

## Why have historians found it so difficult to define Progressivism?

The Progressive era is a term generally given to the period starting in William McKinley's second term of administration, yet the sheer scope of policies and people who are described as Progressive has always made definitions of the movement difficult. Was the Progressive party which polled well in the 1912 presidential election but which was wiped out two years later the only true Progressive movement? If so, what is the best way to describe the decade or so before Theodore Roosevelt returned from his African safari? The near identical platforms which the three candidates in 1912 put to the electorate do certainly suggest that there was a much more general movement than the partisan nature of voting would suggest, and that in fifteen or so years preceding it a sense of common purpose had existed. Yet the sheer breadth of the policies which we could now describe as Progressive span such a great proportion of society - with the inevitable conflicts of interest and attitude this brought with it - that surely Progressivism must have meant different things to different people. Reform, as Thompson suggests, was an issue which gripped America at intervals of roughly every 20 years - it would be unsurprising if which such a diverse population as America had that all reforms could please everyone.

For some the key issue at hand was curbing the rapidly-growing power of Big Business, of which the railroads were the chief target. The realisation of how the process of industrialisation had changed the face of the nation in less than thirty years had provoked profound concern about the way American business operated. Where before the *laissez-faire* spirit had ruled supreme in the laws that were passed and in the decisions of the Supreme Court, there was a new threat to the 'American way' in the shape of the new conglomerate giants such as Standard Oil and US Steel. In the decade 1887-97 there had only been 86 new industrial combinations with a combined capital of \$1500m, but in the five years that followed this 2,653 independent companies had been swallowed up into combinations which amassed a capital of \$6,320m. United States Steel, which was created in 1901 by the manoeuvrings of investment bankers such as JP Morgan, alone capitalised \$1,370m.<sup>1</sup> Their size threatened cherished assumptions about the marketplace, in that with their huge reserves they could shut out smaller competitors by means of cut-throat rate wars - giant companies could afford the temporary losses rate wars brought about while their competitors rarely could. Their dominance in their sectors, be it refining, steel-production or electric goods also discouraged innovation and entrepreneurship in the shape of new competition. Many of the inventions which were registered at the new US Patent Office were from corporations who sat on them and had no intention of developing them commercially - much to the annoyance of engineers' organisations such as the ASME. Yet this attitude also made the combinations fundamentally uncompetitive and vulnerable to whatever competition could afford to remain - US Steel for instance was responsible for 61.6% of steel-production in 1901 but by 1920 this figure had fallen to just 39.9%. Standard Oil was responsible for 90% of oil refining in 1899, but at its dismantling in 1911 this had fallen to 80%.<sup>2</sup> The wording of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act responsible for the latter's dismemberment was therefore accurate in its fight against any contract or combination in restraint of trade, since this is plainly what the giant trusts had achieved. The second negative effect on the national economy created by trusts was the effect of their monopolies in that they could exploit suppliers, employees and customers who now had little choice in the rest of the marketplace. This level of control extended deep into the political system. As Woodrow Wilson said in 1912 'I do not expect to see monopoly restrain itself. If there are men in this country big enough to own the government of the United States, they are going to own it.'<sup>3</sup> Certainly the anti-trust prosecution of Morgan's Northern Securities

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson *Progressivism* p.8

<sup>2</sup> Thompson *Progressivism*

<sup>3</sup> Thompson *Progressivism*

Company in 1902 had shown that the combinations could control even judges. The combating of unfair grips on the levers of power by business-men and indeed party machinery became one of the key points of Progressive policy. Theodore Roosevelt said in his *New Nationalism* speech 'This means that our government, Nation or State, must be freed from the sinister influence or control of special interests.'<sup>4</sup> In fact his administration had already shown its determination to control the worst examples of monopoly-rule in various areas of national life. The fact that in sharp contrast with his predecessor he had used the apparently moribund Anti-Trust Act no fewer than 44 times goes some way to demonstrate this. The passing of the Hepburn Act of 1906 had made for compulsory regulation of railroad interests under the auspices of the Inter-State Commerce Commission, which was empowered to set maximum rates.

