

CHAPTER ONE

1900–1914

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At the dawn of the twentieth century, few Americans were confident that they understood their country. In 1865 the Union victory in the Civil War marked the climax of a national narrative to which most Americans subscribed, whether they approved the narrative or not. By 1900 the nation's story had grown congested with subplots and hidden texts. There was no longer a widely shared consensus about what it meant or where it was heading, in part because the story had grown so complex, in part because such diverse groups now claimed a right to read it. Old-stock Americans believed their ancestors had possessed a sense of purpose and command which now eluded them. Immigrant newcomers knew little of the nation apart from the promise of decent livelihoods provided by its giant economy. African Americans had, perhaps, the steadiest perspective on their society, because they knew all too well where they belonged in it: at the bottom. All other groups – including that biggest of “minorities,” women – felt they were moving. The whole country was growing bigger and more crowded. But the motion seemed random, the growth undirected. It was not that the center did not hold, but rather that those who looked for a center couldn't find one.

Historians of this period have been searching for a national center and striving to frame its narrative ever since. Almost all of them have concurred that the political record of 1900–14 was dominated by a loose phenomenon they have called – often with distaste, always with qualifications – “the progressive movement.” If this essay concentrates on the historiography of progressivism, that is not because nothing else happened in these years, but instead because progressives influenced or attempted to influence almost everything that did happen. Progressivism can be viewed as “the way in which a whole generation of Americans defined themselves and responded to problems at the turn of the century” (Link and McCormick 1983: 3). The most powerful engines of change in this period may have been technological and economic innovations. The automobile, air travel, the movies, large-scale electrification, national marketing of retail goods, and a host of other developments were fueling prosperity and transforming the material conditions of American life. Yet the nation's inventors, engineers, entrepreneurs, financiers, and managers did not set out to redirect American history or leave a legacy for later generations. The progressives

did. They were the most determined shapers of the nation's narrative in this period, the most deliberate history-makers. This too makes their work integral to the era of 1900–14.

To a great many Americans in the waning years of the nineteenth century, the country felt as if it was falling apart. After staving off political dissolution in the 1860s, the United States had rapidly built an economy that led the world in both agricultural and industrial production. But the epic changes wrought by industrial capitalism had come at the price of constant conflict and volatility. In the tempestuous 1890s the deepest depression so far experienced left 20 percent of the work force unemployed. Angry strikers in Pennsylvania, Illinois, and the Rocky Mountain states brought to a peak the years of clashes between capital and labor; and angry farmers aggressively challenged the power of established parties and rising corporations. The lynching terror drew the color line in blood across the South, and anxieties about rising immigration generated the first calls to restrict it.

Preserving union and keeping order had always been a struggle in a society so vast and loose-knit that centrifugal forces seemed perpetually on the verge of overcoming the forces of cohesion. By 1896, when all the elements of discord were gathered up in a climactic presidential election, many citizens believed the integrity of the country was once again in jeopardy. And to a degree they were right. The preindustrial, mostly rural, relatively homogeneous social order was disintegrating. A stable new order was yet to be established.

Worse than rampant disorder, in the eyes of many, was the menace of a coercive order purchased at the price of liberty and opportunity. Individuals could scarcely grasp, much less stand up against, the scale and speed of the nation's demographic and economic growth. Counting 63 million inhabitants in the census of 1900 (more than any European nation save Russia), the United States had grown demographically to 76 million a decade later. More than 13 million immigrants entered the country between 1901 and 1915, a number greater than the immigration total for 1868–1900. In 1860 there were sixteen cities with as many as 50,000 people; a half-century later there were 109 of them. The capitalization of the new United States Steel Corporation (\$1.4 billion) boggled minds in 1901. By 1913 a congressional investigating committee discovered that a single investment banking firm, the House of Morgan, held directorships in 112 corporations with aggregate assets of more than \$22 billion. In 1914 Henry Ford opened an automobile plant that employed under one roof nearly as many people as had lived in America's largest city, Philadelphia, in 1790. Giant corporations, political machines, and unions had more weight to throw around than state and city governments. Such concentrated masses of money, power, and people might easily turn into a society of herds commanded by tyrants.

Never before had there been such substantial grounds for feeling, as Woodrow Wilson said in the 1912 presidential campaign, that "the individual has been submerged" and "individuality is swallowed up. All over the Union, people are coming to feel they have no control over the course of affairs" (quoted in Diner 1998: 200). What was new in the new century was a widespread feeling of bewilderment and helplessness. Americans not only knew they no longer controlled "the course of affairs." They were not sure they knew who did.

