandal, and the Hocking Coal incident marked the end of that form of manipulation. Yet there are persons who talk of these things as though they were daily occurrences, overlooking the fact that the New York Stock Exchange, by its own efforts, put a stop to the evils complained of, and will never tolerate their return.

In a similar fashion, but from a different institutional perspective, Henry Emery, in his trail-blazing 1896 economics treatise on speculation, argued that the notion of the market being able to be controlled or cornered by a small conspiracy of powerful interests was fundamentally misguided, because share ownership was no longer confined to a handful of insiders. Emery sternly warns against “the greatest evil of speculation,” namely, “the reckless participation in the market by the outside public.” He admits, however, that widening participation in the stock market, in theory, is a good thing, because “the more buyers and sellers the less likelihood, in the long run, of wide fluctuations,” and, more importantly, “manipulation in a wide and active market is probably more difficult than in a narrow market.” The market now needed to be recognized as a vast aggregation of individual transactions, and it was becoming the impersonal mech-
anism for determining prices and allocating resources that theoretical economic models assumed. “Many of the most active securities represent capital of such enormous proportions, and so widely distributed, as to make individual control . . . impossible,” Emery notes. “No corner . . . could occur in such securities.” Emery argues that, unlike the situation in medieval Europe, when it was actually possible for an individual or a clique to manipulate the price of a commodity by buying up and physically hoarding it, in the brave new world of futures trading in the Chicago pits, the speculator could only manage to corner a particular subset of contracts for future delivery, not the actual commodity. For Emery, small-scale manipulations are part of the normal and proper process of establishing the collective wisdom of prices in the market, and the vast accumulation of such trades on an hour-by-hour basis is precisely what makes large-scale manipulation impossible. “In a sense,” he concludes, “all speculation is manipulation.” Although Emery does not state it in these terms, his underlying assumptions are that the market knows best, that the market cannot be beaten, and that prices will ultimately reflect fundamental values. While it has some similarities to the efficient market hypothesis that came to dominate academic discussions of finance from the 1960s on, the implication of Emery’s analysis is that the knowledge and agency of the market itself trumps that of any individual, no matter how powerful. Although Emery and other probusiness commentators insisted that speculation was best left to professionals, who could correctly price and shoulder risk, they also recognized that the increasing democratization of stock market participation would, in theory, ensure that manipulation of the market by cliques of insiders was a thing of the past; therefore, Populist conspiracy theories were hopelessly misguided.

The foolishness of those who thought that they had found the secret to what was really going on in Wall Street is likewise given typically short shrift by Edwin Lefèvre in his short story, “The Tipster,” which tells of a naive young man who is convinced that a mysterious “they” control the market:

Shortly after he left Smithers he buttonholed another acquaintance, a young man who thought he knew Wall Street, and therefore had a hobby—manipulation. No one could induce him to buy stocks by telling him how well the companies were doing, how bright the prospects, etc. That was bait for “suckers,” not for clever young stock operators. But any one, even a stranger, who said that “they”—the perennially mysterious “they,” the “big men,” the mighty “manipulators” whose life was one prolonged conspiracy to pull the wool over the public’s eyes—“they” were going to “jack up” these or the other shares, was welcomed and his advice acted
upon. Young Freeman believed in nothing but “their” wickedness and “their” power to advance or depress stock values at will. Thinking of his wisdom had given him a chronic sneer.45

Although writers like Emery and Lefèvre decried the naivety of conspiracy interpretations of market movements, their own position was predicated on an equally dubious Panglossian faith that the market, if left to professionals rather than bungling amateurs, would miraculously regulate itself. They ignored not only the stark reality that individual manipulation of the market continued to play a part, but also the increasingly apparent conclusion that the operation of the stock and produce exchanges was skewed toward predictable class interests.

Some probusiness writers made similar arguments, positing that the socialization of ownership brought on by corporate shareholding gave the lie to muckraking accusations about powerful individuals manipulating the market behind the scenes. As we saw in chapter 3, in the postbellum period, both critics and apologists alike tended to identify particular corporations visually with the charismatic individuals who had created them, seeing either the visible hand of Napoleonic genius or the sinister hand of conspiracy. By the 1890s, early efforts at antitrust legislation had begun to warn of the danger of vast, superhuman entities crowding out small entrepreneurs and proprietors, with the impersonal corporations, not the charismatic proprietor, now constituting the real conspiracy. Yet those in favor of the Great Merger Movement argued that the dispersal of ownership through mass shareholding ensured that large industrial combinations and their influence over the market could no longer be regarded as a plutocratic conspiracy against the “little guy,” because ordinary folk were now the collective owners. For example, in his testimony before the U.S. Industrial Commission’s inquiry into trusts in 1900, Charles Flint insisted: “Never before was there such a wide distribution of manufacturing interests. The great bulk of the stock is held, not by the very rich, but by the moderately well-to-do. The control of the new system is not vested as it was under the old, in the hands of a few abnormally rich men, but it rests with the majority of stockholders, whose numerical strength is growing every day.”46 For Flint and other corporate advocates, the democratization of ownership—combined with what they saw as the increasing complexity of the channels of decision making and control within large, bureaucratic organizations—ensured that a simple model of market abuse under the sway of a conspiring robber baron no longer made sense. In this line of procorporate thinking, conspiracy theories were necessarily mistaken. Their opponents, however, insisted that the increasing size and complexity of corpo-
rate capitalism merely meant that conspiracies were far more dangerous, and far harder to detect.

**Conspiracy in Restraint of Trade**

Despite these emerging attempts to rethink the nature of individual agency in an era of increasingly collective organization, from the 1870s into the first decades of the twentieth century, large-scale combinations continued, for good or ill, to be viewed in both the popular and legal imaginations in terms of individual rights, sometimes as extensions of the will of singular “captains of industry.” As Rudolph Peritz comments: “Trusts and other large business enterprises were not the faceless conglomerates we perceive them to be today. Rather, they were associated with names, faces, and industries... And the personified corporation was not limited to popular culture. Among elites as well, bureaucratic institutions were imagined in human terms.”

The central issue was whether, in an increasingly interconnected economy, agency was always the result of individual, intentional action or whether it emerged—in a way that was hard to explain or represent or find morally accountable—from the corporation itself, as if it were a single person, and (more problematic still) from the interacting components of the entire corporate system.

This question was at the heart of legal debates over the definition of the crime of conspiracy in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. British common law, especially concerning labor combinations to raise wages, had traditionally viewed the very act of conspiring as illegal in itself, even if the planned actions (e.g., withdrawing one’s labor) were not a crime if carried out by an individual. American jurists, at least up until the 1890s, rejected this common law approach, insisting instead that it was the criminality of the acts carried out by a conspiracy that made them wrong, rather than their origin in a conspiracy, a position that was articulated most notably by Massachusetts Supreme Court Justice Lemuel Shaw in the *Commonwealth v. Hunt* decision of 1842. Price fixing and other “combinations in restraint of trade” on the part of business owners had also traditionally been viewed under British common law as wrongful conspiracies, but in the United States—at least until the emergence of antitrust legislation in the late nineteenth century—they were not considered illegal in their own right. At any rate, secret but voluntary agreements to carry out a conspiracy to skew the market were not contracts that could be enforced at law, so members of a conspiracy could not sue one another for failing to keep their private agreements. In addition to being regarded as operating within the legitimate realm of individual freedom of contract, price-fixing pools, or cartels (in the industrial sector), and the corner, or the...
stock flotation syndicate (in the realm of finance), were seen by their participants as legitimate solutions to the problem of falling profits amid what businessmen began to blame as ruinous and chaotic competition. What was regarded as sensible cooperation by some, however, was viewed as potentially damaging collusion by others, with an uneasy convergence of prolabor, antimonopoly critics on the one hand, and defenders of traditional values of free-market competition on the other.49

These modes of informal collusion were not formally regarded as criminal conspiracies, but the development of antitrust legislation, beginning with the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890, meant—at first—that all combinations in restraint of trade, whether cartel or trust or union, were deemed to be inherently illegal. The act reflected the still-dominant laissez-faire assumption that any concentration was an interference with the natural laws of free competition, and monopolistic power was only achievable through conspiracy or some other illegitimate manipulation. For the more conservative, literalist position (still in the majority in the U.S. Supreme Court in the early part of the 1890s) the aim was to outlaw all forms of combination or conspiracy in restrain of trade as inimical to free competition and, therefore, illegal per se. These antimonopolist critics insisted that the need for the state to intervene in the market and curtail individual freedom of contract in order to ensure competition trumped the traditional principles of free-market liberalism. All fixed prices, whether they benefited the public or not, were deemed to be wrong, because the aim was to protect “small dealers and worthy men” (in the much-repeated phrase of Supreme Court Justice Peckham’s opinion in the United States v. Trans-Missouri Freight Association case of 1897) from the unfair encroachment of big corporations. With the Addyston Pipe & Steel Company case (1899), however, the rule-of-reason faction began to dominate the judicial argument. The case before the U.S. Court of Appeals (Sixth Circuit) involved a deal among makers of cast-iron pipe not to bid competitively against one another in tendering for municipal business. Their defense was that such an agreement was necessary for them to make a reasonable profit. Judge Howard Taft rejected their case but made the important clarification that some restraints of trade should be permissible if they were reasonable and not the direct aim of the conspirators. Rather than forbidding all restraints of trade as necessarily a conspiracy, the rule-of-reason proponents were thus prepared to countenance the possibility that some form of combination in restraint of trade was reasonable, if it was necessary to provide a fair return on investment; or, through corporate reorganization that achieved a monopoly, a reduction in prices beneficial to the public; or, to a lesser extent, for labor to command a fair wage.
The existence of a conspiracy was thus no longer a crime in itself in the eyes of probusiness jurists.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite the ascendency of the rule-of-reason faction, however, gentlemen’s agreements and even more formalized cartels continued to come under the anti-trust spotlight in the 1880s and 1890s.\textsuperscript{51} If profits were falling because of “ruinous competition,” as corporate apologists argued, the challenge for business was to find ways of cooperating that avoiding legal sanction and yet worked in practice. Even if a group of businessmen succeeded in establishing a conspiratorial agreement to fix prices or corner the market in the short term, the difficulty was that the collusion, unenforceable by legal contract, ultimately tended to break down. Given the antimonopoly attacks on business collusion from without and the inherent weakness of informal agreements from within, it soon became apparent to corporate lawyers that a different form of cooperative structure would be needed. Following the cartel, the next logical development, from the 1880s onward, was the trust, a legal ruse that was first instituted in 1882 by Samuel Dodd, a lawyer working for Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company. Owners of the constituent firms that were being amalgamated voluntarily assigned their voting rights—in secret—to the trustees, thus bypassing the need for formal incorporation, with all of the usual restrictions that would have brought with it. The trust format was thus designed to sidestep legal restrictions on ultra vires and foreign-ownership rules (i.e., operating beyond the particular state in which they were chartered) that pertained to corporations, quite simply because trusts were not corporations.

