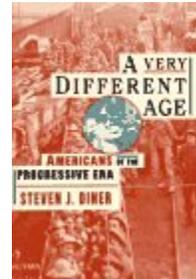


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

Reviewed by John Reynolds (University of Texas at San Antonio)
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Stephen J. Diner contends that an over emphasis on “corporations, government and reform” has distorted our perspective on the Progressive Era (p. 8). These were not vitally important concerns to most Americans as they went about their day-to-day routines. Diner’s survey outlines “how Americans of diverse backgrounds lived in this era” (p. vii). *A Very Different Age* incorporates a generation of social history scholarship to produce a group portrait of the United States between the Depression of the 1890s through World War I.

Most of chapters explore the experiences of groups classified by ancestry and occupation. The sections devoted to immigrants and Afro-Americans mostly follow well worn paths; the four chapters that look at occupational groups (“Owners and Managers,” “Industrial Workers,” “White Collar Workers,” and “Professionals”) offer fresher material. I particularly liked the portions devoted to the broad “new middle class” of clerks, salesmen, doctors, librarians, etc. Rural Americans get their own chapter that draws on recent works on the “country life movement” and the response to scientific agriculture. Women are not relegated to a separate sphere in the book but are well integrated into the text.

Diner aims to identify the goals and strategies pursued by the various groups and to measure their success accordingly. Each group, in its own way, sought to promote its economic security, personal autonomy and social status. The search for security and status was certainly nothing new to American history. Autonomy, however, confronted special problems in the face of a new gospel of efficiency promoting standardization and centralization. The conflicts and debates bearing on autonomy are a conspicuous feature of early twentieth century America and what perhaps best sets it apart as a

“very different age.” Recurrent efforts to achieve or preserve autonomy occupy a central place in the narrative.

One chapter explores the era’s zeal for reform. Diner prefers to speak of a progressive “discourse” rather than a coherent movement. Politicians, muckrakers and other reform types set the terms of debate over the political agenda. They asked how—not whether—“government could restore individual autonomy and preserve democracy in an age of industrial concentration” (p. 201). The progressive mindset challenged a laissez-faire political ethos that Diner sees rooted in Social Darwinism. Yet, the latter philosophy, while popular in New Haven and other bastions of privilege, was hardly as pervasive as reformers and historians wanted to believe. The lingering legacy of Republicanism presented the main obstacle confronting progressives seeking relief from the state.

The struggle for autonomy, security and social status was often a zero sum game. For some groups, such as the professionals, security and autonomy went hand in hand; other groups had to settle for a trade off. Most Americans working in farms, factories and offices surrendered some of their independence for promises of greater economic rewards. Moreover, the pursuit of independence, status and material goods sometimes pitted one group against another. The book’s organization, examining each occupational or ethnic/racial group in turn, does not allow Diner to fully expound on these between group dynamics. Plainly some groups came out ahead: doctors, business managers and Afro Americans who left the servant quarters and went to work in the factories. Others saw their independence undermined: factory foremen, small farmers, and various types of office or clerical workers. Doctors plausibly made the most gains, but, as Diner notes, they did so in part by deliberately squeeze-

ing women and minorities out of the profession. Diner most fully addresses this conflict in his coverage of progressivism. Much of what passed as progressive reform represented programs protecting the interests of middle class professionals who intruded on the lives of immigrant and working class Americans.

A Very Different Age carries the standard strengths and weaknesses of most works with a multi-cultural flavor. It is more sensitive to distinctions of class and ethnicity than past works. Cultural developments are mostly overlooked, though there is a brief section on "working class culture." The Indians, who get about three and a half pages, are almost as invisible here as they were in 1910. All too aware of the diversity of experiences of Americans of different classes and social backgrounds,

Diner is reluctant to describe the larger mosaic or the vectors of historical change. I was sorry that he choose to end the work with a chapter on World War I in lieu of a concise concluding chapter that further elaborated on the book's themes.

I would categorize *A Very Different Age* as an "overview" rather than as a work of synthesis. Students in an upper division Gilded Age/Progressive Era course will find the book useful in framing the social context of the progressive movement, but they will need to look elsewhere to make sense of the era's changes and legacy.

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