Into this predicament marched battalions of reformers who around 1910 began to call themselves progressives. In 1912 Theodore Roosevelt formed a new party that

used this name, but the progressive movement was a much bigger, messier, more plural, and more durable phenomenon than the Progressive Party. Even to call it “a movement” may suggest more unity than it really had. Nearer the truth would be to characterize it as a collection of loosely related reform movements. Among the many progressivisms was a drive to root out corruption in city governments that began in the mid-1890s; a Populist-tinged midwestern progressivism led by Senator Robert LaFollette of Wisconsin that tenaciously represented the interests of farmers and workers; a relatively elitist and conservative eastern progressivism led by the Republican Theodore Roosevelt and the Democrat Woodrow Wilson that specialized in building the regulatory powers of the federal government; and a “social justice progressivism” that specialized in safeguarding the welfare of women, children, and other vulnerable groups. The name “progressive” denoted one of the few qualities all these shared: a common determination to restore to their communities, their lives, and their country a direction they could call “progress.”

The movement’s objectives were as diverse as its parts. Many progressives wanted to remove corruption from government, so they supported the secret ballot, the direct election of US Senators, women’s suffrage, home-rule charters for cities, the replacement of patronage with civil service jobs, and professional-manager forms of city government. Progressives campaigned for laws and government agencies to regulate business, to the end that private enterprise respect “the public interest.” “Gas and water socialism” – municipally owned utilities – represented an extreme of progressive intervention in the economy; more typical were efforts to increase the powers of existing regulatory agencies (the Interstate Commerce Commission), to create new agencies (the Federal Trade Commission, the Pure Food and Drug Administration, the Women’s Bureau, the Federal Reserve Board), and to file anti-trust lawsuits. Progressives backed a huge array of private and public initiatives to relieve the distress of society’s weaker members: settlement houses serving immigrant families; workmen’s compensation laws, to make employers liable for accidents on the job; minimum wage and maximum hours laws for women; restrictions on child labor; compulsory school attendance laws; modest protections for unions; widows’ pensions; and a mildly redistributive income tax (the Sixteenth Amendment). Finally progressives advocated measures to impose their morality and ensure their dominion over immigrants and the poor: prohibition; Jim Crow segregation; anti-vice (mostly prostitution) campaigns; and restrictions on immigration.

The historiography of progressivism has been almost as disjointed and argumentative as progressivism itself. Before the shifting course of that historiography can be traced, three large patterns of interpretations of the past must be identified.

First, since scholars inaugurated the history of progressivism – and indeed of the whole period 1900–14 – they have constantly widened their perspective, discovering new dimensions of the subject. Progressivism has come to be recognized as an immense, diverse, even protean phenomenon. This has made for a pattern of historiographic dispersal, to the point that some scholars have wondered whether a coherent “progressivism” ever really existed.

This pattern of diverging interpretations has been rebutted by a second pattern, of rough consensus on the overall nature of progressivism. Almost all historians have agreed that progressivism was a movement to fix flaws in the nation’s polity, economy, and society that had built up during the preceding period. The Gilded Age had been

marked by depressions, industrial violence, corruption of public officials, growing disparities between rich and poor, growing insecurity, the erosion of democratic institutions, and in response to all these, movements for wholesale change. Progressivism sought to reverse these trends. Its reform thrust was toward control, including control over other, competing models of social change. Far from being revolutionary, progressivism may be understood as a counter-revolutionary movement, not just un-radical but concertedly anti-radical. It sought alternatives to the status quo left over from the Gilded Age as well as antidotes to the revolutionary forces let loose during the Gilded Age.

In sum, rather than seek to transform the existing political economy or the existing social structure, progressivism tried to make the best of them. In *The Age of Reform*, the enduring historical masterpiece on this period, Richard Hofstadter astutely called eastern progressivism “a mild and judicious movement, whose goal was not a sharp change in the social structure, but rather the formation of a responsible elite, which was to take charge of the popular impulse toward change and direct it into moderate and, as they would have said, ‘constructive’ channels” (1955: 163–4). Some historians have suggested that the real project of the progressive period was to put America more firmly on the Gold Standard by re-gilding the Gilded Age, applying a shinier and more durable coating to mask the baser metals beneath. In one form or another, progressives addressed all the principal divisions in the American society of 1900–14, including those of race, ethnicity, and gender.

A third pattern in the interpretation of progressivism has been rough agreement that progressives also wrestled with issues of class. They did this more self-consciously than any previous generation of reformers, though with no greater enthusiasm. For the progressives universally deplored class division as un-American and class conflict as a social malignancy. They were decidedly anti-Marxist and anti-socialist as well, despite efforts by moderates in the Socialist Party of America to link up with left-wing progressivism. In their interpretations of this period, historians have chosen variously to emphasize class conflict, hold it at arm’s length, or deny its centrality. But all have acknowledged the specter of class haunting America in 1900–14 and, like the progressives themselves, all have kept a wary eye on it.