Antitrust legislation, however, soon targeted these new trusts as conspiracies by any other name, based on what would soon become the increasingly outmoded laissez-faire assumption that any concentration of business power that thwarted “natural” competition must be the result of conspiratorial manipulation. In 1892, for example, the Ohio Supreme Court ordered the breakup of Standard Oil of Ohio, although the larger Standard Oil entity continued to operate through interlocking directorships. The next phase of legal maneuvering saw the introduction of the corporation as a full-blown holding company, which came about with the passage of the New Jersey Corporation Law of 1889. New Jersey’s free incorporation law (followed rapidly by other states that were forced to play catch-up) was initially designed to make the creation of trusts easier, but it had the effect of opening the floodgates to the creation of vast corporate conglomerates, in what became known as the Great Merger Movement, in the decade from approximately 1895 to 1905. Whereas corporate lawyers had justified the trust in terms of the natural property rights of the individual shareholders
(transferred by proxy to the trust directors), they increasingly began to insist that the merged corporation, as a holding company, possessed a legal identity—a personality, in the jargon of the time—in its own right. This form of an unlimited corporation did away with a preponderance of the usual restrictions imposed on corporations, most notably by allowing the holding company to buy shares in other companies. Now that business entities were free to buy up a controlling interest in rival firms (without having to go to the enormous expense and hassle of outright ownership), corporations resulting from mergers became virtually immune to antitrust accusations of monopolistic, conspiratorial price fixing and other predatory activities, despite their increasing power and control of particular industrial sectors.

Indeed, one advantage of both trusts and mergers as legal entities was that they made the accusation of, say, a price-fixing conspiracy much harder to prove, because the original, separate firms were now, in theory, part of the same huge organization, so technically there were no two separate parties that could conspire with one another. Where once rivals within a particular sector of the economy had needed to actively conspire to bring about a restraint of trade, now they could voluntarily secede their intentions to a holding company that could not, logically, conspire with itself.52

Despite the increasing acceptance by both apologists and critics alike that economic concentration was inevitable, some commentators continued to rail against the dangers of conspiracy to the body politic. The muckraking journalist and political agitator Henry Demarest Lloyd, for example, feared that the logical endgame would be for all corporations to eventually consolidate into a single, giant combination that, despite its omnipotent, monopolistic reach, would nonetheless be able to avoid an accusation of conspiracy: “Under these kaleidoscopic masks [of the different legal forms of combination] we begin at last to see progressing to its terminus a steady consolidation, the end of which is one-man power. The conspiracy ends in one, and one cannot conspire with himself.”53

The final stage of this evolutionary arms race between regulators and corporate lawyers was the kind of “community of interest” pursued by Standard Oil (or, more accurately, this was how the company chose to present itself when the legal spotlight was on it). In the U.S. Supreme Court case of 1911 that led to its breakup, Standard Oil was accused of being the ringmaster of a cartel, illegally forcing its competitors to toe its line through predatory pricing and exclusionary transportation deals. Rockefeller’s lawyers insisted, however, that the deals had been struck under an individual’s freedom of contract, and that, instead of a conspiracy, there was merely a convergence of enlightened interests.54
It is thus arguable that the changing organizational and legal structure of industrial combinations during this period was not simply the inexorable progress of greater managerial efficiency (as many argued at the time, and since), but was instead part of a long-running, highly contested, intricate set of legal maneuvers designed to avoid antitrust legislation, or, at the very least, maneuvers entered into with the predictable consequence that they might avoid such scrutiny. At the same time, however, the new corporate forms enabled precisely the kind of collusive, coordinated activity that muckraking critics denounced as conspiracy. The vital question for critics trying to prove a conspiracy was whether a trust or a corporation could act with the same degree of coordination and purpose—and therefore culpability—as an individual. Trust advocates claimed that stockholders and corporate directors handed over control to the trustees, who made decisions for companies in which they had no direct involvement, often not through formal, recorded, decision-making processes, but merely through an unspoken, cartel-like harmony of purpose. The trustees were thus deemed not to be personally accountable—a state of affairs that was hard to combat under existing antitrust laws. The Brown University economist Elisha Andrews, for example, insisted that trusts were indeed capable of acting like a conspiracy. “Whatever the theory,” Andrews argued, “whatever it states in law, the trust is, in actual fact, a solid, organic, efficiently centralized structure.”

The ebb and flow of the legal struggles surrounding trusts and corporations ended up redefining the very idea of conspiracy. Although not initially designed to do so, the legal notion of corporate personality (or corporate personification, as it was sometimes known) ended up being used to bypass trust-busting accusations of conspiracy by presenting these complex organizations as if they were a single being, almost with a life and a mind of their own. At the same time, however, muckraking opponents of the vast industrial and financial conglomerates used the familiar trope of personification to provide an easy target on which to focus their resentments, “piercing the corporate veil” (in the legal jargon of the time) to show the individual intention and culpability behind the legal euphemism of collective agency, coupled with limited liability for individual shareholders. Reading the market as a conspiracy was thus not the last refuge of the simple-minded, but an understandable response to the need to hold someone or something to account for the economic hardships that beset so many yet seemed either to be attributable to a faceless corporation or to merely emerge out of the nature of the economic system. In some muckraking novels and commentary, however, illegitimate power came to be imagined not as concentrated in a single hand, but dispersed throughout a network—all the while without lapsing back into the
Smithian fantasy of the benevolent coordination of the invisible hand. Indeed, antitrust agitation began to suggest that the system of corporate and financial capitalism itself constituted a conspiracy, rather than any specific aberration of it.

The second part of this chapter will consider in detail two particular attempts from the early decades of the twentieth century to come to terms with, and come up with terms for, the changing nature of corporate and financial conspiracy. Both cases push up against the limits of representation as they struggle to bring together an understanding of impersonal structure and personal agency. They also explore the possibility of a conspiracy that is organized not as a simple, hierarchical chain of command, but as a distributed system. The first case study is Frank Norris’s naturalist novel, *The Octopus*, and the second is the work, in the U.S. House of Representatives, of the Pujo Committee’s investigation into the existence of a purported money trust, focusing in particular on Exhibit 243, a diagram produced by the committee.

**The Fiction of Corporate Personality**

From the 1870s to the 1920s, legal debate returned repeatedly to the issue of what was known in legal jargon as the “fiction of corporate personality.” Since the time of the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward* decision (1819) up to the 1880s, legal orthodoxy and common practice held that a corporation was a creature of the state, with its powers explicitly granted and limited by state charter. Corporations were thus deemed to be “artificial entities,” whose property rights were derived from public authority through charters, grants, and concessions, rather than inhering in them naturally, as in the dominant Lockean model of private individuals contracting freely. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, the concession theory of corporate existence was undermined, as the development of free incorporation meant that, in reality, corporations no longer owed their existence to or could be controlled by the state charters that supposedly created them. In the eyes of both critics and apologists alike, industrial combinations and their efficiencies of scale were seen as part of the inexorable, evolutionary progress of business organization that would inevitably eclipse the age of small-scale, proprietorial, individual competition. Some conservative legal theorists in the 1880s and 1890s nevertheless attempted to account for the emergence of the new, freely incorporated combinations in terms of traditional individual property rights. Corporations, in this line of thinking, were merely agglomerations of individual corporators, and any rights that seemed to belong in a metaphysical fashion to the combination, as if it were a person, were ultimately derived from the unproblematic natural rights of the individual.
shareholders (even when signed over to trustees). Corporations, in effect, were little more than large partnerships, and thus required no new legal categories to explain their rights and qualities.\textsuperscript{56}

In contrast to this contractarian approach, legal commentators, influenced by the German organicist tradition associated most famously with Otto Gierke and translated for an Anglo-American context by Frederic Maitland and Ernst Freund, began in the 1890s to theorize instead that a corporation—like other collective organizations and groups—had an identity, and thus a legal stature, in its own right, just like natural legal persons. In this model, corporate personality was not derived from an explicit state concession or from the rights of the individual members that supposedly made up the collective. By 1900, a corporation was no longer deemed to be an artificial creature of the state but was designated as a real, or natural, entity in its own right—a legal person, or, as Maitland put it, a “right-and-duty-bearing unit.”\textsuperscript{57} By 1911, for example, law professor Arthur Machen could confidently declare that “a corporation is an entity—not imaginary or fictitious, but real, not artificial but natural.”\textsuperscript{58} One important consequence of conceiving of the corporation as a real rather than an artificial entity was to make it less amenable to state regulation or scrutiny. Yet the idea of a collective organization having (nearly) the same legal status as individuals caused great difficulty for some commentators. As the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey complained in a famous article in 1926 (by which time the debate had come to seem archaic), the discourses about the legal fiction of corporate personality in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era became bogged down in unnecessarily metaphysical discussions, often because commentators drew on nonlegal, philosophical notions of personhood in order to test their applicability to the corporate case, at times tying themselves in knots as they tried to identify the qualities of personality that could apply to both individuals and groups.\textsuperscript{59}

Despite Dewey’s dismissal of the pointlessness of much of this discussion, the debates in the legal sphere, as much as in the popular realm, nevertheless had to grapple with genuinely difficult questions about intentionality, agency, blame, and identity in the age of ever-larger corporate conglomerations. The idea that a corporation was merely a glorified partnership was increasingly untenable from the 1890s onward. For one thing, shares in the newly formed mergers began to be offered directly to the wider public, as investors, through the stock exchanges, rather than through a private subscription to a limited number of active owner-partners. Given the anonymity and complexity of the emerging market in industrial securities in which the ownership of shares could pass through many hands, courts in the early 1890s therefore understandably began to relax
the “trust fund doctrine” that previously had, in theory, made the initial subscribers of subsequently failed companies liable for the full par value of the shares.\textsuperscript{60}

Corporations were thus recognized as having a legal identity separate from the identity of the individual owners—even to the logical conclusion of immortality—in a way that partnerships (which were wound up with the demise of the partners) never could. Ownership was now simply too diffuse to make the idea of a corporation as a private partnership plausible, and the practical, day-to-day influence of the directors and managers was too powerful to maintain a fantasy of active control by a corporation’s supposedly ultimate owners. Indeed, the real point of the corporate form of organization was precisely that it enabled limited liability for the shareholders, unlike the strict liability rules governing partnerships. Likewise, it was no longer possible, in any meaningful sense, to see corporate decisions as the unanimous expression of the conglomerated intentions of the individual corporators. Corporations were therefore described as having a will and an identity of their own that corresponded neither to the intentions of the shareholders nor even strictly to the intentions of the appointed directors and managers. Despite this convenient legal fiction of corporate will and personality, in reality, corporate activities and decision making were becoming too complex to be regarded as the product of unitary identity and intentionality, whether derived from the will of the shareholders, the directors, or the “corporate personality” itself. As we have seen, however, this did not stop Populist critics from continuing to try to hold individuals accountable or to identify—even if only for dramatic purposes—the real individual power behind the veil of corporate personality.

Given this situation, it comes as little surprise that novelists around the turn of the twentieth century were repeatedly attracted to the rhetoric and narrative logic of conspiracy as they grappled with the problem of representing the complexities of collective liability and complex causality through a traditional narrative form that privileged individual agency and responsibility. Ignatius Donnelly, for example, not only penned the Omaha Platform, as well as his truly bizarre conspiracist interpretations of the myths surrounding the lost continent of Atlantis and the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays, but he also wrote \textit{Caesar’s Column} (1890), a macabre, dystopian imagining of class conflict as an all-out conspiracy.\textsuperscript{61} Jack London’s \textit{Iron Heel} (1908) likewise presented a dystopian future in which a shadowy oligarchy of corporate trusts controlled the whole of society. Many of the fictional portrayals of finance from this period pandered to the public’s insatiable appetite for revelations about the underhanded scheming carried out by the nation’s robber barons. For example, in David Graham Phillips’s muckraking novels—\textit{The Master-Rogue} (1903), \textit{The Cost} (1904), and \textit{The Deluge} (1905)—everything that
happens in Wall Street is shown to be the result of deliberate plotting by the 
Machiavellian princes at the heart of the nation’s financial exchanges. In The 
Cost, the narrator at one point suggests that the striking events on the stock ex-
change are like a force of nature: “The mysterious force which had produced a 
succession of earthquakes moved horribly on, still in mystery impenetrable, to 
produce a cataclysm. In the midst of the chaos two vast whirlpools formed—one 
where Great Lakes sucked down men and fortunes, the other where Woolens 
drew some down to destruction, flung others up to wealth.” By this point in the 
novel, however, the reader knows that the sudden downturn is not the result of 
natural, elemental forces, but of an individual enemy motivated by a love tussle. 
In a fairly heavy-handed way, The Master-Rogue and The Deluge allow readers to 
see market machinations from the inside, because they are presented as an un-
apologetic, first-person account: we learn, as all good conspiracy theorists believe, 
that nothing happens by accident, because everything is planned and plotted in 
advance. Some novels, however, began to question what conspiratorial agency 
and moral accountability might mean in the era of vast, bureaucratic corpora-
tions and the complex, interwoven nature of modern economic life. As David 
Zimmerman has shown, Upton Sinclair’s The Moneychangers (1908), a fictional 
account of the panic of 1907, destabilizes the traditional notion of conspiracy by 
suggesting that ordinary members of the public might be complicit in letting the 
financial panics happen, even if they have their origins in the sinister machina-
tions of an oligarchy.

