The Failure of Progressivism

The Shaping of the Twentieth Century

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My thesis is that progressivism failed. Its reform was more conservation of the old than moving forward into the future. Indeed, Progressivism sought to save the old view, and the old values and

modes, by educating the immigrants and the poor so as to facilitate their acceptance of and absorption into the Anglo-American mode of life, or by excluding the "unassimilable” altogether; by instituting antitrust legislation or, at the least, by imposing regulations upon corporate practices in order to preserve a minimal base for small proprietary business enterprise; by making legislative accommodations to the newly important wage-earning classes--accommodations that might provide some measure of wealth and income redistribution, on-the-job safety, occupational security, and the like—so as to forestall a forcible transfer of policy-making power away from the groups that had conventionally exercised that power; and by broadening the political selection process, through direct elections, direct nominations, and direct legislation, in order to reduce tensions caused unnecessarily by excessively narrow and provincial cliques of policymakers. When the economic and political reforms failed to restore the consensus by giving the previously unprivileged an ostensible stake in it, progressive energies turned increasingly toward using the force of the state to proscribe or restrict speciﬁcally opprobrious modes of social behavior, such as gaming habits, drinking habits, sexual habits, and Sabbatarian habits. In the ultimate resort, with the proliferation of sedition and criminal laws, it sought to constrict political discourse itself.

One measure of progressivism's failure lies in the xenophobic racism that reappeared on a large scale even by 1910. ln many parts of the country, for example, in the far west and the south, racism and nativism had been fully blended with reform movements even at the height of progressive activities there. The alleged threats of ”coolie labor" to American living standards, and of “venal” immigrant and Negro voting to republican institutions generally, underlay the alliance of racism and reform in this period. By 1910, signs of heightening ethnic animosities, most notably anti-Catholicism, began appearing in other areas of the country as well. Similarly, American Negroes also began to adopt a more aggressive public stance after having been subdued for more than a decade by antiblack violence and the accommodationist tactics suggested in 1895 by Booker T. Washington. As early as 1905, many black leaders had broken with Washington in founding the Niagara Movement for a more vigorous assertion of Negro demands for equality.'But most historians seem to agree that it was probably the Springﬁeld race riot of 1908 that ended illusions that black people could gain an equitable share in the rewards of American culture by accommodationist or assimilationist methods. The organization of the NAACP in 1909 gave substantive force for the ﬁrst time to the three-year-old Niagara Movement. The year 1915 symbolically concluded the demise of accommodationism. That year, the Negro-baiting movie, ”The Birth of a Nation,” played to massive, enthusiastic audiences that included notably the president of the United States and the chief justice of the Supreme Court; the KKK was revived; and Booker T. Washington died. The next year, black nationalist Marcus Garvey arrived in New York from Jamaica.

Meanwhile, scientiﬁc knowledge about race and culture was undergoing a crucial revision. At least in small part stimulated by a keen self-consciousness of his own "outsider" status in American culture, the German-Jewish immigrant Franz Boas was pioneering in the new anthropological concept of "cultures," based on the idea that human behavioral traits are conditioned by historical traditions. The new view of culture was in time to undermine completely the prevailing evolutionary view that ethnic differences must mean racial inequality.

The telltale sign of progressivism's failure was the violent crusade against dissent that took place in the closing years of the Wilson administration. It is too easy to ascribe the literal hysteria of the postwar years to the dislocations of the War alone. Incidents of violent repression of labor and radical activities had been growing remarkably, often in step with xenophobic outbreaks, for several years before America's intervention in the War. lt seems clear that the anti-Catholic and anti-radical views both arose out of the sources of the reform ferment itself. When reform failed to enlarge the consensus, or to make it more relevant to the needs of the still disadvantaged and disaffected, and when in fact reform seemed to be encouraging more radical challenges to the social order, the old anxieties of the 1890's returned.

