
The Historiography of Progressivism

In the following essay, Rutgers University historian Richard L. McCormick provides a sweeping review of the historiography of progressivism. McCormick notes the reticence of contemporary historians in using the term “progressivism” to describe a broad movement whose participants, goals, and actions defy easy definition. He goes on to advance his own view of early twentieth-century reform, suggesting several basic characteristics common to most Progressives and the reforms they sought.



Convulsive reform movements swept across the American landscape from the 1890s 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, more efficient municipal government, and, sometimes, the control of social groups whose habits they hated and feared. 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. By around 1910, many of these crusading men and women were calling themselves progressives. Ever since, historians have used the term “progressivism” to describe the reform movements of the early twentieth-century United States.

Yet many historians today are no longer very comfortable with the term. David P. Thelen, one of the best scholars working in the field of early twentieth-century reform, recently observed that “progressivism seems basically to have disappeared from historiographical and political discussion.” Thelen perhaps exaggerated the point, but this much, at least, is true; there is a malaise among historians about the concept of progressivism and a growing urge to avoid the word itself whenever possible.

Three causes account for this situation. For one, the terms “progressive” and “progressivism” commonly have been invoked in a casual way to denote people and changes that are “good” or “enlightened” or “far-sighted.” These are the connotations which the progressives themselves gave to the words. Historians, being naturally wary of such value-laden terms, tend to seek a more neutral language that is better suited to impartial analysis. Such disinclination to use the word “progressivism” has been strengthened by the now-common judgment that early twentieth-century reform was not entirely good or enlightened or farsighted.

Second, the malaise about progressivism reflects a general discouragement with the liberal reform tradition in American history. I refer not simply to the nation’s current political conservatism (for relatively few professional historians share the new mood) but more generally to a widespread sense, both within and without academe, that liberalism historically has been characterized by both insincerity and failure. These are the dual criticisms most frequently leveled against the Great Society programs of the 1960s. They were not genuinely intended to uplift the disadvantaged, but rather to assuage guilty liberal consciences. And the devices upon

which they relied, namely, expensive governmental bureaucracies, proved conspicuously unequal to the problems at hand.

The same two complaints, of insincerity and failure, underlie most of the contemporary criticism of the early twentieth-century liberals who called themselves progressives. They are said to have used democratic rhetoric only as a cloak for elitist purposes. And they are berated for placing too much confidence in scientific methods and administrative techniques that turned out to possess few of the magical powers which the reformers attributed to them. Almost every major political figure of the era is said to have supported remedies that were grossly inadequate to the observed problems.

Often these two criticisms are conjoined in the notion that the progressives never intended their reforms to succeed, only to appear successful. Thus Richard Hofstadter explained the progressives' attraction to "ceremonial," rather than far-reaching, solutions by observing the reformers' own deep need to feel better about American society and their own status within it. Other historians, including Gabriel Kolko and James Weinstein, have suggested that even more consciously selfish motives- specifically the drive of business elites to turn government to their own ends- lay behind the failure of progressivism to solve the problems of an industrial society.

These alleged evils of progressivism- its dishonest rhetoric and its inadequate methods- bring us to an attribute of liberalism that goes a long way toward explaining the sour reputation it has today. Liberals frequently excel in recognizing- indeed, in dramatizing- the social and economic conflicts of American society, but they quickly cover up those conflicts by declaring them solved through expertise and government. The progressives of the early 1900s did this. Conservatives are at least consistent in affirming that capitalism produces a fundamental "harmony of interests," while radicals, for their part, consider social conflict unremitting and unsolvable, save through revolution. But liberals often seem (and seemed) to occupy the foolish, middle position of alternately recognizing and denying the existence of basic social and economic divisions. I call attention to this pattern because it strikes me as essential to understanding why so many of today's historians appear to have lost respect for progressivism and to avoid the term whenever they can.

The third reason why contemporary historians are dissatisfied with the concept of progressivism is the awful complexity and diversity of early twentieth-century reform. Nothing illustrates this better than the longstanding historiographical debate over the progressives' identity that flourished during the 1950s and 1960s. Farmers, businessmen, professionals, old middle classes, and immigrants all were named by one scholar or another as the key progressives. The historians offering these diverse interpretations were not content with carving out niches within the reform movement for the groups they studied. Rather they tended to claim, at least implicitly, that "their" key progressives placed a distinctive stamp on early twentieth-century reform and define progressivism narrowly enough to substantiate that claim. We learned a great deal from these studies about how different social and economic groups experienced and responded to the problems of the early 1900s. But obviously all the historians debating the identity question cannot have been right about what progressivism was. For while many groups had a hand in it, none exclusively shaped it.

