Progressives and Progressive Reform

Progressives were troubled by the social conditions and economic exploitation that accompanied the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the late 19th century.

And so at its origins, the Progressive movement was a…

RESPONSE TO INDUSTRIALIZATION

Progressives feared that if economic inequality grew any more pronounced, there could be a social revolution. People forced to live in squalid conditions due to low wages might grow so disillusioned that they might follow the lead of radical “rabble rousers” who were urging them to overturn the capitalist system.

There had been revolutions or threats of revolutions in Europe over the past fifty years, and Progressives feared that some immigrants who had fled Europe to escape prosecution for participating in such revolutionary activity might bring their radical ideas with them to the United States.

Progressives appealed to the wealthy and business elite to join with them to improve the conditions of workers and the poor so that a revolution could be avoided. They get little cooperation on this front.

This fear of approaching social turmoil or even revolution leads the middle class Progressive reformers to a…

SEARCH FOR ORDER

The Progressives’ ideal society is one in which conflict is minimized and consensus is emphasized. Industrialization, immigration, and urbanization has produced “disorder” on a massive scale. All sorts of conflicting values, races, ethnicities, cultures, and economic interests run rampant in American cities at the turn of the 20th Century.

The Progressives are determined to “smooth over” these conflicts and produce a more unitary culture where everyone agrees on basic issues. Of course, their model for this “ordered” unitary culture looks much like their own white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon culture.

Progressives are especially concerned about papering over class conflict (again motivated by their fear of “disorder” in the form of revolution).

How, then, does one produce a more humane, yet “ordered” society?

INNOVATIVE NOSTALGIA

Not necessarily a contradiction in terms, though one might read it this way.

On the “innovative” side…
Progressives sought to put into practice new ideas that had been discussed in the universities during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Many of these ideas came from disciplines like Economics, Sociology, Psychology, Urban Planning, and Political Science (the “social sciences”).

Progressives believed that applying “social science” principles from the university, they could produce order in the disorderly urban neighborhoods.

On the “nostalgia” side…

Progressives look back – somewhat romantically – to the American society of their youth. In their memories, this had been a “Golden Age” when citizens shared common values, priorities, and interests; when communities were strong and supportive; when people looked out for each other instead of focusing exclusively on making money.

In sum, they harkened back to “small town” America. In many ways, then, the Progressives’ nostalgic vision was profoundly anti-urban. More subtly, it was also at times anti-immigrant (since the old small towns had been largely homogeneous – consisting largely of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants like themselves.)

The Progressives bring together innovation and nostalgia by offering a social vision in which the “Golden Age” of small town WASP America can be re-created and brought into the disorderly cities by having educated experts (like themselves) apply innovative social science methods to solve the problems that have created such disorder.

Progressives see themselves as “innovative” reformers – unlike the old reform crusaders who used to focus on preaching adherence to religious values.

PROGRESSIVES also contrast themselves to SOCIAL DARWINISTS.

Social Darwinists believed that “survival of the fittest” applied not only in the plant and animal kingdoms, but could also be applied to human society.

The weak, the sick, the badly bred, the poor, and (often) the non-white, they believed, would eventually die out and the ambitious, entrepreneurial, intelligent, physically strong, (and white) would come to dominate society. This would produce, in the end, a stronger society.

Accordingly, Social Darwinists insisted nothing should be done to help the disadvantaged since doing so interfered with “natural selection” and impeded the course of social improvement.

Social Darwinists, then, put great emphasis on “nature” in the nature vs nurture debate. People were born the way they were and had little chance of changing for the better over the course of their lives – a rather pessimistic view of human nature.

Progressives shared some of the Social Darwinists’ prejudices regarding “lower” races and ethnicities (witness their support for Eugenics and birth control – particularly birth control for non-WASPs)

HOWEVER, the new social sciences that the Progressives embraced had a far more optimistic view of human nature and attributed far more significance to ENVIRONMENT (or nurture) as an influence in shaping human development.
For example, a very “fit” whale dropped into the Sahara desert, Progressives noted, stood little chance of surviving – not because it was genetically inferior, but because it could not be expected to survive in such an inhospitable environment. Likewise with a champion thoroughbred horse dropped into the Pacific Ocean.

This reasoning extended to human society.

If the environment in which people lived and worked could be improved – if people’s surroundings could be made more hospitable – the people would benefit and improve as well.

**HOW TO IMPROVE THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT?**

Progressives believe this can be achieved through…

**THINKING SYSTEMATICALLY**

You don’t solve problems in isolation. You must figure out how problems are interrelated and then devise scientifically viable plans to solve these related problems.