The first historians of progressivism were members or admirers of the movement. In their view the progressives were champions of “the people” in their perennial struggle to defend their freedom against “the interests.” On one side stood the majority of Americans: holders of small property, eager for opportunity, jealous of their rights. On the other stood the forces of predatory privilege: the railroads, manufacturing corporations, banks, and the entrenched parties that served them. The progressives defied the overlords of the new industrial economy. In the first scholarly study, *The Progressive Movement* (1915), political scientist Benjamin Parke De Witt wrote that “men became economic slaves . . . Slowly, Americans realized that they were not free” (1968: 14). As a principled movement of the whole “people,” progressivism transcended political and social divisions. De Witt called it the “expression of fundamental measures and principles of reform that have been advocated for many years by all political parties” (p. vii). In their landmark text, *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), Charles and Mary Beard painted in heroic colors the progressives’ drive “towards social democracy.” After the reformers had finished with the political economy bequeathed from the Gilded Age, “it was so

battered and undermined at the base that the men of the age which had constructed it imagined, perhaps with undue fright, that the solid earth was crumbling beneath their feet” (1930: 543).

A substantially different interpretation was advanced four years later. John D. Hicks also identified progressivism as a movement of democratic protest against overweening economic power and corrupt political authority (1931). But he held that a particular segment of “the people” – poor farmers – made up the backbone of the movement. This agrarian movement was more defined by class interests than the miscellaneous paladins of reform who figured in the accounts by De Witt and the Beards. According to Hicks, progressivism was essentially an expansion of the reform efforts set in motion by the Farmers Alliances and the Populist Party of the 1880s and 1890s. Elizabeth Sanders recently reasserted important elements of Hicks’s interpretation, arguing that the “roots of reform” throughout the period 1877–1917 lay in “politically mobilized farmers . . . driven to establish public control over a rampaging capitalism. The periphery [of poor agrarians] generated the bulk of the reform agenda and furnished the foot soldiers that saw reform through the legislature” (Sanders 1999: 1, 3).

After World War II a group of gifted historians developed a reading of progressivism that in some respects remains the most persuasive account. Though they acknowledged the Populist “seedbed” of many progressive proposals, they characterized progressivism as a middle-class reaction against Populism. According to George Mowry, Richard Hofstadter, and Arthur Link, progressivism represented a protest by the safe and sane middle against alien and dangerous extremes. The core progressives were predominantly urban, unlike the agrarians; they were predominantly white collar, unlike the wage-earners; they were comfortable, in distinction to the sybaritic rich; and they were better educated than any other segment of the population. What most clearly distinguished them, however, was their location between classes that they associated with disorder (the workers or proletarians) and with despotism (the business moguls or plutocrats). “Nearly all the problems which vex society have their sources above or below the middle-class man,” wrote a California progressive cited by George Mowry. “From above come the problems of predatory wealth . . . From below come the problems of poverty and of pigheaded and brutish criminality” (quoted in Mann 1963: 35). Mowry profiled the typical progressive as an individualist who “became militant when he felt himself hemmed in between the battering corporation and the rising labor unions” (1946: 37). Or as the progressive attorney Louis D. Brandeis announced, the movement’s aim was to take up “a position of independence between the wealthy and the people, prepared to curb the excesses of either” (quoted in Hofstadter 1955: 164).

But though the progressives readily identified themselves as “middle class,” they resisted defining themselves by their class position; nor did they admit that they had class-specific interests. Instead they thought of themselves as people of the “middling sort,” virtuous and respectable citizens representing the solid center of society. Industrialization, by creating barbarian classes “above” and “below” them, had made this status a position of peculiar vulnerability. They felt exposed and surrounded. They aspired to rise above sordid class conflict, hoping to restore America to its original classlessness.

Representative progressives, according to this reading of the movement, were figures like Jane Addams, who regarded class conflict as the root of all the country’s

evils. For her the Pullman strike of 1894 epitomized “the danger and futility involved in the open warfare of opposing social forces,” which made “the search for justice and righteousness in industrial relations . . . infinitely more difficult” (Addams 1961: 158–64). Impartial referees, she thought, should separate the combatants and then resolve their private differences in light of the public interest. By deploying the objective and neutral middle against the selfish and irrational extremes, mediation could turn the progressives’ “betweenness” into a position of strength.

With *The Triumph of Conservatism* (1963), historian Gabriel Kolko challenged the Mowry–Hofstadter thesis of progressive moderation and middleness, and located the progressives squarely on the side of “the interests” and the governing class. Kolko argued that progressives’ campaigns for federal regulation of corporations were “invariably controlled by leaders of the regulated industry, and directed toward ends they deemed . . . desirable.” Thus, for example, the 1906 Hepburn Act (giving the Interstate Commerce Commission increased authority to control railroad rates) and agencies like the Bureau of Corporations (1903) aided the corporations by quieting their critics and stabilizing markets in their industries. Kolko concluded: “It is business control over politics rather than political regulation of the economy that is the significant phenomenon of the Progressive Era” (1963: 2–3). James Weinstein joined Kolko in contending that “few reforms were enacted without the tacit approval, if not the guidance, of the large corporate interests.” But instead of considering progressivism “conservative,” Weinstein maintained that it represented “corporate liberalism,” a sophisticated strategy for defending business interests by disarming critics and co-opting opponents (1968: ix–x).

