https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If They Repeal the Progressive Era, Should We Care?

Charles Postel, San Francisco State University

These are extraordinary times for the study of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States. Commentators tell us that we are passing through a Second Gilded Age. Capitalism has produced levels of economic inequality unmatched since the first Gilded Age, while old battles from a century ago are being fought anew. Federal regulation of industry and finance, progressive taxation, corporate political influence, and union rights are once again flashpoints of a sharply polarized politics. During his reelection campaign, the president took to channeling Theodore Roosevelt as a progressive champion, while his conservative opposition make Presidents Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson special targets of vilification as they labor to repeal the reforms of the Progressive Era.

These developments pose a number of interrelated and complex questions for historians. I will cut them down to four sets of problems and make them perhaps too simple in the process. The first pertains to the current historical mindedness concerning the Progressive Era. The second has to do with economic thought and its political role. The third has to do with the nature of political theater. And lastly, there are questions about what all of this means for the tasks of the historian.

Historical Mindedness

One of the most striking elements of today's political debates is their historical mindedness. Within these debates, the Progressive Era has become a common point of reference for political combatants on all sides. For Barack Obama, Theodore Roosevelt became the man of the hour, the "Republican son of wealth" who stood up for economic fair play. George W. Bush likened himself to the Roosevelt of San Juan Hill. But Obama channeled Roosevelt the social reformer and lion tamer of special interests. In December 2011, President Obama traveled to Osawatomie, Kansas, to pay homage

to Roosevelt and his New Nationalism speech of 1910. Obama mentioned Teddy Roosevelt by name eight times in his remarks. He also made a passing reference to Franklin Roosevelt, but Obama emphasized Theodore and the Progressive Era as his points of reference.[1] This may make political sense. A Pew Research Center study in 2011 reported that the word *progressive* had the most positive public reception of any term in American politics.[2] It was also Obama's response to his adversaries.

As suggested by its name, the Tea Party movement is all about history lessons. In April 2010, *Time* magazine listed Glenn Beck, the TV and radio personality who helped launch the Tea Party, among the 100 most influential people in the world. Former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin explained it like this:

> [Glenn Beck] has become America's professor of common sense. . .. Consider his desire to teach Americans about the history of the progressive movement: he's doing to *progressive* what Ronald Reagan did to *liberal*—explaining that it's a damaged brand.[3]

In Beck's history lessons, the progressive movement introduced into American life pernicious and unconstitutional notions of social justice. Progressive ideas represent what he calls "the cancer" of government tyranny. It is the same cancer, Beck explains, that led to National Socialism in Germany and to the Obama socialism that is now destroying America. Beck, in turn, learned his history from Cleon Skousen. Like Beck, Skousen was a Mormon, and he was a self-described theologian and constitutional scholar. During the Cold War, Skousen, a close ally of Robert Welch and the John Birch Society, perched on the far edge of the hard Right. He wrote religious tracts as well as best-selling political books with scintillating titles such as *The Naked Communist*, which sold over a million copies in the early 1960s.[4] Skousen shared Welch's conspiratorial vision that the Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy administrations had been doing the work of global communism. The

[1]"Remarks by the President on the Economy in Osawatomie, Kansas, Dec. 6, 2011, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/06/remarks-president-economy-osawatomie-kansas (accessed Jan. 7, 2014).
[2]"Little Change in Public's Response to 'Capitalism,' 'Socialism,'" Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Dec. 28, 2011, www.people-press.org/2011/12/28/little-change-in-publics-response-to-capitalism-socialism/ (accessed Jan. 7, 2014).
[3]Sarah Palin, "Glenn Beck" in "The 2010 *Time* 100," *Time*, April 29, 2010.
[4]W. Cleon Skousen, *The Naked Communist* (Salt Lake City, 1962).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

disloyalty of the presidents was self-evident in their acceptance of New Deal reforms and their appeasement of the Civil Rights movement. When Welch's views came under criticism from William Buckley Jr. and other conservative intellectuals around the journal *National Review*, Skousen wrote a vigorous defense of the Birch Society.[5]