Frank Norris’s novels provide some of the most intriguing, but also the most 
contradictory, fictional engagements with financial conspiracy during this pe-
riod. The Octopus (1901) and The Pit (1903), the first two portions of Norris’s 
Epic of the Wheat, a projected trilogy of novels about the production, marketing, 
and consumption of wheat, revolve around the question of who, or what, is in 
control of the mighty economic systems at play. These works of literary fiction, 
immensely popular in their time, engage with the same issues that were animat-
ing the debate on the legal notion of corporate personality. The novels capture 
the conflicting desire to represent corporate capitalism and the manipulation of 
finance as both a simple, personal conspiracy and a complex, impersonal net-
work. Like the octopus cartoons examined in chapter 3, at one and the same time 
they personalize financial conspiracy, and register the dispersal of power into the 
abstractions of the economic sublime, as they struggle to find a representational 
form that can bring together agency and structure. Both novels are shot through 
with awkward tensions as they try to square the circle of individual versus collec-
In the eyes of its original readers, *The Octopus* presented a classic Populist portrait of the megacorporation at the turn of the twentieth century as an evil conspiracy against the common people, and it did much to popularize the image of the corporate financial system as a cephalopod with a sinister, human face.67 The novel is mainly told from the perspective of Presley, a would-be poet from the east who wants to write a modern Homeric epic of the west. He eventually comes to realize that his true epic subject is the struggle of the farmers of the San Joaquin Valley in California against the might of the (fictional) Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. Early in the novel, Presley is out walking in the fields when a railroad locomotive thunders by, and it is described in the first of many such incantatory passages as a monstrous creature, part horse, part mythical being: “a locomotive, single, unattached, shot by him with a roar, filling the air with the reek of hot oil, vomiting smoke and sparks; its enormous eye, cyclopean, red, throwing a glare far in advance, shooting by in a sudden crash of confused thunder; filling the night with the terrific clamor of its iron hoofs.”68 Back home at Magnus Derrick’s ranch, where he is staying, Presley then sees the locomotive—through a trope of what might be termed mechanical anthropomorphization—as a symbolic embodiment of the unstoppable power of the railroad trust itself:

Then, faint and prolonged, across the levels of the ranch, he heard the engine whistling for Bonneville. Again and again, at rapid intervals in its flying course, it whistled for road crossings, for sharp curves, for trestles; ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with the accents of menace and defiance; and abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus. (1: 48)

The passage works its way through repetition and amplification, eventually alighting on the single image that sums up what the “soulless” corporation is to those whose livelihoods are shaped by it: the octopus.

The novel is loosely based on the Mussel Slough incident of 1880, in which a small group of Californian farmers tried to prevent the Southern Pacific Railroad from seizing their homesteads in a dispute over the price the railroad wanted to
charge the settlers to buy the land they had worked on and improved for more than a decade. In Norris’s version, however, the protagonists are not the dirt-poor tenant farmers of Mussel Slough, but are comparatively wealthy ranchers with large landholdings. Despite their relative affluence, in the logic of Norris’s story they represent the increasingly outdated fantasy of a Jeffersonian yeomanry, coupled with an old-fashioned faith in the level playing field of a free-market exchange between equals. Magnus Derrick, the leader of the Farmers’ League that is set up to fight the railroad’s conspiratorial scheme, believes in the fantasy of rugged individualism. He prides himself on his supposedly unimpeachable virtue and, more than anything, wants to be firmly in control of his own destiny. In an image drawn from the world of railroads, Derrick refuses to take a vacation, because he believes that his firm and very visible hand is needed to control his ranch, imagined as an engine: “the machine would not as yet run of itself; he must still feel his hand upon the lever” (1: 57).

Derrick, however, is still a gold miner and a gambler at heart. His get-rich-quick attitude is at odds with the nostalgic ideal of careful husbandry of the land. He and the other farmers of the San Joaquin Valley are not immune to the spirit of financial speculation that, in most of the agrarian and Populist rhetoric of the period, was an anathema to the producerist fantasy of honest, self-reliant labor as the only true source of economic value. As Norris’s trilogy aimed to show, however, both the seemingly self-reliant producers of wheat in remote corners of California and the distant consumers in the Far East are tied together in an intricate financial network, with the stock ticker as the symbol of the local presence of that abstract and deterritorialized market. Like the ticker fiends explored in chapter 2, Magnus and his son Harran “had sat up nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel. At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains of India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine” (1: 51). With their large ranches, the farmers in *The Octopus* are described as practicing agriculture on an industrial scale that is as monumental and as rapacious as the railroad itself. Derrick, in particular, is seduced by the idea of establishing a vast (and presumably monopolistic) trust of producers that could exploit new global markets and stand up to the might of the railroad.

Despite the seemingly clear opposition between the evil of the trust and the good of the people, the novel makes the connections between the two sides apparent. The main story revolves around a supposed conspiracy orchestrated by
the railroad: first, to raise its freight rates in order to drive those farmers to ruin, and then to sell off the tenanted lands at prices elevated to a level beyond the reach of the farmers, before installing its own dummy buyers in their place. In the eyes of the ranchers, the railroad is the very epitome of a cunning and ruthless conspiracy. We learn, for example, that in the eyes of Dyke, the locomotive engineer turned hop farmer, “the Trust was silent, its ways inscrutable, the public saw only results. It worked on in the dark, calm, disciplined, irresistible” (2: 60). Yet, pushed into a corner, the Farmers’ League sets in motion—in Presley’s dismissive term—its own “obscure conspiracy” (2: 161), employing Derrick’s other son, Lyman, in a doomed attempt to fix the election of the railroad commission that will set the rates. For Derrick, resorting to bribery is an affront to his much-vaunted moral code, but other farmers, such as the hot-headed Annixter, see it merely as a way of fighting fire with fire. This necessary turn away from their republican faith in the impartiality of contract ironically returns them to a more old-fashioned and more personalized form of business, which is also in keeping with their conviction that the railroad trust had made a personal, contractual promise to them to honor the original valuation of the land.

This tension between a personal and an impersonal encounter with the trust and the larger financial market runs throughout the novel. On the one hand, in the eyes of the ranchers, the railroad is inhuman, a mixture of monster and machine. For example, Annie Derrick, Magnus’s wife, “saw very plainly the galloping terror of steam and steel, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon, symbol of a vast power, huge and terrible; the leviathan with tentacles of steel, to oppose which meant to be ground to instant destruction beneath the clashing wheels” (1: 173). On the other hand, the vast and seemingly anonymous trust is embodied for them in the all-too-solid person of its local agent and banker, S. Behrman. “There was no denying the fact,” the narrator comments, “that for Osterman, Broderson, Annixter, and Derrick, S. Behrman was the railroad” (1: 64). Behrman’s corpulent and repulsive frame, together with his ostensibly Jewish name, seems to the farmers to be the very personification of corporate greed and shady manipulation. In the logic of the novel Behrman is, at one and the same time, an actual individual and a symbolic representation—a personification—of the corporation. In a very different sense to the one used in legal debates during that period, he is a literalized fiction of corporate personality. His all-too-human flesh, like a corporation, is seemingly immortal, impossible to kill off, despite Presley’s would-be anarchist attempt to assassinate him with a thrown bomb and Dyke’s last-ditch attempt to kill, with his bare hands, the man who, in his eyes, embodies all the duplicity of the railroad. For Annie Derrick, it
was futile to “grapple with the railroad—that great monster, iron-hearted, relentless, infinitely powerful. Always it had issued triumphant from the fight; always S. Behrman, the Corporation’s champion, remained upon the field as victor, placid, unperturbed, unassailable” (1: 172). Behrman, who is both a man and a personification, eventually dies in a manner that is overloaded with symbolism: he is smothered by the wheat flowing into the hold of a cargo ship, until only his hand—the visible hand of invisible manipulation—is seen clutching in desperation above the rising tide of grain. If Behrman is the human representative of the vast trust, even he—as he contemplates the Niagara of wheat that will soon drown him in the hold of the cargo ship—believes that there is no single individual behind the entire system: “The place was deserted. No human agency seemed to be back of the movement of the wheat. Rather, the grain seemed impelled with a force of its own, a resistless, huge force, eager, vivid, impatient for the sea” (2: 350).

Although Behrman is the local stand-in for the railroad and the most immediate instrument of the conspiracy, the farmers are in no doubt as to who is really behind the trust and its plots. As Harran explains to his fellow ranchers: “S. Behrman manipulated the whole affair. There’s a big deal of some kind in the air, and if there is, we all know who is back of it; S. Behrman, of course, but who’s back of him? It’s Shelgrim.” The narrator picks up on this thought:

Shelgrim! The name fell squarely in the midst of the conversation, abrupt, grave, somber, big with suggestion, pregnant with huge associations. No one in the group who was not familiar with it; no one, for that matter, in the county, the State, the whole reach of the West, the entire Union, that did not entertain convictions as to the man who carried it; a giant figure in the end-of-the-century finance, a product of circumstance, an inevitable result of conditions, characteristic, typical, symbolic of ungovernable forces. In the New Movement, the New Finance, the reorganization of capital, the amalgamation of powers, the consolidation of enormous enterprises—no one individual was more constantly in the eye of the world; no one was more hated, more dreaded, no one more compelling of unwilling tribute to his commanding genius, to the colossal intellect operating the width of an entire continent than the president and owner of the Pacific and Southwestern. (1: 99–100)

In the farmers’ vernacular, Shelgrim is the puppet master who controls everything and is at the heart of the conspiracy. “He sits in his office in San Francisco,” Annierter declares, “and pulls the strings and we’ve got to dance” (1: 100). Shelgrim is the hidden hand, rather than the invisible hand.

After a violent showdown in which many of Presley’s rancher friends are
killed, he finds himself in San Francisco, passing the building that houses the headquarters of the railroad trust. In an image of individual control that is repeated many times in the novel, Presley imagines Shelgrim as the locomotive engineer in charge of the entire machinery of the trust, albeit combined with a hint of the medieval feudalism of the robber barons: “Here was the keep of the castle, and here, behind one of those many windows, in one of those many offices, his hand upon the levers of his mighty engine, sat the master, Shelgrim himself” (2: 279). On a whim, Presley decides to enter the building and confront the legendary man who is the controlling intelligence behind the evil octopus conspiracy. The man he finds, however, is not monstrous, but human. Presley “had been prepared to come upon an ogre, a brute, a terrible man of blood and iron, and instead had discovered a sentimentalist and an art critic” (2: 284). Although not the ogre Presley had been expecting, Shelgrim is nevertheless a man of infinite capacities, larger than life, more than a mere individual. He was “not only great, but large; many-sided, of vast sympathies, who understood with equal intelligence, the human nature in an habitual drunkard, the ethics of a masterpiece of painting, and the financiering and operation of ten thousand miles of railroad” (2: 284).

