Walter Nugent

PROGRESSIVISM

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Introduction

In the history of American society and politics, “Progressivism” was a many-sided reform movement that emerged in the final years of the nineteenth century, flourished from about 1900 to 1920, and faded away by the early 1920s. In national politics, its greatest achievements occurred between 1910 and 1917. In state and local politics and in private reform efforts—churches, settlement houses, campaigns to fight diseases, for example—Progressive changes began appearing in the 1890s and continued into the 1920s. In these social-justice efforts, legions of activist women, despite lacking the suffrage, were enormously effective. Most prominent in national politics were the “big four”: William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, Robert M. La Follette, and Woodrow Wilson. Mayors Tom Johnson and Sam “Golden Rule” Jones in Ohio led change in their cities, as did governors Hiram Johnson of California and James Vardaman of Mississippi. Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and the rest of the crusaders (known as “muckrakers”) spearheaded what would later be called investigative journalism. Progressive educators ranged from university presidents to philosophers to sociologists. In philanthropy, Chicago’s Julius Rosenwald supported Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, while the Rockefeller Foundation poured millions into education and health in the South. The Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch, the Episcopalian W. D. P. Bliss, and the Catholic John A. Ryan led their churches toward social justice, and by 1910 every major

Protestant denomination espoused what was called the Social Gospel. A major progressive-era innovation, the settlement house, combated poverty, ignorance, disease, and injustice in many cities, led outstandingly by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in Chicago, Lillian Wald and Florence Kelley in New York, and Mary Workman in Los Angeles.

Successful reform movements need followers as well as leaders. Progressivism had millions of followers across the country, electing legislators who put Progressive statutes on the books from Massachusetts to Kansas to California. Some Progressives pushed only one or two reforms, while others called for a broad spectrum. By the time the movement played itself out, many of these objectives had been achieved, particularly those intended to reduce some of the inequities—iniquities, a Progressive would likely have said—and problems that had festered and spread from the unregulated capitalist economy that developed after the Civil War ended in 1865.

Progressivism reflected a growing, if temporary, consensus among Americans that major changes in the late nineteenth century had produced unwelcome, un-American imbalances in their society. Evidences of this were a new class of ostentatious millionaires, monopolistic and out-of-control corporations, conflict (often violent) between workers and capitalists, and supine responses from governments. A traditional suspicion of cities intensified as many middle-sized ones proliferated and a few immense ones expanded, fed not only by migrants from the American countryside itself but also from unfamiliar parts of Europe and Asia. Cities seemed to produce social ills—poverty, prostitution, disease, drunkenness, despair—not that the countryside, especially in the South, was free of such things. But cities, especially large ones, drew more attention.

What could or should be done about all this? How could governments be made more responsive to "the people?" How could economic life be made fair again? How could American society remain faithful to its long-held core values, yet cope with new forces?

Progressives tried in many ways to answer these questions. Most of them favored using some form and degree of government—local, state, or federal—to regulate economic problems, ameliorate social ills, and reconcile change with tradition. Such willingness to use governments broke with the anti-regulatory attitude of the "Gilded Age" that preceded the Progressive era. By 1919 America had changed in many particulars, with a lot of social problems solved (especially for the small-town, small-city, white middle class), though others had hardly been touched. Yet the sense of crisis so urgent in 1900 had passed, whether from the many reforms themselves, from war-weariness, or from a sense of expanded individual opportunity. When all was said and done—despite its incomplete and inadequate attacks on society's problems—the Progressive era constituted one of the longest periods in American history when reform was generally welcome.

Because Progressivism manifested itself in everything from railroad regulation to woman suffrage to immigration control to realist art and literature to the first real mass media and paved roads, the movement's core theme has been hard to pin down. "Reform" itself was that theme, vague as the term was and is. But much of the Progressive spirit lay in that very openness to change, that conviction that "something needs to be done." How, when, and by whom those changes were carried out is the concern of this book.

The consistent conviction of virtually all Progressives was that a "public interest" or "common good" really existed. Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and conservatives of similar mind have denied that there are such things, and, as Reagan famously said, government itself was the problem, not the solution. The result in the post-Reagan years has been legislation and political ideology that is radically individualistic, and certainly not conservative in the traditional philosophic sense. In short, the history of those years played out on a different premise than the Progressives'. Whether we like the individualistic or the societal view better, we can study these century-past reformers to understand that there once was a different consensus.

