https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781411000089 Published online by Cambridge University Press

# What the Progressives Had in Common

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When Professor Benjamin Parke De Witt of New York University sat down to write the first history of the progressive movement in 1915, he promised "to give form and definiteness to a movement which is, in the minds of many, confused and chaotic."[1] Apparently it was a fool's errand, because confusion and chaos continued to plague historians of early twentieth-century reform long after Professor De Witt laid his pen to rest. The maddening variety of reform and reformers in the early twentieth century has perpetually confounded historians' efforts to identify what, if anything, the progressives had in common. Back in the 1950s, Richard Hofstadter charitably allowed that progressives were "of two minds on many issues," whereas Arthur Link argued that "the progressive movement never really existed" because it pursued so many "contradictory objectives."[2] In the 1960s, Robert Wiebe concluded that the progressives, if they constituted a movement at all, showed "little regard for consistency." In the 1970s, Peter Filene wrote an "obituary" for progressivism by reasserting Link's claim that the movement had "never existed" because it was so divided and diffuse.[3] In the 1980s, Daniel Rodgers tried to recast the "ideologically fluid" progressive movement as a pastiche of vaguely related rhetorical styles. By the 1990s, so many competing characterizations of progressivism had emerged that Alan Dawley wondered if "they merely cancel each other out."[4] In 2002, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore declared emphatically that "historians *cannot* agree" on progressivism. In 2010, Walter Nugent admitted that "the movement's core theme has been hard to pin down" because

[1]Benjamin Parke De Witt, *The Progressive Movement: A Non-Partisan, Comprehensive Discussion of Current Tendencies in American Politics* (1915; Seattle, 1968), viii.
[2]Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), 134; Arthur S. Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920s?" *American Historical Review* 64 (June 1959): 836.
[3]Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967), 144; Peter G. Filene, "An Obituary for 'The Progressive Movement,'" *American Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1970): 20.
[4]Daniel Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10 (Dec. 1982): 114; Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 128.

progressivism had "many concerns" and "included a wide range of persons and groups."[5]

Most historians now seem comfortable with the idea that progressives were "varied and contradictory" and that early twentieth-century reform encompassed a broad array of "progressives and progressivisms." Michael McGerr likens the movement to a cacophonous jazz band composed of individual melodists improvising their own tunes.[6] However, dwelling on progressive diversity in the customary manner of historians has the effect, even when unintended, of imputing a fundamental lack of unity and coherence to one of the most important reform movements in American political history. To be sure, *dis*-unity is not hard to find among progressives: historians have long been aware of sharp debates within reform ranks over contentious issues such as prohibition, labor, immigration, trusts, imperialism, and war. Since the 1960s, with the rise of social history, the historiographical emphasis in studies of progressivism has shifted from political disputes to demographic diversity, drawing attention to the disparate race, class, ethnic, and gender identities of various reformers and reform organizations.[7] Either way, whether by focusing on contradictory progressive programs or diverse progressive identities, historians run the risk of magnifying the fragmentary fringes of the movement while obscuring its common core.

The irony here is that Americans who called themselves "progressives" a century ago must have shared *something* in common or else they would not have so eagerly pinned this name as a unifying badge of honor on themselves and on their movement. Theodore Roosevelt, when he broke with the Republican Party in 1912, naturally called his new political party the Progressive Party—as did Robert La Follette a dozen years later when he finally followed suit and gave up on the Republicans, too. These two men despised each other, but they chose the same name for their parties for the same reason: the word "progressive" had intuitive appeal for millions of Americans regardless of identity or program, not to mention party or region. The challenge for

[5]Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, "Introduction: Responding to the Challenges of the Progressive Era," in *Who Were the Progressives?*, ed. Gilmore (Boston, 2002), 18; Walter Nugent, *Progressivism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, 2010), 3–4.

[6]Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Arlington Heights, IL, 1983), 2; Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s–1920s* (New York, 2007); Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York, 2003), 73.

