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ESSAYS

From different angles, the following two essays treat the ambivalence (and the internal differentiation) of progressive reform. In a sweeping review of progressive historiography, historian Richard L. McCormick of the University of Washington reclaims the social-justice side of progressive reformers from recent preoccupation with their coercive, social-control tendencies. In the second essay, along the same lines, Professor Robert Westbrook of Northwestern University, contrasts the ethics of Progressive Era documentary photographer Lewis Hine with those of his more manipulative, and socially condescending, contemporaries.

### Evaluating the Progressives

RICHARD L. McCORMICK



Convulsive reform movements swept across the American landscape from the 1890s to 1917. Angry farmers demanded better prices for their products, regulation of the railroads, and the destruction of what they thought was the evil power of bankers, middlemen, and corrupt politicians. Urban residents crusaded for better city services, more efficient municipal government, and, sometimes, the control of social groups whose habits they hated and feared. Members of various professions, such as social workers and doctors, tried to improve the dangerous and unhealthy conditions in which many people lived and worked. Businessmen, too, lobbied incessantly for goals which they defined as reform. By around 1910, many of these crusading men and women were calling themselves progressives. Ever since, historians have used the term "progressivism" to describe the reform movements of the early twentieth-century United States.

Yet many historians today are no longer very comfortable with the term. David P. Thelen, one of the best scholars working in the field of early twentieth-century reform, recently observed that "progressivism seems basically to have disappeared from historiographical and political discussion." Thelen perhaps exaggerated the point, but this much, at least, is true: there is a malaise among historians about the concept of progressivism and a growing urge to avoid the word itself whenever possible.

Three causes account for this situation. For one, the terms "progressive" and "progressivism" commonly have been invoked in a casual way to denote people and changes that are "good" or "enlightened" or "farsighted." These are the connotations which the progressives themselves gave to the words. Historians, being naturally wary of such value-laden terms, tend to seek a more neutral language that is better suited to impartial analysis. Such disinclination to use the word "progressivism" has been strengthened by the now-common judgment that early twentieth-century reform was not entirely good or enlightened or farsighted.

Second, the malaise about progressivism reflects a general discouragement with the liberal reform tradition in American history. I refer not simply to the nation's

ed in Alice Sheppard, *Cartoon*, 135. Photo: The Schlesinger

Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford, 1986), 263–288. Copyright © 1988 by Richard L. McCormick. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

current political conservatism (for relatively few professional historians share the new mood) but more generally to a widespread sense, both within and without academe, that liberalism historically has been characterized by both insincerity and failure. These are the dual criticisms most frequently leveled against the Great Society programs of the 1960s. They were not genuinely intended to uplift the disadvantaged, but rather to assuage guilty liberal consciences. And the devices upon which they relied, namely, expensive governmental bureaucracies, proved conspicuously unequal to the problems at hand.

The same two complaints, of insincerity and failure, underlie most of the contemporary criticism of the early twentieth-century liberals who called themselves progressives. They are said to have used democratic rhetoric only as a cloak for elitist purposes. And they are berated for placing too much confidence in scientific methods and administrative techniques that turned out to possess few of the magical powers which the reformers attributed to them. Almost every major political figure of the era is said to have supported remedies that were grossly inadequate to the observed problems.

Often these two criticisms are conjoined in the notion that the progressives never intended their reforms to succeed, only to appear successful. Thus Richard Hofstadter explained the progressives' attraction to "ceremonial," rather than far-reaching, solutions by observing the reformers' own deep need to feel better about American society and their own status within it. Other historians, including Gabriel Kolko and James Weinstein, have suggested that even more consciously selfish motives—specifically the drive of business elites to turn government to their own ends—lay behind the failure of progressivism to solve the problems of industrial society.

These alleged evils of progressivism—its dishonest rhetoric and its inadequate methods—bring us to an attribute of liberalism that goes a long way toward explaining the sour reputation it has today. Liberals frequently excel in recognizing—indeed, in dramatizing—the social and economic conflicts of American society, but they quickly cover up those conflicts by declaring them solved through expertise and government. The progressives of the early 1900s did this. Conservatives are at least consistent in affirming that capitalism produces a fundamental "harmony of interests," while radicals, for their part, consider social conflict unremitting and unsolvable, save through revolution. But liberals often seem (and seemed) to occupy the foolish, middle position of alternately recognizing and denying the existence of basic social and economic divisions. I call attention to this pattern because it strikes me as essential to understanding why so many of today's historians appear to have lost respect for progressivism and to avoid the term whenever they can.