Skousen saw New Deal reforms, especially the Social Security Act and the legalization of trade unions, as measures to sovietize America. But the root of the evil did not lie in the New Deal but in the expansion of the regulatory state at the beginning of the twentieth century. To restore America to constitutional bedrock required repealing the Progressive Era. For Skousen the key targets for repeal included the Sixteenth Amendment, which provided for the progressive income tax; the Federal Reserve Act, which provided for a more flexible currency and banking regulation; and the Seventeenth Amendment, which provided for the direct election of senators. In regard to this last measure, Skousen explained that it was in the early twentieth century that socialists and progressives introduced the confusing notion of the United States as a democracy rather than a republic. (As the John Birch Society slogan puts it: "The United States is a Republic, not a Democracy.") Constitutional first principles, in Skousen's narrative, required a restoration of the republic lost in the deluge of Progressive Era reform.[6]

In the 1960s, Skousen's name was well known in conservative households, with his books at the top of the conservative reading lists. Although he may have fallen beneath the mainstream of the political radar, networks of Skousen supporters continued to popularize his work. Following his death in 2006, Glenn Beck, Fox News, and right-wing radio have again made Skousen a household name in conservative America. And Tea Party Republicans such as Governor Rick Perry of Texas have adopted the Skousen ideological system. They write political treatises and give speeches calling for the repeal of the Federal Reserve Act and the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Amendments.[7] And they compete to see which of

[5]W. Cleon Skousen, *The Communist Attack on the John Birch Society* (Salt Lake City, 1963).
[6]W. Cleon Skousen, "12th Principle: Advantages of a Republic" in Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap: 28 Great Ideas That Changed the World*, foreword by Glenn Beck (1981; Franklin, TN, 2009), 113–18.
[7]Rick Perry, "The Progressive Era: Remaking the Constitution with the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Amendments" in Perry, *Fed Up! Our Fight to Save America from Washington* (New York, 2010), 39.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

them can be more hostile to financial regulation, limits on corporate cash in politics, public education, and the other measures that Teddy Roosevelt spoke about at Osawatomie as essential for what he called "real democracy."

What is so striking about the Tea Party critique of Progressive Era reform is its timing. Over the last thirty years, conservatives have already won much of the war over the shape of the American political economy. They have undercut progressive taxation, shifting the tax burden from the wealthiest to the rest and reducing federal revenues to the lowest level in sixty years. They have gutted financial regulation, opening the doors to the most severe banking crisis since the Great Depression. They have tied the trade union movement in legal knots, putting the wages and pensions of working-class Americans in free fall. These policies have produced levels of income inequality not seen for nearly a century. But income inequality is about winners and losers; and some of the winners, and some of those who imagine themselves as potential winners, would like to see an acceleration of these same policies. To paraphrase Sarah Palin, Reagan discredited the New Deal, and now is the time to finish the job by dismantling the Progressive Era.

In 2001, Linda Gordon gave a SHGAPE distinguished historian address that asked, "If the Progressives Were Advising Us Today, Should We Listen?" Gordon answered her question with a cautious, half-full assessment. But the substance of her talk, which focused on progressivism's white exclusiveness, reliance on un-elected experts, and other undemocratic features, might have also led to a cautious half-empty.[8] A dozen years later, her question only grows more pertinent. We have a dozen more years of a deepening crisis of inequality and renewal of corporate power. And the progressives of a century past have emerged as the heroes and villains of todays' historic mindedness. The present moment poses a related, yet different kind of question: "If they repeal the Progressive Era, should we care?" This question leads to a second major problem of concern in this essay: the renewed centrality of economic thought in political life, and the hardening of ideas about the political economy.

Economic Thought

Historians have paid a good deal of attention to the economic thought of populist and progressive reformers during the 1890s

[8]Linda Gordon, "If the Progressives Were Advising Us Today, Should We Listen?" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (Apr. 2002): 109–21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and first decades of the twentieth century. Scholars have employed a wide variety of methods—from soil science to mass psychology—to analyze the popular fevers surrounding greenbacks; silver and soft money; and the passions around taxes and the regulation of railroads, banks, and other monopolies. But most historians still miss just how fevered the conservative opponents of reform were in *their* ideological commitments.

