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The Progressive Intellectual Tradition in America

Part One of the Progressive Tradition Series

Part one of the Progressive Tradition Series examines the philosophical and theoretical development of progressivism as a response to the rise of industrial capitalism.

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Restoring Social Trust in Democracy, Democracy, Progressive Movement

The National Progressive Convention in Chicago is seen on August 6, 1912. As a philosophical tradition, progressivism in its most complete form developed as a "new liberalism" for a new century – updating the American liberal tradition from its Jeffersonian, small-government, republican roots best suited for the agrarian economy of the nation's founding era to a more democratic and modern liberalism capable of checking rising corporate power. (Library of Congress)

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About the Progressive Tradition Series

What is progressivism?

Progressivism at its core is grounded in the idea of progress—moving beyond the status quo to more equal and just social conditions consistent with original American democratic principles such as freedom, equality, and the common good. Progressivism as an intellectual movement emerged between 1890 and 1920 as a response to the multitude of problems associated with the industrialization of the U.S. economy—frequent economic depressions, political corruption, rising poverty, low wages, poor working conditions, tenement living, child labor, lack of collective bargaining power, unsafe consumer products, and the misuse of natural resources.

The original Progressive Era is known primarily for two major developments in American politics:

- One, **political reforms** crafted to break up the power of privileged interests, such as expanded suffrage, direct primaries, direct election of senators, and the initiative and referendum process
- Two, **economic reforms** structured to counterbalance the excessive power of business and to fight inequality measures such as the graduated income and inheritance taxes, the right to organize and other labor protections, unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, old age and disability provisions, food and drug safety laws, and conservation measures

As a philosophical tradition, progressivism in its most complete form developed as a "new liberalism" for a new century—updating the American liberal tradition from its Jeffersonian, small-government, republican roots best suited for the agrarian economy of the nation's founding era to a more democratic and modern liberalism capable of checking rising corporate power. The original progressives argued that changes in the economy's organization required a more complete understanding of human freedom, equality, and opportunity that Jefferson championed so persuasively. Progressives believed that formal legal freedom alone—the negative protections against government intrusions on personal liberty—were not enough to provide the effective freedom necessary for citizens to fulfill their human potential in an age of rising inequality, paltry wages, and labor abuses. Changed conditions demanded a changed defense of human liberty.

Writing at the height of the New Deal reform era, John Dewey explained the progressive view of liberty as a continuation of historic movements for human liberation:

Liberty in the concrete signifies release from the impact of particular oppressive forces; emancipation from something once taken as a normal part of human life but now experienced as bondage. At one time, liberty signified liberation from chattel slavery; at another time, release of a class from serfdom. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries it meant liberation from despotic dynastic rule. A century later it meant release of industrialists from inherited legal customs that hampered the rise of new forces of production. Today it signifies liberation from material insecurity and from the coercions and repressions that prevent multitudes from the participation in the vast cultural resources that are at hand.

Progressives argued that rigid adherence to past versions of limited government had to be discarded in order to promote genuine liberty and opportunity for people at a time of concentrated economic power. Progressives challenged excessive individualism in social thought and politics, promoted an alternative to laissez-faire economics, and replaced constitutional formalism with a more responsive legal order that expanded American democracy and superseded the economic status quo with a stronger national framework of regulations and social reforms.

Progressives sought above all to give real meaning to the promise of the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution—"We the people" working together to build a more perfect union, promote the general welfare, and expand prosperity to all citizens. Drawing on the American nationalist tradition of Alexander Hamilton and Abraham Lincoln, progressives posited that stronger government action was necessary to advance the common good, regulate business interests, promote national economic growth, protect workers and families displaced by modern capitalism, and promote true economic and social opportunity for all people.

In the famous formulation of progressive thought often associated with the progressive theorist Herbert Croly, this meant using Hamiltonian means (national action) to achieve Jeffersonian ends (liberty, equality, and opportunity). Progressives' overall goal was to replace a rigid economic philosophy—one that had morphed from its egalitarian roots into a legalistic defense of economic power and privilege—with a more democratic political order that allowed people to flourish individually within a larger national community.

Progressivism has always been part of a broader global movement to build a more humane, just, and economically stable international community based on full opportunity and selfdetermination for all citizens. Progressives on both sides of the Atlantic learned from one another in their attempts to build more responsive and democratic governments. But as a distinctly American response to the nation's economic conditions and its political tradition, progressivism steered a middle way between the radical ideas of socialism prevalent in some parts of Europe and the unbending hands-off approach of conservatives ascendant in the United States.

In terms of its political values, progressivism throughout the years stressed a range of ideals that remain important today:

- **Freedom**, in its fullest sense, including negative freedom from undue coercion by government or society and the effective freedom of every person to lead a fulfilling and economically secure life
- **The common good**, broadly meaning a commitment in government and society to placing public needs and the concerns of the least well-off above narrow self-interest or the demands of the privileged
- **Pragmatism**, both in its philosophical form of evaluating ideas based on their real world consequences rather than abstract ideals, and in more practical terms as an approach to problem solving grounded in science, empirical evidence, and policy experimentation
- **Equality**, as first put forth by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence and updated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

- **Social justice**, the proper arrangement of law, society, and the economy to ensure that all people have the formal and informal capacity to shape their own lives and realize their dreams
- **Democracy**, the full participation of citizens in the major decisions and debates that affect their lives
- **Cooperation and interdependence**, particularly as these ideas relate to global affairs, an overall humanitarian vision, and the importance of shared social and economic knowledge

This paper explores these progressive values and traditions in more detail by looking at the historical context that gave rise to progressivism, the conservative traditions it challenged, and its affirmative values, ideas, and goals.

About the Progressive Tradition Series

With the rise of the contemporary progressive movement and the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, there is extensive public interest in better understanding the origins, values, and intellectual strands of progressivism. Who were the original progressive thinkers and activists? Where did their ideas come from and what motivated their beliefs and actions? What were their main goals for society and government? How did their ideas influence or diverge from alternative social doctrines? How do their ideas and beliefs relate to contemporary progressivism?

The new Progressive Tradition Series from the Center for American Progress traces the development of progressivism as a social and political tradition stretching from the late 19th century reform efforts to the current day. The series is designed primarily for educational and leadership development purposes to help students and activists better understand the foundations of progressive thought and its relationship to politics and social movements. Although the Progressive Studies Program has its own views about the relative merit of the various values, ideas, and actors discussed within the progressive tradition, the essays included in the series are descriptive and analytical rather than opinion based. We envision the essays serving as primers for exploring progressivism and liberalism in more depth through core texts—and in contrast to the conservative intellectual tradition and canon. We hope that these papers will promote ongoing discourse about the proper role of the state and individual in society, the relationship between empirical evidence and policymaking, and how progressives today might approach specific issues involving the economy, health care, energy-climate change, education, financial regulation, social and cultural affairs, and international relations and national security.

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