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Steven J. Diner. *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1998. xii + 320 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-2553-4.

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Steven J. Diner has produced a very useful synthesis of social and political-economic history of the Progressive Era. *A Very Different Age* reminded me of Alan Brinkley's important 1984 article on the problems encountered in writing modern American history.[1] Diner meets many, if not all, of the challenges of writing synthesis that Brinkley presented, and most importantly, he has written a book which can be used profitably in upper-division undergraduate courses and in graduate-level reading courses. (Graduate students will benefit from the excellent Bibliographical Essay to the extent that it chronicles the best social history of the last two decades, along with many of the classics of progressive era historiography.)

Diner believes that the current state of progressive era historiography presents an incomplete picture of the U.S. between 1890 and 1920, focused as it has been on corporations, government, and reform movements. Highlighting progressive reformers, corporate dominance, and the profusion of bureaucratic values omits considerations of other Americans, which recent social historians have analyzed in specialized studies, but which they have rarely synthesized into the larger framework. To rectify this incompleteness, Diner attempts to "combine political, institutional, and social history" (p. 8). He focuses on "groups," although he recognizes that members of one group often belonged to another (women, particularly are highlighted in different groups).

He is interested in–and this is what makes this book significant for H-Pol readers–"how Americans sought to control their lives and their government during the transformation of America" (p. 9). The book's title is taken from a quotation of Woodrow Wilson's in 1912 in which he described how different the times were from earlier years. The manner of doing business had changed how the individual interacted within all of society, making "most men…the servants of the corporations" (p. xi).

As Diner illustrates throughout, however, the role of "servants of the corporations" was not accepted by most Americans. Thus, corporate capitalists, while ultimately comprising the most powerful group because they set the terms of the contest for control (p. 264), were under siege not only from reformers and government institutions, but also from individual Americans during the progressive era. Many Americans actively struggled to attain economic security, personal autonomy, and social status (three themes that anchor the book). Thus, individuals and groups were not victims of the very different age, but rather active agents attempting to respond to a changing way of life. While Diner does not eschew organized movements against corporate capitalism (indeed, he exposes the irony of these groups later in the book), he emphasizes much more than any other synthesis of the progressive era Americans' informal and unorganized attempts to gain control over their lives: "politics and reform did not dominate most Americans' lives. The vast majority had to cope first and foremost with the social and economic consequences wrought by industrialism and corporate capitalism" (p. 29).

In nine chapters, Diner takes the reader from the emergence of corporate capitalism in the late nineteenth century to the first World War, tying together the narrative with the theme of "competition for control." In the first chapter, "Owners, Managers, and Corporate Capitalism," Diner presents the most clear and succinct overview of the rise of corporate capitalism I have ever read (my sub-specialty is business history). He then proceeds in the next five chapters to show how industrial workers, immigrants, rural citizens, African-Americans, and white-collar workers resisted and accommodated the values of corporate capitalism. In each case, he takes care to include the contributions of women within these groups.

In Chapter 7, he shows how the emergence of professionalism shaped many of the groups, each "divided by social origin, ideology, and sex" through competition for control of "economic rewards, social status, and autonomy, producing losers as well as winners" (p. 199).

In the penultimate chapter, "The Progressive Discourse in American Politics," Diner surveys the older view of progressivism and shows that while progressive reformers delineated the parameters of the political debate, they were not all that successful in achieving their preferred outcomes.

The final chapter, "The Great War and the Competition for Control," brings together the various threads of the previous chapters to conclude that the progressive reformers that progressive era historians have emphasized never understood what Diner has developed in the rest of his book, that most other Americans were not interested in the social engineering promoted by elite reformers and agents of the state, but rather in attaining social and economic autonomy for themselves. Probably many of us who have struggled with teaching and writing about the Progressive Era have recognized this point, but Diner has clearly made the argument for us in this well-written synthesis.

For the most part, Diner skillfully combines the recent emphasis on social history with the older emphasis on business, politics, and reform. There are a few caveats, however, that must be included in this otherwise supportive review! Although he includes information on North and South in the chapters on African-Americans and rural Americans, Diner does not develop the theme of regional differences, which Brinkley raised in his 1984 article and which should include the west. Nor does Diner engage directly the various historiographical issues we historians have grappled with, although the reader can infer them from the narrative and bibliographical essay. The final chapter, on World War I, is not as satisfying as it could have been: while Diner correctly reveals the ironies of progressive reformers' programs (many progressives, although not all, never understood that Americans did not want social engineering) and while in places he suggests connections to the current political situation, he does not suggest how Americans' quest for economic security, autonomy, and social status continued throughout the twentieth century after this transformative period. Following from his argument, one could imply that what had been informal resistance before World War I more and more had to become formal, organized interest group politics afterwards, if success was to be achieved.

One of the book jacket blurbs asserts that Diner has redefined the progressive era in *A Very Different Age*. He has done no such thing. What he has done–and this is more important than another "redefinition"–is to synthesize what we have learned from social historians over the last quarter century with an acute analysis of the ironies of progressive reform movements.

Note

[1]. Alan Brinkley, "Writing the History of Contemporary America: Dilemmas and Challenges," *Daedalus*, (Summer 1984), 121-141.

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