This perspective on progressivism effectively exposed the defects of the old interpretation of the “people vs. interests.” Not all proponents of progressive reform were democrats or idealists. But the revisionist interpretations of Kolko, Weinstein, and others simply ignored segments of the progressive movement that did not fit their theses, such as the thousands of women and men who worked in settlement houses. *The Triumph of Conservatism* never mentions progressives like Jane Addams or, for that matter, historians like Richard Hofstadter.

A subtler and ultimately stronger challenge to the Mowry–Hofstadter interpretation of reform politics in 1900–14 was first sketched by Samuel P. Hays and then elaborated by Robert Wiebe. Their accounts melted progressivism into what Hays called *The Response to Industrialism* (the title of his 1957 book) and that Wiebe called *The Search for Order* (the title of his 1967 book). For Mowry and Hofstadter proactive reformers assembled in purposive “movements” made the history of this period. Hays and Wiebe portrayed progressivism in terms of Americans’ “response” to external forces and their “search” for a stability that largely eluded them. At the turn of the century, industrial capitalism was creating a modernity that made all things new: methods and mechanisms of production and distribution and communication, forms of social relatedness, values, ways of interpreting experience. Progressive reform campaigns were interpreted by Hays and Wiebe as strategies of adaptation to these immense, bewildering changes. The key to Americans’ “adjustment to industrialism,” Hays held, was organization. Manufacturers, distributors, workers, and farmers learned how to act collectively in trusts, unions, and other kinds of associations. Thus they gained a measure of control over the marketplace and a measure of security in their economic lives. Gradually a loose society of independent

producers, self-sufficient families, and autonomous communities was transformed into a far more integrated and interdependent society dominated by large organizations. Reformers changed with the times.

Wiebe refined the “organizational thesis” that has left an enduring mark on the historiography of progressivism. Like Hofstadter, Wiebe proposed that most progressive leaders came from the urban middle class. But he placed stronger emphasis on the reform activism of a new middle class composed of professional people and “specialists in business, in labor, and in agriculture.” Common to these two groups was their “consciousness of unique skills and functions.” In a word they were experts, whose productive property lay in their knowledge and brains. This new middle class had made its peace with the economy and society created by industrial capitalism. Indeed many progressives – lawyers, accountants, engineers, executives – were employed by the corporations. “Most of them lived and worked in the midst of modern society and accepting its major thrust drew both their inspiration and their programs from its peculiar traits,” Wiebe claimed. Like a great many inhabitants of industrializing America, progressives were adepts of organization, eager “to join others like themselves in a craft union, professional organization, trade association, or agricultural cooperative” (1967: 112). Wiebe called their style of reform “bureaucratic”: “suited to the fluidity and impersonality of an urban-industrial world. They pictured a society of ceaselessly interacting members and concentrated upon adjustments within it” (p. 145).

By the 1960s there was less consensus about the nature and composition of progressivism than ever. Who were the core progressives? Historians had variously nominated creative politicians, ex-Populist farmers, corporate fixers, humanitarian idealists, immigrant workers, the old middle class and the new middle class. What was their purpose? Historians had variously argued that the chief mission of progressivism was to clean up political corruption, stabilize the political economy, save industrial capitalism, care for its victims, head off socialist revolution, achieve efficiency, restore order, restore competition, restore civility, restore democracy. Little wonder that some scholars began to doubt that a phenomenon described so differently by so many investigators had ever really happened. Perhaps, Peter Filene suggested in 1970 and Daniel Rodgers in 1982, “progressivism” was, historically speaking, a mirage. Perhaps there had never been a coherent “progressive movement,” but only a passel of disparate movements, sharing nothing but the same dates. The suspicion lingers. For example, one historian has recently contended that “progressivism” has become so elastic and applied to so many different things that “its utility as a historical category is threatened.” The “essential common denominator” of progressivism lies in nothing but the “rhetorical formula” of advocating “united public action against corrupt forces” (Connolly 1998: 8). Yet most historians of the early twentieth century have continued to find unity and utility in the concept of progressivism, for a number of reasons.

First, however flimsy and scattered the movement has sometimes seemed to later observers, to the historical actors themselves progressivism was real and important. One purpose of De Witt’s pioneering study of progressivism in 1915 was “to give form and definiteness to a movement which is, in the minds of many, confused and chaotic” (1968: viii). Its champions certainly thought of themselves as belonging to a recognizable collectivity. Even if progressivism amounted to little more than “a style

of political behavior,” at least the style was uniform and widely shared, as James J. Connolly has noted: “Each set of Progressives – whether settlement house feminists, elite male municipal reformers, antitrust crusaders, or ethnic politicians – presented themselves as the leaders of a communal response to the actions of illicit interests and the problems of urban-industrial life” (1998: 8).