Now, certainly during the progressive era a lot of reform legislation was passed, much that contributed genuinely to a more liberal society, though more that contributed to the more absolutistic moral objectives of progressivism. Progressivism indeed had real, lasting effects for the blunting of the sharper edges of self-interest in American life, and for the reduction of the harsher cruelties suffered by the society's underprivileged. These achievements deserve emphasis. But the overall effect of the period's legislation is not so impressive. For example, all the popular government measures put together have not conspicuously raised the quality of American political life. Direct nominations and elections have tended to make political campaigns so expensive as to reduce the number of eligible candidates for public ofﬁce to (1) the independently wealthy; (2) the ideologues, especially on the right, who can raise the needed campaign money from independently wealthy ideologues like themselves, or from the organizations set up to promote a particular ideology; and (3) party hacks who payoff their debt to the party treasury by whistle-stopping and chicken dinner speeches. Direct legislation through the Initiative and Referendum device has made cities and states prey to the best-ﬁnanced and organized special-interest group pressures, as have so-called nonpartisan elections. Which is not to say that things are worse than before, but only that they are not conspicuously better. Without disparaging the long list of reform measures that passed during the progressive era, the question remains whether all the ”substantive reforms" together accomplished what the progressives wanted them to accomplish.

Certain social and economic advantages were indeed shufﬂed about, but this must be regarded as a short-term achievement for special groups at best. Certain commercial interests, for example, achieved greater political leverage in railroad policy-making than they had had in 1900 through measures such as the Hepburn and Mann-Elkins Acts—though it was not until the 1940's that any real change occurred in the general rate structure.

Moreover, farmers received little help from Progressives. Farm credits, and land-bank acts gave the diminishing numbers of farm owners enhanced opportunities to mortgage their property, and some business groups had persuaded the federal government to use national revenues to educate farmers on how to increase their productivity, but most farmers remained as dependent as ever upon forces beyond their control—the bankers, the middlemen, the international market. In addition,

American farmers on the whole and in particular seemed to suffer increasing disadvantages. While Progressives claimed that the farmer “was still the backbone of the Nation,” they did little to help. In fact, there were fewer farmers in the total population at the end of the progressive era. The number of farm tenants increased by 21 percent from 1900 to 1920; 38.1 percent of all farm operators in 1921 were tenants. Finally, although agriculture had enjoyed some of its most prosperous years in history in the 1910-20 period, the 21 percent of the nation's gainfully employed who were in agriculture in 1919 (a peak year) earned only 16 percent of the national income.

The progressives failed in their regulation of business too. The FTC, and the Tariff Commission established in 1916, extended the principle of using government agencies to adjudicate intra-industrial conﬂicts ostensibly in the national interest, but these agencies would develop a lamentable tendency of deferring to and even conﬁrming rather than moderating the power of each industry's dominant interests. The Federal Reserve Act made the currency more ﬂexible, and that certainly made more sense than the old system, as even the bankers agreed. But depositers would be as prey to defaulting banks as they had been in the days of the Pharaoh—bank deposit insurance somehow was "socialism" to even the best of men in this generation. And despite Woodrow Wilson's brave promise to end the banker's stiﬂing hold on innovative small business, one searches in vain for some provision in the Federal Reserve designed speciﬁcally to encourage small or new businesses. In fact, the only constraints on the bankers’ power came primarily from the ability of the larger corporations to ﬁnance their own expansion out of capital surpluses they had accumulated from extortionate war proﬁts.

The progressives may have fought for improved labor conditions, but they jealously fought against the enlargement of union power. It was no aberration that once the need for wartime productive efﬁciency evaporated, leading progressives such as A. Mitchell Palmer, Miles Poindexter, and Woodrow Wilson himself helped civic and employer organizations to bludgeon the labor movement into disunity and docility.

