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Historiography: The Progressive Era of the United States

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Abstract

This article discusses what is meant by progressivism. The paper focuses on various viewpoints of progressivism in the United States and presents some of the salient features of the Progressive Era of the United States.

Who is a Progressive Person?

As a noun, the term *progressive* means “a person who is progressive or who favors progress or reform, especially in political matters” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/progressive?s=t>). As an adjective, it generally means “1. favoring or advocating progress, change, improvement, or reform, as opposed to wishing to

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Selvi Bunce

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303

maintain things as they are, especially in political matters: a progressive mayor. 2. making progress toward better conditions; employing or advocating more enlightened or liberal ideas, new or experimental methods, etc.” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/progressive?s=t>) The term *progressive* is widely used and is very popular in political gatherings and alliances in many developing nations. For example, the political alliance led by the Indian National Congress in India is named **United Progressive Alliance**. At present in these developing nations, term *progressive* has socialist/left political connotations. A study of progressivism in the United States will help us to understand the trends of progressivism, and the similarities and differences as practiced and assumed in other nations.

Progressivism in USA – Critical Views

The Progressive Era is not by any means one of the few under-studied eras of American history. On the contrary, the Progressive Era has been looked at multiple times from multiple viewpoints. Joseph Huthmacher, in his essay “Urban Liberalism and the Act of Reform”, describes progressivism as a reform movement oriented to benefit urban workers. George Mowry, in his excerpt “Progressivism: Middle Class Disillusionment” maintains that the middle class was the cause of the Progressive Era. Though their views are different their writing is similar in that both authors use a limited number of statistics and rely heavily on inferences about class culture and belief. Magnanimously different from both these authors, Gabriel Kolko holds that not the majority, but big business actually ran the Progressive Era for their personal benefit. In his book *The Triumph of Conservatism* Kolko repeatedly states that it was big business that caused change in America during this time, and he backs this up with many examples. Yet, as always whenever history is involved, no interpretation is perfect.

Who were the Progressives?

The question of who the progressives were was one directly open to much scrutiny. According to George Mowry’s excerpt “Progressivism: Middle Class Disillusionment” the progressives were young to middle-aged, economically comfortable, men and women of old American heritage and British descent. The majority were college-educated professionals (254,

255). These middle class progressives wished to assimilate the urban working poor and bring them up from their degradation of being an immigrant lower class into the “moral crowd” of the middle class (264). The middle class progressives were afraid of being over powered by the tycoon class of big business, while at the same time they were confident and comfortable in their situation. Mowry states “Eager for the wealth and the power that flowed from the new collectivism, the progressive was at once nostalgic, envious, fearful, and yet confident about the future” (263). This seems to be a fairly accurate interpretation of the middle class of the time, but it cannot be said for certain, especially because Mowry does not cite any legislation or organization that sprouted from these confused feelings of the middle class. Mowry makes inferences like these multiple times throughout his paper, and each time, they are supported with little to no evidence.

Not a Political Party – Middle Class Progressivism

The Progressives of the middle class were not a people’s party. They rejected the labor unions of the lower class workers and worshipped the individual mind, all the while condemning the immigrant lower class (Mowry 257, 259). So, how did this “worship of the unfettered individual, the strong pride of self, the strain of ambition, and the almost compulsive desire for power” (257) affect society, politics, and the economy? First, it must be understood that when the word individual is used, the middle class progressives did not mean the individual mind of the common working man. They meant their own kind of individual; the respectable, educated middle class man who could rule the people by, as Theodore Roosevelt stated, “giving justice from above” (257). The middle class progressives wanted a strong federal government, as long as they could control it (257).

Moral Superiority

Mowry eloquently states and describes these feelings of middle class moral superiority; he even offers quotes that clearly express the preference of a government of the educated individual to a government for and by the people. However, what Mowry fails to do is impart what legislation, if any, arose from these middle class “feelings” of superiority, agrarian nostalgia, and anti-unionism (259). For example, Mowry states that in order to justify their own wealth the middle class drew a line between good and bad wealth. They wanted laws to be

created that would enable man “to get only the amount they earned” (260). Mowry then goes on to describe how this wanting of “man to be the master of his economy” led to things such as the Square Deal, the New Deal, and the Fair Deal (261). Mowry does not describe how the middle class, a minority population, managed to influence politics and how these “Deals” affected society and the economy, and if it actually helped the middle class progressives outside of mental safety only.

Mowry’s Illustration of Middle Class Progressivism

Mowry does a more than adequate job of illustrating what the middle class progressives thought, why they felt this way, and how this affected the general climate of politics at the time. He fails to exhibit the precise effects of these feelings on politics, society, and the economy. He also seldom talks about specific legislation, either from the federal or state level that was caused by these middle class progressives. Mowry and Huthmacher are similar in that both give the reader a fairly clear idea of what the progressives wanted in general, but neglect to mention enough specific details about progressive legislation to support their thesis, leaving them only with inferences about total class attitude. This is precisely what makes Mowry and Huthmacher similar, and less persuasive.

Lower Class Urban Immigrants as the Main Source of Progressivism

Extremely contrary to Mowry in almost every way except in that which is stated above, Joseph Huthmacher, in his article, “Urban Liberalism and the Act of Reform” explains how lower-class urban immigrants were the main source and cause of the progressive reform movement. Huthmacher lumps together the many groups of immigrants working in industrial urban areas at the time and assumes they all had similar beliefs in order to mobilize progressivism, because “Not until the reform spirit had seized a large number of urbanites could there be hope of achieving meaningful political, economic, and social adjustments” (8).