[7]See, for example, Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye, eds., *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lexington, KY, 1991); and William Deverell and Tom Sitton, eds., *California Progressivism Revisited* (Berkeley, 1994).



https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781411000089 Published online by Cambridge University Press

historians, then, is to recapture this sense of a coherent, recognizable, transcendent, historically specific understanding of progressivism, a sense shared by Roosevelt, La Follette, and their millions of followers, however disparate their origins, characteristics, and predilections. How can we rediscover the cohesive clarity that the word "progressive" held for those who hoisted high this proud banner a century ago?

Most fundamentally, what the progressives had in common was an ideology of positive statism defined in opposition to the dominant late nineteenth-century conservative ideology of negative statism. Progressives, if nothing else, were not conservatives, who in the late nineteenth century forged social Darwinist philosophy, substantive due process jurisprudence, and laissez-faire economics into a "steel chain of ideas," in Eric Goldman's phrase, that shackled any step toward a more activist state. Conservatives never tired of preaching the "Gilded Age gospels," as David Nasaw calls the set of hackneyed, simplistic postulates about social, economic, and biological "inevitability" that were routinely deployed to discredit any form of state activism on behalf of workers, consumers, immigrants, small business, the environment, or the poor.[8] Conservatives hypocritically welcomed state activism on behalf of corporations in the form of tariffs, land grants, subsidies, anti-labor injunctions, government contracts, legal privileges, and other special favors. However, state activism on behalf of any other interest group constituted an "absurd effort to make the world over," as the prominent conservative William Graham Sumner put it.[9] Such efforts were bound to bring disaster because, in the conservative schema, man must never meddle with the forces of God, nature, or the marketplace—except to help corporations, apparently.

Progressives just saw things differently. They rejected the negative statism and political abnegation of conservatives; they felt instead what John Whiteclay Chambers calls "the interventionist impulse," meaning the urge to wield state power on behalf of the common good, not just corporations.[10] It began with private voluntary groups and philanthropic associations, often

[8]Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous With Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York, 1956), 66–81; David Nasaw, "Gilded Age Gospels" in *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 123–48. See also Robert Green McCloskey, *American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise, 1865–1910* (Cambridge, MA, 1951).

[9]William Graham Sumner, "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over," *Forum* 17 (Mar. 1894): 92–102.

[10]John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890–1920*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ, 2000), 275–80.



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church-based; but some conservatives also participated in such groups, and in any case progressives soon realized that the problems of the new urban industrial order could not be solved by charity alone. Few women progressives, for example, were satisfied with voluntarism, or not for long: most of them wanted the right to vote.[11] Progressives of both sexes were drawn to European-style social democracy, and even toward socialism, but few could contemplate such a drastic restructuring of American capitalism.[12] Instead, progressives shared a generalized commitment to meliorist political action—scientifically designed, morally justified, and democratically controlled—yet without unanimously supporting any particular reform. "No hard-and-fast rule can be laid down as to the way in which such work must be done," said Theodore Roosevelt of the reform persuasion that held progressives together, "but most certainly every man, whatever his position, should strive to do it in some way and to some degree."[13] In Walter Lippmann's pithy summation, progressives were simply those Americans who rejected the "drift" of a rudderless, complacent nation under conservative helmsmanship and who wished to establish "mastery" over the nation's errant course by seizing the wheel themselves and steering it toward a better future. "We can no longer treat life as something that has trickled down to us," Lippmann wrote. "We have to deal with it deliberately, . . . alter its tools, . . . [and] put intention where custom has reigned."[14]

