

The American Progressive Vision

Henry Adams was the great-grandson of President John Adams. In his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, he measures himself against his extraordinary ancestors and finds himself wanting. Even though he himself was a writer, a congressman, and a noted historian, he felt inferior to his presidential and Patriot forebears. Henry Adams was one of the pioneers in the thought that informed the Progressive Movement.

Adams's most important work of history had been his study of medieval churches. Adams' work focused on the remarkable social impact of medieval Christianity, with its focus on the Virgin Mary.

At the Great Exhibition in Paris in 1900, a friend of Adams showed him an exhibition of massive coal powered electric dynamos. Obsessed with the giant machines, Adams returned to view them again and again while he was in Paris. He was fascinated with their size and potential power. He dwelt on a whole new technology that had sprung into being in just a few years' time — dynamos, telephones, radio waves, automobiles — invisible new forces of radiation and electric fields. He saw that the dynamo would shake Western civilization just as surely as the Virgin had changed it 800 years before. His historical training and expertise made him comfortable with the 12th century, but this was more than he could digest. Adams noted that the Virgin was the mystery that drove the medieval spiritual revolution, while the Dynamo and modern science were ultimately being shaped by forces no less mysterious. Nevertheless, Adams knew that, like the cult of the Virgin Mary that drove the social movements of the Middle Ages, the new world order of the 20th century would be shaped and molded, formed and guided, changed forever for the better, by science and technology. He didn't understand quite how, but he knew, as a Medieval pilgrim before the image of the Virgin Mother knew, that science and technology would deliver the 20th century out of the ills of the past.

Adams' insight forms the very basis of the Progressive movement. At the heart of Progressivism is the idea that the future will be shaped by scientific and technological progress — that science will provide the answers to all of the problems that plague modern society.

Origins of Progressivism

The Progressive movement in the United States was the result of higher education in the later 1800s and early 1900s. Pre-Civil War higher education had primarily taken place in small church sponsored schools. The objective of these centers of education was to build high moral character in each new generation of American social and political leaders. In the Post-War period, a great many Americans attended universities in Europe, and especially in Germany. The goal of German universities was to disseminate and expand knowledge. Professors were expected to research and publish and expand their expertise in a particular field of study. Their position was morally neutral, that is, it was nice if a professor had a high moral character, but personal morality wasn't a job requirement.

In the late 19th century new ideas were finding fertile ground in the rarified atmosphere of the European Universities. The theories of English naturalist Charles Darwin were much discussed and disseminated. The “scientific” social theories of Karl Marx were taught and expanded upon. A new method of teaching had also appeared in Germany by about the 1870s that would be of some importance. As more and more students began to attend university, the old methods of teaching—tutorials and seminars—gave way to lectures in which a large number of students attended a lecture and took notes. There was far less give and take, less discussion and debate in the lecture class. The classroom became less a discourse between students and professors and more a recitation of the views of the professor. Graduate students got seminars where they expounded on the theories that they had learned in undergraduate lectures. Admission to the universities in Europe was widened in the later 1800s to meet the need for well-trained civil servants and business people and for middle-class politicians in the age of socially expanded parliamentary governments. These *bourgeoise* students demanded that education be relevant to the needs of society.

Nearly 10,000 American students attended German universities in the decades after the Civil War. Many of them returned to the U.S. and took up teaching positions in the new land-grant universities that were popping into existence all over the nation. The focus of education moved from the old ivy-tower elite schools like Harvard and Princeton and Yale (Oh, My!), to new schools like the University of Wisconsin and the University of Chicago. American education was leaving the stuffy old elite centers of learning and moving to the wild, woolly, and, most important, agrarian and bourgeois mid-west. And, it was in the mid-western universities that something happened that would change the shape of American Progressivism and make it different from its European cousin. Progressivism ran smack-dab into Populism.

