

Progressivism: The Waltz with Modernity

By Nels Abrams

The Progressive Era in the United States took place around the turn of the 20th century. Although its exact duration is open to interpretation, the depression of 1893 and the end of WWI will serve as acceptable bookends. This period in our history is significant for its radical changes and, perhaps more importantly, for its prominent role in the creation of modern America. But before I begin to elaborate more fully on that idea, allow me to stop a moment to illuminate what is meant by “modern.”

“Modern” is a slippery word. Depending on the source, one could plausibly use the term in as varied terrain as Napoleon’s France or the factories of New York. We are given a glimpse into the heart of the matter by Emile Durkheim, the founder of Modernization Theory, through his analogy of societies’ modernization to the evolution of an organism; each start out simple and grow in complexity and interdependence. This understanding was given support in our class lecture when modernization was explained at different times as the ‘move from community to society’ and as ‘becoming more complex and interdependent’. For the purpose of this essay “modernization” will imply the process of growth, increasing diversity, and specialization.

Progressivism has a special relationship with the modernization of America. On the one hand it can be seen as a response to large, outside forces. The second industrial revolution, burgeoning cities full of immigrants, and a vast train network transformed the country. The earlier political, economic, and social landscape based on communities and personal relationships was torn apart. The upheavals of change left everyone scrambling to make sense of their new surroundings. On the other hand, it is important to recognize the influence of Progressivism in actively modernizing America. Many of the developments of that era shape our lives to this day.

Americans had responded to increasing modernization before. The Populists, for example, were dealing with many of the same issues as the Progressives. What distinguishes the Progressives—and marks their contribution as the beginning of the modern era—is that they responded to modernization on its own terms. They did not reject the changing world; they used modern methods to solve modern problems. In this essay I hope to demonstrate the dual role of Progressivism as a response to and an integral part of the modernization of America.

The 2nd Industrial Revolution from 1870-1914 had a tremendous impact. Innovations in the chemical, electrical, and steel industries increased production exponentially. Scientific Management methods such as the assembly line were established to handle the new production capacity. The resulting demand for cheap labor in the factories prompted millions of immigrants to flood into the major cities for work. The combined effect of these developments was to greatly increase the diversity of our population and to create a much more urban national demographic. The predominantly Protestant Reformers felt their culture was threatened by the

massive influx of people and they responded by disenfranchising the “undesirable” voters. This legislation reversed the trend of an increasing voter base championed by Andrew Jackson. Racism in the South shaped the reform and subsequently the political power of blacks was crippled for generations.

The expansion of the railroad network combined with improved communication technology to both connect people living in distant locations and diminish the significance of communities’ local relationships. The Pacific Railroad nailed in the Golden Spike connecting the coasts in 1869 and a new national society overwhelmed the autonomy of previous community institutions. This development met with both enthusiasm and resentment. While trade increased, local companies and farmers suddenly found themselves competing with far away strangers. Also, the railroads charged uneven rates to exploit the South and West for the benefit of Northeast financial centers. Progressive Republican leaders such as Robert LaFollete of Wisconsin fought in congress for railroad regulation and tariff reform. The division in the Republican Party between traditional conservatives and progressives handed the 1912 presidential elections to the Democratic candidate, Wilson.

The urban centers’ growth created new problems such as sanitation, mass poverty, and crime. For these reasons the Progressive movement originated in the cities. A “new middle class” of urban professionals motivated by ambition and altruism used their expertise to take the lead. These reformers claimed that party politics were inefficient and corrupt, so they took steps to take power away from the “machines” and the immigrants they represented. The Progressives wanted to streamline governance and ensure that people they could trust—experts—were making the important decisions. Examples of this reform were increasing the power of the mayors and establishing civil-service guidelines for public posts. This emphasis on administrative government continues today, with over 1,000 appointed commissions.

There was another group of Progressive reformers who focused on ameliorating the negative social consequences of modernization. A change in the intellectual atmosphere from Social Darwinism to the Social Gospel prompted many people to adopt different views towards the less fortunate. Failure was now recognized as systemic instead of the result of personal sin or weakness. These reformers were led by women, with Jane Addams and her Hull House as perhaps the most famous example. They improved schools and hospitals, built public playgrounds, and generally attempted to, as 1901 Mayor Fagin said, make cities “a pleasant place to live in.”

The distinction between the “Social Reformers” and the “Structural Reformers” was hazy. Some people worked on both sets of issues and many shared similar socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, they all had faith in the Progressive method: identify the problem, do research to discover the root causes, develop public support through the dissemination of knowledge, and

legislate. This secular faith in sociology and science blended easily with their religious zeal because there wasn't a necessary contradiction between the two in that era.

Modern America owes a lot to the men and women of the Progressive era. The technology and trains of that time gave us international power. Administrative governance and public responsibility for social welfare are integral aspects to our democracy today. As we round the corner into the 21st century, we face new waves of immigrants, revolutionary technology, and an increasingly interconnected world—the Progressive Era's successes and failures could provide timely lessons.