The third reason why contemporary historians are dissatisfied with the concept of progressivism is the awful complexity and diversity of early twentieth-century reform. Nothing illustrates this better than the long-standing historiographical debate over the progressives' identity that flourished during the 1950s and 1960s. Farmers, businessmen, professionals, old middle classes, and immigrants all were named by one scholar or another as the key progressives. The historians offering these diverse interpretations were not content with carving out niches within the reform movement for the groups they studied. Rather they tended to claim, at least implicitly, that "their" key progressives placed a distinctive stamp on early twentieth-century

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reform and to define progressivism narrowly enough to substantiate that claim. We learned a great deal from these studies about how different social and economic groups experienced and responded to the problems of the early 1900s. But obviously all the historians debating the identity question cannot have been right about what progressivism was. For while many groups had a hand in it, none exclusively shaped it.

Of all the answers to the question of who the progressives were, one has exerted an especially pronounced influence upon the field: the so-called "organizational" interpretation. Led by Samuel P. Hays and Robert H. Wiebe, a number of scholars have located the progressive impulse in the drive of newly formed business and professional groups to achieve their goals through cooperation and expertise. Other groups then copied the organizers, whose bureaucratic methods gave progressivism its distinctive character.

Yet while it has influenced dozens of scholars, the organizational model is too limited to encompass much that we know about early twentieth-century reform. Hays's and Wiebe's organized, expert progressives seem too bland, too passionless, and too self-confident to have waged the frantic battles many reformers did. Their interpretations particularly err in downplaying the dramatic events that punctuated the chronology of progressivism, aroused ordinary people, and gave reform its shape and timing: a sensational muckraking article, an amazing political scandal, or a tragic social calamity. Without taking into account how the masses of Americans perceived and responded to such occurrences, progressivism cannot be understood.

More than ten years ago, Peter G. Filene and John D. Buenker published articles recognizing the progressives' diversity and suggesting ways to reorient historical scholarship on the subject. Filene proposed the more drastic response to the complexity of progressivism: abandon the concept of a progressive movement. It had no unity, either of supporters, or purposes, or ideas. Indeed, it "displays a puzzling and irreducible incoherence." Like Filene, Buenker denied there was a unified progressive movement, but he was more optimistic about the meaningfulness of progressivism. Divergent groups, Buenker suggested, came together on one issue and changed alliances on the next. Often, he observed, reformers favored the same measure for different, even opposing, reasons. Only by looking at each reform and the distinctive coalition behind it could progressivism be understood.

Here were two shrewd proposals for coping with the baffling diversity of early twentieth-century reform. Both have been heeded. Filene's pessimism stirred many scholars to abandon the term *progressivism* altogether. Buenker's call for research on individual reforms helped inspire an outpouring of monographic work on discrete aspects of progressivism. Their two responses offer a classic case of the historical profession's effort to cope with the numbing complexity of the past: give up the game or restore coherence through infinite particularizing.

Neither response will do. We cannot avoid the concept of progressivism—or even a progressive movement—because, particularly after 1910, the terms were deeply embedded in the language of reformers and because they considered the words meaningful. We cannot go on merely particularizing because (however valuable many recent monographs have been) it is important to appreciate and understand progressivism as a whole. The "whole" will scarcely turn out to have been unified or simple, but it is unlikely to have been either incoherent or utterly beyond

comprehension. The renewed acceptance of the concept of progressivism may have the added benefit of enabling us to regain respect for the reformers—to see why their rhetoric and their true goals sometimes clashed; to understand why they sometimes failed to achieve their purposes; and to grasp how they, like liberals ever since, often were confused over whether the United States was, in the final analysis, a harmonious society or a divided one.