Second, since the 1980s most students of progressivism have chalked up its awkward pluralism to its protean character and to the confusing nature of the transformations to which progressives were responding. The movement was disparate because it was very broad, they have decided; and this very breadth suggests its significance. The parable of the blind men and the elephant seems apropos here. That different groups of Americans in 1900–14 grasped different parts of the progressive “elephant,” that no one saw the whole animal, does not mean no elephant existed. Nor does it mean that the different parts of progressivism were not related to one another.

Third, recent historians have regained a sense of the coherence of progressivism by recovering an awareness of the movement’s international context. Seconding Roosevelt’s nomination for the presidency in 1912, Jane Addams called the new Progressive Party “the American exponent of a worldwide movement toward juster social conditions, a movement which the United States, lagging behind other great nations, has been unaccountably slow to embody in political action” (quoted in Rodgers 1998: 74). Historians have established that the American progressives were participating in a process of adaptation to industrial capitalism that had analogues in the industrialized nations of Western Europe. James Kloppenberg and Daniel Rodgers have written superb studies of transatlantic convergence and cooperation. Kloppenberg analyzed the sometimes parallel, sometimes intersecting intellectual histories of American progressivism and European social democracy (1986); Rodgers masterfully mapped a whole North Atlantic community of “social politics,” in which American progressives were more often borrowers than lenders of reform ideas (1998).

The historiography of progressivism remains rambunctiously heterogeneous. There is no “standard account.” A sensible book that comes closest to being such an account, however, is the careful synthesis published by Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick in 1983. The authors represent two generations of historians: Link began writing about progressivism in the 1940s, McCormick in the 1970s. These scholars relied principally on the Hays–Wiebe “organizational thesis,” but combined with it the Mowry–Hofstadter perspective on progressives’ attitudes and added anticipatory glances toward the broader context explored by Rodgers: “The progressives made the first comprehensive efforts to grapple with the ills of a modern urban-industrial society.” Striving not to dismantle industrial capitalism but “rather to ameliorate and improve the conditions of industrial life,” the progressives initiated processes of ambivalent accommodation with “industrialism” that would go on long past the period 1900–14 (Link and McCormick 1983: 3, 21).

From the perspective gained from a century’s distance and stacks of previous studies, historians today see aspects of progressivism that were not clearly visible in the 1950s or even the 1980s. Wider-angle lenses enable them to discern patterns and connections in the jostling welter of particular movements, leaders, communities, and groups. One result is the possibility of achieving a more inclusive, panoramic image of the period, without necessarily losing the high resolution that close-ups provide. In

any case the task of mapping the landscape of progressivism is, of course, a work in progress. I conclude with a sketch that indicates where the work is now and where it appears to be leading.

The most significant contemporary trend in study of this period may be that of putting American developments in a larger framework. Eager to shed the entrenched parochialism of their trade, American historians are exploring the implications for the United States of taking part in an industrial capitalist revolution which, though centered in the North Atlantic region, had consequences all over the world. Though no one then spoke of “globalization,” more and more goods, people, and ideas were flowing across national boundaries. Improved means of trans-oceanic communication (by cable) and transportation (by steamship) led to increasing international trade in globally organized markets. Immigrants retained more of their old-country characteristics than did previous immigrants, partly by choice, partly in defense against the prejudices of native-born Americans, partly because – isolated in ghettos – they had no choice. In major cities and industrial towns, immigrants and their children made up most of the population, a highly visible “foreign” presence.

To many of the native-born, all this came as a shock. “Americans had grown up with the placid assumption that the development of their country was so much unlike what happened elsewhere,” Hofstadter observed, “that the social conflicts troubling other countries could never become a major problem here” (1955: 166). At the turn of the twentieth century, titanic economic and demographic shifts were eroding distinctions between “here” and “there.” In matters of material production, Europeans learned more from Americans than the other way around; but as Rodgers and Kloppenberg have demonstrated, American reformers often took inspiration from Europeans, as did a great many American intellectuals and artists. In this period the Armory Show introduced Americans to modernist art, and Sigmund Freud introduced them to depth psychology.

The United States was far from being a passive participant in these epic changes. Massive immigration depended on government policy, which in turn responded to booming industries’ appetite for cheap labor. Policy also drove the republic out into the world beyond its borders. The US decisively emerged from its former isolation by acquiring a modest Caribbean and Pacific empire in 1898, then, under Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, behaved diplomatically like the great power it had become.

One of the touchstones of progressivism, in fact, was its readiness to embrace the nation’s entry into the mainstream of world history. Americans had earlier identified their exceptionalism with their strengths and virtues. Signs of reversion to the benighted ways of the Old World were to be deplored. In contrast, progressives were inclined to view the shrinking of differences between the New World and the Old dispassionately, or to call it maturity. Convergence with Europe was not, in their eyes, retrogression, but joining with other advanced nations in a modernization that held high promise for them and perhaps for all of humankind.

