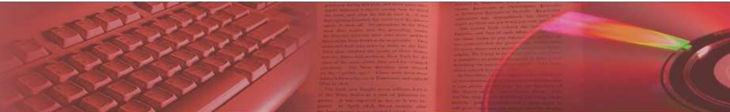

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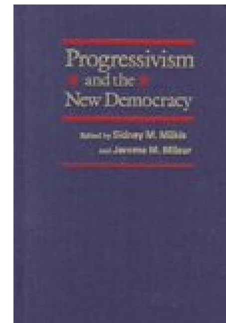

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The Triumph of Progressivism

Historians of the Progressive Era have long labored in the shadow of their New Deal colleagues. Possessing the clearer economic motivation, the more obvious claim to long-term political influence, the most publicly prominent social legislation, not to mention the leading Roosevelt, the New Deal has drawn attention both as a public issue and as a turning point in twentieth-century American historiography for more than half a century. On the other hand, Progressivism has remained a specialty reserved for a healthy but less prominent band of historians interested in the period between the cataclysms of the Civil War and the Great Depression.

But as we leave the twentieth century behind, scholars of the Progressive Era seem to be shaking off their second-class status and asserting a claim to the prime place in explaining the political changes of the twentieth century. Social scientists interested in the rise of the state, social capital theorists, political philosophers, and historians have all contributed studies suggesting we need to go back to the turn of the century to understand politics and reform in late-twentieth century America. Taking this as a jumping off point, the historians and political scientists who have contributed essays to *Progressivism and the New Democracy* collectively argue that the Progressive Era, rather than the New Deal, was the fundamental shaper of the twentieth-century American political order.

Progressivism and the New Democracy consists of seven original essays along with detailed commentaries by volume editors Sidney Milkis and Jerome Mileur. The volume grew out of a conference entitled "Progressivism: Then and Now," which was held at Brandeis University in 1996. While focused specifically on Progressive-Era politics, the topics covered in this collection reflect a wide range of interests, including economic reform, pragmatism and democracy, intergovernmental relations, Progressive moral thought, and others. In addition to looking specifically at the years between 1890 and 1920, the essays in this volume consider the period's long-term influence on American governance and society as well as speculating on the potential relevance of "progressive" politics in the future.

Essays by historians Morton Keller and Alonzo Hamby provide context for the volume. Drawing from his book *Regulating a New Economy*, Keller argues that Progressive Era social and economic regulation was not nearly as revolutionary as it was made out to be, and concludes that regulation depended at least as much on old economic ideas as new ones. In his article, Hamby projects Progressivism forward and explores the "evolutionary continuity" between Progressivism and later reforms, seeing a pattern of developing reform across the twentieth century (p. 61).

Virtually all of the contributors to this volume see Progressivism in its nationalist phase – viewing the early twentieth century not only as "a preeminent institution building era," but also as the triumph of centralizing national consciousness over regional, state, and local identi-

ties (p. 149). For example, even in intergovernmental relations, in which Progressivism played a relatively minor institutional role, political scientists Martha Derthick and John Dinan argue that Progressive reformers provided a crucial attitudinal change that led to the rise of federal power in the later years of the twentieth century. Teddy Roosevelt and Herbert Croly, not proprietary capitalist figures such as Louis Brandeis or local-oriented politicians like Hazen Pingree, are the heroes of *Progressivism and the New Democracy*. While some readers may disagree as to whom the true Progressives were, such an affirmative approach brings coherence. In contrast to the long-running tendency to focus on the particular and avoid broad syntheses in Progressive-Era history, seeing Progressivism as vaguely related "tissues," many of the articles in this volume are consciously definitional. They advance strong, focused interpretations of Progressivism as a conscious and coherent movement.

Eldon Eisenach, whose 1994 book *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* reasserted the claim that Progressivism could be viewed as a single political approach, expands his ideas to include "Progressive Internationalism" in his vision. Eisenach argues that Progressivism was a "church invisible" that combined social science with the remnants of an older evangelical theology to produce a post-Protestant, secularized, and state-oriented reform stream (p. 228). That the ministers, academics, and politicians who directed this reform stream were linked together in the broad goals of "democratization," "Christianization," and "Americanization" only confirms to Eisenach the essential national identity that underlay Progressivism (p. 233). Moreover, in Eisenach's view, the same evangelical and self-sacrificing spirit that drove Americans to reconstruct their society led them to believe that reforming the rest of the world was a way of fulfilling their mission at home. As Lyman Abbott, whom Eisenach quotes, stated, "We are likely to be a leader among the world powers. We could not help ourselves if we would; we would not help ourselves if we could" (p. 239).

