

Hays, Samuel P. The Response to Industrialism 1885-1914. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1957.

Author Samuel P. Hays believes that the dominant literature regarding the Progressive period has “adopted the ideology of the reformers themselves”; specifically, that the era was defined by a revolt against the corruption and abuses of big-business. This simplistic picture of the “haves” vs. the “have-nots” was adequate for the sensationalistic muckraking journalism of the times but fails to portray the complexities that comprised the Progressive movement.

The Progressive reformers, according to Hays, can best be understood by viewing their actions as part of a larger societal response to the overwhelming influence of industrialism. What distinguished the Progressive movement from Populism was that the populists attempted to reject the implications of industry and to remake society. The progressives were unified in their acceptance of industry as fact but their responses were as varied as the specific needs and situations of the people affected: farmers, businessmen, women, immigrants, everybody had to make unique adjustments. In his book “The Response to Industrialism” Hays interprets the Progressive movement as the culmination of these different, often conflicting, reactions.

A common thread throughout these reactions was organization. The new world created by industry was national, if not international, and the individual efforts that worked locally were no longer effective. Each segment of society sought to strengthen their influence through collective effort. The business community became the most powerful due to its disproportionate “capital, technical and managerial skills, and public influence.” Big business attempted to mitigate the unsettling effects of free market competition by establishing trusts and holding companies.

Labor and Farmers responded in kind through the creation of powerful unions such as the American Federation of labor (AFL) and agricultural Co-operatives. Clearly these separate concentrations of power were not mutually beneficial; each organization conflicted with the others over important issues.

In addition to professional differences there were significant conflicts of interest between geographic regions. Economic growth was uneven around the United States after the Civil War. Hays argues that some of this disparity is due to the natural disadvantages of the South and West but that these disadvantages were exacerbated by the pseudo-colonial exploitation of the North. The South was hindered by the tremendous loss of capital accompanying the emancipation of the slaves, widespread infrastructure damage during the war, and a lack of capital and industry. Similarly, the West was handicapped through a lack of transportation and water. The North again used its influence to further retard the West's development through low tariffs for raw materials and high tariffs for manufactured goods. These tariffs protected northern industry from competition while undermining the farms.

The international effect of industrialization in the United States was that America was thrust into the position of a global power. Although there were some reservations about becoming involved in foreign affairs that resulted in an erratic acceptance of this role, the undeniable trend was toward more active international participation. Hays ends his survey of Progressivism with an examination of several specific instances of aggressive American intervention.