In the late nineteenth century, corporate and academic conservatives refashioned the ideas of equal rights liberalism into a "corporate liberalism" that systematically privileged the interests of corporate persons over the equal rights claims made by human beings.[9] In this process of refashioning, conservative economic thought hardened and fastened on three interrelated propositions: so-called laissez-faire, the freedom of contract, and hard money. This holy trinity of economic ideas corresponded to the explosion of wealth and enhanced political power of the corporate elite. It also stirred deep passions. Take gold, for example. Conservatives in the 1890s were known as gold bugs because they were gold fetishists. They convinced themselves that this particular metal represented a moral, naturally ordered, and superior civilization. When William McKinley ran against William Jennings Bryan in the presidential campaign of 1896, McKinley's campaign manager Mark Hanna decried the "communist spirit" in Byran's support for silver coinage. For the journalist William Allen White, Bryan's soft money campaign was "an incarnation of demagogy, the apotheosis of riot, destruction, and carnage." The economist Francis A. Walker, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, warned that paper money threatened "public morality," weakening the power of husbands over their wives and children, and unleashing "manners at once gross and effeminate."[10]

This is how the better people talked and how learned professors wrote, about any number of subjects. But the gold standard was a particularly highly charged ideological commitment that had everything to do with the shape of the political economy; the crisis of inequality; and the violence, brutality, and polarized politics of the 1890s. Conservative economic thought bent under the pressures

[9]For this usage of "corporate liberalism," see R. Jeffrey Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1890–1920* (Berkeley, 1982).
[10]R. Hal Williams, *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896* (Lawrence, KS, 2010), 91, 128; Michael O'Malley, "Free Silver and the Constitution of Man," *Common-Place* 6 (Apr. 2006), www.common-place.org; Francis A. Walker, *Money in Its Relation to Trade and Industry* (New York, 1889), 243.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of new, twentieth-century political realities, especially in the aftermath of the financial panic of 1907. The election of 1912 represented a rejection of the conservative economic position, as three-quarters of the voters cast their ballots for Wilson, Roosevelt, or Debs. From time to time, nonetheless, the old dogmas would reassert themselves in their old, militant form: with the du Pont brothers and the Liberty League during the Great Depression; and again with Robert Taft, Joseph McCarthy, Robert Welch, and Barry Goldwater during the early Cold War.

The early 2000s saw a renewed hardening of conservative economic thinking. Late nineteenth-century corporate liberalism revived in a militant form, and with it the same holy trinity of laissez-faire, the freedom of contract, and hard money. From the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, to the Wisconsin law limiting public sector union rights, new political realities reflect new orthodoxies mirroring the most ideological of the laissez-faire and freedom of contract arguments of the 1880s and '90s. Not just metaphorically, today's conservatives are also the new gold bugs. Glenn Beck sells gold coins on his television and radio broadcasts. America's salvation, he explains, requires a combination of "God, Guns, and Gold." Republican presidential candidates say much the same, promising voters that they will deliver on hard money and the gold standard.[11] As recently as 1990, Milton Friedman, perhaps the most influential conservative economist of the late twentieth century, aptly described the right-wing ideologues who clung to the notion of returning the United States to the gold standard as "monetary monomaniacs." Today, conservatives have tossed Milton Friedman overboard in favor of Gilded Age specie worship.[12]

There is, however, one striking difference with the past. In the first Gilded Age the two main political parties represented fractured coalitions of interest, geography, and ideology. Both parties had their conservative and reform or progressive wings. There were silver Republicans just as there were gold Democrats. Both parties had their factional divisions over labor rights, tariffs, income taxes, civil-service reform, and the other contested issues of the political economy. Today's Republican Party may have its intraparty shades of difference over the role that the United States should play in the

[11]Ralph Benko, "The Gold Standard: A Litmus Test for GOP Candidates," *Forbes*, July 5, 2011.
[12]Milton Friedman, "Bimetallism Revisited," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 4 (Fall 1990): 85–104.

world and over certain matters regarding social policy. Perhaps such disagreements will at some point take their toll. But at this historical moment Republicans have forged a remarkable cohesion on the basis of economic ideas. This is reflected in the stark reality that nearly every Republican elected official or candidate on the national scene embraces a set of highly ideological positions from the Laffer Curve (the belief that cutting taxes raises tax revenue) and the Norquist Pledge to never, ever, raise tax rates to hard money and restrictions on union rights and collective bargaining. At the same time they have forged a militant and nearly uniform opposition regarding the regulation of the health-care industry, the financial sector, and carbon emissions. For this historical moment, the Republican Party has approached a level of ideological coherence that has few precedents in the history of major parties in this country.