Here, Presley at last penetrates behind the corporate veil, supposedly discovering the actual person behind the fiction of corporate personality. Like the revelatory moment in The Wizard of Oz (another novel with seemingly strong, agrarian, Populist sympathies, published a year before The Octopus), Presley presumes he has discovered the human figure pulling the levers of power behind the anonymous façade of the trust. Although Shelgrim turns out not to be quite the cartoon octopus of the Populist imagination, Presley nevertheless presumes that he is the controlling intelligence at the peak of the vast pyramid of conspiracy that defeated the ranchers. Instead, in a disorienting moment that catches Presley completely off guard, Shelgrim conjures up an infinite regress of the origin of power, insisting that even he is not in control of the railroad trust:

“Believe this, young man,” exclaimed Shelgrim, laying a thick powerful forefinger on the table to emphasize his words, “try to believe this—to begin with—that railroads build themselves. Where there is a demand sooner or later there will be a supply. Mr. Derrick, does he grow his wheat? The Wheat grows itself. What does he count for? Does he supply the force? What do I count for? Do I build the Railroad? You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men. There is the Wheat, the supply. It must be carried to feed the People. There is the demand. The Wheat is one force, the Railroad, another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have only little
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“Complications may arise, conditions that bear hard on the individual—crush him maybe—but the wheat will be carried to feed the people as inevitably as it will grow. If you want to fasten the blame of the affair at Los Muertos on any one person, you will make a mistake. Blame conditions, not men.”

“But—but,” faltered Presley, “you are the head, you control the road.”

“You are a very young man. Control the road! Can I stop it? I can go into bankruptcy if you like. But otherwise if I run my road, as a business proposition, I can do nothing. I can not control it. It is a force born out of certain conditions, and I—no man—can stop it or control it. Can your Mr. Derrick stop the Wheat growing? He can burn his crop, or he can give it away, or sell it for a cent a bushel—just as I could go into bankruptcy—but otherwise his Wheat must grow. Can any one stop the Wheat? Well, then no more can I stop the Road.” (2: 285–86)

As in The Pit, the vision of power that Shelgrim evokes is one in which human actors are mere conduits for the sublime, impersonal, and natural forces that flow through them. Other than the personified abstractions of the wheat and the railroad themselves, there is no individual at the top of the chain of command. Or, to put it another way, in Shelgrim’s cosmogony, there is no hidden center from which the conspiracy originates, with the corporation and its actions appearing instead as blameless acts of nature:

Presley regained the street stupefied, his brain in a whirl. This new idea, this new conception dumfounded him. Somehow, he could not deny it. It rang with the clear reverberation of truth. Was no one, then, to blame for the horror at the irrigating ditch? Forces, conditions, laws of supply and demand—were these then the enemies, after all? Not enemies; there was no malevolence in Nature. Colossal indifference only, a vast trend toward appointed goals. Nature was, then, a gigantic engine, a vast cyclopean power, huge, terrible, a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing out the human atom standing in its way, with nirvanic calm, the agony of destruction sending never a jar, never the faintest tremor through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels and cogs. (2: 286)

Much to his surprise, Presley finds himself swayed by Shelgrim’s argument. The novel itself takes the possibility of the uncanny agency of corporations seriously, not least because it chimes in with the mystical sense of enlightenment that Presley’s shepherd friend Vanamee has achieved in viewing human endeavor—as well as human tragedies, including the rape and death of his beloved—as insignificant in the face of cosmic energies, of which the fertility of the wheat and the might of the railroad trust are the most potent symbols. The final conclu-
tion that the novel reaches, buoyed up by capital letters, as if trying to convince both the reader and Presley himself, is that individual human agency is insignificant in the face of seemingly cosmic forces:

Men—motes in the sunshine—perished, were shot down in the very noon of life, hearts were broken, little children started in life lamentably handicapped; young girls were brought to a life of shame; old women died in the heart of life for lack of food. In that little, isolated group of human insects, misery, death, and anguish spun like a wheel of fire. But the wheat remained. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves. (2: 360)

Both the railroad trust—the local symbol of global capitalism—and the irrepressible fertility of the wheat crop are presented as impersonal forces that operate on a plane far above mere mortal concerns and the traditional conceptions of individual agency: “Men were naught, death was naught, life was naught; force only existed—force that brought men into the world, force that crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation, force that made the wheat grow, force that garnered it from the soil to give place to the succeeding crop” (2: 343). At the same time, however, these inhuman forces are repeatedly personified in the novel. Like the use of prosopopeia in Greek mythology, the personification of abstract forces humanizes but also mystifies natural and social processes. “There, under the sun and under the speckless sheen of the sky,” the description of the harvest rhapsodizes, “the wooing of the Titan began, the vast primal passion, the two world-forces, the elemental Male and Female, locked in a colossal embrace, at grapples in the throes of an infinite desire, at once terrible and divine, knowing no law, untamed, savage, natural, sublime” (1: 125–26).

Although Presley is seduced by the vision of sublime natural and economic forces that cast into relief petty human concerns, he finds the implications of Shelgrim’s speech troubling. He still feels an emotional need to find someone responsible for the tragic events at the ditch, and the final section of the novel vacillates between the two positions. Once away from Shelgrim’s office, Presley qualifies the self-serving analysis provided by the railroad boss, recognizing instead the asymmetrical nature of power and suffering:

The drama was over. The fight of Ranch and Railroad had been wrought out to its dreadful close. It was true, as Shelgrim had said, that forces rather than men had locked horns in that struggle, but for all that the men of the Ranch and not the men
of the Railroad had suffered. Into the prosperous valley, into the quiet community of farmers, that galloping monster, that terror of steel and steam had burst, shooting athwart the horizons, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the ranches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path. Yes, the Railroad had prevailed. The ranches had been seized in the tentacles of the octopus; the iniquitous burden of extortionate freight rates had been imposed like a yoke of iron. The monster had killed Harran, had killed Osterman, had killed Broderson, had killed Hooven. 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. (2: 359)

Unlike Shelgrim’s insistence on the passive voice, this passage—focalized through Presley’s consciousness—once again uses active verbs, although it is not the railroad boss himself that is the subject, but the abstract, collective personifications: “the Railroad,” “the monster,” “the Octopus.”

As Presley reflects on the death of his friends, especially when he is sickened by the indifference of the haute bourgeoisie whose dinners he attends in San Francisco, he still feels an emotional pull to the dawning class consciousness fuelled by Populist and anarchist conspiracy rhetoric that had marked his final weeks at the ranch, leading up to the cataclysmic events at the ditch. He is dimly aware that Shelgrim’s insistence that the trust creates and controls itself is an ideological naturalization of a political-economic arrangement, borne out in the way Shelgrim equates the sublime “financiering” of the trust with the uncontrollable fertility of the wheat. Although the novel continues to push toward its final, mystical conclusion, Presley nevertheless registers a residual resistance to Shelgrim’s all-too-convenient evasion of blame: “The Railroad might indeed be a force only, which no man could control and for which no man was responsible, but his friends had been killed” (2: 317).

Contemporary readers of the novel assumed that The Octopus was a straightforward attack on corporate trusts, pictured as a conspiracy against the common man. New Historicist critics, however, such as Walter Benn Michaels, have insisted that Norris’s novel legitimates the procorporate position, because it naturalizes corporations by fetishizing the discourse of superhuman forces. 71 Nonetheless, it would be more accurate to read the novel as both a diatribe against the incorporation of America and an endorsement of it. Like many of the other Populist attacks on financial capitalism explored in this chapter, it combines the rhetoric of personalized conspiratorial agency with a quasi-structural analysis of distributed systems of power that operate as networks, rather than as simple, hierarchical chains of command. What makes the movement between the two
more fluid, and thus more complicated, is that the portrait of impersonal power is often presented through the trope of personification. Far from an older, animistic tradition of thought giving way to a newer, more abstract mode of economic representation in the age of the corporation, *The Octopus* demonstrated that the abstract could only be made legible via new modes of personification. The naturalist writing thus attempted to make sense of collective agency and causality through the representational technology of the individual-centered novel. There is not a simple conspiracy behind the railroad, the novel implies, but an entire system of corporate trusts; nevertheless, that abstract system is endowed with monstrous will and envisioned as an octopus (which, in turn, is imagined as if it were endowed with human desires and intentionality). The rhetoric suggests that, on the one hand, the evil is intentional and centered in the “great bulk” (2: 283) of Shelgrim’s body, yet, on the other hand, it is so infinitely distributed that it is scarcely recognizable as a coherent being: “Abruptly Dyke received the impression of the multitudinous ramifications of the colossus. Under his feet the ground seemed mined; down there below him in the dark the huge tentacles were silently twisting and advancing, spreading out in every direction, sapping the strength of all opposition, quiet, gradual, biding the time to reach up and out and grip with a sudden unleashing of gigantic strength” (2: 60–61). The image of the octopus enables Norris (and other radical critics of that era) to conceive of the dizzying complexity of financial capitalism as part of a single, coherent system, yet, at the same time, to imbue that abstract system with agency and will. In this way, *The Octopus* establishes a *mise en abyme* in the quest for the ultimate source of agency and causality.

The map of conspiracy the novel creates is not the usual one, in which power is conceived as a chain or a pyramid, or, at the very least, as having a center. When Presley visits the railroad headquarters in San Francisco (which is in keeping with the revelation about Shelgrim that he is about to discover), he at first is struck by the fact that the building is not “pretentious.” He “must have passed it, unheeding, many times,” yet despite being unremarkable from the outside, nevertheless “it was the stronghold of the enemy—the center of all that vast ramifying system of arteries that drained the life-blood of the State; the nucleus of the web in which so many lives, so many fortunes, so many destinies had been enmeshed” (2: 279). Presley’s mental map of how power operates resembles the actual map of the railroad that Lyman Derrick studies in his office:

It was a commissioner’s official railway map of the State of California, completed to March 30th of that year. Upon it the different railways of the State were accurately
plotted in various colors, blue, green, yellow. However, the blue, the yellow, and the
green were but brief traceries, very short, isolated, unimportant. At a little distance
these could hardly be seen. The whole map was gridironed by a vast, complicated
network of red lines marked P. and S. W. R. R. These centralized at San Francisco
and thence ramified and spread north, east, and south, to every quarter of the State.
From Coles, in the topmost corner of the map, to Yuma in the lowest, from Reno
on one side to San Francisco on the other, ran the plexus of red, a veritable system
of blood circulation, complicated, dividing, and reuniting, branching, splitting, ex-
tending, throwing out feelers, off-shoots, tap roots, feeders—diminutive little blood
suckers that shot out from the main jugular and went twisting up into some remote
county, laying hold upon some forgotten village or town, involving it in one of a
myriad branching coils, one of a hundred tentacles, drawing it, as it were, toward
that center from which all this system sprang. The map was white, and it seemed
as if all the color which should have gone to vivify the various counties, towns, and
cities marked upon it had been absorbed by that huge, sprawling organism, with
its ruddy arteries converging to a central point. It was as though the State had been
sucked white and colorless, and against this pallid background the red arteries of
the monster stood out, swollen with life-blood, reaching out to infinity, gorged to
bursting; an excrescence, a gigantic parasite fattening upon the life-blood of an
entire commonwealth. (2: 4–5)

The map of the railroad both abstracts and vivifies a system. It is, at one and the
same time, mechanical and organic, animal and vegetable, impersonal yet alive
with its own malevolent volition. On the one hand, the passage suggests that
the inanimate railroad is a living creature that has a single point of control, be
it the “plexus” of a central nervous system or a beating heart, with its “ruddy
arteries converging to a central point.” At other moments, however, the “multi-
titudinous ramifications” of the railroad are portrayed not as part of a being with a
central location of control, but as a dizzying and decentered network out of which
conspiratorial agency emerges, without there being any obvious commanding
agent pulling the strings. Yet, just when it seems that the passage lapses into
ideological obfuscation with its portrait of the railroad trust as a sublime phe-
nomenon whose complexity and vast scale is beyond human comprehension,
it invokes the uncanny possibility that there is agency and control in the system
itself. The description also conjures up the master image of the novel as a whole:
the map of the railroad resembles an octopus, with a centralized intelligence, yet
with endlessly ramifying appendages that constitute a complex but organic whole
(“a myriad branching coils, one of a hundred tentacles”).
In its account of corporate and financial capitalism, the novel thus wavers between embracing a thoroughly posthuman notion of individual agency, viewed from a sublime distance, and remaining committed to a rabble-rousing, conspiratorial depiction of big business as the expression of a monstrous, parasitic will. These contradictory viewpoints within *The Octopus* are never ultimately resolved, either aesthetically or politically. In part this is a reflection of and engagement with the contemporary legal debates surrounding the nature of corporations. The novel does raise the possibility, however, of a synthesis between the two opposing poles of theories: traditional, individual agency versus newer, sociological models of structural causation. In the era of monopoly capitalism, *The Octopus* represents the system of class privilege as conspiracy.

