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Forum: Populists and Progressives, Capitalism and Democracy

The next four essays are revised versions of talks given at a roundtable at the 2012 Organization of American Historians conference in Milwaukee. The event, thankfully, did not provide the drama of the Progressive Party rally in the same city a century before, when Theodore Roosevelt revealed theatrically to the crowd that he had been shot on his way to the hall and then—resisting repeated entreaties that he go to the hospital already—he delivered an impassioned, one-hour defense of his New Nationalist vision for progressive reform. The Bull Moose version of Roosevelt recurs in the essays in this forum, as he and Woodrow Wilson (far more than Taft or Debs) reappeared in portrait and caricature throughout the 2012 campaign.

Asked to consider the place of populism and progressivism in present-day politics, the four participants in this forum responded with New History-style reflections on the uses of past politics in the present and the usefulness of populist and progressive concerns, attitudes, and ideas for contemporary agendas. Daniel T. Rodgers took the occasion to update for present circumstances his 1982 essay, "In Search of Progressivism," in this editor's view the founding essay in the modern historiography of progressivism. Nowadays, Rodgers explains, he would stress progressive misgivings over capitalism more than thirty years ago, especially Progressive Era efforts to create institutions and spheres of politics and life capable of standing apart from, judging, and delimiting capitalism's tendency to commodify everything.

In a variant of the old question, "What's the Matter with Kansas?," Catherine McNicol Stock turns her attention to foreign affairs and the military. She notes that the Great Plains that supported the People's Party and the Bryanite Democrats had for much of its history leaned heavily toward the anti-militarist, isolationist strains in U.S. politics. Stock offers surprising suggestions as to how and why that changed, along with hints that present-day Kansas may

not have cast aside its customary outlook as much as it seems on the surface.

Charles Postel and Robert D. Johnston address the historical background of the odd competition over the Progressive Era's meaning and legacy that broke out, at times loudly, amid the campaign of 2012. Both point to the long evolution of conservative intellectual traditions and analyses that most academic scholars of progressivism had overlooked or failed to take seriously enough. In Postel's view, this makes the current era a neo-progressive moment both because Americans find themselves refighting the battles of the Progressive Era and because all sides assume that interpretations of history are crucial to understanding and shaping the present. From the same starting point, Johnston goes in a different direction. He scrutinizes the versions of the Progressive Era that have come to prevail on the Right and Left and finds that each holds up as history in its own way, more or less. Also in a neo-populist or neo-progressive fashion, Johnston argues that understanding of and deliberation with those who perceive the past and experience the present differently from oneself are essential for a democratic resolution of the country's quarrels.

Since self-conscious relevance was a hallmark of the progressive approach to history, the editor allowed the essayists, if they so desired, to retain the atmosphere of 2012. This helps explain these essays' vitality, even though from the perspective of 2014, the tumult of 2012 seems long ago.

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