Now, the Progressivism that emerged in European universities in the late 1800s was an elitist movement. After all, as Henry Adams noted, science and technology is pretty complicated stuff. Not just anybody can understand how to build a dynamo, or how society should be manipulated by experts to bring about desirable change. That stuff is surely best left to experts. And whole areas of study grew up in late 19th century European universities to create experts who could mold and shape European society. Some of the new academic fields included:

- ★ Economics—Marx based— it focused on economic/social/governmental activities like taxation, social redistribution of wealth and the dynamics of government and the market.
- ★ Political science focused on the dynamics of leadership and politics. You could basically get a degree that made you a politician/civil servant, well-versed in the Progressive mindset.
- ★ Eugenics. Eugenics is the science of improvement of the human race by controlled selective breeding. If science could improve upon the ills of the past, then certainly one of the areas that science should lend a hand was in improving the human race. Progressive European scholars believed in Darwin’s theory of evolution to a fault. They were nationalists as well. German and British scientists began to argue that the “German race” needed to be cleaned up by selectively breeding racially pure “Nordic” peoples. These scientists also argued that “unfit” and “impure races” like Jews and Eastern Europeans should be eradicated from the gene pool.

- ★ Various kinds of academic programs grew up in European universities that contained the word “planning.” There was city planning, agrarian planning, economic planning, and other stuff. After all, science gave leaders the tools to plan better societies, better economies, better cities, and (as in the case of eugenics) better people to take part in those planned cities and societies.

European Progressives of the late 19th century supported the idea of “rule by experts.” They were rather hostile toward democracy for several reasons:

- ★ Europeans were used to monarchical governments. Monarchs often depended on experts, ministers as they were called, to create and control policies.
- ★ Many European thinkers didn’t really trust the common classes to make wise decisions. Thinkers argued that the common folk were not intelligent enough to support enlightened reform.
- ★ Many Europeans equated democratic institutions with the chaos of the French Revolution, which had begun with democratic and egalitarian intentions, but dissolved into chaos and terror.

These elitist European ideas were introduced in the U.S. in the early years of the 20th century. But, a lot of American Progressivism wasn’t really Progressivism at all. It was Populism! A great many of the reforms that are associated with the Progressive Era in the U.S. were actually inspired by the Populists. Remember that, a little while ago, I mentioned that the real cutting edge Universities of the end of the 19th century were in the Midwest? Places like Wisconsin and Chicago were centers for agrarian protest. Populists protested against the railroads and the corrupt relations between business and government. Well, a lot of the folks that attended these universities were from farming families. They had grown up listening to Grange and Populist rhetoric. They brought these ideas with them and these Populist ideas sort of got mixed up with the Progressive ideas that their professors had brought from Europe. The next generation of academics from these midwestern institutions really couldn’t tell whether they were Populists like their dads or Progressives like their professors. They wanted to create government that was efficient, that employed scientific expertise to cure society’s ills (the Progressive stuff); but they wanted to make government more democratic, more in touch with and the needs, and the will, of the people. In other words, they wanted to synthesize American Populism with European Progressivism. Problem is that the two ideologies aren’t always compatible.

Progressive Beliefs

Like their European academic forebears, American Progressives believed that science and technology in the hands of experts could mold and shape society for the better, but unlike the European academics, American Progressives initially wanted these experts to be dominated and guided by popular democratic institutions.

Like the European Progressives, American Progressives believed that the government should regulate big business. But, European Progressives wanted the government to take some ownership control over businesses (European national socialism). To many European Progressive thinkers, the best industry was essentially a government owned monopoly, guided and controlled by government experts who could protect workers and consumers.

Europeans viewed big business as essentially good only *if the government controlled it*. American Progressives, influenced by Populism, thought the government was a little too cozy with business already. Populists and American Progressives believed that big business should be regulated to protect small business, workers and consumers. The government should only step in:

- ★ to break up monopolies that stifled competition.
- ★ to regulate working conditions in industries to protect workers and consumers.
- ★ to protect the small farmer from the railroads that unfairly took too much of the farmer's profits to transport products to market.