Not every American of the early twentieth century became a Progressive. As always, some people resisted change in all things, while for others almost no reform went far enough. For the mass in the middle, however, change was desirable and necessary. This mass comprised the followers of the Progressive movement, without whom leaders like Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt would have accomplished little. Both leaders and followers were essential. By 1920 progress had indeed been made on many fronts; American society had moved a long way from where it was in 1900. Yet not everything changed; some backsliding happened in the conservative 1920s, yet overall the main contours of America persisted. At root, Progressivism was reformist, not radical.

Progressivism was a movement of many concerns. It included a wide range of persons and groups, and it arose in different versions in every region of the country. It crossed the lines of party, class, gender, and even race. In the industrializing and urbanizing Northeast and Midwest, Progressives fought against corruption and cronyism in city and state government, and repression of workers in factories and mines; they also fought for public education, clean cities, and responsive governments. In the predominantly agrarian South and Great Plains, Progressives fought against railroad monopolies, scarce credit, exploitation of child labor, and chronic diseases. In many states they promoted woman suffrage. In the exotic and underpopulated Far West, they sought all of these things. On great national issues, such as tariffs on imports (before 1915 the chief source of federal revenue) or imperialism, they divided—Republican Progressives advocated higher tariffs as Republicans always had, and they usually favored aggressive expansion, while Democratic Progressives sought lower tariffs and opposed such colonialism as the annexation of the Philippines in 1898. Eventually, by the second decade of the 1900s, most of them agreed on broad measures such as the graduated income tax, the direct election of U.S. senators, and woman suffrage, though not always on the details. The majority also supported two policies that were not part of the liberalism of the New Deal and later, immigration restriction and prohibition of alcoholic beverages. The majority of Americans in the early twentieth century, Progressives included, did not believe in racial equality; those were the peak years of segregation, Jim Crow laws, and lynchings. Yet some Progressives joined to create the NAACP and the Urban League. No one favored American imperialism more than Theodore Roosevelt, yet he was undeniably a Progressive leader. Many favored entering World War I against Germany, yet Jane Addams, William Jennings Bryan, and many other Progressives opposed it strongly.

In sum, there were many varieties of Progressivism and Progressives. They held in common, however, a conviction that society should be fair to its members (white native-born ones, anyway), and that governments had to represent "the people" and to regulate "the interests." It went without saying that there was such a thing as "society." The progressive "big four"—Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, La Follette, and Wilson—and the many less visible Progressives for all their differences shared a belief in society, a common good, and social justice, and that society could be changed into a better place.

Chapter 1
The predicament: the discontents of the Gilded Age

Why did Progressivism happen when it did, rather than earlier or later? Why were enough Americans "ready for reform" by 1900 and willing for the next fifteen to twenty years to make it happen?

Progressivism began emerging in the closing years of the 1800s, developed with accumulating speed from about 1900 to 1917, and then fragmented and faded during and right after World War I, from 1917 to the early 1920s. Why then? Briefly, because Americans increasingly gained the sense, as the nineteenth century lumbered through its final years, that their society was changing—sometimes for the better, but in important ways, for the worse. Undoubtedly better were the prosperity that marked the 1880s, the multiplication of miles of railroad tracks that promoted and enabled economic development, the first electrified city streets and public places, and the first skyscrapers. On the other hand, undoubtedly worse were the working conditions in factories and mines, the monopolistic control that those very railroads placed on millions of farmers, and above all the increasingly visible disparities in rewards between the most fortunate members of society and the general mass of people. The rich were getting richer—far richer—than most people. Up to a point that seemed reasonable and justifiable, but beyond that point, it felt unfair and unjust. What, if anything, could be done?

Rumblings of discontent were apparent as early as 1880. For some decades before that, Americans very often thought of society as a harmonious collection of people engaged in producing and distributing things. Farmers produced grain, cotton, and livestock; skilled craftsmen built houses and shod horses; manufacturers produced nails and rails; shopkeepers sold them. The economy consisted of small producers. Hardly anybody was extremely rich or extremely poor—and shouldn't be. Nonproducers were suspect, sometimes called manipulators of the wealth that real people produced. Reality did not always match this ideal, but the harmonious association of producers and the very secondary role of nonproducers was how American society should be. The best American political economist of the nineteenth century, Henry C. Carey of Philadelphia, theorized that the good society consisted of the harmonious association of its members. The act of production was vital and honorable. The great French observer of the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting in 1831, explained that Americans loved change, but they hated revolution—because they were a people of "scanty fortunes," none really rich, but all with some property to invest, nurture, and defend. To these writers, American society succeeded, not because its members were equal but because opportunity was widespread, and property was, in general, fairly distributed.