Yet Progressive ideas even as far as the fight against monopoly domination was concerned, did not form a united movement as some historians have imagined. Differences in approach certainly lay across parties. Theodore Roosevelt said in 1910 that 'It has become entirely clear that we must have government supervision of the capitalisation, not only of public-service corporations, including, particularly, railroads, but of all corporations doing interstate business.'<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Woodrow Wilson's *New Freedom* speech had called not just for regulation of Big Business but for the dismantling of trusts as restraints of trade. Were these both Progressive? It is not surprising that JP Morgan for example continued to support the Republicans despite seeing many of his conglomerates succumb to anti-trust actions - it remained preferable to the anti-industrial tone taken by the Democratic party and especially William J Bryan.

A second plank of Progressive thought was the rectifying of the worst social effects of industrialisation, in the shape of municipal reforms and slum-clearing. Without doubt reform of municipal infrastructure was well overdue given the crowded and unsanitary condition of many American cities at this time. By 1900, Baltimore and New Orleans had not installed a sewerage system; two-thirds of Chicago's streets remained mud tracks; Pittsburgh's impure water supply meant that it held the dubious distinction of having the highest cholera and typhoid rates of any city in the world.<sup>6</sup> If these facts alone did not account for the proliferation of slums, the high population density - rising to as many as 1,000 people per acre in New York City - meant that the situation had become such that Jacob Riis felt the need to comment that 'When a man is drowning, the thing to do is to pull him out; afterward there will be time for talking it over.'<sup>7</sup> Yet when he said that 'either wipe out the slum or it wipes out us' it was not mere altruism which provoked it - Progressivism was not a mechanism for pure social welfare and Roosevelt's square deal did 'not mean that I want a square deal for the man who remains poor because he has not got the energy to work for himself.' Instead, 'the only object has been to achieve in large measure equality of opportunity'<sup>8</sup> - an opportunity which could only come if one would 'regard the executive power as the steward of the public welfare' which 'must be freed from the sinister influence or control of special interests.' Jacob Riis agreed with Roosevelt's suggestion that 'we keep countless good men from being good citizens by the conditions of life with which we surround them', when he pointed out that 'Put it this way: you cannot let men live like pigs when you need their votes as freemen; it is not safe.'<sup>9</sup> In other words the conditions which men lived under affected their ability to participate properly in the political life of the country, and that the government must only intervene to remove the inequalities of life insofar as they adversely affected the judgements of free voters. The second aspect of municipal reform therefore was a

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<sup>4</sup> Boorstin *An American Primer* p.739

<sup>5</sup> Boorstin *An American Primer* p.740

<sup>6</sup> Thompson *Progressivism*, Link & McCormick *The Progressive Movement*

<sup>7</sup> Boorstin *An American Primer* p.667

<sup>8</sup> Boorstin *An American Primer* p.738

<sup>9</sup> Boorstin *An American Primer* p.669

greater concentration on the process of democracy itself and its maintenance. As Walter Weyl said in 1912 'It is the increasing wealth of America which makes democracy possible and solvent; for democracy, like civilisation, costs money.'<sup>10</sup> Robert La Follette's 'laboratory of democracy' in Wisconsin was therefore in the forefront of measures to renew and purify the democratic process - and much of what was implemented there found its way onto the statute book in many other parts of the country. Primary elections for instance, removed control from the party bosses in deciding the candidates for an election and instead placed it in the hands of party members. By 1916, well over half of the states had also adopted primaries for themselves. La Follette's innovation of direct election for US Senators as opposed to nomination by state legislatures even found its way into the Constitution in the form of the Seventeenth Amendment. However, these reforms and others such as the use of initiative, referendum & recall procedures, did not come about thanks merely to far-sighted politicians such as La Follette. Instead they came about to a great extent thanks to the growing distaste of corrupt party machines such as Tammany Hall in New York through the writings of the great muckraking journalists. Lincoln Steffens for example said in *The Shame of Cities* that 'Tammany is bad government; not inefficient, but dishonest; not a party but a delusion and a snare, hardly known by its party name - Democracy.'<sup>11</sup> Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* was largely responsible for the Meat Inspection Act and the Food & Drug Act of 1906 cleaning up the Chicago stockyards. Yet even here it is impossible to describe these reforms as a distinctive movement. As Steffens pointed out 'The reformers have no ward organisations, no machine at all; their appeal is solely to the intelligence of the voter and their power rests on that.' Those with Progressive ideas could not count on any sort of organisation in the same way that the Republican and Democrat parties could.