Of all the answers to the question of who the progressives were, one has exerted an especially pronounced influence upon the field: the so-called "organizational" interpretation. Led by Samuel P. Hays and Robert H. Wiebe, a number of scholars have located the progressive impulse in the drive of newly formed business and professional groups to achieve their goals

through cooperation and expertise. Other groups then copied the organizers, whose bureaucratic methods gave progressivism its distinctive character.

Yet while it has influenced dozens of scholars, the organizational model is too limited to encompass much that we know about the early twentieth-century reform. Hay's and Wiebe's organized, expert progressives seem too bland, too passionless, and too self-confident to have waged the frantic battles many reformers did. Their interpretations particularly err in downplaying the dramatic events that punctuated the chronology of progressivism, aroused ordinary people, and gave reform its shape and timing: a sensational muckraking article, an amazing political scandal, or a tragic social calamity. Without taking into account how the masses of Americans perceived and responded to such occurrences, progressivism cannot be understood.

More than ten years ago, Peter G. Filene and John D. Buenker published articles recognizing the progressives' diversity and suggesting ways to reorient historical scholarship on the subject. Filene proposed the more drastic response to the complexity of progressivism: abandon the concept of a progressive movement. It had no unity, either of supporters, or purposes, or ideas. Indeed, it "displays a puzzling and irreducible incoherence." Like Filene, Buenker denied there was a unified progressive movement, but he was more optimistic about the meaningfulness of progressivism. Divergent groups, Buenker suggested, came together on one issue and changed alliances on the next. Often, he observed, reformers favored the same measure for different, even opposing, reasons. Only by looking at each reform and the distinctive coalition behind it could progressivism be understood.

Here were two shrewd proposals for coping with the baffling diversity of early twentieth-century reform. Both have been heeded. Filene's pessimism stirred many scholars to abandon the term *progressivism* altogether. Buenker's call for research on individual reforms helped inspire an outpouring of monographic work on discrete aspects of progressivism. Their two responses offer a classic case of the historical profession's effort to cope with the numbing complexity of the past: give up the game or restore coherence through infinite particularizing.

Neither response will do. We cannot avoid the concept of progressivism- or even a progressive movement- because, particularly after 1910, the terms were deeply embedded in the language of reformers and because they considered the terms meaningful. We cannot go on merely particularizing because (however valuable many recent monographs have been) it is important to appreciate and understand progressivism as a whole. The "whole" will scarcely turn out to have been unified or simple, but it is unlikely to have been either incoherent or utterly beyond comprehension. The renewed acceptance of the concept of progressivism may have the added benefit of enabling us to regain respect for the reformers- to see why their rhetoric and their true goals sometimes clashed; to understand why they sometimes failed to achieve their purposes; and to grasp how they, like liberals ever since, often were confused over whether the United States was, in the final analysis, a harmonious society or a divided one.

Two lines of analysis seem to me useful in achieving such an understanding of progressivism. The first is to identify the basic characteristics that were common, in varying measure, to many (and probably most) progressive reforms. No one list of progressive characteristics will satisfy every historian, but I think we know enough for a tentative enumeration. The second way to proceed is by distinguishing with care the goals of reform, the reasons publicly given for it, and the actual results. Purposes, rationale, and results are three different things, and the unexamined identification of any one with another is invalid.

Progressivism was characterized, first of all, by a distinctive set of attributes toward industrialism. By the early 1900s, most Americans seem reluctantly to have accepted the permanence of big business. The progressives shared this attitude. They undertook reforms not to dismantle modern industry and commerce but rather to improve and ameliorate the conditions of industrial life. Yet progressivism was infused with a deep, lingering outrage against many of the worst consequences of industrialism. Outpourings of anger and dismay about corporation wrongdoing and of suspicion for industrial values frequently punctuated the course of reform. Both the acceptance of industrialism and the anger against it were intrinsic to progressivism. This does not mean that the movement was mindless or that it must be considered indefinable. What it suggests is that a powerful irony lay at the heart of progressivism: reforms that gained vitality from a people angry with industrialism ended up by assisting them to accommodate to it.

These ameliorative reforms were distinguished, secondly, by a basic optimism about people's ability to improve their environment through continuous human action. Those hurt by industrialization could be protected and their surroundings made more humane. Progressive intellectuals, as well as popularizers, produced a vast literature denouncing *laissez-faire* and affirming the capacity of men and women to better their conditions. Even reformers with little interest in philosophical questions absorbed the era's optimism and environmentalism. Their reforms reflected this habit of mind.

