

## **Progressives and Progressive Reform**

By the 1890s, three closely related forces – **industrialization, immigration, and urbanization** – had combined to create a “disorderly” society.

Immigrants, for example, had to adapt to their new urban surroundings. This could mean “creating” ethnic cultures that were not exactly the same as the ones they had left behind, but not necessarily “American” either. Immigrants from Naples (Napolese) or Venice (Venetians) were labeled “Italians” once they got to America, and, even though they had never identified as “Italians” in the Old Country, they made this new label the foundation of their new, American identity. This was not assimilation, but it did indicate an attempt to use available resources to carve out an identity in a new environment.

To put this in less abstract terms, given the new availability of inexpensive meat in America, Italian immigrants create “spaghetti and meatballs,” which becomes an “Italian-American” dish, even though no one in Italy ate it.

Similarly, immigrant groups that may have lived in small villages in the Old Country must now adjust to urban living, but to ease the transition, they settle in the same neighborhood enclaves.

Though there were some positive developments to emerge from the combined impact of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization – lower prices for consumers, more productive factories, more job availability – there were also negative results – overcrowded and sub-standard housing, poor health and safety conditions, low wages and little job security (workers were easily replaced). The new conditions, many believed, had produced excessive inequality (too large a gap between the very rich and the very poor) which could in time lead to social revolution. The wealthy, it was argued, had to take some action to reduce this inequality for the good of everyone, and to restore consensus and reduce disorder.

More specifically, as the economy and society underwent significant changes, the political system had to catch up and adjust to the new conditions. Those who would soon identify as progressive reformers believed that government had to play a role in restoring an “orderly” society in which citizens could live humane lives. Many reformers, like Theodore Roosevelt, concluded that government should play a regulatory or mediating role – as a “referee” between the contending forces in society (haves vs have nots; employers vs employees, etc)

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

### **RESPONSE TO INDUSTRIALIZATION**

Progressives did fear 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.

There had also been violent clashes between labor and management in the US. None had led to a

revolution, but the persistence of these conflicts was disturbing nonetheless.

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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, for example, produce order in the disorderly urban neighborhoods. They were taking the elements of the scientific method used in the "hard sciences" (biology, chemistry, etc.) and applying them to the "science" of studying society (i.e. people) → "social sciences."

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 and relying on prayer to produce “better character” and a better society.

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 and human potential.

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

Sometimes, failing to think systematically produced unintended consequences.

[Consider the example of the newly designed tenement buildings that had more windows to allow for better ventilation, but whose “dumb bell” shape led to trash being dumped into the interior air shafts.]

Ventilation was but one isolated problem in a larger series of problems. Even the larger trash problem was part of a still larger economic problem – the poor did not have access to sufficient financial resources, and this why their neighborhoods were unhealthy. That is, the real problem is POVERTY.

## Theory vs Practice

Theories must work → pragmatism

To a pragmatist, an idea's value is measured in terms of whether it works. So.... Progressives want to put their ideas into practice.

## How to put theory into practice?

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

But soon they realize they need politicians to help them. Local politicians have the power and the resources to help Progressive reformers solve problems, but they are suspicious of the reformers who seem impractical and because they threaten their monopoly on power.

To win political support, Progressives fight the city bosses and try to bring national attention to their issues. (That is, by informing the public, they hope to stir up enough grass roots outrage to get around the political bosses.)

They learn from Hearst's penny press. They use the media to get the word out → Muckrakers become known for “exposing” social problems caused by crowding in the cities and by poorly regulated industries.

Some Muckrakers, like Upton Sinclair who wrote *The Jungle*, hoped to appeal to readers' sense of righteousness and justice. His book, he hoped, would start a movement to get better wages and working conditions for workers in the meatpacking industry. Instead, readers were less concerned about the workers and more concerned about tainted meat. This showed that reformers often viewed the world more idealistically (and selflessly) than most Americans, who tended to be primarily

concerned with how a specific issue affected them. That said, the reforms for which Sinclair advocated were enacted, if not for the reasons he believed they should be enacted.

Reformers did learn, however, that even in “educating” the people, they could not always anticipate exactly what the people would “learn.” One good rule of thumb was that most people were open to reform if it was explained clearly to them how they personally would benefit.

Accordingly, reformers should couch their arguments for changes in the system in selfish terms. When asked to support a cause, most Americans ask, “What’s in it for me?” Reformers needed to address this question, rather than focus on abstractions such as “social improvement.”

Therefore, 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. (This addresses “What’s in it for me?”)

The argument might go as follows:

- all urban residents had to breathe polluted air;
- everyone could suffer if contagious diseases spread due to poor sanitary conditions;
- factory owners’ productivity would suffer if workers were sick and malnourished or so underpaid they could not afford to seek medical attention when they were sick;
- business owners who did not maintain sanitary conditions and standards of quality control not only exploited poor workers but also risked the health and safety of all those who bought their products (this concern led to such Progressive Era legislation as the Meat Inspection Act, and the Pure Food and Drug Act.)

**The Progressives’ answer to how one could systematically solve problems that affected all citizens and that were largely attributable to environmental factors was based on two premises:**

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.”

In many ways this attitude resembled the attitude of imperialists who sought to “uplift” the “lower orders” of people in the developing world. They wanted to intervene in these people's lives and business since they were convinced that with the proper assistance, they could be made into better people who lived in more orderly and productive societies.

As we saw in looking at the reaction of the Cubans and Filipinos to American intervention, those being “helped” did not always appreciate the help. Even when they agreed that the Americans' goals were worthy, they resented the way that policies were imposed on them – often without their input.

They resented the Americans' power over them and they resented the Americans' tendency to treat them like “children” who should simply obey, and not ask questions.

The people in the poor urban neighborhoods often resented the intervention of the middle-class reformers in much the same way. They recognized that some of the Progressives' goals made sense, but they also noted that the Progressives were detached from the reality of poverty in the neighborhood.

In essence, poor people lacked the resources required to solve their problems. If they had the resources, they believed, they could solve their problems in their own way. When reformers not only ignored them, but refused to let them control the resources, they grew even more resentful and resisted the reformers' efforts to “help” them.

When this happened, Progressives shifted from an emphasis on SOCIAL JUSTICE to SOCIAL CONTROL. They could become excessively intolerant and 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.

### **Difference between “social control” and “social justice” Progressives?**

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

Social Justice Progressives would argue that since the REAL problem is urban poverty, fines just make the poor people poorer and angrier (and create more financial problems for them). Instead, you can help solve the garbage problem, but, more importantly, offer economic opportunity to the families in the slums (and address poverty) by employing the poor as garbage men.

Beyond their occasional obsession with “controlling” the behavior of the poor rather than empowering them to solve their own problems, 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 power and 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. Fighting poverty becomes harder if you rule out redistributing wealth or power from one group to another, but most Progressives (and most Americans during this period) were more afraid of giving government too much power than they were concerned about fighting poverty.

Even reformers remained confident that the free market central to a capitalist system could work to the benefit of all citizens who were willing to work hard and play by the rules.

In general, then, Progressives 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. Determining wages was the responsibility of the employer, not the government.

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. Fundamental change or governmental support for redistribution of wealth and power so as to help the poor would not have won the political support of the majority. And, in a democracy, if one cannot persuade the majority that one’s position is valid, then reform is unlikely.