To be sure, American exceptionalism persisted. Convergence with Europe was to be selective. Most progressives were fervent nationalists. The most celebrated of them all, Theodore Roosevelt, was an unapologetic imperialist who called his domestic program “the New Nationalism.” Progressives of all stripes were determined to defend distinctive elements of the national culture. In relative terms the United States was less rigidly class-divided, more capitalist and Protestant and moralist, more resistant

to state power and socialism, than were any of its industrialized peers; and progressives were happy to keep it that way. Other aspects of American peculiarity, however, progressives were eager to discard. Most, for example, were uncomfortable with the ethnic heterogeneity that set the United States apart from its rivals; cultural pluralism (the precursor of today's "multiculturalism") was a minority position among progressives. Many were also happy to cut back on what they viewed as the excesses of democracy. Thus literacy tests enjoyed wide support among progressives in the South (for denying the franchise to undesirable voters) as well as in the North (for barring undesirable immigrants).

This readiness to compromise democracy points to the progressives' heavenly city: a managed democracy, that is, a democracy that worked to their satisfaction because it was managed by people like themselves. Many progressives were sincere proponents of the secret ballot and of plebiscitary instruments like initiative, recall, and referendum. But considered as a whole, the movement's commitment to purifying democracy has been exaggerated. More basic to the progressive enterprise was a commitment to gaining control of democratic institutions that had, they believed, been corrupted by venality or grown inadequate to the needs of a modern society.

The agrarian and labor radicals of the Gilded Age had wanted to purify a society corrupted by sin. For progressives the problem was not just sin but also the inefficiency of institutions that allowed sin to flourish. The economy and society were corruptible because they were sloppily organized and haphazardly led. The solution to both sin and inefficiency was intelligent, diligent management. That meant using the scientific method to direct economic and social change; it meant constant gathering and analysis of data, constant measuring and monitoring of results, constant evaluation and adjustment of policies. Progressives believed that managerial methods gave them the capacity to overcome drift and to master history over the long haul. For static laws enforced in courts, they substituted frequently amended regulations applied by administrative agencies; for converted hearts, they substituted scientific reason and expertise; for millennialist visions, they substituted perpetual problem-solving. "The rules" they lived by were not fixed principles or laws but orientations based on probabilities; their techniques stressed "constant watchfulness and mechanisms of continuous management" (Wiebe 1967: 167). Most successful reform campaigns of the period exhibited the new emphasis on painstaking data-gathering, organization, and management. Employed by Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Women's Suffrage Association, these methods were crucial to building support for the Suffrage Amendment; employed by the American Saloon League, they helped build a winning coalition behind the Prohibition Amendment; thanks to social workers like Florence Kelley and Josephine Goldmark, these methods brought countless gains in protections and services for workers and their families.

Not all progressives were equally infatuated with managerial methods. Republican progressives in the big urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest were the most prone to believe that honest, efficient management cleansed all sins. Rooseveltians even distinguished between "good trusts" that owed their size to superior efficiency and the "bad trusts" that had grown big by corrupt practices. These were the progressives who exhibited the "conservative" or "corporate liberal" orientations described by Kolko and Weinstein. Westerners and Southerners who came to pro-

gressivism by way of Populism and the Democratic Party tended to distrust big concentrations of private economic power, whether well managed or not. To the proponents of Woodrow Wilson's "New Freedom," trusts were bad just for being trusts.

But all progressives believed in good *public* management. All believed in cleaning up government and making it an effective instrument for policing "the interests." Business, labor, and even the champions of reform causes had grown mighty by mastering organizational and managerial skills. Now government, representing the welfare of the public, had to catch up. Thus progressivism reacted decisively against the ethos of *laissez-faire*. Any society needs to be governed, progressives believed, and none more than a modern industrialized society. Competing interest groups arise from a multitude of differences, whether of economic situation, section, race, ethnicity, or religion. As groups proliferate and organize, their interests collide. Members of each group become less cognizant of the values and needs of other groups, more intent on getting their own needs satisfied and their own values respected. A public interest grows hard to define, even harder to assert. Under these conditions, progressives believed, the state has the obligation to adjudicate fairly among interest groups and to furnish services left unprovided by the market economy. In practice this meant a larger and more active government. "Regulating a new society – using government and law to control the behavior of institutions, individuals, and groups – was a conspicuous feature of that outburst of state activism that we call the Progressive movement," according to Morton Keller (1994: 1).

Though progressives accepted the legitimacy of both interest groups and government, they were less sure about the legitimacy of parties. Parties had begun as mechanisms for brokering and bargaining among private interests in a relatively homogeneous preindustrial society. But the immense complexity of a modern industrialized country had overloaded party circuits, making them less efficient and more corruptible. Progressives were prone to rely on the state to undertake balancing functions previously performed by parties, and to replace the crass give-and-take dealings of politics with the theoretically just and transparent calculations of management.