Meanwhile, the distribution of advantages in the society did not change much at all. In some cases, from the progressive reformers’ viewpoint at least, it may even have changed for the worse. According to the ﬁgures of the National Industrial Conference Board, even income was as badly distributed at the end of the era as before. In 1921, the highest 10 per-cent of income recipients received 38 percent of total personal income, and that ﬁgure was only 34 percent in 1910. Maldistribution was to grow worse until after 1929.

Perhaps the crowning failure of progressivism was the American role in World War I. It is true that many progressives opposed America's intervention, but it is also true that a great many more supported it. The failure in progressivism lies not in the decision to intervene but in the futility of intervention measured by progressive expectations.

Richard McCormic

Progressivism in History

Convulsive reform movements swept across the American landscape from the 18905 to 1917. Angry farmers demanded better prices for their products, regulation of the railroads, and the destruction of what they thought was the evil power of bankers, middlemen, and corrupt politicians. Urban residents crusaded for better city services and more efﬁcient municipal government. Members of various professions, such as social workers and doctors, tried to improve the dangerous and unhealthy conditions in which many people lived and worked. Businessmen, too, lobbied incessantly for goals which they deﬁned as reform. Never before had the people of the United States engaged in so many diverse movements for the improvement of their political system, economy, were calling themselves progressives. Ever since, historians have used the term progessivism to describe the many reform movements of the early twentieth century.

Yet in the goals they sought and the remedies they tried, the reformers were a varied and contradictory lot. Some progressives wanted to increase the political inﬂuence and control of ordinary people, while other progressives wanted to concentrate authority in experts. Many reformers tried to curtail the growth of large corporations; others accepted bigness in

industry on account of its supposed economic beneﬁts. Some progressives were genuinely concerned about the welfare of the "new" immigrants from southern and eastern Europe; other progressives sought, sometimes frantically, to "Americanize" the newcomers or to keep them ‘out altogether. In general, progressives sought to improve the conditions of life and labor and to create as much social stability as possible. But each group of progressives had its own deﬁnitions of improvement and stability. In the broadest sense, progressivism was the way in which a whole generation of Americans deﬁned themselves politically and responded to the nation's problems at the turn of the century. The progressives made the ﬁrst comprehensive efforts to grapple with the ills of a modern urban- industrial society.

Ever since the early twentieth century, people have argued about who the progressives were and what they stood for. Not surprisingly, historians have had trouble agreeing on who really shaped progressivism and its goals. However, given the different groups and ideas, it seems clear that progressivism was characterized, in the ﬁrst place by a distinctive set of attitudes toward industrialism. By the turn of the century, the overwhelming majority of Americans had accepted the permanence of large-scale industrial, commercial, and ﬁnancial enterprises and the wage and factory systems. The progressives shared this attitude. Most were not socialists, and they undertook reform, not to dismantle modern economic institutions, but rather to ameliorate and improve the conditions of industrial life. Yet progressivism was infused with a deep outrage aginst the worst consequences of industrialism. Outpourings of anger at corporate wrongdoing and of hatred for industry's callous pursuit of proﬁt frequently punctuated the course of reform in the early twentieth century. lndeed, anti-business emotion was a prime mover of progressivism.

The progressives’ ameliorative reforms also reﬂected their faith in progress-—in mankind's ability, through purposeful action, to improve the environment and the conditions of life. In particular, reforms could protect the people hurt by industrialization, and make the environment more humane. For intellertuals of the era, the achievement of such goals meant that they had to meet Herbert Spencer head on and reject his belief in Social Darwinism. Instead, Progressive thinkers, led by Lester Frank Ward, Richard T. Ely, and, most important, John Dewey, demolished Social Darwinism with ”Reform Darwinism." They asserted that human adaptation to the environment did not interfere with the evolutionary process, but was, rather, part and parcel of the law of natural change. Progressive intellectuals produced a vast literature to condemn laissez faire and to promote the concept of the active state.