The profound unfairness that American society wreaked on its nonwhite members was foreign to the theory of Carey or the observations of Tocqueville. The immense fracture of the recent Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction belied talk of harmonious association, given that over 600,000 had died in that war and that deep sectional and racial hostility persisted long afterward. Nonetheless, the ideal of harmony, and the democratic, wide dispersal of economic and political power that permitted and supported it, continued to satisfy a great many Americans as an answer to the question, what should America be like? Producerism was optimistic, rosy-eyed, and to some extent mythical, yet it did seem to define how the political economy of the country worked.

That country, as of the late 1870s, looked like this: Just under 50,000,000 people were scattered across 3,000,000 square miles of land between the Pacific and the Atlantic. About a third of them lived in the Midwest, another third in the South, two in seven in the Northeast, and fewer than one in twenty-five in the vast West. More than 43,000,000 were white. Fewer than 7,000,000 were African American, of whom over 90 percent lived in the South. Thirteen percent were born in other places, led by Germany, Ireland, Canada, Britain, and Scandinavia, in that order. The only nonwhite minorities, other than blacks, were about 100,000 Chinese (nearly all in West Coast cities or railroad stops) and perhaps 400,000 American Indians, also living mainly in the West. In short, the majority of the population was homogeneous, white, and native-born, but it also included sizeable minorities of blacks in the South, Asians and Indians in the West, and immigrants in eastern and midwestern cities.

What did they do? They farmed, more than anything else. Sometime during the 1870s those who worked on farms began to be outnumbered by those who did other work, but not by any single kind. The nonfarmers divided mainly among factory workers, service workers, professionals, business people, and commercial workers. Americans had always been a farming people, and the majority continued, until about 1920, to live on farms, or in small villages even if they worked at something other than the land and livestock. Many people who did not actually farm were, nonetheless, agrarians. They shod horses, made barbed wire, ran country stores, and preached in country churches. Furthermore, many of those who no longer lived on farms or in villages had grown up in them and looked at the world through rural eyes. The second-largest occupational group, factory workers, did not outnumber farmers for some decades after the

1870s. Until well past 1920, the American people were largely agrarian, either in actual residence and occupation or in their outlook.

As for the distribution of wealth and income, they were by no means equal in 1870 or 1880, even for the white, native-born majority. And they never had been. Yet in a nation of farmers, mechanics, shopkeepers, preachers, physicians, and the like, disparities between rich and poor were seldom great. A few nabobs could be found on Wall Street or its equivalents, and the social distance between factory owners and factory workers was palpable. But when the Civil War began in 1861, there were not yet enough factory owners or even managers to constitute much of a separate class of the wealthy. The great planters of the South were, until then, almost a feudal aristocracy, powerful enough to shanghai their humbler neighbors into supporting secession. But they were laid low by the war. Through the 1870s the South and the West-Midwest, and even the small-town Northeast, could cling to the myth and even, to some extent, the reality of an equitable, though not always equal, economic society.

Through the closing years of the nineteenth century and through the Progressive era, this preponderance of population in rural and small-town places, about two-thirds of it in the South and Midwest—regions that, except for Chicago, did not include really large cities—persisted. Yet much was changing. Immigrants from Europe entered by the hundreds of thousands in the 1880s and the millions after 1905, most of them not from northwestern Europe but from Italy, Poland, Russia, and the Balkans. Coming from czarist Russia or other monarchies, could they ever learn democratic ways?—wondered many members of the native-born white majority. While small family farms, usually called homesteads, sprouted in Kansas in the 1880s and across the Great Plains after 1900, cities grew faster, raising tough problems of public health, utilities, policing, and education. Businesses and industries multiplied, often in the form of corporations, and they grew larger and larger, making the ratio of employer-capitalist to employee-laborer ever greater. A new class arose of middle managers, neither owners nor workers but bureaucrats in railroad companies and a range of businesses. While Americans were still a rural people not only by tradition but in actuality, they were gradually urbanizing and industrializing. They were also trying all the while to figure out what that meant and how to keep the downsides from dominating them.