Two lines of analysis seem to me useful in achieving such an understanding of progressivism. The first is to identify the basic characteristics that were common, in varying measure, to many (and probably most) progressive reforms. No one list of progressive characteristics will satisfy every historian, but I think we know enough for a tentative enumeration. The second way to proceed is by distinguishing with care the goals of reform, the reasons publicly given for it, and the actual results. Purposes, rationale, and results are three different things, and the unexamined identification of any one with another is invalid.

Progressivism was characterized, first of all, by a distinctive set of attitudes toward industrialism. By the early 1900s, most Americans seem reluctantly to have accepted the permanence of big business. The progressives shared this attitude. They undertook reforms not to dismantle modern industry and commerce but rather to improve and ameliorate the conditions of industrial life. Yet progressivism was infused with a deep, lingering outrage against many of the worst consequences of industrialism. Outpourings of anger and dismay about corporation wrongdoing and of suspicion for industrial values frequently punctuated the course of reform. Both the acceptance of industrialism and the anger against it were intrinsic to progressivism. This does not mean that the movement was mindless or that it must be considered indefinable. What it suggests is that a powerful irony lay at the heart of progressivism: reforms that gained vitality from a people angry with industrialism ended up by assisting them to accommodate to it.

These ameliorative reforms were distinguished, secondly, by a basic optimism about people's ability to improve their environment through continuous human action. Those hurt by industrialization could be protected and their surroundings made more humane. Progressive intellectuals, as well as popularizers, produced a vast literature denouncing *laissez-faire* and affirming the capacity of men and women to better their conditions. Even reformers with little interest in philosophical questions absorbed the era's optimism and environmentalism. Their reforms reflected this habit of mind.

Improving the environment meant, above all, intervening in people's economic and social affairs to channel natural forces and give them order. This attribute of interventionism, of regulation, and even of coercion, constitutes a third essential characteristic of progressivism, visible in almost every reform of the early 1900s. Intervention could be accomplished through both private and public means. Given a choice, most progressives preferred to work through voluntary associations for non-coercive improvements in economic and social conditions. As time passed, however, more and more of their reforms relied on the hand of government.

Progressive reforms may, then, be characterized as interventions in the environment intended to improve the conditions of industrial life. But such a description says little about the ideals behind progressivism or about its distinctive methods.

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These must make up part of any account of the character of early twentieth-century reform. Progressivism took its inspiration, as well as much of its substance and technique, from two bodies of belief and knowledge: evangelical Protestantism and the sciences, both natural and social. Each imparted distinctive qualities to the reforms of the age.

Progressivism visibly bore the imprint of the evangelical ethos. Basic to this mentality was the drive to purge the world of sin—such as the sins of slavery and intemperance, against which nineteenth-century reformers had crusaded. Now the progressives carried the struggle into the modern citadels of sin, the teeming industrial cities of the nation. No one can read their moralistic appeals without realizing how deeply many of them felt a Christian duty to right the wrongs that sprang from industrialism. The reforms that followed from such appeals could be generous in spirit, but they also could be intolerant. Some progressive reforms were frankly intended to perpetuate a Protestant social order. Not every progressive shared the evangelical ethos, much less its intolerance, but few of the era's reforms were untouched by the spirit and the techniques of Protestant revivalism.

Science, too, had a pervasive influence on the contents and methods of progressivism. Many of the leading reformers considered themselves social scientists—that is, members of the newer disciplines of economics, sociology, statistics, and psychology that came into being between 1880 and 1910. Sharing the environmentalist and interventionist assumptions of the day, they believed that rational measures could be devised and applied to improve the human condition. Their methods inspired elements common to nearly every reform of the age: the investigation of facts, the application of social-science knowledge, the entrusting of trained experts to decide what should be done, and the authorization of governmental officials to take the steps that science suggested.

Dispassionate as these methods sound, they actually were compatible with the moralizing tendencies within progressivism. In its earliest days, American social science was infused by ethical concerns. An essential purpose of economics, sociology, and psychology was to improve and uplift people's lives. Progressives blended science and religion into a view of human behavior that was unique to their generation of Americans: people who had grown up in an age of revivals and come to maturity at the birth of social science.