To improve the environment meant, above all, to intervene in economic and social affairs in order to control natural forces and impose a measure of order upon them. This belief in interventionism was visible in almost every reform of the era, from the supervision of business to the prohibition of alcohol. Most progressive reforms could be achieved

only by legislation and public control. Some went as far as Herbert Croly in glorifying the state in his The Promise of American Life (1909) . Even so, the intervention necessary for their reforms inevitably propelled progressives toward an advocacy of the use of governmental power.

The basis of progressive ideas and action came from two complementary forces: evangelical Protestantism and sciences. Ever since the religious revivals from about 1820 to 1840, evangelical Protestantism had spurred reform in the United States. Basic to the reform mentality was an all-consuming urge to purge the world of sin, and the progressives carried the struggle into the modern citadels of sin——the teeming cities of the nation. No one can read their writings and speeches without being struck by the fact that many of them believed that it was their Christian duty to right the wrongs created by the processes of industrialization. Such belief was the motive force behind the Social Gospel, a movement which swept through the Protestant churches in the 1890s and 1900s. Its goal was to align churches, frankly and aggressively, on the side of the downtrodden, the poor, and working people-—in other words, to make Christianity relevant to this world, not the next. Progressivism sometimes seemed to envision life in a small town Protestant community—a vision sharply different from that of Catholic or Jewish immigrants. Not everyone shared this evangelical ethos, but few were untouched by the spirit and techniques of Protestant revivalism.

Science also had a pervasive impact on the methods and objectives of progressivism. Many leading reformers were specialists in the new disciplines of statistics, economics, sociology, and psychology. These new social scientists set out to gather data on human behavior as it actually was and to discover the laws which governed it. Since social scientists accepted environmentalist and interventionist assumptions implicitly, they believed that knowledge of natural laws would make it possible to devise and apply solutions to improve the human condition. This faith underpinned the optimism of most progressives and predetermined the methods used by almost all reformers of the time: investigation of the facts and application of social-science knowledge to their analysis; entrusting trained experts to decide what should be done; and, ﬁnally, mandating government to execute reform. These methods may have been rational, but they were also compatible with progressive moralism. Progressives blended science and religion into a view of human behavior which was unique to their generation, which had grown up in an age of revivals and come to maturity at the birth of social science.

All of progressivism's distinctive ideas of science and religion found expression in muckraking—the literary spearhead of early twentieth-century reform. Through the medium of such new ten-cent magazines as McCIures, the muckrakers exposed every dark aspect and corner of American life. Nothing escaped the probe of writers such as Ida M. Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, and Burton Hendrick- not big business, politics, prostitution, race relations, or even the churches.

Behind the exposes of the muckrakers lay the progressive attitude toward industrialism: it was here to stay, but many of its aspects seemed to be deplorable. These could be improved, however, if only people became aware of conditions and determined to ameliorate them. To bring about such awareness, the muckrakers appealed to their readers’ consciences. Steffens' famous series, published in book form as The Shame of the Cities in 1904, was frankly intended to make people feel guilty about the condition of their cities.

Unfortunately, reforms frequently did not measure up to popular, anti-business expectations. But it wasn’t always their fault. It is important to recall how terribly ambitious were the stated aims and true goals of the reformers. They missed some of their marks because they sought to do so much. And, despite all their shortcomings, they accomplished an enormous part of what they set out to achieve. Progressivism brought major innovations to almost every facet of public and private life in the United States. In the broadest sense, the progressives sought to mitigate the injustice and the disorder of a society now dominated by its industries and cities. However, before one judges the reformers too harshly for that, it is well to remember how bad urban social conditions were in the late nineteenth century and the odds against which the reformers fought. It is also well to remember that they often succeeded in mitigating the harshness of urban-industrial life. The problems with which the progressives struggled have, by and large, continued to challenge Americans ever since. The progressives had too much faith in their untried methods. Yet if this was a failing, it was also a source of strength, one now missing from reform in America. For the essence of progressivism lay in the hopefulness and optimism which the reformers brought to the tasks of applying science and administration to the high moral purposes in which they believed.