Farmers, mass-market magazines, and modernity

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During the first decades of the twentieth century commercial illustrator Robert Robinson produced dozens of images of rustic old men. Versions of this sympathetically rendered 'type' -- affectionately known as 'the codger' -- appeared on the cover of mass market magazines including the ***Saturday Evening Post*** **(http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2010/07/10/art-literature/artists-illustrators/global-warming-july.html/attachment/cover_9100709)** and *Harper's Weekly*, trade publications such as *American Druggist* and, more intriguingly, the Socialist monthly, *The Masses*. **Cultural historians (http://www.jstor.org/stable/303358)** who rightly identify the *Post* as a powerful hegemonising force devoted to a vision of modernity defined by consumer capitalism have taken Robinson's illustrations as exemplars of the magazine's condescending tone, as "commentary from an earlier generation about which the new self-made men and wives could feel both nostalgic and superior." Yet, as Robinson's work for *The Masses* indicates, rustic old men could also mean something else.

In the years around 1910, the *Post*'s editor, George Horace Lorimer, relentlessly championed the pro-business, Progressive Republicanism of Theodore Roosevelt. On the *Post*'s **November 26, 1910 (http://www.curtispublishing.com/images/NonRockwell/9101126.jpg)** cover Robinson pictures the codger in a state of righteous anger, accompanied by a portrait of TR and an indifferent interlocutor. This illustration, this picture of everyday life, can be located within a longer history of genre scenes depicting ordinary people -- **Jacksonian American (http://art.thewalters.org/detail/28889/politics-in-an-oyster-house/)** citizens or **English labourers (http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=10295)** for example -- engaged in political talk. While, like these earlier images, Robinson's cover leaves the nature of that talk open to speculation (and, perhaps, ridicule), here and on other occasions the codger appears to be in conflict with the modern world of the *Post* and its readers, and the "special interests" and Progressive bureaucrats that dominated the era's national politics.

In this context the codger's age and rusticity carry oppositional, rather than nostalgic, connotations: he calls to mind the resentments harboured by Civil War veterans or, more potently, revises the **demeaning iconography (http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b41555/)** that adhered to the agrarian political movements of the late nineteenth century. Describing the Populist movement that came close to real political power in the early 1890s as "one of the most intense challenges to corporate power in American history," historian Charles Postel emphasises that this challenge was not straightforwardly anti-modern. These agrarian radicals opposed mechanisation and bureaucratisation only to the extent that they were tools of the 'big money' powers that worked against their interests. Inside the first issue of *The Masses* that Robinson illustrated, a columnist asks "Farmers of America, what's wrong? Why aren't you in the forefront of the revolutionary line of battle?" This plea for farmers to join the struggle of the "producer coalition" is also an invitation to participate in modernity.

In the early 1910s Robinson's illustrations – ephemeral artefacts of commercial culture – pose questions about the place of farmers within the popular and political iconography of early-twentieth-century America. In Robinson's later illustrations – and in images made by his celebrated colleague on the *Post*, Norman Rockwell – codgers continue to carry complex connotations, but tend to be the bewildered, becalmed butt of the joke. The documentary photographs made by Ben Shahn, Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans during the 1930s return rural people to the discourse of American modernity, but do so by very different means and to very different ends.

My research on Robinson is part of a wider project concerned with the reuse and revival of genre painting motifs, types and techniques in early-twentieth-century American culture.

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