The trusts and disorders of the Gilded Age demonstrated the incapacity of *laissez-faire* liberalism to keep capitalism sound and stable. Progressives were liberals who saw the necessity to revise the old formula for achieving order and security. They recognized the need for government to perform functions which – in a complex capitalist society – the market and human nature would not automatically fulfill. Progressives remained liberals, determined to preserve as much space for personal choice as social needs would allow. But they were liberals in search of a viable balance between government and liberty. Order was a precondition of liberty, and in 1900 order demanded the expansion of the state.

This understanding of progressivism, as liberalism in the process of reinventing itself, helps explain the faith in management, which was a way of exercising power that was free of all the things that tainted power in liberals' eyes. Being essentially scientific, management was animated by impartial reason. In theory, at least, its books were open; it operated in public hearings, courtrooms, and government documents rather than in smoke-filled rooms or locked boardrooms. Thus it was intellectually neutral. More importantly, it was politically neutral; the power of a

regulatory commission or a bureau of labor statistics stood above privilege and partisanship. Managerial power was supposed to be disinterested. Regulators mediated or arbitrated between private interests, taking neither bribes nor sides. At an extreme progressives could pretend that management had nothing do with power, but was a purely mechanical process. Progressives venerated markets kept honest and efficient by neutral regulation.

Like many reformers, progressives were clearer about what they were against than what they were for. They were against dishonesty, secrecy, and greed. They were against class privilege and class solidarity. They were against predatory interest groups. They were against irresponsible power, whether wielded by bullying corporations, venal bosses, or conspiratorial unions. They were against dogmatic ideologies, especially those of the left. They were against overt, swords-drawn conflict. Perhaps more than anything else, they were against the partisanship of politics-as-usual. They loved the ideal of a public. They said that they wished to lead the whole country, not a class or party; and they wished to lead it neither to the right nor to the left, but forward. To move the country forward required rising “above” politics. When they tried to describe their political principles, progressives avoided crass words like “power,” “self-interest,” and “bargain.” They preferred to use august words like “democracy” and “public interest” or austere words like “interdependence,” “efficiency,” and “administration.”

A particular favorite was the word “control,” a managerial word that connoted order purged of interest, conflict, and the open exercise of power. Yet try as they often did to deny it, the control that progressives desired entailed political deal-making and the exercise of power. The progressives were more like their wayward countrymen than they liked to acknowledge. Like all political actors, they had distinct class interests, cultural biases, and partisan instincts. As Hofstadter and Mowry noted decades ago, progressive leaders belonged to a middle class that was acutely anxious about its status in a class-divided industrialized society. Progressive leaders and the bulk of their followers were white Protestants of British heritage, a shrinking segment of the population. And Roosevelt, Wilson, LaFollette, and other progressive giants were reform-oriented politicians, superbly skilled in the arts of steering the interests they represented through conflicts and compromises.

George Mowry called “paradoxical in the extreme” the typical progressive’s ability to combine “his own intense group loyalties with his strong antipathy to the class consciousness of organized capital and organized labor” (quoted in Mann 1963: 38). Naïveté accounted for some of the dissonance between the chaste neutrality that they professed and the interest-driven politics that they pursued. Probably the swift pace of events accounted for more of it; progressives’ perceptions and ideas lagged behind their motives and actions. If they identified their peculiar values with “the public interest,” confusion was as much to blame as deceit. But the gap between progressives’ rhetoric and their practice also reflected blindness, hypocrisy, and arrogance. While proclaiming their reverence for science, democracy, and the public interest, not infrequently the progressives were infected by racism, ethnocentrism, class snobbery, and patriarchy. Progressives could be found in the ranks of the most illiberal causes of the day: prohibition, immigration restriction, gunboat diplomacy, movie censorship, rigidly moralistic approaches to vice, assaults on the First Amendment rights of unionists and leftists, and opposition to the social and economic equality of women.

Their record in race relations was particularly lamentable. 1900–1914 was a period of stagnation or deterioration in the conditions of life for black Americans. “Scientific racism” was riding high; and the incidence of lynching, having peaked in the 1890s, barely abated. A few prominent white reformers joined with blacks led by W. E. B. DuBois to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. To be sure, President Roosevelt entertained Booker T. Washington in the White House and appointed African Americans to some federal posts. But President Wilson resegregated the federal civil service and trumpeted his delight with D. W. Griffith’s racist cinematic masterpiece, *Birth of a Nation*, despite anguished NAACP protests. Progressives mostly supported the disenfranchisement and segregation of blacks in the South and exhibited indifference to their predicament everywhere else.