Finally, progressivism was the first (perhaps the only) reform movement to be experienced by the whole American nation. Widely circulated magazines gave people everywhere the shameful facts of corruption and carried the clamor for reform into every town and city of the country. Almost no one in the United States in, say, 1906 could have been unaware that ten-year-old children worked through the night in dangerous factories or that many United States senators served the big business corporations. Progressivism's national reach and mass base vastly exceeded that of Jacksonian reform several generations before. And its dependence on the people for its shape and timing has no comparison in the later executive-dominated New Deal and Great Society. Wars and depressions had previously engaged the whole nation's attention, but never reform.

These half-dozen attributes of progressivism go a long way toward defining the movement as a whole, but they do not tell us much about who was doing what to whom or about what the reforms accomplished. Most progressive crusades

shared in the methods and assumptions enumerated above, but they did so in different measure and with different emphases. Some reflected greater acceptance of industrialism, while others expressed more of the outrage against it. Some intervened to improve the environment through private means; others depended on government. Each reform struck a distinctive balance between the claims of Protestant moralism and scientific rationalism.

To move beyond what are essentially a series of continuums along which diverse reforms ranged, we must distinguish goals from rhetoric from results. This is a more difficult task than might be supposed. Older interpretations of progressivism implicitly assumed that the rhetoric explained the goals and that if a reform became law the results fulfilled the intentions behind it. Neither assumption is a good one. Writing in 1964, Samuel P. Hays shrewdly exposed the fallacy of equating the reformers' democratic language with their true purposes. The two may have coincided, but the historian has to show that, not take it for granted. The automatic identification of either intentions or rhetoric with results is also invalid, although it is still a common feature of scholarship on progressivism. Only within the last decade or so have historians begun to examine with care the actual achievements of the reformers. To do so is to observe the ironies, complexities, and disappointments that accompanied progressivism. For the reformers by no means always got what they wanted, or what they said they wanted.

If the two lines of analysis sketched out here were systematically applied to early twentieth-century reform, our comprehension of—and possibly our respect for—progressivism would be substantially enhanced. The existing research and scholarship do not permit that; nor, if they did, is my space here sufficient for it. Instead of being systematic, the following pages are illustrative, taking up, in turn, political reform and social reform. The end in view remains a better understanding of American liberalism and its limits.

Shortly after 1900 many of the basic elements of American politics and government were transformed. New patterns of political participation emerged, while the structure and tasks of government changed, too. Ever since the Jackson period, casting party ballots on election day had formed by far the most important means of political expression and involvement. Sectional, cultural, and historical influences all had contributed to shaping men's party loyalties, and to judge from the available evidence most of them took those loyalties seriously indeed. Only under unusual circumstances did ordinary people turn away from their parties and seek other means of influencing the government, although it is worth observing that nonelectoral methods were the *only* possible avenues of political expression for all women and many blacks. Prior to 1900, however, those nonelectoral avenues were difficult to travel and commonly led to failure.

Beginning in the early twentieth century this older structure of political participation gave way to new patterns. Voter turnout fell, ticket-splitting rose and relatively fewer voters could be counted upon to support the regular party candidates year after year. In the same period, a great variety of interest groups successfully pioneered new ways of influencing the government and its agencies. By organizing their members, raising money, hiring lobbyists, pressuring officials, and inundating the public with their propaganda, the strongest of these groups managed to compel

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During the same years, the nature and functions of American government also saw significant changes. To a degree unprecedented in the nineteenth century, public officials became widely involved in monitoring and regulating how people lived and worked. In consequence, both the institutions of government and the content of public policy were decisively altered. Legislatures, which had dominated nineteenth-century governments in both the states and the nation, now lost power to increasingly strong executives and, even more importantly, to the recently created boards and agencies that made up a virtually new branch of government. These new agencies, moreover, carried out policies of a sort only rarely seen before. Where nineteenth-century governmental action had mainly concerned discrete groups and locales (to which governments distributed resources and privileges), public authorities now began to recognize and deal with clashing interests throughout the whole society. Inconsistently at first—but with increasing determination—American governments assumed the responsibility for mitigating social conflicts by taking on such previously neglected functions as regulation, administration, and even planning.

These political and governmental changes were important in themselves, quite apart from what they tell us about progressivism. One might, indeed, be tempted to study them on their own terms, with only passing reference to an upsurge of reform. The changes were, after all, products of those all-powerful, ubiquitous forces in modern American history: industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Historians accordingly have devoted much of their attention to tracing the twisted pathways leading from economic and social developments to the political and governmental responses. Without progressivism, however, the shape and timing and, above all, the results of the political transformation are impossible to understand.