In this view World War I is the logical culmination of Progressive beliefs, and Eisenach reorients our understanding of the war's place in America's reform history. World War I was not the means to extend reform at home, or a serendipitous event bringing new associationalism that would predominate in the 1920s, but the only fitting end point to Progressive aspirations. In Eisenach's words, "As preparedness turned to mobilization, and mobilization turned to war, it was almost as if four decades of cultural and political preparation by the Progressives had at last found and object worthy of its impulses" (p. 240). While Eisenach claims to have the most historical interpretation, the test of this view against the past is debatable. Conscription, which he sees as proof positive of the nationalist, voluntary spirit of Progressivism seems anything but voluntary. That troops came out of compulsion, not by choice (as in the Spanish American War) calls into question how motivated the nationalist soldiers were. Furthermore, Eisenach stresses the fact that "almost the entire apparatus of the draft functioned outside of the official government," as evidence of the public spirit of Progressivism and the war (p. 241). That a conscripting bureaucracy, not the army, was voluntary seems only to demonstrate the willingness of Americans to sacrifice others, not themselves, a very different spirit than the author cites. Nonetheless, Eisenach produces a compelling essay that runs counter to the flow of current writing on the Progressive Era, continues his excellent work in the field, and most clearly reflects the theme of this volume.

In "Standing at Armageddon," Wilson Carey McWilliams turns more subtly to similar themes. Although conceding that Progressivism was "more disposition than doctrine," McWilliams provides a remarkably coherent picture of the Progressive mindset (p. 103). Focusing on the social, economic, and cultural similarities among the vast majority of Progressive-Era activists, McWilliams argues that Progressives believed in the supremacy of moral conscience, rather than attachment to forms or a strict belief in doctrine, as the guide to right action. Such an argument proves a useful way to understand and define Progressive politicians, as Teddy Roosevelt's evolving "confession of faith" stands out remarkably well from William Howard Taft's rooted, legalistic formalism.[1] In McWilliams' view, the essence of Progressive ideology is not so much political economy or democratic doctrine, but a religious and cultural approach to public affairs that lived on well after 1920.

While the contributors to this volume agree on the central place of Progressive-Era institutions, they do not agree on the relative value of these institutions nor in the promise of Progressivism as a whole. Both Philip Ethington and Eileen McDonagh see fundamental flaws in the centralizing tendencies of nationalist Progressivism, but differ as to the legacy of these weak points. In "The Metropolis and Multicultural Ethics," Ethington starts by noting how ardently Progressives worked at "suppressing the voices of diversity within U.S. political discourse" (p. 196). He then considers the "brief and shining moment" when an alternative, pragmatist democracy that incorporated rather than suppressed racial, ethnic, and

social diversity was possible (p. 199). Focusing on social reformer Jane Addams and philosopher George Herbert Mead, Ethington identifies an intersubjective political approach based upon democratic dialogue, as well as democratic political structures that developed in Chicago around the turn of the century. Ethington believes that this approach was superior to later politics because it was both normative and multicultural. That is, it set up a political process that not only accommodated, but also demanded a multiplicity of voices and included those voices in a conversation that was inherently about moral and ethical issues. Extrapolating from Ethington's focus on the Chicago practitioners themselves, one could see an intersubjective democracy that was both national and local. The approach itself would likely be national and common, but solutions would be discrete and dependent upon the social content of the conversations.

Ethington labels the practitioners of intersubjective democracy "heroic," while also acknowledging their failure both to apply their ideas fully as well as to understand the potential danger in consensus-based solutions (p. 200). However, he leaves little doubt where American politics truly went astray when he contrasts the missed opportunity of intersubjective democracy with the interest-group liberalism that developed after the Progressive Era. As opposed to multicultural democracy, which produced an inherently moral solution, interest-group politics are fundamentally amoral. Because interest-group systems are based entirely upon the power of organized groups and political bargaining between these powerful structures, they literally have no place for moral or social dialogue. While some readers may look askance at Ethington's monocausal explanation, no one observing contemporary American politics (as I write we are in the midst of a series of political conventions few people are watching and even fewer care about) can argue against its barrenness and seeming lack of connection to social life. Furthermore, Ethington's essay is remarkable in that it locates the current crisis of politics not in the particular programs and politicians of the last half-century – but in the broader system of democracy, the political structure, itself – that developed out of the Progressive Era. The legacy of Progressivism is in the process not the product, and Ethington notes the early twentieth century may be best remembered for the "damage done to democracy by her closest friends" (p. 192).

Eileen McDonagh takes a schematic approach in evaluating the Progressive legacy for American politics and reaches an equally damning conclusion about Progressive democracy, but one that sees later developments in a far more favorable light than does Ethington. Using two axes to measure democratic politics (the institutional axis, which measures the extent and efficiency of state services, and the participatory axis, which tests how inclusive the political process was) McDonagh concludes that 1890-1920 was marked by high institutional democracy and state capacity but significantly diminished inclusiveness and popular participation. In essence, as the government did more, significant sectors of the country, women, African Americans, and new immigrants, were able to participate less.