American Progressives, influenced by Populist thought, believed that the best protection against business corruption was more democracy. They argued that the more involved the people were in government, the more honest government would be. Some early Progressive policies reflect this Populist belief in the power of more direct popular involvement in politics. Here are a couple of examples of this kind of "democratic Progressivism":

- ★ The *referendum* or *initiative* to allow the voters to place laws on the ballot for inclusion in elections. Similar laws were passed in a number of other states including North and South Dakota, California, Oregon, Montana, Maine and Michigan within the next few years. The referendum allowed the voters of a state to bypass corrupt state lawmakers and politicians. By 1924, 24 states had some form of the referendum in state and city politics.
- ★ In 1912, a Progressive Congress passed the 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which required the direct popular election of U.S. Senators. This measure took the election of Senators out of the hands of the state legislatures.

One area where many American Progressives agreed with their European mentors was on the subject of race. At American universities at the turn of the 20th century, budding young Progressive students read exposes of the great Robber Barons and attacks on big business by muckraking journalists. But, they also read tracts that drew on the latest anthropology, biology, psychology, sociology, eugenics, and medical science to show the superiority of the "white Nordic race," as opposed to blacks or Asians, especially, but also such "inferior European races" as Italians and Eastern Europeans.

Popular Progressive books included Charles Carroll's *The Negro a Beast* (1900) and Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), which discussed the concept of "race suicide," the theory that inferior races were out-breeding their betters. President Theodore Roosevelt was one of many Progressives captivated by this notion: He opposed voting rights for African-American men on the grounds that the black race was "still in its adolescence."

Such thinking fit perfectly within the Progressive worldview. Remember that relationship between science and the social good. Well, the "science" of the turn of the 20th century absolutely accepted that Darwin's theory of "survival of the fittest" applied to races of humans as well as other species. Why shouldn't it; after all, science said that humans be just another species. The new sciences of Anthropology and Sociology defined some humans as civilized (the Europeans) and some as primitive (everybody else). We have already looked at Theodore Roosevelt's assumptions about African Americans; how about a couple more examples:

- ★ Carter Glass of Virginia was a Progressive U.S. senator and one of the major architects of the Federal Reserve Act of 1913. He was also an enthusiastic supporter of Virginia's effort to disfranchise black voters. "Discrimination! Why that is exactly what we propose," he told a journalist. He proposed to remove every black voter from the Virginia voter rolls.
- ★ Eugene V. Debs, the leader of the American Socialist Party, declared during his 1912 campaign for the presidency, "We have nothing special to offer the Negro."
- ★ The Progressive founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger, advocated birth control and sterilization in order to limit the reproduction of such "unfit" ethnicities as blacks and the Irish in the U.S.

Populism in the Progressive movement began to fade in the first decade of the 20th century. By 1910 a new breed of American Progressives had joined their European teachers in the belief that democratic political institutions were fundamentally flawed. Like their European colleagues, American Progressives began to argue that advances in the social sciences had enabled the creation of a more efficient kind of government that would cure the ills of American society far better than the often slow and difficult democratic systems of the 18th century.

These new Progressives argued that the Constitution created roadblocks to efficient government that hindered rapid change. The Progressives advocated a new kind of government that they called the "administrative state." In essence, the administrative state would shift power from institutions created by the Constitution to a network of unelected experts who could effect change for the good of the people without having to actually having to go through the often messy and disappointing process of legislation by the peoples' representatives in Congress.

The new insistence on the administrative state by American Progressives by the 20th century indicates that they had more or less walked away from the clumsy democracy of the Populists and embraced the European Progressive ideal. European and American Progressives extolled the virtues of an administrative state, whose experts would rule in the name of the people, for the good of the people, but without actually having to deal with the people and unwieldy popular democratic government.