For in light of the long-term social and economic forces involved, the new patterns of politics and government were established with remarkable speed. In 1900 they were just beginning to make their appearance, but by 1915 they were largely in place. During these years three historic barriers to political and governmental change were significantly weakened: the traditional American devotion to small government, the long-standing unwillingness to enact "class legislation" recognizing the competing needs of different groups, and the intense partisan loyalties of the nineteenth-century electorate. These barriers had largely held throughout the class warfare of the 1880s and the political turmoil of the 1890s. Now they gave way, under assault from a nationwide wave of resentment against bosses and businessmen.

The precipitating crisis came in the form of a series of revelations concerning politico-business corruption. During the two years following Theodore Roosevelt's reelection as president in 1904, while muckraking journalists were trumpeting the details of corruption to a nationwide magazine audience, a remarkable number of cities and states went through wrenching discoveries of how local businessmen bribed legislators, conspired with party leaders, and controlled nominations. . . .

In response, innumerable pent-up proposals for political and governmental reform were enacted. Commonly the progressives presented their plans in moralistic, democratic language, but often the true purposes of many reformers were more complicated. Often, as well, the actual results of reform surprised some of its proponents. On the whole, the anti-boss, anti-business forces that had inspired the

outcries of 1905–06 found it difficult to keep control of the complex political developments that followed.

Many new laws redefined the eligible electorate by excluding certain people from voting and including others. Even electors whose eligibility remained unchanged found that the new laws had altered the rules, and even the purposes, of voting. The progressives defended these reforms—together with related measures of direct democracy, including the initiative, referendum, and recall—as efforts to curtail corruption, weaken party bosses, and restore power to ordinary people. But nearly every election-law reform contained fundamental ambiguities, and most brought results that amazed some of their advocates.

A series of laws directed against the party machines provides a case in point. During the years after 1906, most states enacted the direct primary, placing party nominations in the hands of party voters themselves. In practice, this reform eliminated the most blatant abuses of the machine's control over convention nominations, but it left the party leaders substantially in charge of selecting candidates because voter turnout in primary elections tended to be so low. Other progressive measures established stringent governmental regulation of the parties, but in so doing they embedded parties more firmly in the legal machinery of the elections than they had ever been before. In the cities, antimachine elites supported structural reforms, such as commission government, in order to take power from local politicians. But the commissions frequently succumbed to shrewd bosses who learned the new rules of politics. Commission government became the very basis of Frank Hague's rule of Jersey City for three decades.

Governmental policies of economic regulation also were enacted in the aftermath of the exposures of politico-business corruption. Many states established railroad commissions for the first time, while others strengthened their existing boards. Other industries, too, came under effective supervision, not just from state governments but also from the cities and the nation. Yet considerable irony attended the regulatory laws of the early 1900s. Brought forth amidst progressive cries for restraining corrupt corporations and protecting consumers, the new measures usually were opposed by the businesses to be supervised. When it came to shaping the details of regulation, plural, competing interests took a hand in the process and maneuvered to obtain favorable treatment in the law. In actual practice, the regulated corporations often found benefits in the legislation they had initially opposed, although this was not always the case. Perhaps the most significant result of the regulatory revolution of the Progressive era was one that few had expected: the shifting of economic policymaking from the noisy legislative halls to the quiet offices of little-known administrators. There organized interests found a congenial environment for doing their business with the government.

By the end of the Progressive era, the political and governmental system of the United States looked very different than it had in the late nineteenth century. Political parties had been regulated, and the active electorate had become relatively smaller and less enthusiastic. Interest groups had taken over many of the parties' old functions and achieved recognition as legitimate agencies for influencing the now-expanded government. The legislature was less important than before, and the executive more powerful, but many of the government's new roles fell to independent administrative agencies which performed their tasks of investigation and adjustment.

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well outside the public's eye. These changes were not revolutionary, but considering how stable American politics have commonly been (compared, say, with those of Europe) they were changes of great importance.