The late 1870s brought wake-up calls. If Henry Carey's harmonious association of producers had ever existed, it was shattered by then. Ever since a financial panic in September 1873 brought down Jay Cooke & Company of Philadelphia, the nation's largest banking house, the economy had sunk into depression. The downturn, while spotty, was severe in many sectors. Conditions did not generally improve until 1879. The worst shock was a strike of railroad workers that began in Martinsville, West Virginia, and quickly spread to Pittsburgh, Chicago, and westward in the summer of 1877. It was like no previous labor conflict; it was nationwide. The Pennsylvania governor called in the state militia. A fearful public wanted no repeat of the Paris Commune uprising of 1871 when the French capital was briefly taken over by radicals. The panicked militia fired into the crowd of strikers, bystanders, supporters, and their families. Fifty were killed. Sympathy strikes erupted along railroad lines west and east. Violent confrontations spread across New York State from Buffalo to Rochester, Syracuse, and Albany. But the upheaval was soon suppressed. Besides the dead and wounded, another casualty was confidence in "the harmony of the producing classes." If it had ever really existed, it obviously no longer did. Farmers and workers now were on one side of a great social divide, owners and managers—capitalists—on the other. No longer would Americans think in terms of harmony, but of conflict: capital versus labor, "the interests" versus "the people." Serious changes had to come. But how? Neither major political party was remotely ready for even moderate changes. Reform was years away. For thinking people, however, America had turned a corner, and around that corner were some very menacing forces.

The Great Railway Strike of 1877 was not the only disturbance. In 1882 the already large oil-producing companies controlled by John D. Rockefeller were combined into the Standard Oil Trust, forming a corporation that by itself controlled, monopolistically, a vital industry. The U.S. Supreme Court in rulings at that time defined a corporation as a legal person, in the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment. Corporations therefore had rights, as flesh-and-blood persons did, that governments could not infringe upon. Railroads, too, were assuming corporate form, and the process was under way by which some of them would "rationalize" themselves into regional monopolies. By the late 1870s, 80,000 miles of tracks were operating, mostly in the Northeast and Midwest; by 1890 the trackage had doubled to 167,000 miles including four transcontinentals and a fifth one across Canada. Big business had become a fact of American life. And the bigger corporations became, the smaller the average worker and farmer felt, far smaller in comparison to the rich and powerful than they had ever been. Would big business require control and regulation? Only a small minority were awake to that need or possibility in 1880, or to whatever shape that would take. Only a few had any idea.

The total output of the American economy and the gross national product actually increased during the 1870s. During that decade, settlers and ranchers continued to invade the Indian lands of the Great Plains, with the most famous of several confrontations occurring at the Little Big Horn River in Montana in June 1876, when an army detachment under Lt. Col. George A. Custer was wiped out by Sioux warriors led by Crazy Horse. The national depression of 1873–78 helped end Reconstruction in the South, suppressed immigration, and demolished the security and well-being of people all across the industrializing Northeast and Great Lakes. Unemployment laid low thousands of families. Plagues of grasshoppers in Minnesota and elsewhere in the upper

Midwest "ate everything but the mortgage," but state governments refused to provide any relief. Even in well-settled and civilized Massachusetts, as of 1875, almost one in four infants died before its first birthday, and nearly one in three persons before they reached twenty-one.

Much of this was categorized as natural calamity, the inevitable risks of living, about which almost nothing could be done. Medicine was primitive. The germ theory of disease and therefore the prevention of contagion was virtually unknown or disbelieved. The fast-expanding cities were hard put to build sewerage and safe water supplies to keep up with their fast-rising populations. Infrastructure—not just the physical kind, but technological and scientific knowledge adequate to, and required for, a safe urban and industrial existence—was still lacking in significant ways. Necessity mothered such inventions through the last two decades of the century, but progress was spotty and slow. The Northeast and Great Lakes regions, the parts of the country in the throes of industrializing and urbanizing, were most immediately in need of change. But the agrarian majority also found itself deprived of economic self-determination. Railroads, the grain and cattle markets, and sellers of goods protected by high tariff walls called more and more of the shots, squeezing producers—farmers and urban workers—between low incomes and high costs.

Only two significant reform proposals surfaced in the late 1870s. One was enactment of civil service laws, which, if they worked, would ensure that public officials got their jobs through competence rather than party patronage—a laudable change but hardly one that got to the root of existing and growing social problems. The other proposal called for expansion of the currency through the issuing of paper money, or "greenbacks," backed by the faith and credit of the government, but by nothing more, not by gold or silver. Greenbacks had circulated successfully, though at a discount, during the Civil War and Reconstruction, and have been the chief national currency in recent times.