“Unless You Have Got Actual Control, You Can Not Control Anything”

When antitrust legislation was not being used to attack unions, the cases brought forward tended to involve individual firms or clusters of firms working through a deliberate, yet secret, agreement to fix prices or force competitors out of business. I now want to examine in detail a case study in which the purported conspiracy not only involved an entire sector of the economy, but was imagined as operating almost without intentional agreement. What makes the case so arresting is that it pushes to the limit the very meaning of conspiracy and raises the question of how best to represent the system of high finance that was emerging around the turn of the twentieth century. Was there indeed a system, or was it merely a collection of individual, uncoordinated acts? Should finance be left to the experts, or should the state bring regulatory oversight and transparency to what bankers insisted were private agreements, governed by individual freedom of contract? Were bankers selflessly working in the national interest to maintain financial stability, or should the government be trusted to interfere in the natural organization of the market? If there was a panic on Wall Street, must there always be someone to blame? If there seemed to be evidence of what looked to all intents and purposes like coordination and control in the financial markets, must there necessarily be a hidden hand at work? Finally, was the financial system now too complex to be controlled by a small clique of powerful private bankers—and, if so, then who should be in charge of it?

Although J. P. Morgan was at first hailed as a popular hero for single-handedly saving the nation’s financial system during the panic of 1907, some skeptical voices were troubled by the idea that an individual banker could wield such vast financial power, constituting a one-man lender of last resort, a function that, critics began to argue, should be the privilege and the responsibility of a central
Following agitation by Senator Robert La Follette and Senator Charles Lindbergh Sr. (father of the future aviator hero), the U.S. House of Representatives established the Pujo Committee in 1912 to investigate monopolistic abuses of power in the banking sector: to discover whether, in short, there existed a secretive money trust. As the original House Resolution that established the investigation put it:

> It has been further charged and is generally believed that these same groups of financiers have so entrenched themselves in their control of the aforesaid financial and other institutions and otherwise in the direction of the finances of the country that they are thereby enabled to use the funds and property of the great national banks and other moneyed corporations in the leading money centers to control the security and commodity markets; to regulate the interest for money; to create, avert, and compose panics; to dominate the New York Stock Exchange and the various clearing house associations throughout the country, and through such associations and by reason of their aforesaid control over the aforesaid railroads, industrial corporations, and moneyed institutions, and others, and in other ways resulting therefrom, have wielded a power over the business, commerce, credits, and finances of the country that is despotic and perilous and is daily becoming more perilous to the public welfare.

The working assumption of the investigation was not merely that a de facto banking conspiracy had a stranglehold on credit, but that a “money trust” had control of the industrial combinations they floated on the New York Stock Exchange. The investigation argued that the private bankers were drumming up new business by using the inside information and influence they obtained from each bank having one of their partners as a director on the board of a large number of companies. The suspicion was that a cluster of investment banks acted as both principal and agent, both underwriter and investor, in the enormous consolidation deals they brokered, which would mean that the nation’s system of finance was hopelessly corrupt. At its heart, the Pujo Committee was concerned with the question of whether there should be democratic oversight of high finance, and whether there should be a limit to the influence—either explicit or implied—that an individual or a single bank could hold over the nation’s economic institutions.

Despite the fiery rhetoric of the House Resolution, in practice the Pujo Committee was more circumscribed in its investigative remit, constrained at first by the need to avoid seeming partisan in the election season of 1912, and hampered by a reluctance on the part not only of the banking community, but also
sectors of the government itself, to furnish relevant evidence. Although denied access to the full accounts of most corporations, and even to the government’s own records kept by the comptroller of the currency, the committee’s lead counsel, Samuel Untermyer, nevertheless managed to amass a large amount of data about the extent of the interlocking corporate directorships of the biggest Wall Street investment banks and many of the largest industrial combinations in the country. In particular, Untermyer focused on the concentration of power and money in the hands of a small group of financial institutions, led by J. P. Morgan, that included the First National Bank; the National City Bank; Lee, Higginson, and Company; Kidder, Peabody, and Company; and Kuhn, Loeb, and Company. Among its many headlined conclusions (which were summarized and expanded in Other People’s Money, a popular and influential book written by Louis Brandeis in 1914), the report concluded that industrial corporations and public utilities worth $22 billion were under the control or influence of this handful of financiers, who sat on the boards of countless corporations in a complex pattern of interlocking directorships and voting trusts, and participated as stockholders.

For example, George F. Baker, the president of the First National Bank, was a director in 58 companies, while Morgan, First National Bank, and National City and Guaranty Trust held over 300 directorships in 100 companies.

The volume of evidence was overwhelming, and it provided the American public with a damning insight into the murky world of high finance. Yet the evidence remained circumstantial, at best, without ever uncovering a “smoking gun” document or a moment of testimony that would prove the existence of a money trust as anything more than a muckraking metaphor. Morgan, for example, admitted in one cross-examination that he and Baker were old friends and had engaged in mutually beneficial associations and transactions, but there was no paper record of the agreements, and thus no chance of proving an actual conspiracy—a state of affairs befitting the genteel world of banking in which a gentleman’s word was his bond. Proof of a conspiracy was the sticking point. Although the original House Resolution—and certainly the popular view—was that a money trust indeed existed and was engaged in a “despotic” and “perilous” conspiracy, Untermyer and Brandeis came to a more diplomatic conclusion. In their eyes, even if there was not an actual document that could prove a conspiratorial agreement or intention behind the money trust, this small group of financiers nevertheless managed—through a “gentleman’s agreement” or “banking ethics”—to eliminate competition in investment banking and thus constituted, in all but name, a monopolistic conspiracy in restraint of trade under the terms
of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. For Untermyer, the terminology was crucial: “If, however, we mean by this loose, elastic term ‘trust’ as applied to the concentration of the ‘money power’ that there is a close and well-defined ‘community of interest’ and understanding among the men who dominate the financial destinies of our country and who wield fabulous power over the fortunes of others through their control of corporate funds belonging to other people, our investigators will find a situation confronting us far more serious than is popularly supposed to exist.” The Pujo Committee never managed to prove the conspiracy allegations conclusively, although it is arguable that they did manage to provide convincing evidence that high finance was run by a “community of interest”—even if they did not go so far as to name it class privilege. The changes to antitrust legislation that were passed by the U.S. Congress, however, were ultimately not very far-reaching or effective in tackling the problems the investigation had exposed. The committee concluded that banks were likely to fall prey to a conflict of interests, with their loyalties compromised between promoting the profitability of their own firm and securing the best deal for both their corporate clients and the investing public, and, more often than not, they abused their position of privileged access to inside information to speculate for easy profits. As a solution to the specific problem of conflicts of interest, the committee proposed the Clayton Act of 1914, which extended the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 by prohibiting directors from sitting on the boards of two companies competing in the same sector of the economy.

Despite the failure of the investigation to prove an explicit conspiracy, I want to argue that the Pujo Committee’s struggle to explain and represent the nature of collusion in itself provides a significant insight into the public perception of finance during this period. Leaving aside the specific political wranglings, what this case reveals is a deep-seated ideological rift in the understanding of agency and causation. An older, more personal, individualistic way of thinking about business continued to hold sway in Wall Street long after the complexity of large, collective organizations became a reality. The case also brings home the difficulties that observers of finance had in finding an adequate way of representing the relationship between individual agency and structural causation in the new corporate era, with much of the debate revolving around the thorny issue of what counted as control and conspiracy, and where the dividing line between the two lay. The first section will look in detail at some of the thousands of pages of testimony from the Pujo hearings, while the following section will examine an individual diagram produced by the committee that maps the interlocking corporate and financial directorships.
The Pujo Hearings

The hearings were a fraught affair. Most notoriously, William Rockefeller evaded appearing before the committee, with his doctors insisting that he was too ill to give testimony, because a cough brought on by stress could kill him. He led the committee's lawyers, who were trying to serve a subpoena on him, on a merry dance as he retreated from public view into his mansion in North Tarrytown, New York. He gave the slip to the Pinkerton detectives watching out for him and escaped to his cottage on Jekyll Island in Georgia, where he eventually granted a brief and inconclusive interview, cut short by his supposedly life-threatening laryngitis. In the actual hearings, Untermyer repeatedly tried to show that the coterie of bankers centered on Morgan acted covertly, in concert, to control the financial affairs of the nation. For his part, Morgan was adamant in arguing that he had no actual control over any of the companies he was associated with. He insisted that his private banking business (an unlimited partnership, rather than a limited liability corporation) should remain out of the scrutinizing gaze of the state. As far as he was concerned, his selfless patriotism and his gentlemanly code of banking ethics were ultimately a better guarantee that the interests of the nation would be served than any regulatory intrusion.

