Progressivism

Progressivism was a political and socio-economic movement central to American national politics from the Gilded Age (1890s) through the Roaring Twenties. At its heart it was a populist, bi-partisan reaction to the excesses of the wealthy “robber-baron” classes and the threat of revolution from the disenfranchised working class—many of which did not share in the dramatic economic growth of the age—along with a distinctly anti-immigrant nativism. Within the Republican Party, President Theodore Roosevelt entered the national stage as a Progressive champion in 1901. His stances on trust busting, conservation of resources, and safe working conditions for laborers made him a populist hero among Americans, though not always within his own party. But his progressivism also allowed for imperialist goals in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. For the Democratic Party, President Woodrow Wilson embodied many of the same issues, adding expanded emphasis on consumer rights and a federal income tax. But Wilson’s evangelical progressivism was tempered by his strong support of Jim Crow racism. World War I provided a court of judgment for the Progressive Movement. Wilson’s idealistic post-war promise to “make the world safe for democracy” with his “League of Nations” was undermined by French and German demands for punishing reparations from Germany and by rising domestic isolationism. Women’s Suffrage in the 1920s and a controversial Prohibition of alcohol were the last major achievements of a movement that had championed grassroots political action, a faith in scientific progress (including eugenics), and democracy writ large via government intervention.

Bibliography: McGerr, Michael, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003)

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