The same cannot be said of the Democratic Party. Many Democrats accept much of the conservative framework and the Wall Street payola that comes with it. Yet, many Democrats also reflexively cling to what is left of the twentieth-century social contract. This includes notions of both neo-Keynesian and monetarist responses to high unemployment. The economist Paul Krugman keeps reiterating in his *New York Times* column how half-hearted these notions are. But perhaps the present transatlantic context, with hard money serving as the religion of the German and other European managerial classes, gives a different meaning to the ideological half-heartedness of Obama and the Democrats. The emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement shows another type of ideological commitment. True, the presence of Ron Paul libertarians within the Occupy movement speaks to a blurring of lines. But the slogan "We Are the 99%" has proven sharper in both accuracy and political effect than its critics have allowed. The Occupy critique of inequality and corporate malfeasance carry much of the same ideological charge as was carried by the populist and progressive critiques of the same phenomena.

We are living through a highly ideological moment. This reveals nothing about the future; today's ideological lines may rapidly dissolve into something else. But today's extraordinary ideological commitments pose a number of questions about the historic significance of such commitments, and about how and why such commitments take hold. Understanding the precise mechanisms by which economic ideas shape (or fail to shape) political economy remains one of the outstanding problems of American political development. Anyone looking at either the first Gilded Age or the last thirty years

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of American experience cannot fail to recognize the importance of developing better answers to this historical problem.

Role of Theater

Commentators, including within the historical profession, have discussed the Tea Party and Occupy movements as theater lacking the substance of social movements of the past. Similarly, they have critiqued Obama's Osawatomie speech as performance rather than policy. Whereas Theodore Roosevelt "rarely missed an opportunity to bust on the trusts," as Eric Rauchway sharply noted, "Obama is most likely to be remembered as a thin William Howard Taft."[13] Nonetheless, both then and now, even poor theater might reflect tectonic shifts in political thought and political economy. The depression of the 1890s brought terrible suffering for millions of unemployed workers and a deepening crisis of inequality. These issues came to a political boil in the spring of 1894 with a march of the unemployed on Washington. Jacob Coxey, a wealthy businessman who owned expensive racehorses, led the march. His leadership involved elaborate political theater along the lines of a traveling circus. The press treated the event as farce. Yet Coxey's march caught the popular imagination, and for generations influenced the political calculus of unemployment in times of industrial distress. Similarly, William Jennings Bryan, as any "middle-of-the-road" Populist understood at the time, was all histrionics. Even so, Bryan's nomination at the 1896 Democratic convention marked a shift in party structure, ideology, and economic policy.

True, Obama may be more Taft than Roosevelt. But Roosevelt also played his part in history as theater. Obama made gentlemen's agreements with the insurance companies over health-care reform and with the bankers over finance reform. In a similar spirit, Roosevelt knew how to give the monopolists a verbal boxing while, as Gabriel Kolko tried to document, also seeking gentlemen's agreements with U.S. Steel and the House of Morgan.[14] Roosevelt traveled to Osawatomie to give his New Nationalism speech because John Brown performed there in what Roosevelt called "the theatre upon which the first act of the second of our great

[13]Eric Rauchway, "TR? Obama's More Like Taft," *Politico*, Dec. 7, 2011, www.politico.com.

[14]Gabriel Kolko, "Roosevelt and Big Business," in Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916* (New York, 1963), 113–38.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

national life dramas was played."[15] The Tea Party, Occupy, and the Obama presidency may all be more show than substance. But perhaps this raises in a vivid way the need for a better understanding of the substantive role that theater has played in shaping the history of American thought and political economy.