Ultimately progressives were themselves an aggressive interest group. They could justly profess to be more broad-minded and far-sighted than other groups. Their claims to virtuous high-mindedness are less persuasive. They were as determined as other groups to defend their own interests, as ready to use coercive means to achieve their ends, as avid to gain power. Management, their preferred remedy for social ills was more than the objective tool progressives liked to think it; it was also a subtle weapon that they deployed in the low-intensity interest-group wars of their time. Moreover, whenever progressives were forced out of their stance as apolitical middlemen and apostles of reason, whenever they were forced to choose sides in class and culture conflicts, they knew which side they were on. They stood with the established institutions that kept order, guarded property, and fueled prosperity: the law, the churches, the schools, the government, and the corporations. Industrial capitalism had transformed their country, and they accepted its work. Their purpose was to reform the complicated America that they had inherited, not to transform it again.

But if progressives were often disingenuous, and sometimes illiberal, they were seldom duplicitous. Though a century’s hindsight enables us to see the limitations of this “progressive period,” progress there surely was; and progressives were responsible for most of it. Especially in gender relations progressivism sponsored enormous advances. The movement was itself a vehicle for women’s emergence from domesticity and subservience. Women led the social justice wing of the movement and took part in all branches of it. The most unequivocal gains in rights and welfare were made by and for women: increasing participation in higher education and the work force, protections for working women, services for mothers and their children, and decisive progress toward the Suffrage Amendment of 1920. The progressive ethos facilitated all these developments. Its emphasis on rationality, gentility, and service helped usher women into realms of power and work from which they had always been excluded.

On the score of inclusiveness and tolerance, in fact, the progressives have a better record than their contemporaries, or their predecessors in the Gilded Age, and certainly than their successors during the Great War period and in the 1920s. Though the hectic pluralism of American society disturbed them, the progressives dealt with immigrants, workers, and African Americans with a measure of sympathy and a sense of duty. They proposed to solve the “problems” of pluralism with management, education, and voluntary Americanization. The generation of political actors that followed them attacked these problems with repression and exclusion: 100 percent

Americanism, the Red Scare, immigration restriction, and nativist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan.

This essay has addressed a segment of American society that aspired to control the rest of it, and for the most part succeeded. The progressive formula for a managed democracy that took hold in 1900–14 eventually became the prevailing approach to governing the political economy. What began in protest and reform ended in established institutions and orthodoxy. After the reactionary 1920s, progressivism swept back into power with the New Deal, and has remained a force to be reckoned with ever since. If the United States grew up under a regime of *laissez-faire* capitalism and classical liberalism, in its industrial maturity it has relied on the welfare-state capitalism and corporate liberalism that the progressives pioneered. The world they made – of a managerial state adjudicating among organized interest groups and supporting a market economy dominated by big corporations – is the world we still inhabit.

Where is the historiography of 1900–14 heading a century later? It seems likely that historians will have less to say about progressivism and more about the rest of American society: the myriad groups and sectors that the progressives sought to control. Under the aegis of the “new social history” and “history from the bottom up,” they will sustain a focus that most younger historians have already adopted, on the divisions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. The many “others” who lived far from the centers of American power – people of color, the immigrant working class, farmers, women – all made their own contributions to the national narrative in 1900–14, including contributions to the development of progressivism.

Though most recent scholarship has explored divisions of race, ethnicity, and gender, historians must also continue to probe divisions of class in the early twentieth century. Class division seems highly pertinent to the history of progressivism, as a number of historians have already established. J. Joseph Huthmacher (1962) and John Buenker (1973) argued some time ago that progressivism cannot be understood without appreciating the role played in progressive political coalitions by urban working-class voters. The Socialist Party of America attracted nearly one million votes in 1912 for its presidential candidate, Eugene Victor Debs, largely because – according to Nick Salvatore (1982) and Irving Howe (1985) – its socialism was an undoctinaire, native-born ideology that had wider appeal than most progressives cared to admit. Progressivism may have been a defensive movement, designed to undercut the appeal of the left by ministering to workers’ interests. David Montgomery also showed that the obstreperous radical labor federation called the Wobblies (*Industrial Workers of the World*), founded in 1905, was not the only manifestation of working-class militancy in the Progressive Era (1987). He described the whole period from 1909 till 1922 as one of resurgent working-class solidarity and activism. In light of this pattern, progressive initiatives to improve the lot of workers, plus later campaigns to suppress left parties and unions (1917–22), may have had the same basic motive: to keep the working class from making too much history.

Finally, historians will surely expand their explorations of the international contexts of American history in the early twentieth century. The United States became a potent actor not just in the North Atlantic region but across the planet during this period, which partly anticipated the “globalization” of our own time. The topic of American exceptionalism will continue to compel investigation, to assess the balance between factors that distinguished American development and factors that were

drawing the country into transnational networks and patterns. Surely it is significant that in an age of explosive revolutions (in Mexico in 1910, in China in 1911, in Russia in 1917), the most dynamic actors on the American scene were middle-class reformers. Surely it is significant, too, that reform movements akin to progressivism (though more statist) occurred in Great Britain, France, and Germany. Those who know only progressivism – and only America – cannot deeply know either.

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