It would be hard to say whether the new system was more or less democratic than the old one. Voting had become more difficult for many (especially blacks and new immigrants), but for others new avenues of political participation had opened up. The recently created agencies of administrative government often bent to the will of the rich, but so had legislative government in the nineteenth century. Probably we will never have a fully satisfactory answer to the question of whether early twentieth-century American politics became more "progressive" in the casual sense of the word. We can be certain, however, that no one could have anticipated the actual results of political and governmental reform—not the ordinary people whose resentment of bosses and businessmen gave the era its vitality, nor their enemies either.

Progressive social reform, like economic regulation, was based on the recognition of group conflict and on a willingness to intervene in people's lives to mitigate disharmony. Some reformers, inspired by evangelical Protestantism, acted on the basis of a heartfelt desire to alleviate suffering and bring justice. Others sought the professional prestige that went with providing scientific solutions for social problems. Still others craved the power and satisfaction that came to those who imposed what they considered right forms of behavior on the masses. Few of them failed to employ the moralistic rhetoric of altruism; fewer still neglected the needs of their own group or class in determining how to act.

What distinguished the progressive reformers of the early 1900s was their conviction that men and women were social creatures. People who lived in large cities, where social contacts and conflicts were unrelenting, had little choice but to accept their dependence on each other and seek common solutions to problems. Doctors learned that venereal disease and tuberculosis were indices of social conditions; curing them meant stamping out prostitution and eradicating the insanitary conditions that accompanied poverty. Policemen and lawyers saw that crime was most prevalent in certain social circumstances; stopping it depended on improving the environment and rehabilitating the criminal. Many progressives blamed social ills on the habits and practices of the southern and eastern European immigrants who were crowding into the United States; reform thus meant restricting immigration, prohibiting the use of alcoholic beverages, and encouraging the Anglo-Saxon way of life. It might even necessitate preventing unfit people from having children. Whatever changes they advocated, progressives tended to recognize the need for solutions that were citywide, statewide, or even nationwide in scope. Whether tolerant or culturally imperialistic, they saw that everybody was bound up in a common social system. It mattered to everyone how employers treated their employees. It even mattered who was having sexual intercourse with whom.

As the foregoing examples suggest, the progressives sought reforms that would accomplish at least two analytically distinct goals: the establishment of social justice and the imposition of social control. Many reformers focused their efforts on improving the lives of exploited industrial workers and impoverished city dwellers. The progressive campaigns for the abolition of child labor, shorter hours of work and better wages for women, industrial safety and workmen's compensation,

improved housing conditions, and the alleviation of poverty were among the leading reforms of this sort. The settlement-house movement was perhaps the most characteristic progressive endeavor for social justice, and Jane Addams of Hull House was the ideal reformer. Traditional scholarship placed predominant emphasis on these progressive campaigns for social justice.

Recent historical writing makes clear that this is too restricted a view. Numerous social reforms of the early twentieth century expressed the progressives' desire to impose uniform living habits on a culturally diverse population whose behavior sometimes seemed to threaten the morality and health of the community. The campaigns for immigration restriction, racial segregation, sterilization of the mentally defective, and mandatory school attendance demonstrated the reformers' passion for social control. The prohibition of alcoholic beverages was perhaps the prototypical reform of this type.

Weighing the relative gains made by progressives for social justice and social control is a significant problem in historical interpretation. But it is equally important to recognize that most reforms and reformers expressed both goals. There was scarcely any social change that was not advocated, often sincerely, as a means of bringing justice. Yet, in practice, almost every progressive reform gave added control to those who implemented it. . . .

Justice and control scarcely meant the same things to all progressives. The settlement-house workers, the reforming professionals, and the advocates of such coercive measures as immigration restriction and racial segregation each gave distinctive interpretations to these goals and placed different emphases upon them. Some progressive controls entailed relatively benign environmental constraints; others mandated recognized "experts" to set standards of behavior within the areas of their supposed competence; still other social controls were frankly racist and repressive.

Whatever meaning they gave to justice and control and whatever balance they struck (or failed to strike) between them, most social progressives adopted roughly similar methods. In time a pattern of social reform became familiar, variations of which were followed by progressives in almost every area. They typically began by organizing a voluntary association, investigating a problem, gathering mounds of relevant social data, and analyzing it according to the precepts of one of the newer social sciences. From such an analysis, a proposed solution would emerge, be popularized through campaigns of education and moral suasion, and—as often as not, if it seemed to work—be taken over by some level of government as a permanent public function. Usually the details of the law were worked out through bargaining among the competing groups interested in the measure.

