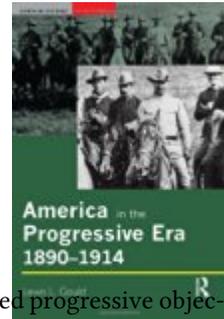


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lewis L. Gould. *America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1914*. New York and Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001. xiv + 132 pp. \$11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-35671-9.

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The prolific Lewis Gould has added another title to the literature of progressivism. His *America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1914* is part of Longman's Seminar Studies series (largely aimed at Longman's UK market) and is very brief (at 126 pages). A sixth of the volume (twenty pages) presents twenty excerpted documents. The work also contains a chronology, a glossary, a who's who of twenty-four individuals, and an annotated bibliography. While Gould credits scholars by way of reference to numbered items in the bibliography (footnoting, of a sort) and while the publisher takes pains not to call the volume a "textbook," the work nonetheless bears the markings of an introductory survey designed for college students.

How should one assess a textbook on the progressive era? Several straight-forward questions set some working criteria. First, what was progressivism? This query goes well beyond the provision of a simple definition, as understandings of the nature of progressivism vary among scholars. Better to ask: how does the author conceptualize and describe the subject? What is the writer's *modus operandi* in treating the Era? Second, when did the progressive era occur? In some regards this query is an extension of the initial question, as chronology is inherently linked to historical conceptualization. Some scholars see the origins of progressivism in the Gilded Age; others emphasize progressivism blossoming between 1907 and 1914.

Third, what caused progressivism? This question has challenged historians from the inception of the Progressive Era. Because progressivism is customarily associated with the "reform" of politics and other parts of society, a sub-dimension of this query is "who were the reformers" (or "the progressives")? The identification of

individuals and groups that supported progressive objectives has been used to extrapolate motivations for pursuing reform. From this evidence (and associated suppositions) some historians have deduced causes for progressivism. Other interpretative techniques have been used. Still, scholars have a long way to go in reconstructing the dynamics that animated early twentieth-century reform. The subject continues to invite creative scholarship.

Fourth, how does the author assess the significance of the age and its achievements? Most writers have concluded that reform politics during the early twentieth century imparted a lasting legacy to American governance, although historians also acknowledge that some developments (like increased racism, sexism, imperialist tendencies, and corporate hegemony) have been retrogressive. To these four traditional questions one should now add a fifth, given the rising interest in world history. Did progressivism in the United States have significant transnational linkages? Or was American progressive reform exceptional? These five substantive queries fit the peculiarities of the Progressive Era. As with any book designed for undergraduates, one should also ask how well the volume is written. Presentation can turn a mediocre meal into a gourmet's delight.

Gould's conception of progressivism is exclusively political. His writing exemplifies what has been styled the "presidential synthesis," an approach that emphasizes national politics, with the president at the center of the action. The space constraint of the Longman series no doubt helps to keep a tight focus on politics, limiting the author's ability to give attention to non-political subjects, such as one finds in the surveys by John Chambers, Nell Painter, and John Cooper.[1] Gould's Progressive Era is closer to Link and McCormick's *Progressivism*

and Gould's earlier *Reform and Regulation* in composition and emphasis.[2]

Historians looking for a socially textured account of the progressive era will be disappointed with *America in the Progressive Era*. The book contains little about economic change and is virtually silent about social (e.g. ethnic, family, women, organizational) and cultural (e.g. intellectual, literary, popular entertainment) developments. Teachers who wish to introduce global dimensions into their discussion of the period, following the suggestions of writers such as Alan Dawley and Daniel Rodgers, also must look elsewhere.[3] Nor are the parallels to challenges to the political status quo in other parts of the world during the era, especially during the 1907-1914 period, acknowledged in the work.[4] This book is about America in the Progressive Era, not America and progressivism as a generic, transnational phenomenon.

But what about political historians? How will they size up Gould's political history. Gould is clearly a master of writing a traditionally-based narrative of politics. He has a knack of linking personality to political action. His characterization of Theodore Roosevelt is incisive and suggestive, as one might expect from a scholar who has spent a career tilling this field. Important legislative developments are satisfactorily tracked and described. He traces the cadence of these developments, noting the stirrings of activism in the 1890s, follows their unfolding during the Roosevelt and Taft presidencies, and recounts reform's crescendo during the first Wilson administration. Written in a crisp, clear style, Gould's overview sets the tone and tempo of national politics between 1890 and 1916, when the scope and scale of national governance expanded. His annotated bibliography offers a superb selection of one hundred titles on the politics of the period.

>From another perspective, however, Gould's portrait of a politics that radiated from Washington is one-dimensional. Government in the United States was purposefully and conspicuously a non-centralized affair, nested within a federal system. This arrangement allotted a major responsibility for governance to the forty-five state governments and 16,000 cities, counties, and localities that exercised general political authority in 1900. These subnational units of governments, which were staffed by literally hundreds of thousands of men and women, managed important public functions, such as education, criminal justice, economic assistance, and social welfare. During the Progressive Era subnational government exercised dominant and sometimes exclusive control over most of these activities. In short, assessing gov-

ernance in America by looking only at Washington is like trying to scope out the condition of a house by looking only at its exterior. One will see only a single plane of a multi-dimensional construction.

The causes of progressivism have been elusive. Textbook writers on the period avoid serious discussion of the issue. Gould's work continues this tradition. He is content with merely hinting at factors that propelled reform. Following David Thelen, Gould points to the depression of the 1890s, especially its generation of anger among middle-class taxpayers, as an incubator of progressive urges.[5] Partisan change counted too. William Jennings Bryan's 1896 campaign "infused his party with an anti-corporate, pro-regulation spirit that would carry the Democrats away from their earlier negative attitude toward the governmental process" (p. 16). In addition, the depression helped to stimulate the corporate merger movement, which intensified the political spotlight on big business in the early twentieth century. Gould points to the Spanish-American war as another influence on progressivism but without indicating how, other than noting its contribution to elevating TR to the White House. Finally, Gould argues that the arrival of prosperity after 1898 provided the economic context for progressivism.

Following TR's 1904 election, "the spirit of progressive reform became a dominant element in American public life. A number of causes came together in 1905 and 1906 to inspire advocates of change with the possibility of redirecting society" (p. 38). Here Gould points in passing to rising wages, the emergence of a consumer mentality, and increased public attention to newspaper exposes of shoddy and unhealthy products. He called 1909-1912 "a period of upheaval" during which "the parties had redefined themselves along ideological lines" (p. 53). After the election of 1912 Wilson and the Democrats became the prime bearers of the progressive torch, until the recession of 1914-15 sapped the life from reform activity.

Gould's suggestions about causation are tantalizingly brief. But so are competitor volumes. I find this analytic vacuum surprising in light of the importance that Gould and other historians have assigned to the period's political accomplishments. Politics between 1890 and 1914, Gould wrote, "set the terms of debate down to the end of the twentieth century." During these years citizens "had set the social priorities for a century." The statement contains some hyperbole, but the judgment seems basically accurate.

Notes

- [1]. John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: Norton, 1987); John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900-1920* (New York: Norton, 1990).
- [2]. Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1983); Lewis L. Gould, *Reform and Regulation: American Politics from Roosevelt to Wilson* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1996).
- [3]. Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- [4]. Ballard Campbell, "Comparative Perspectives on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 1:2 (April, 2002), pp. 154-78.
- [5]. David P. Thelen, *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972).

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