Untermyer clashed repeatedly with his witnesses, with the two sides differing not only in their fundamental political outlook, but also in the meaning of seemingly straightforward terms. At the heart of the matter was whether Morgan and the dense network of directors associated with him were actually in control of the corporate and trust boards they sat on. For example, when Untermyer quizzed William Sherer, the manager of the New York Clearing House Association, on whether the Security Bank and the Fourth National Bank were closely interwoven, Sherer replied that he had no direct, personal knowledge, only hearsay. Untermyer prodded him further, trying to pin him down over the meaning of the term “control,” and the exchange ended in a stalemate:

untermyer: Do you know that they have a number of directors in common?
scherer: Yes. The bank is owned by a great many stockholders.
untermyer: I am not talking about stockholders. We are talking about the people who control its practical affairs and its management, not about the stockholders. You know what control means, do you not?
scherer: Yes.
untermyer: You know that control of a bank, so far as its active management and direction and policy are concerned, is not dependent upon the stock ownership, and that the two have no relation, do you not?
sharer: I do not want to answer that, because I consider the stockholders the owners of the bank, and I do not want to say that the owners of the bank give up control of it.

untermyer: But you know the management is one thing and the stockholding is quite another thing?

sharer: Yes.

untermyer: You know that the banks of this city, as a rule, are managed by men who do not control the stock?

sharer: No, I do not know that.

untermyer: Do you know whether that is so or not?

sharer: No.82

Untermyer then returns to the question of what counts as “control” in one of his lengthy cross-examinations of Morgan. Untermyer tries to get Morgan to admit that he favors combination over competition, and Morgan confesses that while he likes “a little competition,” he prefers cooperation (the term he insists on using instead of the more damning “combination”). Morgan feels that he is being misrepresented and makes a request to put his version across. The two men dance around the meaning of the word “control,” in a sequence of bizarre and increasingly tautological exchanges:

morgan: This may be a sensitive subject. I do not want to talk of it. This is probably the only chance I will have to speak of it.

untermyer: You mean the subject of combination and concentration?

morgan: Yes; the question of control. Without you have control, you can not do anything.

untermyer: Unless you have got control, you can not do what?

morgan: Unless you have got actual control, you can not control anything.

untermyer: Well, I guess that is right. Is that the reason you want to control everything?

morgan: I want to control nothing.

untermyer: Then what sort of control is it that you want? You say, in order to have complete control . . .

morgan: I do not want either—I do not want any control.

untermyer: What is the point, Mr. Morgan, you want to make, because I do not quite gather it?

morgan: What I say is this, that control is a thing, particularly in money, and you are talking about a money control—now, there is nothing in the world that you can make a trust on money.
Morgan interprets Untermyer’s words in a literal fashion, arguing that money—understood simply as gold coin rather than as privileged access to credit—is impossible to monopolize. In another session, Untermyer returns to the question of control, and once again fails to get Morgan—arguably the most powerful and influential man in America at this point—to admit that he controls anything:

**Untermyer:** Some other man who might control might not take the view you have?
**Morgan:** He would not have the control.
**Untermyer:** That is your idea, is it? Your idea is that when a man has got a vast power, such as you have—you admit you have, do you not?
**Morgan:** I do not know it, sir.
**Untermyer:** You admit you have, do you not?
**Morgan:** I do not think I have.
**Untermyer:** You do not feel it at all?
**Morgan:** No; I do not feel it at all.83

Morgan’s immediate argument is that a single, powerful man cannot control affairs because the board of directors can always outnumber him. What is more striking, however, is his steadfast refusal to acknowledge that, even if in a minority, the outsized influence of his firm in the financial community could still hold sway, or to even concede that he could, in any way, be considered powerful.84

On another occasion, Morgan begrudgingly accepts Untermyer’s suggestion that his authority is *unconscious* for him, calling up the enigmatic notion that he possesses power over which he claims to have no personal knowledge or control. This raises the paradoxical possibility that a conspiracy might emerge unknownst to the conspirators:

**Untermyer:** You and Mr. Baker dominate the anthracite coalroad situation, do you not, together?
**Morgan:** No; we do not.
**Untermyer:** Do you not?
**Morgan:** I do not think we do. At least, if we do, I do not know it.
**Untermyer:** Your power in any direction is entirely unconscious to you, is it not?
**Morgan:** It is, sir; if that is the case.
**Untermyer:** You do not think you have any power in any department of industry in this country, do you?
**Morgan:** I do not.
**Untermyer:** Not the slightest?
**Morgan:** Not the slightest.85
In one light, Morgan’s prevarications spring from his conviction that he is merely
primo inter pares on a board of trustees, a humble agent for the individual share-
holders he represents, rather than the formally recognized principal driving the
structural changes to the constituent businesses—a process that, unsurprisingly,
became dubbed “Morganization.” Read in a different light, however, these re-
peated clashes around the definition of “control” get at the heart of the issue at
stake in the Pujo hearings. If there is no actual conspiracy, is it possible for con-
trol to emerge without straightforward intention or direct, personal knowledge?
Is it possible that Untermyer is wrong to claim that there is a conspiracy, but,
at the same time, that Morgan is wrong to deny having any influence over the
nation’s financial and industrial system?

For their part, the bankers insisted that there had been no conscious act of
conspiracy, and no personal knowledge of one. They also therefore claimed that,
if there happened to emerge a situation that, in an unfavorable light, resembled
an illegal restraint of trade, it was not their primary aim—and this was key to
the legal definition of conspiracy under the rule-of-reason interpretation of the
Sherman Anti-Trust Act, which permitted restraints of trade as long as they were
not the main intention of the business agreement. For example, Sherer defended
the Clearing House Association’s (CHA) practice of creating a virtual monopoly
by forbidding members to deal with the Curb Exchange or the rival Consoli-
dated Exchange, along with the stipulation that only members could clear checks
through the CHA at the set rate. Like most of the witnesses, Sherer endlessly
tried to claim no personal knowledge of any of the common rumors of sharp
practices. He maintained that it was not a case of a deliberate restraint of trade,
since the Clearing House was like a private club in which the members submit
voluntarily to the rules that they endorse. In this case, however, as Sherer and
others insisted, the agreement on rates did not happen through explicit, contrac-
tual approval, but through a tacit, mutual accord on the principles of conservative
banking. The CHA thus did not constitute a conspiracy, Sherer argued with a
remarkable degree of chutzpah, any more than did a voluntary agreement by
union members not to offer their labor below a certain wage. This voluntarist
model obsessively cleaved to the principle of economic actors as autonomous
individuals, operating on the level playing field produced by freedom of contract
and competition. Sherer’s denial of the existence of a money-trust conspiracy
thus did not contravene the Sherman Anti-Trust Act on a very literal reading
of the law. Nevertheless, it ignored the patently obvious facts exposed by the
investigation: the CHA used its clout to reinforce the monopoly power and priv-
ileges of an inner circle of elite bankers.
Like Sherer, Morgan repeatedly rebuffed the accusation that there was a formal money-trust agreement contravening existing law by likewise employing a very literalist interpretation of how conspiratorial agreements are made. He made clear, for example, that he did not personally know some of the directors with whom he was alleged to be colluding and thus could not be guilty of orchestrating a conspiracy. In a letter belatedly replying to the accusations and insinuations made by Untermyer in his cross-examination of Morgan, Morgan & Company’s lawyers were adamant that the kind of all-encompassing money trust sketched out by the Pujo Committee was impossible, because it was contrary to the natural, immutable, impersonal laws of supply and demand: competition can never be totally suppressed. The letter challenged the “exceedingly mistaken inferences,” drawn from the diagrams and tables prepared by the committee that showed interlocking directorships, that “this vast aggregate of the country’s wealth is at the disposal of these 180 men.” The letter noted that “such an implication rests solely upon the untenable theory that these men, living in different parts of the country, in many cases personally unacquainted with each other, and in most cases associated only in occasional transactions, vote always for the same policies and control with united purpose.”

This face-saving letter presented a view of high finance operating solely through the impersonal, rational calculus of economic logic, rather than the actual mutual back-scratching of a clubbable coterie. It rejected out of hand the all-too-plausible idea that vested class interest indeed might lead to individual bankers always voting the same way, even if they did not explicitly agree to do so in advance—a possibility that, ironically, was pretty much exactly the defense offered by Sherer in his account of the Clearing House, operating, through tacit agreement, as a private members’ club.

In his own testimony before the Pujo Committee, Morgan did not emphasize the modern, abstract, impartial nature of finance, as the letter from his counsel had done, but instead, like Sherer, repeatedly evoked a picture of banking dominated by the Old World values of personal trust and close-knit social connections. He was adamant, for example, that the decision to loan money ultimately rested not on an objective and strictly numerical analysis of credit history or financial worth, but on a much more subjective response to an applicant, based on a trust in personal character, rather than impersonal numbers:

**Morgan:** I know lots of men, business men, too, who can borrow any amount, whose credit is unquestioned.

**Untermyer:** Is that not because it is believed that they have the money back of them?
Morgan: No, sir; it is because people believe in the man.
Untermeyer: And it is regardless of whether he has any financial backing at all, is it?
Morgan: It is very often.
Untermeyer: And he might not be worth anything?
Morgan: He might not have anything. I have known a man to come into my office, and I have given him a check for a million dollars when I knew he had not a cent in the world.

[...]
Untermeyer: Is not commercial credit based primarily on money or property?
Morgan: No, sir; the first thing is character.
Untermeyer: Before money or property?
Morgan: Before money or anything else. Money can not buy it.
Untermeyer: So that a man with character, without anything at all behind it, can get all the credit he wants, and a man with the property can not get it?
Morgan: That is very often the case.
Untermeyer: But that is the rule of business.
Morgan: That is the rule of business. . . . Because a man I do not trust could not get money from me on all the bonds in Christendom.87

Morgan and the other bankers called before the Pujo Committee thus seemed to want it both ways. On the one hand, they stressed that business is a matter of impersonal, rational calculation and economic laws that would undermine any conspiracy theory of a cabal of bankers pulling the strings behind the scenes. On the other hand, they were keen to emphasize that personal relationships and trust are the key to the world of private banking. This contradiction was not merely the result of self-serving prevarication (although there is fair measure of that). Instead, it must be seen as a result of the wider difficulty that both critics and apologists alike had in accounting for the continuing relevance of individualism in an era of megalithic corporations operating in an increasingly complex financial landscape.

The financiers resolutely denied any kind of conspiratorial connection or monopolistic control, but it is still worth asking if there was any substance to the Pujo Committee's accusations. If there was not an actual conspiracy, then how can we explain the overwhelming influence of a small clique of private bankers—and of J. P. Morgan in particular—during the development of the great trusts and corporations? Following the lead of Alfred Chandler, many business and economic historians have argued that, unlike Britain and France, the United States
and Germany followed a path to the “managerial revolution” that separated ownership from control. For Chandler, it was the persistence of “personal capitalism” (that is, both family ties in the ownership of corporations, and the close involvement of family owners in the management of their firms) that explains why Britain suffered an economic decline in the twentieth century. In this story, the United States had a far lower rate of interlocking corporate directorships than Britain and even Germany, thereby explaining its comparative economic success. The Pujo Committee, according to this line of thinking, saw the hidden hand of an evil conspiracy, whereas it should have seen the genius of what Chandler famously termed the “visible hand” of managerial efficiency.\(^8^8\) Chandler’s story of inevitable progress toward technological and economic efficiency has, however, been challenged from many quarters. Some historians have shown that “personal capitalism” persisted in some sectors of the American economy far longer than Chandler had imagined and, in the British case, was necessary to sustain trade across the vast distances of the Empire.\(^8^9\) Even the basic premise of the American innovation of managerial capitalism has been questioned, with Leslie Hannah, for instance, demonstrating how, in 1900, Britain and France had a far more democratic spread of share ownership and corporate governance rules, with the United States far closer in reality to the picture of plutocratic control sketched out in the Pujo Committee’s report and its diagrams.\(^9^0\) It is arguable, therefore, that during this period, it was the United States, and not Britain, that was dominated by “personal capitalism” and dense interlocking networks of elite bankers, even if they were structured by mutual interests and social cohesion, rather than direct conspiracy.\(^9^1\)

More recently, economists such as Bradford DeLong have revisited the issue, posing the question, if there was no monopoly, why did firms like J. P. Morgan & Company manage to sustain such extravagant profits from the mergers they created? DeLong starts with the presumption that there was no secret money trust. Therefore, he posits that both the corporations and the investors were willing to pay a premium for something they might have been able to get cheaper elsewhere. DeLong claims that using Morgan to handle the stock market flotations of newly formed corporate behemoths in effect added 30 percent to the value of a corporation’s stock, in part because Morgan insisted on instituting sound managerial restructurings once he took his seat on the board. In essence, DeLong’s argument is that in a “market for lemons,” sound guidance is worth paying for, to even up the informational asymmetry.\(^9^2\) DeLong’s neoclassical economic analysis sees only rational economic agents, however, and ignores the possibility that forms of monopoly control exist that do not amount to a full-
blown conspiracy, yet profoundly tilt the playing field in favor of the already powerful.

