

# H-Net Reviews

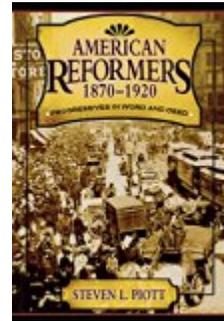
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven Piott. *American Reformers 1870-1920*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 240 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-2763-8.

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## Yet Another Look at the Progressives

Who were the Progressives? Was there a Progressive movement? When did the Progressive Era begin and end, if it even existed? Such deceptively simple questions; such elusive answers. Historians who study the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States—dare we say the Progressive Era—have debated these questions for decades. In fact, the struggle to define the terms and time frame of Progressivism can be traced back to the election of 1912 and Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party.

Nearly forty years ago, Peter Filene penned an obituary for the Progressive movement, arguing that the term obscured more than it explained about political, social, and economic reform at the turn of the twentieth century. A decade later, Daniel Rodgers went again “In Search of Progressivism” and found an amorphous creature—an octopus, if you like—speaking in “three distinct social languages ... the rhetoric of antimonopolism ... an emphasis on social bonds and the social nature of human beings, and ... the language of social efficiency.” In recent years, Steven Diner, Michael McGerr, and Maureen Flanagan have all waded into this historiographic arena to try and tame, or at least explain, the beast that is the Progressive movement and the Progressive Era.[1]

Steven Piott has decided to take a biographical approach to the world of American Progressive reformers—actually, he includes twelve biographical chapters in one compendium. Some of his subjects are well-known denizens of what might be called the Progressive pan-

theon: Jane Addams, founder of the Hull House social settlement house in Chicago; Louis Brandeis, the “people’s lawyer” and author of the “Brandeis brief”; and Lincoln Steffens, the muckraking journalist. Other chapters introduce readers to some of the era’s lesser lights: Charles Macune, who helped develop the Populists’ sub-treasury plan (and including a Populist leader in a book about Progressives raises another can of historiographical worms about the connections between those two movements); Harvey Wiley, the chief chemist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture who may have done more than Upton Sinclair to press the case for the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906; and John Randolph Haynes, an eccentric and wealthy California physician who embraced the direct democracy movement and its demands for ballot initiatives, referenda, and recalls.

In between the familiar and the more obscure lie another half dozen chapters on men and women whose works and words may well challenge assumptions about the timespan and ideology of Progressivism. Piott presents Lester Frank Ward and Henry George as intellectual godfathers to the Progressives who often read their books as young men and women; Ida B. Wells insisted that the campaign against lynching be seen as a essential Progressive reform; Walter Rauschenbusch emerged as a powerful preacher for the Social Gospel; Florence Kelley drank deeply from the wellsprings of activism at Hull House and became a national leader in labor and consumer legislation; and Alice Paul reinvigorated the women’s suffrage movement during World

War I and took her fighting spirit into the post-suffrage women's movement.

Piott's twelve mini-biographies have all the strengths and limitations of that genre. His chapters are concise and thoughtful; each demonstrates how the personal could be political for these Progressives. Piott shows that each man and woman had a unique life story that shaped his or her ideas and actions on the public stage, and he makes his arguments without resorting to broad psychohistorical claims. On the other hand, writing twelve biographies in one book necessitates that Piott rely mostly on secondary sources, and rather old chestnuts in some cases. In sum, the book is a series of intriguing windows into the lives of various actors in the Progressive drama, but these snapshots do not add up to any significant synthesis of the era or the movement.

Piott does begin his book with an introduction that sets the economic, legal, and ideological environment at the turn of the twentieth century. He also hints at some of the major reforms that he will later explore through the individual lives portrayed in the biographical chapters: settlement houses, Social Gospel, women's suffrage, muckraking journalism. However, Piott does not use this introductory chapter to frame the structure of his whole project. He never explains why he selected these particular Progressives to portray; he never says whether the chapters have an explicit order to them (though there appears to be some unstated chronological progression); he never indicates whether the men and women portrayed add up to a new understanding of Progressivism; in fact, he never even states why a series of brief biographies is a useful way to approach this era.

Piott's biographical chapters contain much that will be familiar to scholars and students of the Progressive Era. Yet there are also intriguing insights into many individual lives and their impact on other reformers. For example, Piott makes a strong case that Lester Frank Ward's pioneering work in "dynamic sociology" provided a key intellectual foundation for later Progressive arguments about the state as a positive force in improving public welfare. The portrait of Henry George shows that his magnum opus, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), was not only an economic treatise but also an appeal for reform based in deeply held Protestant social ethics. George's book, and his campaign for New York City mayor in 1886, pro-

vided a training ground for other emerging social reformers such as Walter Rauschenbusch. The chapters on Florence Kelley and Louis Brandeis reveal how the struggle for labor legislation in the early twentieth century drew Kelley's Consumer League and Brandeis's legal realism together.

All these connections between individual lives and biographies seem to beg for some conclusion that would reflect back on what this web of intellectual influence and organizational engagement might mean for understanding the broader Progressive movement. In fact, this tapestry of overlapping ideas and ideology might support a renewed argument for appreciating the Progressives as more than an amorphous conglomeration of reformers in search of social change. Sadly, Piott does not pursue any of these intriguing possibilities; his collection closes without any conclusion.

What Piott finally offers readers is a series of brief, brisk, yet thoughtful sketches on a dozen men and women who struggled for a range of reforms in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States. This book could be an excellent choice to combine with a more synthetic overview for an undergraduate seminar on the Progressive Era (whatever the time frame may be), and will certainly introduce students to a wide variety of fascinating and courageous men and women well worth studying. The collection lends itself to rich discussions about biographical methods, and the myriad roles that individuals can play in social change. But readers hoping for a series of biographical portraits that might open new methodological and analytical avenues into Progressivism will find themselves with many tantalizing hints but few arguments developed to their full potential.

#### Note

[1]. Peter G. Filene, "An Obituary for 'The Progressive Movement,'" *American Quarterly* 22 (1970): 20-34; Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): 113-132 (quotation on 123); Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Maureen Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s-1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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