American Progressives argued that the Constitution was a rusty old relic of the 18th century, completely unsuited for the new day of science and technology. Progressives like historian Charles Beard, argued that it was had been created to stifle change. They wanted a government that was, like Henry Adams' dynamo. powerful, dynamic constantly changing to meet the ceaseless demands of progress. As Woodrow Wilson put it in 1912:

Some citizens of this country have never got beyond the Declaration of Independence. All that progressives ask or desire is permission— in an era when "development," "evolution," is the scientific word—to interpret the Constitution according to Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition that a nation is a living thing and not a machine.

Progressive Reforms

Now I would like to take a look at early Progressive activities and reforms.

Muckrakers — This term was applied to a group of writers who used books, pamphlets and newspaper articles to stir up popular opinion about reform by exposing the abuses of big business. Many of these writers used magazines as a medium for their works. Important Muckrakers include:

Frank Norris — wrote *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903), in which he attacked Southern Pacific Railroad and Chicago grain market.

Ida Tarbell — wrote *History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), condemned monopolistic practices in the big oil companies.

Upton Sinclair — wrote *The Jungle* (1906) about the horrible conditions in Chicago meatpacking plants.

Direct Government — Many critics of American legislative practices charged that privileged interests ran government. There was a movement toward procedures that would bring issues to the people. Many of these reforms grew out of Populism.

- ✓ *The initiative* — first adopted by South Dakota (1898). Permits a percentage of voters to initiate or propose legislation.
- ✓ *The referendum* — also South Dakota (1898) allows a certain percentage of voters to call for the repeal of a law.
- ✓ *The recall* — first used in Los Angeles in 1903.
- ✓ *The direct primary* — Wisconsin 1903 — preliminary elections to allow voters to nominate candidates directly without the use of a convention. This was to keep political party machines from putting in their men.
- ✓ *The Australian Ballot* — until 1890 voting had not been done in secret. Ballots were cast in plain view.
- ✓ *The 17th Amendment* — provided for the direct election of senators.
- ✓ *Women's Suffrage* — the Progressives also endorsed the vote for women. By 1900 four states allowed women to vote in state elections (Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Colorado). As public support increased, all of the states west of the Mississippi had women's suffrage by 1914. In 1920, the 19th Amendment gave women the vote.

Administrative State Reform — Really at odds with the direct government ideas were Progressives' movement toward administrative reforms that tended to alienate policies within a bureaucracy of experts rather than the more democratic institutions of legislative government. Some of these “administrative state” reforms included:

- ★ The passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, made possible the creation of the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA is responsible for regulating and supervising the safety of foods, tobacco products, dietary supplements, prescription and non-prescription medication, vaccines, and a growing plethora of other products.
- ★ The Interstate Commerce Commission was created in 1887 as a the result of widespread and longstanding anti-railroad agitation, by mostly Western farmers. The ICC came to regulate practically all aspects of interstate transportation.
- ★ The Federal Trade Commission was begun by Woodrow Wilson as a federal agency that policed big business to prevent monopolies, trusts and other “unfair business practices.”

Social Reform and the Progressives

Progressives engaged in several areas of social reform, some of which we would find less than praiseworthy today.

Prohibition — Prohibition refers to the period during which the manufacture, sale and transport of alcohol was prohibited. Throughout the Progressive Era, it remained one of the main reform causes at the local, state and national level. It achieved national success with the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1919. Prohibition began as a religious movement backed by evangelical churches, but Woodrow Wilson would incorporate it into his

Progressive legislation of World War I. Like other Progressive reforms, prohibition in its final form reflects a sort of “experts know best” attitude toward social engineering on a nation wide scale. Its success may be judged by the fact that it is the only Amendment that was ever been repealed.