Certain assumptions guided those who adopted this approach to reform. One concerned the utility of social science in fostering harmony. Progressives knew full well that different groups in American society had competing interests, and they recognized that conflicting social elements often hurt one another. They were not deluded by a belief in a natural harmony of interests. Yet the social sciences, based as they were on a vision of human interdependence, offered the possibility for devising reforms that regulated and harmonized antagonistic social groups. If the facts were gathered and properly understood, solutions could be found that genuinely benefited everyone. Individual reforms might assist one group against another, but a

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r social justice and social i. But it is equally important both goals. There was sincerely, as a means of : reform gave added con-

to all progressives. The d the advocates of such gregation each gave dis- t emphases upon them. ironmental constraints; behavior within the areas were frankly racist and

whatever balance they ssives adopted roughly familiar, variations of they typically began by , gathering mounds of ts of one of the newer would emerge, be pop- and—as often as not, nment as a permanent ut through bargaining

roach to reform. One rogressives knew full ing interests, and they other. They were not social sciences, based he possibility for de- social groups. If the found that genuinely against another, but a

carefully crafted program of reforms would establish a more perfect harmony of interests than ever appeared in nature.

A related progressive assumption held that government could be trusted to carry out broad social reforms. In social policy, just as in the economic area, nineteenth-century American governments had tended to produce haphazard legislative decisions, each having little connection to the next. What Gerald N. Grob has called "clear policy formation and social planning" were largely absent. Most social progressives did not initially set out to expand the limited scope of government. They placed their confidence first in private organization. As time passed, however, the reformers increasingly looked to public agencies to carry out their programs.

Having methods that were largely untried and assumptions that often approximated mere articles of faith, the progressives not surprisingly failed to achieve many of their social purposes. Often they succeeded, however, and their basic approach to social problems has not yet been repudiated in the United States. The foregoing discussion of progressivism has frequently pointed to the differences between the rhetoric, intentions, and results of reform. In every area there were wide gaps between what the progressives said they were doing, what they actually wanted to do, and what they accomplished. It is important to deal explicitly with the reasons for these seeming inconsistencies and to reflect on what they tell us about progressivism.

The failure of reform to fulfill all of the expectations behind it was not, of course, unique to the Progressive era. Jacksonian reform, Reconstruction, and the New Deal all exhibited ironies and disappointments. In each case, the clash between reformers having divergent purposes, the inability to predict how given methods of reform would work in practice, and the ultimate waning of popular zeal for change all contributed to the disjunction of rationale, purpose, and achievement. Yet the gap between these things seems more noticeable in the Progressive era. So many movements for reform took place in a relatively brief span of time, accompanied by such resounding rhetoric and by such high expectations for improving the American social and political environment. The effort to change so many things at once and the grandiose claims made for the moral and material betterment that would result meant that disappointments were bound to occur.

Yet even the great number of reforms and the uncommonly high expectations behind them cannot fully account for the consistent gaps between the stated purposes, real intentions, and actual results of progressivism. Several additional factors, intrinsic to the nature of early twentieth-century reform, help explain the ironies and contradictions. One of these factors was the progressives' confident reliance on modern methods of reform. Heirs of recent advances in science and social science, they enthusiastically crafted and applied new techniques for improving American government and society. Often their methods worked, but often progressive programs simply did not prove capable of accomplishing what had been expected of them. This was not necessarily the reformers' fault. Making hopeful use of untried methods, they nonetheless lacked a science of society that was equal to all the great problems they perceived. Worse, the progressives' scientific reforms frequently involved the collection of data, making it possible to know just how far short of success their programs sometimes fell. The evidence of their failures was thus more visible than in any previous era of reform. To the progressives'



credit, they usually published that evidence—for contemporaries and historians alike to see.