Susie Pak’s study of the secretive world of private banking begins with a similar question to that of DeLong: “If the Morgans’ network was not homogenous or collusive, and if their influence was not based on their monetary capital, as they claimed, what was the source of their power?” Like DeLong, Pak starts from the position that there was no tightly knit conspiracy, at least in the way that the Pujo Committee and popular sentiment imagined. Her research into the Morgans’ social networks suggests, however, that their influence was not solely a result of rational and impersonal economic factors. The kinship and community networks the Morgans cultivated were necessary in a business world in which information was hard to come by, because there was very little in the way of regulatory requirements for disclosure and the publication of accounts. In short, they provided the personal trust that was vital to doing business in an era without adequate mechanisms for impersonal trust, and this personal mode persisted far longer into the twentieth century than most economic theorists, either at the time or since, have countenanced. The underwriting syndicates the Morgans put together relied on—and in turn helped cement—social networks in Manhattan based on kinship ties, memberships in elite clubs, and the reciprocal exchange of favors, as well as the interlocking directorships identified by the Pujo Committee. As Edith Wharton’s novels make clear, inclusion in a deal was as much the result of a social calculation as an economic one, and, vice versa, financial cooperation also helped advance social ambitions, albeit not always in fully reciprocated ways. Pak also demonstrates that although the Morgans maintained their elevated status by cultivating very exclusive and exclusionary social circles (they were undeniably racist and antisemitic), they nonetheless were willing to do business, when necessary, with German-Jewish bankers, such as the house of Kuhn-Loeb. The two groups moved on parallel social tracks but shared a commitment to the discretion and conservative values that formed the bedrock of “gentleman banking.” It was precisely the flexibility of their networks that made them so durable, with their secretive world of insider dealing and the granting of favors lasting long into twentieth century. Simple-minded Populist conspiracy theories about the existence of a money trust may well have been mistaken in many of their claims, but their basic sense that finance was dominated by a plutocratic network was not so wide of the mark.

As Pak suggests, it was the invisibility of those ties—maintained more by tacit assumptions than actual agreements—that made it so difficult for the Pujo Committee to prove that there was a conspiracy. Progressive critics of high fi-
nance thus made the mistake of focusing solely on combating illegal, formal collusion, when, in fact, it was the informal social ties and shared mores that were more important in oiling the machinery of business during this period. The partners of J. P. Morgan & Company (Morgan himself died in 1913) reluctantly accepted the Clayton Act’s prohibition on interlocking directorships, if only to avoid negative publicity, but in private they recognized that the social relationships would continue unabated, and, ironically, would become increasingly important if more-formal channels of economic cooperation were outlawed. Thus Jack Morgan (Pierpont’s son) insisted in private that he was “absolutely confident that the present relationships are built on personalities rather than on stock ownership, and that they will continue unadulterated,” while Benjamin Strong Jr. of the Bankers Trust acknowledged that “legislation won’t bother us if we are surrounded by such good friends.”

Muckraking critics were thus wrong to focus fixatedly on the specific details of a single, vast, money-trust conspiracy. Their broader conspiratorial outlook on high finance, however, should not necessarily be rejected automatically as delusional or misguided. First of all, the Chandlerian dismissal of Progressive Era interpretations of business and economic development as a highly personal story of heroes and villains (associated most famously with The Robber Barons, Matthew Josephson’s scathing look back at the Gilded Age from the anticapitalist perspective of the Great Depression) is in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Chandler advocated a new approach to business history that would focus not on the individual skullduggery or the genius of the robber barons, but on the abstract economic, technological, and managerial factors that seemed to inevitably fuel industrial progress. By taking this line, however, the emergent discipline of business history downplayed the role of finance (and the particular compromises reached between Washington and Wall Street) in its Whiggish story of the triumph of the efficiencies of industrial capitalism. The preoccupation with modern structures of impersonal bureaucracy, economic rationality, and professional management blinded this research to the surprising persistence of personal connections, insider dealing, and a cultural milieu more suited to secretive collusion than transparent competition. In a similar fashion, Hofstadter’s attack on the irrational elements of Populist and muckraking rhetoric ended up unfairly delegitimizing the desire to understand the way in which monopoly power worked: through personal networks and the unspoken assumptions of class privilege. Hofstadter might have been correct in dismissing Populist critics for their adherence to the “simple virtues and unmitigated villainies of a rural melodrama,” but the alternative—seeing financial history as entirely the
result of immutable economic laws—ignores the role of individual agency and the socially embedded networks of privilege in which those individuals operate.

If the Pujo Committee was wrong to claim that the money trust was a carefully orchestrated conspiracy, it was nevertheless correct to recognize that financial networks based on personal connection were central to the monopoly stage of industrial capitalism, especially before the banking reforms of the New Deal. What emerges from the surreal and frustrating exchanges in the Pujo hearings is a surprisingly complex picture of power that is both individual and structural, intentional and unconscious. The forms of collusion it reveals are sometimes conscious but more often are unspoken, merely taken for granted, part of the collective world view of gentleman banking. Muckraking attacks on high finance thus grappled with the problem of what to call the concatenation of influence they uncovered, how to make sense of it, and how to represent it. If it was not a conspiracy, what was it? The short answer is that it was the workings of the class interest of the moneyed elite, coupled with lax regulation, with all of it underpinned by a shared ideological outlook that made active, conscious conspiring unnecessary. But the language of class and ideology has usually been relegated to the fringes of American political life, as stigmatized as the talk of conspiracy. (Even Pak, for example, rarely identifies the exclusive social networks of the Morgans as part of class privilege.) As William Domhoff rightly notes in his exhaustive study of the way that America has historically been ruled by a small elite that, with the Occupy Movement, has recently come to be identified as “the 1%,” there is no need for a conspiracy theory. The elite openly pursue their transparent goals of self-advancement, and it does not take a secret conspiracy of obscure plotters for them to be able to achieve this. On the other hand, in the early decades of the twentieth century, in a situation with little accurate information on the workings of Wall Street, and in the absence of the analytical frameworks of sophisticated sociology, making sense of the invisible networks of high finance—figuring out whether Morgan was, like Shelgrim, the cunning spider at the center of the web—stretched to the limit the explanatory and representational models of the time.

**Exhibit 243 and Other Diagrams**

The tension between viewing power in terms of individual, secretive, intentional agency or seeing it as the result of an ideological collective structure is at its most extreme in a remarkable illustration that was included as an appendix to the Pujo Committee’s report (fig. 5.1). The chart was submitted as Exhibit 243 and was one of a series of diagrams that provided a schematic representation of the links...
Figure 5.1 “Exhibit No. 243,” Pujo Committee Report, 25 February 1913. The Pujo Committee was tasked with investigating the existence of a money trust that allegedly involved an illegitimate concentration of power in the hands of the nation’s bankers. This illustration, prepared by the Committee, shows the affiliations of J. P. Morgan with other directors of banks and insurance firms. Image courtesy of FRASER [Federal Reserve Archival System for Economic Research, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis].
between the various bankers and institutions under investigation. The diagram was derived from a huge table that plotted all the interlocking directorships of the biggest financial firms with the largest industrial and transportation companies. The table and diagrams were prepared by Philip Scudder of the Investors’ Agency, a New York firm of accountants and financial advisers. In his testimony to the committee, Scudder recounted how it took a team of twelve clerks, working day and night for three weeks solid, to gather the data and prepare the table and charts. Exhibit 243 uses careful color-coding to show the various affiliations (black for those involving J. P. Morgan & Company, green for the National City Bank, and so on), along with different lines to indicate the precise nature of the relationship (e.g., a wiggly line for a voting trustee, dashes for a director in a subsidiary company). Finally, the size of the circles is in proportion to the capital worth of each firm.

It was important to Populist, Progressive, and Socialist critics alike to find a way of rendering visible the networks of power against which they were protesting. As Louis Brandeis put it: “Wealth expressed in figures gives a wholly inadequate picture of the allies’ power. Their wealth is dynamic. It is wielded by geniuses in combination. It finds its proper expression in means of control. To comprehend the power of the allies we must try to visualize the ramifications through which the forces operate” (emphasis added). Scudder no doubt would have received his instructions from Untermyer, but there is little in the historical record about where the latter derived the specifications for Exhibit 243. Although largely forgotten now, the diagram is fascinating, because it draws on a variety of different and quite contradictory representational traditions to create what is arguably one of the first attempts to provide a graphical mapping of the entire landscape of American financial capitalism.

We might begin by noting that the diagram has a family resemblance to the many satirical cartoons of the era, which picture corporations as octopuses. With its depiction of Morgan as the central financial intelligence, connected by numerous appendages to outlying parts of the national economy, Exhibit 243 resembles a structural circuit diagram of a cephalopod. Like the railroad map in The Octopus, the schematic conjures up the specter of a monster with flailing tentacles. The chart also recalls muckraking cartoons that depicted Morgan as a spider at the center of the web of “flim flam finance,” trying to lure the public to their doom (see figure 3.4). The muckraking cartoons of the era and the Pujo diagrams share a desire to see a totality that is more than the sum of its parts, to visualize a coordinated pattern beneath the surface detail, and, above all else, to identify the individual—or at any rate, the individual firm—at the center of the web.
Unlike the satirical cartoons, however, the Pujo diagrams unsurprisingly eschew any direct personification or anthropomorphism, relying on corporate names, numbers, and color-coded lines to make their argument. Yet, as illustrations, they are not entirely mechanical and impersonal; they are painstakingly hand drawn, equally works of art as charts of accountancy.99

As much as the diagrams are geometric abstractions of anthropomorphic octopuses or spiders, they also draw their visual rhetoric from the corporate organizational charts that were pioneered by the engineer Daniel McCallum for the New York and Erie Railroad in the 1850s.100 In McCallum’s seminal drawing, the unprecedented organizational complexity of a large corporation was visualized as a series of branch and trunk lines, much like the ramifying structure of the railroad itself (fig. 5.2). What is striking, however, is that the more familiar pyramidal shape in twentieth-century organizational charts is here inverted: the managers are at the bottom, with the lowliest and remotest parts of the New York and Erie Railroad at the top. McCallum’s chart is even more intriguing because its visual metaphor is organic, rather than machinic; it resembles a natural-history drawing of a fern or the display of a peacock’s feathers (both favored decorative motifs in Victorian America), rather than an engineering drawing. Its schematic logic also draws on the much older visual trope of the family tree, which was beginning to be used in more systematic ways in the mid-nineteenth century, such as the one-time railroad lawyer Lewis Henry Morgan’s schematic diagrams of comparative kinship structures derived from his study of Native Americans.101

Ironically, the Pujo Committee charts, which were designed to show the conspiratorial complicity of the corporate giants, drew on the very modes of organizational rationality that Chandler and Robert Wiebe argue contributed to the rise of corporations.102 This irony is understandable if we remember that Untermyer was trying to make a case for a money trust that was less fevered than the Populist accusations, which not only had led to the establishment of the Pujo Committee, but were in danger of getting the investigation sunk before it could even begin. It must also be remembered that both Untermyer and Brandeis, before they turned to the antimonopoly cause, had made their fortunes as lawyers undertaking corporate reorganizations, particularly of railroads. It was, I want to suggest, precisely their training in the organizational efficiency of the railroads that allowed them to visualize financial corruption as a system. Exhibit 243 thus reveals insider dealing not as an occasional and incidental corruption of proper business, but as a structural component of it, part of a complete ecosystem.103

The Pujo diagrams have few direct antecedents, but they do share features with two other early twentieth-century visualizations of corporate interlocks.
Figure 5.2 “Representation of a Plan of Organization,” New York and Erie Railroad (1855). Daniel McCallum’s drawing of the organizational structure of the New York and Erie Railroad in the 1850s is considered to be one of the forerunners of modern corporate organizational charts. Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.
Historians of social network analysis have identified the young British Fabian writer, John Atkinson Hobson, as the creator of one of the first visual depictions of corporate interlocks. Having gone to South Africa to report on the Boer War, Hobson was alarmed to discover that the jingoistic promotion of the war was being orchestrated by what he believed to be a conspiracy of newspapers in the control of financiers—and it was the financiers who were cynically promoting military intervention by the British, in order to provide themselves with protection for their business activities that they had no wish to pay for directly themselves. Hobson argued that there was a cabal of corporate and financial interests that were controlling events and, therefore, that the patriotic story of imperial conquest was just a smoke screen. Hobson also insisted that, apart from Cecil Rhodes, most of the significant financial players were Jewish. Hobson’s work on the supposed secret economic truths behind the fiction of imperialism influenced Lenin, and historians such as Niall Ferguson have lined up to dismiss Hobson’s work as conspiracy-minded antisemitism. In the revised edition of his *Evolution of Modern Capitalism*, however, published in 1906, Hobson began to develop a less ad hominem and more structural analysis of the relationship between German-Jewish financial interests, South African corporations, and the process of imperialism. Like the Pujo Committee, Hobson was grappling with the problem of how to visualize financial capitalism at the moment of its dizzying global expansion. A similar convergence of a personal-conspiratorial and an impersonal-structural perspective can be seen in the diagram accompanying Hobson’s text (fig. 5.3). Like the Pujo charts, it encapsulates the contradictory impulses of mapping structure and plotting conspiratorial agency.