The progressive economist Richard Ely, speaking for his reform allies, once composed a statist manifesto for their movement: "We regard the state as an educational and ethical agency whose positive aid is an indispensable condition of human progress." He dismissed obsolete notions of laissez-faire as "unsafe in politics and unsound in morals."[15] Negative statism seemed archaic and downright dangerous to progressives because they did not share the conservative faith in progress as something that would naturally flow from the free play of clashing interests, unfettered by government. Progressives understood that not all interests were equally equipped to do battle in the marketplace. Instead, progressives would use state power to assist vulnerable members of society—workers, farmers, consumers, women, children, small business—in

[11]Ibid., 150–55; Flanagan, *America Reformed*, 131–33; Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 620–47.
[12]Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 33–111; Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 133–138.
[13]Theodore Roosevelt, "Reform Through Social Work," *McClure's*, Mar. 1901, 454.
[14]Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose Our Current Unrest* (New York, 1914), 267.
[15]Richard T. Ely, *Ground Under Our Feet: An Autobiography* (New York, 1938), 136.



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their struggles with powerful interests for the sake of more just and equitable outcomes at a lower human cost. Future progress would require statist intervention in market relations of all kinds, progressives believed, because industrial capitalism had created vast new disparities of wealth and power that rendered absurd the old Victorian notion that all private individuals could look after their own interests and should be left to their own devices without government interference. Progressives believed that the time had come for government power to expand in order to catch up with the increased power of private aggregations of wealth.[16]

Sometimes historians express bafflement that "fear of the state lurked behind everything progressives did, even as they expanded the sphere of state intervention."[17] However, this seeming paradox made perfect sense to progressives: they were dissatisfied with state performance under the corrupt regime of parties and bosses, which they hoped to overthrow at the same time that they loaded the state with new responsibilities. Jackson Lears has diagnosed the progressives as obsessed with "national purification" and "moral regeneration," but progressives fought political corruption not only for moral reasons, nor merely for efficiency's sake, but also because they wished to demand so much more of the state and therefore could not tolerate private misuse of public institutions.[18] The inadequacy of American government at all levels under the crooked rule of parties and bosses only made progressives more determined to reform the process of policy formulation as well as the policies themselves. Progressives like Simon Patten envisioned "a state whose power will be superior to that of any combination of selfish individuals and whose duties will be commensurate with human wants," free of corruption but also free to engage in a much larger sphere of activity than had previously been contemplated in the American experience. It would be what progressive theorists such as Mary Parker Follett and Edward Alsworth Ross termed "collective will" or "social will."[19]

[16]Eldon Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence, KS, 1994), 138–86. See also Thomas G. West, "Progressivism and the Transformation of American Government" in *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science: Transforming the American Regime*, eds. John A. Marini and Ken Masugi (Lanham, MD, 2005), 13–34.

[17]Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 170. See also Eisenach, *Lost Promise of Progressivism*, 150–52.

[18]Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York, 2009), 200, 310. The classic statement of the anticorruptionist animus behind progressivism remains Richard L. McCormick, "The Discovery that Business Corrupts Politics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism," *American Historical Review* 86 (Apr. 1981): 247–74.

[19]Simon N. Patten, "The Effect of the Consumption of Wealth on the Economic Welfare of Society," in *Science Economic Discussion* (New York, 1886), 135; Mary P. Follett, *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government* (New York, 1918), 48–49; Edward Alsworth Ross, *Social Control: A Survey of the Foundations of Order* (New York, 1901), 99.