Just as Rockefeller thought systematically to develop his business model – horizontal and vertical integration – Progressives thought about how to coordinate all the moving pieces of urban life so as to improve conditions.

This involves collecting data, investigating conditions, familiarizing oneself with the environment, developing a hypothesis, acting on it and measuring results.

Social Science → using the scientific method to develop solutions to solve social problems

**Theory vs Practice**

Theories must work → pragmatism

An idea’s value is measured in terms of whether it works.

So… Progressives want to put their ideas into practice.

Initially, Progressives believe they can systematically solve urban problems on their own. Go to the site of the problem – talk to the people – tell them how to solve their problem.

But soon they realize they need politicians to help them.

Throughout the Gilded Age, politics had been a dirty business. At the local level, city bosses had built a system based on corruption.

At the state and federal levels, politicians seemed only responsive to the lobbying of the wealthy business interests.

Also, politics was more based on party loyalty and patronage than on commitment to a particular set of ideas or ideals.
Reformers had rejected party politics and sought independent means of improving conditions outside of the local machines and state and federal party systems.

Reformers in the Gilded Age had already realized this.

“Mugwumps” fight for civil service reform – jobs based on merit, not patronage.

So, the Progressives have their origins in the national Civil Service Reform Movement.

Soon, however, they realize they must involve local government in the process.

[Consider the example of the trash being dumped into the air shafts and how this was but one isolated problem in a larger series of problems. Ultimately, the trash problem was part of a larger economic problem – the poor did not have access to sufficient financial resources, and this why their neighborhoods were unhealthy.]

To win political support, Progressives fight the city bosses and try to bring national attention to their issues.

They learn from Hearst's penny press. Use the media to get the word out → Muckrakers

In trying to convince Americans of all classes that problems had to be solved “systematically,” Progressives emphasized that bad conditions in the urban ghettos and factories did not only affect the poor, they affected all of society and therefore all of society should take an interest in improving the slums.

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1) INTERVENTIONISM

and

2) OPTIMISM

Progressives rejected the Social Darwinists’ insistence that the poor must be “left alone” and that for the best society to emerge, nature should simply be allowed take its course.
Instead, they believed that a more humane (and more orderly) society could only result if reformers INTERVENED to change conditions. In time, Progressives realized not only reformers, but government at the local, state, and federal level had to intervene to improve social conditions.

Progressives’ support for intervention suggests a more OPTIMISTIC view of human nature → Improved conditions would actually produce “improved” people.

Some Progressives took their OPTIMISM even further. Adherents to the SOCIAL GOSPEL came to believe (or at least to hope) that enlightened social policies and reform legislation could produce a “HEAVEN ON EARTH.”

This marked a sharp break from an earlier theology that emphasized that if one lived a good life, one’s reward would be in the “next world.”

The difficulty with Progressives’ OPTIMISTIC INTERVENTIONISM was that the Progressives so convinced themselves their ends were noble and righteous that they considered those who opposed them – whether businessmen, politicians, or the very constituencies they were trying to help – not as groups with contending interests who might want to solve the same problems using different means (or who might view “heaven on earth” differently) but as corrupt or evil – opponents of “progress.”

When this happened, Progressives shifted from an emphasis on SOCIAL JUSTICE to SOCIAL CONTROL. They could become excessively coercive – particularly when dealing with non-white constituencies. In identifying and solving social problems, they tended to dictate more than listen, which often alienated those who they were supposed to be helping.

Social Control → Don’t dump your garbage in the shaft or you’ll be fined

Social Justice → Find a job for residents’ sons as garbage men

This way, you can help solve the garbage problem, but, more importantly, offer economic opportunity to the families in the slums.

The other shortcoming of Progressivism was that despite the reformers’ zeal to create better conditions for the disadvantaged, they were reluctant to confront (or even acknowledge) that some conflicts and sources of disorder derived from more fundamental problems that demanded more fundamental changes if a consensus were to be achieved – particularly changes related to the allocation of economic resources.

Although they believed government should play a more interventionist role in solving social problems, Progressives, like most Americans, did not believe it was government’s role to redistribute wealth or power from one group to another.

In general, they were satisfied with the capitalist system; they simply believed that it should be regulated more carefully so that it worked to the benefit of more citizens (and not just the very wealthy or powerful).

Unlike a later generation of reformers in the 1930s, Progressives also did not believe government could dictate what citizens did with their own private property and resources.
For example, most Progressives did not believe the federal government should dictate the wages that employers paid their workers.

Ultimately, Progressives’ desire for order and consensus outweighed their commitment to addressing the plight of the poor, particularly if alleviating poverty meant giving the government too much power. In this, however, they likely mirrored the political sentiments of the majority of Americans in the 1910s.