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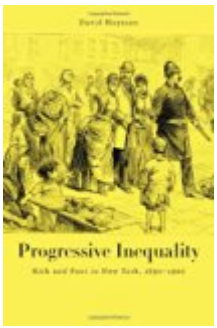
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David N. Huyssen. *Progressive Inequality: Rich and Poor in New York, 1890-1920.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. 392 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-28140-0.



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Published on H-SHGAPE (July, 2014)

Commissioned by Julia Irwin (University of South Florida)

In his 1955 classic *The Age of Reform,* Richard Hofstadter suggested that for all the high moral tone of the movement, Progressivism was neither progressive nor effective. In this important addition to the field, David Huyssen grapples with the issue of why good intentions came to bad ends. Studying Progressive Era-class relations in New York from 1890 to 1920, he concludes that activists were blind to their own class, with its prerogatives of philanthropy from above and imperial prescriptions for how to tame the empire below. This lack of class self-consciousness, he suggests, sabotaged efforts to curb income inequality and in fact exacerbated the contours of poverty in the run-up to the Great Depression. "Progressive" may be the label attached by historians to this period from 1890 to 1920, but in Huyssen's view, the era's outstanding characteristic was the progress made by inequality.

To make his case, Huyssen marshals a myriad of interactions between rich and poor, tracing three kinds of encounters--prescriptive, in which the wealthy prescribe cures for the poor; cooperative, in which some cross-class collaborations flourish; and conflicting, in which friction over remedy widens the distance between the classes, particularly management and labor. He is looking not for change, the benchmark for other scholars of the period, but for continuity; not for disruptions but for patterns, "fault lines that steadily extend themselves across an economic, social and political landscape otherwise characterized by change" (p. 6).

Huyssen is at his best in the prescriptive chapters, where he likens reformers in New York's tenement neighborhoods to those of imperialists leaving the metropole to conquer foreign territory. Like the French ***mission civilisatrice***, theirs was a mission meant to import a corps of values about the civilized life to what used to be called the great unwashed.

To clean up tenement housing in the slums, New York's governor appointed Edward Marshall, a muckraking journalist whose exposé on tene-

ment conditions gave him singular merit to hold the position. Marshall's class and nativist biases colored the project. He brought in temperance men to conduct "scientific" surveys of the number of families, baths, and bedrooms contained within each unit. Finding 11,627 residents "who permit themselves to fall into such a condition of bodily filth as to become traveling menaces to the health and comfort of the public at large," Marshall noted in the final report, by way of suggestion, that in one European city, authorities hosed the poor down in public bathhouses (p. 29).

Similarly, Stanford White's design for the Bowery Savings Bank on the Lower East side was inspired by the grandeur of the Roman Empire, and meant to "transform the streetscape of a poor neighborhood." In Huyssen's view, both were "prescriptive encounters in which private notions of taste and civilization entwined with public spirited reformism, bringing the wealthy to the poor's doorstep with a spirit we might call imperial progressivism" (p. 15).

In the section on cooperating encounters, Huyssen applauds the private philanthropy of such icons of individual giving as Lillian Wald and Jacob Schiff, finding their responses to "begging letters" exemplary, and effective. And he sees a brief moment of cross-class cooperation in the support by a "mink brigade" of *über*wealthy women such as Anne Morgan and Alva Belmont for the garment industry strike against the Triangle Shirtwaist factory and other denizens of the sweatshop. "In the Gotham winter spanning 1909 and 1910, it seemed as if women's solidarity might trump class divisions, destabilizing the entrenched social order," he writes. "A group of women, occupying the entire spectrum from grinding poverty to stratospheric wealth, came together in an unprecedented (and, for scale and sensationalism, unmatched) mutual struggle for women's and labor rights" (p. 182).

As for conflicting encounters, Huyssen focuses on the New York transit strikes of 1916 that disrupted commuter traffic and gave fodder to "a merciless press war." In this case study he finds an important pivot point for the history of labor activism, when public acceptance--or at least understanding--of violence as a tactic of negotiation against unfeeling capitalist owners waned and a new sense grew of what came to be called the public interest. Here he finds "a moment of transition, when nationwide trends in corporate public relations practices, welfare capitalism and state mediation began to undermine workers' justifications for violent protest in the public eye" (p. 230). The "outside agitator," long a staple of management crackdowns, now became a villain in the public mind, clearing the field for the Red Scare and Palmer crackdowns of the 1920s.

In searching this transition for a "usable past," Huyssen ironically weakens his case. Unlike J. P. Morgan, who in 1901 opined, "I owe the public nothing," T. P. Shonts, president of the IRT, talked of how union violence was hurting loyal employees and their families. Appeasing a disgruntled public, Shonts gave the company a sympathetic hue and the unions a black eye. To Huyssen, Shonts' legacy still limits "Americans' political imagination when confronting material inequality" (p. 271) To credit a public relations strategy with upending progress seems questionable--unions knew the script too, and had access to the same PR tools.

More compelling is Huyssen's case that reformers' myopia toward recipients doomed reforms. Their lack of self- awareness was sparked by and perpetuating a myth about capitalism, what he calls "economic natural law," that wealth is a reward for merit and poverty is a punishment for indolence. The Salvation Army's efforts to feed and proselytize to the hungry at Christmas time, the Charity Organization Society's efforts to purge the rolls of the unworthy, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's decision to separate children from low-income parents--all reek of the hauteur of empire. "Wealthy reformers of the

Progressive Era were particularly prone to such obliviousness," he concludes, "steeped as they were in the collective vision of an ascendant, imperial America whose industrial and scientific supremacy would allow them to command a new social order" (p. 106).