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At the same time, however, progressives tempered their state-centered modernizing impulses with a kind of romantic nostalgia for the nation's small-town past, which they retrospectively conceptualized as a bygone era of caring, homogeneous, face-to-face communities. The progressive Frederic Howe, for example, lamented the passing of his "comfortable little world," meaning the small town of Meadsville, Pennsylvania, where he recalled growing up bathed in the warmth of communalized concern for individual welfare.[20] Such places had not disappeared from the American landscape, of course, but progressives like Howe complained that big modern cities failed to reproduce the most cherished characteristics of the small-town community. Foremost among these failures was the city's lack of neighborliness, meaning the absence of any generally felt obligation to care for fellow community members. This is what Jane Addams meant when she complained that "the social organism has broken down through large districts of our great cities." As someone who grew up in a small town herself, Addams could scarcely bear the thought that modern city-dwellers lived "without knowledge of each other, without fellowship, without local tradition or public spirit," and she feared for the urban future because of this perceived loss of mutuality and common stewardship.[21] Apparently, the "neighborliness" of ethnic immigrant communities within large cities did not meet the progressive standard; positive statism would have to serve as a modern substitute for the mutual custodianship that progressives associated with traditional society. The alternative, in their minds, was atomistic individualism—"simple barbarism" to Lyman Abbott or "society dissolved" to John Dewey—which progressives could never accept.[22] They preferred to reinfuse an older communal ethos into the new urban-industrial order by enhancing the state's responsibility for individual welfare. Participating in benevolent organizations of civil society could serve the same end, of course, but few progressives believed that such activities were sufficient any more. State activism would have to supplement private voluntarism in order to advance progress.

For another early statement in favor of state activism, see Henry Carter Adams, "Relation of the State to Industrial Action," *Publications of the American Economic Association* 1 (Jan. 1887): 7–85. On the weakness of the preprogressive American state, see Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (New York, 1982).

[20]Frederic C. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer* (1925; Chicago, 1967), 10; Roy Lubove, "Frederick C. Howe and the Quest for Community in America," *The Historian* 39 (Feb. 1977): 270–91.

[21]Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York, 1910), 368. See also Jean B. Quandt, *From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1970).

[22]Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (New York, 1915), 440; John Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy" in *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898* (Carbondale, IL, 1967–72), 1:231.



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Calling oneself "progressive," then, was primarily a way to signal one's rejection of negative statism and to affirm one's faith in the human ability to create a better world collectively on purpose. This is why progressives called themselves progressives in the first place—literally because they believed in *progress*, a better future that could be reached only by conscious shared effort, not by reliance on natural forces, abstract constitutional principles, or the market's invisible hand. "Progress is not automatic," Jane Addams insisted. "The world grows better because people wish that it should and take the right steps to make it better."[23] The state was the common vehicle for people to make the world better through concerted striving, and it was even possible, as Herbert Croly insisted, to use Hamiltonian means toward Jeffersonian ends.[24] This bedrock conviction that positive statism was necessary to remedy the ills of modern life, and that continued negative statism invited disaster, was what the progressives had in common. Thus, anyone who blamed the poor for being poor, anyone who preached passivity in the face of wrenching social change, anyone who clung to the notion that "whatever is, is right," anyone who categorically condemned state intervention into markets, strikes, or slums, was not a progressive. Anyone who understood the social causes of individual poverty, anyone with faith in society's capacity to choose and shape its own destiny, anyone eager to enhance state power to match the newly emergent aggregations of private economic power, was *ipso facto* a progressive.

Robert La Follette of Wisconsin met this broadest possible definition of progressiveness; indeed, he practically set the standard. Governor La Follette's battle with the railroads underscored the fundamental progressive commitment to statist solutions such as rate regulation and *ad valorem* taxation, reinforced by anti-lobbying and corrupt-practices laws to protect the state itself from malign influences. For other social problems arising from industrialism, La Follette proposed still more statist solutions such as workmen's compensation, employers' liability laws, income taxes, labor regulations, conservation, and regulatory commissions.[25] Russell Nye's classic study of midwestern progressivism found that its "most distinctive tendency . . . was its

[23]Jane Addams, "Henry Demarest Lloyd: His Passion for the Better Social Order," *The Commons* 9 (Jan. 1904): 20. Addams was paraphrasing (without attribution) John Morley, the British liberal politician and philosopher, who had written: "Progress is not automatic. . . . The world only grows better . . . because people wish that it should, and take the right steps to make it better." John Morley, *On Compromise* (London, 1886), 210.