This conclusion is not terribly new (measurements of voter turn-out, which McDonagh does not cite, would also support her claim) but in an interesting turn, McDonagh looks beyond the Progressive Era, to the 1960s, to understand Progressivism's legacy. McDonagh views Progressive reform as a two-stage process. The first, state formation, took place to a large extent between 1890 and 1920, while the second, inclusionary, stage was deferred until the 1960s. By noting that the same groups that suffered exclusion between 1890 and 1920 achieved the greatest gains in the Kennedy and Johnson years, McDonagh provides a reform-oriented, deradicalized, progressive appraisal of the 1960s and 1970s. In her view the rights revolutions of the period, particularly the Civil Rights and Woman's Rights movements are direct legacies of Progressivism and the 1960s should not be understood as a second reconstruction or the rise of the second wave of feminism, but as the second and final stage of Progressive reform. As McDonagh writes, "by juxtaposing them [the 1960s and 1970s] with the earlier era of reform, these decades may be seen as not merely a period of ferment and change, but as one that corrects and thereby complements the Progressive Era" (p. 176). Seen in conjunction with the other essays in this volume, this second wave can also be viewed as the triumph of the centralizing tendency in Progressive reform, as major segments of the population left out by 1920 were included in the central, national polity.

The focus on centralization and nationalism that is the strength of this volume also leads to some notable omissions. Individualist, post-Populist, and regionalist Progressive figures such as Louis Brandeis and Robert M. La Follette receive little mention because ultimately they do not fit into the nationalist picture presented in *Progressivism and the New Democracy*. On its own this criticism can be seen as the kind of "you-didn't-include-my-Progressive-hero" carping that has undermined and devalued the search for coherence in the Progressive Era.

These exclusions, however, open up a broader interpretive issue.

Missing, or at best fleetingly mentioned, in this volume is the economic backdrop precipitating Progressive reforms – the development and rationalization of a large-scale corporate economy and the social, political, and legal structures that surround such economies. While Alan Trachtenberg may be right that this corporate change is "a historical commonplace," these economic changes played a fundamental role in virtually all the politics of the first half of the twentieth century and accounted for the central political changes that are the focus of this volume.[2]

A number of the contributors note Progressive reformers' roles in destroying the late-nineteenth century political regime of localized political parties and courts. They particularly dislike what they see as the tendency of anti-party reforms to break down the connection between constituents and party leaders. However, in the most practical terms, few people today would voluntarily return to the old political system of nomination by caucuses, a non-professional civil service, irregular ballots, and the drunken brawls that characterized American politics in the nineteenth century.

More importantly, the localized, party-centered politics of the nineteenth century fit well the social and economic organization of the antebellum and immediate post war society but were entirely out of place in the emerging corporate society of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The same centralizing economic tendencies that produced the new national mentality and culture during the Progressive era also rendered the old localized and state-centered party structure ineffective. Progressive reformers were not destroying a healthy system that logically would have continued, but replacing an anachronistic one with something more suited to the particular economic and social conditions of their time.

Consequently, the post-Progressive rise of mass media-driven, interest-group politics that many of the scholars in this volume cast a critical eye toward are better understood as a political reflection of economic and social change than as a direct product of political reform (p. 194). It is difficult to argue with the assessment that politics after 1920 was characterized by the break up of the electorate into organized, identity-oriented groups. Nor would most scholars disagree with the view that these groups clashed for power in a struggle that lacked a broader social mission other than gaining power. However, just as the early-twentieth century economy now centered on a limited number of powerful, organized, large-scale, and national enterprises to the detriment of individual proprietors and with the result of turning customers into anonymous consumers, the political system also reorganized around a similar series of pre-organized economic, social, and identity pressure groups. Like the corporate organizations that pushed economic efficiency and profit without regard to social cost, the organized political pressure groups engaged in a non-normative struggle for power that fundamentally excluded questions of morality or consideration for a broader public good. Consequently, except inasmuch as the rise of the corporate economy involved political decisions, the changes producing the "negative and suspicious spirited" politics of the post-Progressive Era may well have been outside of politics itself (p. 212).

Placing political change in economic context helps us understand that the centralizers and nationalizers who are the focus of this volume were not the winners or "true" Progressives (a futile debate), but the men and women whose political vision fit most closely with the dominant economic structure of the twentieth century. In the end the Progressive Era saw the building of the state institutions that would dominate American governance in the twentieth century, but the decisive events leading to these institutions stood outside the control of the reformers themselves. Understanding the place of this economic legacy in the reform of America's turn-of-the-century political economy may prove the key to answering the question posed by Sidney Milkis at the start of the book: "Whether there are roads that were not traveled during the Progressive Era that might now be revisited beneficially as we search for solutions to the most pressing challenges of late twentieth-century America."

Notes

[1]. Theodore Roosevelt, "Address Before the National Convention of the Progressive Party," August 6, 1912, in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, National Edition, v. XVII, Herman Hagedorn, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 254.

[2]. Alan Trachtenberg, "Foreword," in James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1997), xii.

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