Improving the environment meant, above all, intervening in people's economic and social affairs to channel natural forces and give them order. This attribute of interventionism, of regulation, and even of coercion, constitutes a third essential characteristic of progressivism, visible in almost every reform of the early 1900s. Intervention could be accomplished through both private and public means. Given a choice, most progressives preferred to work through voluntary associations for noncoercive improvements in economic and social conditions. As time passed, however, more and more of their reforms relied on the hand of government.

Progressive reforms may, then, be characterized as interventions in the environment intended to improve the conditions of industrial life. But such a description says little about the ideals behind progressivism or about its distinctive methods. These must make up part of any account of the character of early twentieth-century reform. Progressivism took its inspiration, as well as much of its substance and technique, from two bodies of belief and knowledge: evangelical Protestantism and the sciences, both natural and social. Each imparted distinctive qualities to the reforms of the age.

Progressives visibly bore the imprint of the evangelical ethos. Basic to this mentality was the drive to purge the world of sin- such as the sins of slavery and intemperance, against which nineteenth-century reformers had crusaded. Now the progressives carried the struggle into the modern citadels of sin, the teeming industrial cities of the nation. No one can read their moralistic appeals without realizing how deeply many of them felt a Christian duty to right the wrongs that sprang from industrialism. The reforms that followed from such appeals could be generous in spirit, but they also could be intolerant. Some progressive reforms were frankly intended to perpetuate a Protestant social order. Not every progressive shared the evangelical ethos, much less its intolerance, but few of the era's reforms were untouched by the spirit and the techniques of Protestant revivalism.

Science, too, had a persuasive influence on the contents and methods of progressivism. Many of the leading reformers considered themselves social scientists- that is, members of the newer disciplines of economics, sociology, statistics, and psychology that came into being between 1880 and 1910. Sharing the environmentalist and interventionist assumptions of the

day, they believed that rational measures could be devised and applied to improve the human condition. Their methods inspired elements common to nearly every reform of the age: the investigation of facts, the application of social scientific knowledge, the entrusting of trained experts to decide what should be done, and the authorization of governmental officials to take the steps that science suggested.

Dispassionate as these methods sound, they actually were compatible with the moralizing tendencies within progressivism. In its early days, American social science was infused by ethical concerns. An essential purpose of economics, sociology, and psychology was to improve and uplift people's lives. Progressive blended science and religion into a view of human behavior that was unique to their generation of Americans: people who had grown up in an age of revivals and come to maturity at the birth of social science.

Finally, progressivism was the first (perhaps the only) reform movement to be experienced by the whole American nation. Widely circulated magazines gave people everywhere the shameful facts of corruption and carried the clamor for reform into every town and city of the country. Almost no one in the United States in, say, 1906 could have been unaware that ten-year-old children worked through the night in dangerous factories or that many United States senators served the big business corporations. Progressivism's national reach and mass base vastly exceeded that of Jacksonian reform several generations before. And its dependence on the people for its shape and timing has no comparison in the later executive-dominated New Deal and Great Society. Wars and depressions had previously engaged the whole nation's attention, but never reform.

These half-dozen attributes of progressivism go a long way toward defining the movement as a whole, but they do not tell us much about who was doing what to whom or about what the reforms accomplished. Most progressive crusades shared in the methods and assumptions enumerated above, but they did so in different measure and with different emphases. Some reflected greater acceptance of industrialism, while others expressed more of the private means; others depended on government. Each reform struck a distinctive balance between the claims of Protestant moralism and scientific rationalism.

To move beyond what are essentially a series of continuums along which diverse reforms ranged, we must distinguish goals from rhetoric from results. This is a more difficult task than might be supposed. Older interpretations of progressivism implicitly assumed that the rhetoric explained the goals and that if a reform became law the results fulfilled the intentions behind it. Neither assumption is a good one. Writing in 1964, Samuel P. Hays shrewdly exposed the fallacy of equating the reformers' democratic language with their true purposes. The two may have coincided, but the historian has to show that, not take it for granted. The automatic identification of either intentions or rhetoric with results is also invalid, although it is still a common feature of scholarship on progressivism. Only within the last decade or so have historians begun to examine with care the actual achievements of the reformers. To do so is to observe the ironies, complexities, and disappointments that accompanied progressivism. For the reformers by no means always got what they wanted, or what they said they wanted.

If the two lines of analysis sketched out here were systematically applied to early twentieth-century reform, our comprehension of- and possibly our respect for- progressivism would be substantially enhanced. [...]

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