But the prevailing economic doctrine in the late nineteenth century was that precious metals had intrinsic value, and that paper currency had to be convertible into gold (preferably) or silver. This idea plagued economic thinking until well into the twentieth century. During the years 1876 to 1884, pressure grew in parts of the Midwest and East for the government to issue more greenbacks. A Greenback-Labor Party arose, and it elected several dozen members of Congress and some other public officials. But they were never numerous enough to achieve anything except denunciation of themselves as crackpots and radicals. Their proposals would become fully orthodox by the 1930s, and they still are; neither the United States nor any other developed country could operate today without paper currency *not* backed by gold or silver. But few believed it then.

Greenbackism faded from its flickering popularity by the mid-1880s. One reason was that most years of that decade were generally prosperous. Homesteading surged; immigration from Europe broke all records; markets ticked upward. A sense arose among many major-party politicians that public unrest about monopolies, and the unfairness of unprecedented and ostentatious personal wealth, needed to be listened to. The result was federal regulation of corporations, for the first time in a serious way: the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890. Prior to those federal laws, political pressure from farmers, small businessmen, and others propelled a number of state legislatures by the mid-1880s into enacting laws regulating railroad rates. It would commonly happen from this point through the Progressive era that states took the lead in reform measures, followed later by the federal Congress.

For reform to happen, pressure for regulation had to overcome the prevalent laissez-faire attitude that individuals and businesses should be free from interference. This was a long-standing axiom of American economic life. But so was opposition to monopolies, deeply ingrained at least since Andrew Jackson's destruction of the Bank of the United States in 1832, which the Jacksonians denounced as a monster monopoly. By the 1880s the perception (an accurate one) had spread that railroads were all too often able to operate as monopolies, the only effective carriers of goods and peoples across long distances, and could charge shippers whatever the traffic would bear. “Shippers” included farmers selling their produce or livestock, shopkeepers buying goods manufactured elsewhere, manufacturers large and small—in short, everyone who needed to use the roads. They resented being forced to pay whatever the railroads told them to pay. As individuals they saw themselves helpless against the power of corporations (especially the railroads) far larger than themselves. The logical place to turn was state government, and legislatures obliged with regulatory laws.

Then in 1886 the Wabash, St. Louis, and Pacific Railway Company sued the state of Illinois. The Wabash claimed that Illinois' law regulating its operations violated the clause in the U.S. Constitution that reserves control of interstate commerce to the federal government. The U.S. Supreme Court agreed with the Wabash, annulling the Illinois law and, effectively, all other state laws regulating railroads.

Congress responded quickly, passing—with a bipartisan majority—the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887. Democratic president Grover Cleveland signed it in February 1887. The law demanded that railroad rates be “reasonable and just,” forbade trusts and rebates to large shippers like Standard Oil, and required them to publish their rates and not raise them without ten days' public notice.

Three years later, control of Congress and the presidency had passed from the Democrats to the Republicans, but anti-trust and regulatory pressure from the public had only strengthened. Both parties campaigned in 1888 for a general anti-trust law regulating not just railroads but any trust or monopoly. Thus, in July 1890

Congress passed (and President Benjamin Harrison signed) the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Problem solved, or so it seemed. But it was not to be. As Mr. Dooley, the fictional Chicago pundit created by the columnist Finley Peter Dunne, put it: "What you and I see as a brick wall . . . is to a corporation lawyer a triumphal arch." Cases reaching the Supreme Court in the 1890s (and later) whittled away at the Interstate Commerce and Sherman acts, and in fact nullified large parts of them. In an egregious instance, the case of *U.S. v. E. C. Knight Company* in 1895, the Court ruled that manufacturing—even when one company controlled 90 percent of the market—was not commerce, and therefore the anti-trust laws did not apply.

From the late 1890s into the early twentieth century, the monopolistic trend called the "merger movement" dominated American big business, consolidating all sorts of enterprises, railroads included. The consequence was fury on the part of many segments of the public. They had been fooled by the Interstate Commerce Act and the Sherman Act into thinking monopolies were under control; they had been thwarted by a conservative, business-minded Supreme Court; and they were getting the attention of their elected representatives.

The result was a demand for reform that gained powerful force during the 1890s until it reached a widespread sense of crisis by 1900. Until then, the prevailing consensus was hard to break—a consensus on Social Darwinism, that individuals were on their own to sink or swim. Perhaps the most prominent Social Darwinist was William Graham Sumner of Yale, who published a book in 1883 called *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*. His bottom line: nothing.

In that genteel age, it was considered un-genteel to raise Cain with the social and economic order; most editors, pulpiteers, and politicians craved respectability. Greenbackers and angry farmers, in their view, were not respectable. So their complaints and remedies could be disregarded—for the moment.