Tasks of Historical Scholarship

Finally, the historical moment places a number of challenges before the historical profession. Here, Gordon Wood's 2011 review of Jill Lepore's book on the Tea Party is instructive. Lepore wrote her account of the Tea Party and its uses and abuses of the history of the American Revolution to illustrate the contested and political nature of historical understanding.[16] Wood, the best-known contemporary historian of the American Revolution, recognizes how weird Tea Party views can be. For example, although Tea Partiers worship the Federalist authors of the Constitution, he notes that their rhetoric more closely resembles the document's Anti-Federalist critics. Yet, Wood writes, the Tea Party is giving expression, not to history, but to the popular memory of the common people. Critical history, he explains, presumably like that which Lepore practices at Harvard, is "all about the head and no heart," whereas collective or popular memory "fosters identity, and continuity, and in the end makes possible history itself." In that regard, Wood takes Lepore to task for "academic contempt for the attempts of ordinary citizens to find some immediate and emotional meaning in the Revolution."[17]

This is a strange critique. What Lepore tends to disparage as the Tea Party's unschooled, and at times comical, notions of history, Wood defends as Tea Party "popular memory." But what both Wood and Lepore fail to confront is that these are memories and notions of history sustained by a formidable network of conservative opinion and scholarship. It is history elaborated by the well-paid scholars housed at the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and a battery of other conservative foundations and institutes. It is history disseminated on the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and other outlets of elite opinion, and turned into educational workshops and

[15]Theodore Roosevelt, "New Nationalism," Aug. 31, 1910, teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/new-nationalism-speech (accessed Jan. 7, 2014).
[16]Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton, 2010).
[17]Gordon S. Wood, "No Thanks for the Memories," *New York Review of Books,* Jan. 13, 2011.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

legislative seminars by FreedomWorks, Americans for Prosperity, and other corporate lobbies. It is history popularized by Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, and the other "professors of common sense" broadcasting on Fox News and right-wing talk radio. Moreover, it is history that finds its academic nourishment in the economics departments, law schools, and other fixtures of America's most prestigious universities. As Wood points out, the views of Tea Partiers about returning to the "original constitution" are intellectually sustained by legal scholars associated with the Federalist Society and include four justices on the U.S. Supreme Court. This conservative network of opinion and scholarship has put the meanings of the past in the middle of public debate. The historical mindedness surrounding these intense contemporary arguments suggests that this is exactly a moment in which scholars might engage in public debate, if only to set the record straight. As Tea Party organizations consolidate their influence on the U.S. House of Representatives and a dozen state governments in the name of restoring the country to founding principles, might it not be judicious for historians to clarify as best they might the nature and provenance of the meanings Tea Partiers have attached to those principles? As the conservative movement chips away at Progressive Era reforms, do historians have a role to play in excavating the significance of those reforms?

Such an intervention, however, carries implications about the tasks of the historian. The first Gilded Age produced a Progressive school of historical scholarship. Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles and Mary Beard, and a generation of Progressive historians were dedicated to economic justice, antimonopoly, industrial democracy, and other problems rooted in political economy. These scholars were also afflicted with all of the weaknesses that Linda Gordon pointed to in her 2001 address. Most critically, the Progressive historians mainly accepted the white nationalist frameworks articulated by their historical subjects. One of the key points they missed was the role of white power as a central organizing principle of the political economy. Given that failing, it is a small wonder that their project went out of favor among post-Civil Rights-era historians.

In the twenty-first century, in the midst of the second Gilded Age, there are signs within the historical profession of a growing interest in what might be understood as neo-progressive scholarship. Historians of the United States have always been interested in capitalism, business, and the institutional problems of American political development. But the rivulets of research on these interrelated

topics are combining into a broader current, as some of the most cutting edge and influential historical work in recent years has focused on questions of capitalism and political economy. This is taking place amid a growing recognition among historians that too much of this terrain has been surrendered to economics departments and business and law schools, where historical context and lived experience have too often been given short shrift. The present historical mindedness and crisis of political economy offer both extraordinary challenges and opportunities to the historical profession. We are confronted with the practical and intellectual question: "If they repeal the Progressive Era, should we care?" As both historians and global citizens, it seems to me that we have little choice but to answer, we care very much.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000267 Published online by Cambridge University Press