In contrast, John Moody, the American financial analyst and founder of the bond-rating agency that still bears his name, produced diagrams of corporate interlocks around the turn of the twentieth century that were designed not to condemn the conspiracy of capitalism, but to celebrate the emergence of the trusts and corporate combinations as an inevitable stage in economic evolution (fig. 5.4). For Moody—as it was for Morgan—the problem of competition was to be solved through cooperation. “The modern trust,” Moody asserts, “is the natural outcome or evolution of society conditions and ethical standards which are recognized and established among men today as being necessary elements in the development of civilization.” The charts are not mere illustrations, but are central to Moody’s overall project of trying to understand and represent industrial combinations that have grown too big to be grasped by mere mortals.

Moody acknowledges that, because of the lack of publicly available documentation and the interconnectedness of the entity, “it is not possible to more than
attempt an approximate estimate of the entire Standard Oil industrial, financial, and commercial interests of the nation, as their ramifications are so varied and extensive that a clear line of demarcation could not be drawn which would absolutely distinguish the interests which are more or less dominated by them, from those which are not.” Nonetheless, “the chart which we publish . . . gives a fairly accurate ‘bird’s eye view’ of the immensity of their influence and importance as the leading factors in American financial and industrial affairs.”¹⁰⁸ From this imaginary bird’s-eye perspective, Moody is convinced that, beneath the melodramatic surface story of corporate skirmishes, the two sides constitute a single, vast entity: “It should not be supposed, however, that these two great groups of capitalists and financiers are in any real sense rivals or competitors for power, or that such a thing as ‘war’ exists between them. For, as a matter of fact, they are not only friendly, but they are allied to each other by many close ties, and it would probably require only a little stretch of the imagination to describe them as a single great Rockefeller-Morgan group.”¹⁰⁹

Whereas the Pujo Committee saw the “ramifications” of the banking-industrial complex as something akin to a conspiracy, Moody—like Presley in The
Octopus—marveled at the quasi-divine, sublime order that emerged beneath the mundane intrigue and infighting. He paints a picture of a vast corporate being whose life force circulates throughout the nation, and wasteful competition between rival firms is replaced by a new cooperative and symbiotic system:

Therefore, viewed as a whole, we find the dominating influences in the Trusts to be made up of an intricate network of large and small groups of capitalists, many allied to one another by ties of more or less importance, but all being appendages to or parts of the greater groups, which are themselves dependent on and allied with the two mammoth or Rockefeller and Morgan groups. These two mammoth groups jointly (for, as pointed out, they really may be regarded as one) constitute the heart of the business and commercial life of the nation, the others all being the arteries which permeate in a thousand ways our whole national life, making their influence

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*Figure 5.4* John Moody, “The Great Steam Railroad Groups,” *Truth about the Trusts: A Description and Analysis of the American Trust Movement* (New York: Moody, 1904), insert after p. 432. The business analyst and statistician John Moody saw the development of industrial and transport conglomerations as the next inevitable step of economic evolution and attempted to portray visually the interlocking corporate interests as an orderly system. Harvard College Library.
Moody’s written description of the Rockefeller-Morgan group is couched in familiar biological terms (dating back to at least the Physiocrats) of a central heart supplying the economic life force to the whole body of industrial America. Although Moody’s image is labeled a “family tree,” the picture draws more from the visual rhetoric of machine diagrams than the organic language of biological or hereditary models (fig. 5.5). If the Pujo Committee perceived conspiratorial complicity and crushing size, Moody instead saw “interdependence, harmony, financial strength, commercial power, [and] ability.” However, both the Pujo Com-
mittee and Moody were animated by a desire to create a panoramic overview of industrial capitalism as a coordinated system, albeit with very different intents. For the Pujo Committee, as for Hobson, what began to emerge from the diagrams was a picture of a system that acted like a conspiracy, or, at the very least, produced the kinds of effects as if there had been a deliberate plot.111

**Conclusion: System as Conspiracy**

Leaving aside the question of accuracy, the Moody and the Pujo diagrams presented an abstracted panorama of the entire corporate economy of the United States in a way that had not really been done before. Although they reached wildly different conclusions, they both signaled a significant departure from earlier ways of conceiving of the power structure of large organizations—and even the entire economy—as hierarchical. That traditional approach was embodied most clearly in some of the very few visual representations of power structures that were made before twentieth-century corporate organizational charts appeared, such as schematic diagrams from the eighteenth century depicting the Catholic Church, or illustrations from the 1790s revealing the supposed hidden channels of power of secret societies, such as the United Irishmen or the Bavarian Illuminati.112 Like the Moody diagrams, the Pujo charts represent the financial-industrial complex not as a pyramid in which authority flows down from above, or as a simple web in which control radiates outward from the center, or even as a hub-and-spoke conspiracy, but as a circuit of flows in which power is dispersed throughout the entire, interconnected system.

In *Other People’s Money*, Brandeis attempted to clarify what the Pujo Committee had uncovered. “A single example,” he claimed, “will illustrate the vicious circle of control—the endless chain—through which our financial oligarchy now operates.”113 This is not the usual hierarchical chain of command favored by conspiracist denunciations of secret societies like the Illuminati. Instead, Brandeis describes an interwoven pattern of control in which, like poststructuralist theories of signification, the ultimate source of power and meaning is ultimately deferred: “The chain is indeed endless; for each controlled corporation is entwined with many others.”114 Viewed in isolation, Exhibit 243 might seem to show J. P. Morgan & Company as the controlling spider at the center of the web, or the central, octopus-like intelligence controlling the economy through its tentacles. It is important to note, however, that this was just one of several visualizations produced by Scudder from the master table of interlocking directorships, each viewing the network of relationships through a different filter. The individual Pujo diagrams edge toward identifying the commanding conspirator at the heart
of system, but, viewed as an entirety, they create a picture of power that is un-
cannily decentralized and cannot be easily put together into one overarching
figure. On the one hand, the individual diagrams present a level of detail that
is highly personalized: they name names and document in microscopic detail
the actual connections between particular capitalists. On the other hand, taken
together, they constitute an abstract and impersonal representation of the dense
and messy entanglement of familial, social, and financial ties.

In this regard, the Pujo charts have much in common with some recent works
of art that attempt to provide a visualization of financial capitalism. For example,
we can see a similar fusion of the abstract and the personal in the work of the
conceptual artist Mark Lombardi, who produced a series of elaborate drawings
in the 1980s and 1990s that provided a “cognitive mapping” of the conspiratorial
connections that emerged from his research into the financial and political scan-
dals of the period. Lombardi drew the diagrams in order to make some sense
out of the 12,000 filing cards he had assembled in the course of his research.115

Looked at in one way, these drawings are not so different from the countless flow-
charts of conspiratorial association that clutter up the Internet. If we stand back
from Lombardi’s drawings, however, what we see are works of sublime beauty,
geometric abstractions that resemble modern-day constellations. In a similar
fashion, there is the work of the French artist duo, Bureau d’Études, who pro-
duce “cartographies of contemporary political, social, and economic systems,”
with the aim of “revealing what normally remains invisible and contextualizing
apparently separate elements within a bigger whole.”116 Finally, Griftopia, William
Powhida’s 2011 reworking of Lombardi’s drawings, takes us back closer to the
muckraking spirit of the Pujo Committee’s Exhibit 243, where all roads seem to
lead ultimately to Morgan, or, in Powhida’s case, to Alan Greenspan.117

Viewed through the prism of these modern conceptual artists, we can see how
the Pujo diagrams not only combine conspiratorial agency and impersonal sys-
tem, but represent system as conspiracy. They endow impersonal structures with
personal agency, in a similar way to the Gilded Age cartoons that personify finan-
cial corruption as a larger-than-life conspiracy. This may well still mean that they
ultimately fail to account for the structural processes at work, but they cannot be
dismissed as simple and naive conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theory has usually
been seen as the polar opposite of systems theory, a throwback to a humanist and
melodramatic fantasy of individual villainy as the hidden cause behind troubling
developments in society. Timothy Melley, however, in his account of the recurrent
“agency panic” in post–World War II American literature and culture, argues that
there is a “postmodern transference” at work.118 Paranoically fearful of the loss
of individual agency through the controlling influence of vast organizations, networks, technologies, or systems, writers repeatedly imagine that those abstract and impersonal structures act as if they have the malign will of a conspiring individual. A faith in individual agency is thus ironically preserved by imaginatively transferring it onto a larger entity. The abstract structure is imbued with a sense of uncanny, almost supernatural agency, a ghost within the machinery of modernity. Melley suggests that this process is peculiar to the late twentieth century and is, at heart, a panicked reaction to the increasing complexity and interdependence of American life in the era of corporate globalization. Fredric Jameson makes a similar diagnosis, claiming that “conspiracy theory is the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age.” It is, Jameson asserts, a “degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.” Jameson reads conspiracy theory not as a mere symptom of a delusional mindset, but as an allegory, at the level of form rather than content, of the complex social and economic changes of globalization that cannot be understood in any straightforward way.

It is arguable that a similar rhetorical process was at work in the first Gilded Age, as it is in the current Gilded Age, for similar reasons. The sudden emergence of enormous corporate and financial entanglements in the late nineteenth century likewise undermined traditional ways of understanding personal and historical causation, not least because of the increasingly vast disparities of wealth. In his study of the breakdown of traditional societies in the nineteenth century, Robert Wiebe famously noted: “As men ranged farther and farther from their communities, they tried desperately to understand the larger world in terms of their small, familiar environment. They tried, in other words, to impose the known upon the unknown, to master an impersonal world through the customs of a personal society.” For Wiebe, though, as for Hofstadter and Lippmann, those who turned to older and more-personal ways of understanding the world—of which conspiracy theories are a prime example—were rural folk who failed to comprehend the changes that urbanizing modernity was bringing. Instead, we might follow Melley’s insight: many writers turn to the rhetoric of conspiracy theory in order to account for the operation of the invisible hand of the market, because a more properly sociological analysis, in terms of class or ideology or political economy, is viewed with suspicion in the American scene. That was as true for the muckraking era as it is for our own.