Many people have mentioned in relation to this reform of urban squalor that the influence of more 'scientific' measures was therefore a crucial aspect of the Progressive spirit. Pointing to towns such as Dayton, Ohio which in 1902 replaced its mayor and council with a board of commissioners supposedly more effective at managing town affairs than machine politicians, they argue that specialist knowledge in public affairs was a distinctive Progressive trend. It is true that specialists did increase in number and take leading roles in municipal reform. Steffens described Mayor Low of New York City as 'the ideal product of New York theory that municipal government is business not politics, and that as a businessman who would manage the city as he would a business corporation, would solve for us all our troubles.' Yet even he makes it clear that this was far from a general trend and pointed to the example of Chicago as a contrast. In fact, there was not even necessarily a general feeling that a more managerial style of government was preferable to the status quo; his complaint about Tammany as bad government was that it was 'not inefficient, but dishonest.' Instead, it can be argued that the rise of the engineering profession among others showed not a coherent re-evaluation of political emphasis but merely the effects of industrialisation. In an industrialised world, scientific advances in technology such as electrics could mean commercial success or failure, so in business skilled professionals were becoming more essential. With the growth in cities, public health experts and social scientists would inevitably become more in demand. With the increase in wealth there was a much greater market for specialised skills such as architecture, law and medicine - while also more people could afford the time and effort required for this much education. That these professions became more prominent can thus hardly be only ascribed to Progressivism as a concept.

This leaves us to ponder therefore who exactly were the Progressives and if they can therefore be described as a movement? Certainly many reformers came from the white middle-class urban professionals described above and whose qualifications in public health etc. gave them plenty of

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<sup>10</sup> Thompson *Progressivism*

<sup>11</sup> Boorstin *An American Primer* p.679

reason to see the merits of reform. Urban patricians such as those formerly known as mugwumps also encouraged reforming attempts and especially the tight regulation of business interests in the governmental sphere. Yet to describe the movement as being mainly concerned with middle-class values is almost meaningless in that Americans on both sides of the argument considered themselves middle-class. What is certain is that much of the urge for reform especially in the urban context came from specialist groups such as the Social Gospel movement of Protestant communities, and the primly bourgeois NAWSA calling for women's suffrage. Indeed many of the ideas expressed by Progressives were actually initiated by the agrarian Populists at the end of the nineteenth century such as direct election of senators and referendum and recall procedures. Where the Progressives succeeded lies in their ability to avoid the taint of radicalism which had clung to the Populists and to Bryan's Democratic Party. This is not to say that many Progressive ideas were not radical - Roosevelt's announcement that 'I believe in a graduated income tax on big fortunes...and a graduated inheritance tax on big fortunes.' and implementation of such in the Sixteenth Amendment must surely be seen as revolutionary in American politics - but the appearance of disorder was avoided.

It also asks whether a Progressive movement was a sustainable concept. On the face of it, there were some quite remarkable examples of co-operation among apparently antithetical groups. Social workers and machine politicians for example could co-operate on social legislation such as the setting up of a NY State Factory Investigation Commission after the Triangle fire 1911. Businessmen such as JP Morgan could often see the case for a less corrupt and more efficient municipal government. Charles McCarthy, head of Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau even asked 'If you were responsible for the business of government, would you not apply the common rules of efficiency, Mr Businessman? Do you not believe that it would pay well to make a heavy investment in hope, health, happiness and justice?'<sup>12</sup> On the other hand we must not assume that the different reforming emphases did not clash. Certainly municipal reform could remove democracy as much as renew it - Dayton's commissioner system denied voters the right to elect their council. Big Business such as the brewing industry actually benefited from federal regulation in that by overriding diverse state regulations they could more efficiently use their resources, while sweeping up smaller competitors unable to afford the extra costs of employees' welfare that regulation required. In another field the use of the Anti-Trust Act against any contract or combination in restraint of trade led directly to its use against striking labour organisations such as in the Pullman strike of 1894. It was noticeable also that voice of labour in the shape of Eugene Debs was denied the chance to express his account of this strike in *McClure's* magazine, though Grover Cleveland was able to do so. Though Theodore Roosevelt said 'Yes! The White House door, while I am here, shall swing open as easily for the labor man as for the capitalist, *and no easier*'<sup>13</sup> clearly the working-classes were not easily integrated into the Progressive structure. However, the fact which above all others denies the general spread of Progressivism is that it was contemporaneous with the imposition of the Jim Crow laws in the South. While Progressives strove to ensure greater democracy in the urban metropolises, Negroes in the South saw their rights denied. Progressivism was a very Northern preoccupation.

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<sup>12</sup> Thompson *Progressivism*

<sup>13</sup> Filler *The Muckrakers* p.88