Housing — At the non-government level, reformers like Jane Addams undertook to provide acceptable housing for urban poor and especially immigrants. They created housing “communities,” the first of which was founded by Addams, Hull House, in Chicago, Illinois. These settlement houses as they were called, provided not only a home, but a community to their residents. At its height, Hull House was visited each week by around 2000 people. Its facilities included a night school for adults, kindergarten classes, clubs for older children, a public kitchen, an art gallery, a coffeehouse, a gym, a girls' club, a bathhouse, a book bindery, a music school, a drama group, and a library. Hull house was also a sort of working training lab for social workers.

Birth Control — Initially as a part of the Progressive focus on eugenics, and later as a Progressive attempt to control population growth within the laboring class, a number of Progressives began to advocate and organize birth control movements.

- ❖ Margaret Sanger and other Progressives founded the American Birth Control League in 1921 to promote birth control among those who were unfit to parent children because of their race or ethnicity, their economic circumstances, or their general fitness. Sanger, who wrote the League's Principles, noted that:

Everywhere we see poverty and large families going hand in hand. Those least fit to carry on the race are increasing most rapidly. People who cannot support their own offspring are encouraged by Church and State to produce large families. Many of the children thus begotten are diseased or feeble-minded; many become criminals. The burden of supporting these unwanted types has to be borne by the healthy elements of the nation. Funds that should be used to raise the standard of our civilization are diverted to the maintenance of those who should never have been born.

- ❖ Margaret Sanger, along with W.E.B. Dubois, organized the so-called “Negro Project,” that both opened birth control clinics in Harlem, and promoted birth control among black women in the South. Sanger enlisted the services of black ministers to promote contraception, sterilization, and abortion. She noted as late as 1940, that birth control and even “voluntary sterilization” would contribute toward a solution to what she called the “Negro Problem.” Sanger wrote, “We do not want the word to get out that we want to exterminate the Negro population, and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it occurs to any of their more rebellious members.”

The Social Gospel Movement — One of the few places where the Church and Progressivism actually came together was in the Social Gospel Movement. Led by a number of Protestant ministers, these Christian social reformers called upon Christians “to minister to the needs of human beings in this society and the world.” The movement's goals were enshrined in the Social Creed, first passed by the American Methodists in 1907. The creed called for Christians to work to help their fellow men, especially those whose lives had been adversely affected by industrial conditions, inflation, and social problems like liquor and gambling. The Social Gospel movement in the U.S. is one of those “Progressive movements” that were heavily influenced by Populism, and its creed contains a great deal of the more democratic strain of Populist thought, including the statement that “Since all men are endowed by God with certain inalienable rights, we believe that no individual should be denied these rights because of race, creed, culture, national origin or social class.”

The Socialist Challenge

The socialist movement in the US had begun just after the Civil War, but socialism attracted little attention until they began to offer alternative programs to those of the progressives. The Socialist Labor Party, established 1876, and the Social Democratic Party (1897) united in 1901 to form the Socialist Party of America. The leader of the SPA was Eugene V. Debs. The party set as its ultimate goal the establishment of public ownership of all of the means of production and distribution according to the principles of the German economic philosopher Karl Marx. The party advocated the following as its short-term goals:

- Reduction of workday hours
- Unemployment insurance
- Nationalization of railroads, phone and telegraph, and power
- Nationwide adoption of referendum, initiative and recall

The first large share of the vote received by the Socialist Party of America was when Debs ran for president in 1912. He received 897,000 votes. After 1920, the party began to decline. The Socialists were never able to capture as much support for their agenda as the Progressives who developed similar goals in many cases anyway. The story of American liberalism in the 20th century is really a Populist/Progressive, rather than a Socialist, narrative.

From the 1890s on, American Progressives have created and expanded the American administrative state in line with their beliefs. Over the next few lectures we will examine American Progressivism and its policies under three rather different presidents and look at its political development and its legacy in American history. Over the next few days we'll look at the domestic policies of three different Progressive presidents, Republicans Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, and Democrat Woodrow Wilson.