[24]Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York, 1909); David W. Levy, *Herbert Croly of The New Republic: The Life and Thought of an American Progressive* (Princeton, 1985).

[25]Robert S. Maxwell, *La Follette and the Rise of the Progressives in Wisconsin* (1956; New York, 1973), 40–55, 74–86; David P. Thelen, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (Boston,

shift away from pure individualism toward social control" and "its belief that the functions of government should be extended to meet the growing needs of the people," with La Follette's governorship as the prime example. His pursuit of the "Wisconsin Idea" showed his faith in expert research, or what La Follette called "plodding investigation," to steer progress toward desirable ends through the application of scientific methods to public problems.[26] At the same time, however, La Follette's reliance on the direct primary and direct democracy, as well as his constant hortatory appeals to the people, proved that he, like most other progressives, trusted democracy to set the course for the ship of state. Even the most sophisticated state apparatus was, in his view, "simply the executive or administrative branch of the people's will."[27]

Later in his career, when La Follette served in the United States Senate, his opposition to American intervention in World War I is often misinterpreted as "isolationism" or as pandering to the German American vote. However, La Follette was convinced that wealthy bankers and arms merchants were trying to force the United States into war for profit; his progressive instincts practically compelled him to resist that effort by denying the abuse of state power and the needless sacrifice of American lives for any such selfish purpose. As La Follette told Congress, "This war now devastating Europe so ruthlessly is not a war of humanity, but a war of commercialism," and he suspected that President Wilson was responding to "the cry of the Shylocks calling for their pound of flesh." For La Follette, preserving American neutrality meant preserving state power for service to the public interest, while denying its use to selfish private interests. He opposed American involvement in World War I because he refused to allow wealthy private interests to dictate the nation's foreign policy or to hijack state power in this way. Moreover, if any American must be drafted to serve in this war, La Follette insisted that it should be "the sons of manufacturers of ammunition and war supplies, and all stockholders making profits from such trade." Pro-war profiteers "should freely offer their sons on the altar of their country" or "go

1976), 32–51; Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 120–38.

[26]Russell B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870–1958* (New York, 1959), 185, 187; Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI, 1913), 759.

[27]Jørn Brøndal, "The Quest for a New Political Order: Robert M. La Follette and the Genesis of the Direct Primary in Wisconsin, 1891–1904" (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1990); Brett Flehinger, "'Public Interest': Robert M. La Follette and the Economics of Democratic Progressivism" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1997); La Follette quoted in Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, 189.



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themselves," before they dared call on state power to compel anyone else to make the ultimate sacrifice.[28]

So the next time you hear the familiar refrain that the progressive movement had no common core belief, no essential unity as a movement, think of La Follette and his unabashedly statist approach to political, economic, and even diplomatic problems. Think of Florence Kelley, Jane Addams, and any number of progressive sisters in settlement houses and elsewhere whose reform careers began with voluntarism but evolved toward suffragism, formal politics, and government.[29] Or think of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the two most iconic progressives of all: Even when they disagreed sharply over antitrust policy in 1912, they agreed on the need for *some* sort of statist solution to the problem of monopoly. Roosevelt wanted regulated monopoly and Wilson wanted regulated competition—but rather than exaggerate the familiar differences between the New Nationalism and the New Freedom, we can see these programs as essentially similar in their shared rejection of negative statism and their shared reliance on positive statism in the form of increased government regulation, of whatever variant, to solve the mutually recognized problem of declining competition in business.[30] These are clear examples of how faith in the democratically directed power of government to shape America's destiny was what the progressives, for all their differences, had in common.

[28]Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, 239–62; La Follette in *Congressional Record*, 65th Cong., 1st sess. (Apr. 5, 1917), 371–72.
[291]See, for example, Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work* (New Haven, 1995).
[30]James Chace, *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft and Debs—The Election that Changed the Country* (New York, 2004), 191–97.



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