Huthmacher states the reason it is more logical that the urban lower classes were actually at the heart of progressivism, and not the middle class, was because the urban workers had experience in what exactly they were fighting for through reform. They experienced the poor

conditions of factories and knew what they wanted, as opposed to the middle class who relied on muckrakers for the gory details of the daily struggles of urban life (11).

Urban Working Class as the Base

This experience also made the urban working progressives more practical, and therefore allowed them more success (Huthmacher 11). The urbanites generally had no care for the individualism the middle class strove for. Instead, they were used to the bosses of the political machines of the big cities, and were much more prepared to serve a more paternalistic, centralized government, as long as it in turn met their needs (12). Due to their position in society these urban progressives had very little in common with the famed stories of the men that went from rags to riches, and had not an inkling of care as to what the middle class were experiencing as a shift in status (12). Due to these factors the reform advocated by the urban progressives was that of a more immediate need, such as workday conditions. They were not particularly drawn to the “trust-busting” reforms of Wilson, and they didn’t care about the importance or growth of small businesses. The size of the business did not matter to them as long as it “provided job security, adequate wages, and working conditions” (13). This led to the urban progressives preferring “Government stabilization of the economy and regulation of big business as it might well prove more successful in guaranteeing these conditions than would government antitrust drives” (13).

Legislative Efforts

Though still very generalized, Huthmacher does provide more examples than Mowry in legislative effects caused by the urban working-class progressives, even though most of Huthmacher’s evidence only comes from two states, New York and Massachusetts. Huthmacher also brings up multiple points that he fails to explain thoroughly. For example, Huthmacher states that “the urban lower class provided an active, numerically strong, and politically necessary force for reform” (11). Later, he goes on to state that “the lower class can share no part of the ‘credit’ for reforms like Prohibition” (14). How was it possible for Prohibition to pass if the urban lower class held such power in sheer numbers of votes? Huthmacher states that the

middle-class reformers supported the reform for the working class because the middle class were scared of a growing lower class that could potentially over power the middle class if something did not change (13). This leaves the question of whether or not urban reform would have been possible without the middle class. Huthmacher clearly asserts that reform could not have been done without the urban working class due to their sheer numbers and voting power; however he does not explain whether or not the urbanites actually initiated reform, or just voted for it. If the answer is the latter, then the question of who really initiated and caused the progressive era is still up for grabs.

Redefining Progressivism from the Perspective of Conservatism

In his book *The Triumph of Conservatism* Gabriel Kolko completely redefines Progressivism, in fact he labels it as conservatism. Kolko describes the commonly referred to “Progressive” Era as conservative, because the reform movements of the time were not for the general welfare, as was thought, but instead was advocated and motivated by powerful business men of big businesses in an attempt to lower competition and preserve basic social and economic relations (20, 21). The great business men of this time period did not manipulate the politicians to get their way, but instead worked right beside them. Kolko explains how “political and key business leaders with the same set of social values—ultimately class values—was hardly accidental” since “the business and political elites knew each other, went to the same schools, belonged to the same clubs, married into the same families, and shared the same values” (31). This made it possible for the business men and the politicians to work together for the good of the big business.

Role of Big Business Progressives – Progressive Era

According to Kolko the big business progressives sought economic stability and regulation on a federal level to counteract more radical and random regulation by the state. He states, “National progressivism, then, becomes the defense of business against the democratic ferment that was nascent in the states” (23). Kolko also states, “it was business control over politics (and by business I mean major economic interests) rather than political regulation of the economy that is the significant phenomenon of the Progressive Era” (21). Additionally, he says that the main goal of business-directed progressivism was political capitalism or “the utilization

of political outlets to attain conditions of stability, predictability, and security—to attain rationalization—in the economy” (21).

The numerous reforms that happened during the Progressive Era that, to the public eye, seemed to be anti-big business were actually just ways of eliminating competition. “Competition was unacceptable to many key businesses and financial interests” (22) and therefore regulation and rationalization of the market, and even such reforms as the Food and Drug Act helped to eliminate the competition that could not keep up with higher standards. Overall, as Kolko states, Progressivism was not the triumph of small business over trusts, but the victory of big business achieving rationalization of the economy only federal government could supply (30).

Beneficial Relationships between Politicians and Businessmen

Kolko is inventive in that he looks at the Progressive Era as just that, an era. He views it in one piece, in order to see all the interlocking parts as a whole, and not as separate episodes (26, 27). One very important thing that makes Kolko more persuasive than both Mowry and Huthmacher is that he fills in holes where both the others are gaping. For example, Kolko states that through the close relations of politicians and businessmen they had a similar idea of the common good, and therefore the reforms created and motivated by businessmen were successfully voted through by Congress (28).

Perception of Government Regulations of the Economy

Kolko supports his theory by explaining how the general population of America assumed that political capitalism and progressivism was for the good of the public and “government regulation of the economy was a positive social good” (32). Kolko thoroughly explains the general goals of big businessmen in political capitalism, while also naming various examples as the fruits of their efforts. Though he tends to ignore social reform, Kolko does acknowledge the labor movements and welfare reforms enacted in the states (31).

Progressive Era

The Progressive Era is one of numerous definitions, and it contains multiple factors when considering what the major force was behind its cause. Mowry exceeds in explaining his position

clearly and providing many details about the middle class, however much of his evidence as to why the middle class were the main progressive is composed of inferences, which therefore makes his entire argument less persuasive. Huthmacher has more evidence than Mowry, but it is still very limited. He too supports his position well and acknowledges the existence of middle class progressives, but while acknowledging them it is almost as if he temporarily forgets about the urban working class and leaves them behind. Although he is quite repetitive, Kolko is the most persuasive out of these three due to his presentation of superior evidence and well rounded argument on political capitalism and progressivism. No matter what the viewpoint, the Progressive Era will always be an integral part of American history.

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