A second aspect of early twentieth-century reform that helps to account for the gaps between aims and achievements was the progressives' deep ambivalence about industrialism and its consequences. Individual reformers were divided, and so was their movement as a whole. Compared with many reformers of the late 1800s, the progressives fundamentally accepted an industrial society and sought mainly to order and ameliorate it. Even reformers who were intellectually committed to socialist doctrines often acted the part of reformers, not radicals. Yet progressivism was infused and vitalized by people truly angry with an industrial society and its conditions. Few of them wished to tear down the modern institutions of business and commerce, but their anger was real, their moralism genuine, and their passions essential to the era's reforms. Progressivism went forward because of their fervor.

Unfortunately, the reform movement never surmounted this ambivalence about industrialism. Much of its rhetoric and popular passion pointed in one direction, while its leaders and their programs went in another. Often the result was confusion and bitterness. Reforms frequently did not measure up to the popular, anti-business expectations for them—and, indeed, never were expected to measure up by those who designed and implemented them.

Perhaps of most significance, progressivism failed to achieve all its goals because, despite their real efforts to do so, the reformers never fully came to terms with the divisions and conflicts in American society. Again and again, they acknowledged the existence of social disharmony more fully and frankly than had nineteenth-century Americans. Nearly every reform of the era was predicated on the progressives' recognition that diverse cultural and occupational groups had conflicting interests and that the responsibility for mitigating and adjusting those differences lay with the whole society, usually the government. Such recognition formed one of the progressives' greatest achievements. Indeed, it stands as one of the most important accomplishments of liberal reform in all of American history. For by accepting social disharmony, the progressives committed the twentieth-century United States to recognizing—and dealing with—the inevitable conflicts within a heterogeneous, industrial society.

Yet significant as it was, the progressives' recognition of diversity was clouded by the methods and institutions they adopted for coping with conflict. Through scientific data-gathering and analysis, they believed that impartial programs could be devised that genuinely benefited every interest. And through expert, administrative government, those programs could be carried out in fairness to all. But science and administration turned out to be less neutral than the progressives expected. No scientific reform could be any more impartial than the experts who gathered the data or than the bureaucrats who implemented the program. In practice, administrative government often succumbed to the admonition of special interests.

It would be pointless to blame the reformers for the failure of their new methods and agencies to eliminate the divisions within an industrial society. But it is perhaps fair to ask why the progressives adopted measures which tended to disguise and obscure social conflict almost as soon as they had uncovered it. For one thing, they honestly believed in the almost unlimited potential of science and administration. Our late twentieth-century skepticism of these wonders should not blind us to the

contemporaries and historians

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sincerity with which the progressives embraced them and imbued them with what now seem magical properties. For another, most progressives were reformers, not radicals. It was one thing to recognize social conflict, but quite another to admit that it was permanent. By and large these men and women were personally and ideologically inclined to believe that America was fundamentally a harmonious society and that such conflicts as existed could be resolved. Finally, the leading progressives' own class and cultural backgrounds often made them insensitive to lower-class immigrant Americans and their cultures. Reducing social divisions sometimes came down to imposing middle-class Protestant ways. Together these factors diminished whatever chance the progressives may have had of eliminating social conflict. Seeing the problem more fully than had their predecessors, the reformers of the early twentieth century nonetheless tended to consider conflicts resolved when, in fact, they had only been disguised by the establishment of scientific policies and the creation of governmental agencies.

Thus progressivism fell short of its rhetoric and intentions. Lest that seem an unfairly critical evaluation, it is important to recall how terribly ambitious were the reformers' stated aims and true goals. They missed some of their marks because they sought to do so much. And despite the shortcomings, they accomplished an enormous part of what they intended to achieve.

The problems with which the progressives struggled have, by and large, occupied Americans ever since. And although the assumptions and techniques of progressivism no longer command the confidence which early twentieth-century Americans placed in them, no equally comprehensive body of reforms has ever been adopted in their place. I have criticized the progressives for having too much faith in their untried methods. Yet if this was a failing, it was also a source of strength, now missing from reform in America. For the essence of progressivism lay in the hopefulness and optimism the reformers brought to the tasks of applying science and administration to the high moral purposes in which they believed. The historical record of their aims and achievements leaves no doubt that in the United States in the early 1900s there lived people who were not afraid to confront the problems of a modern industrial society with vigor and imagination. They of course failed to solve all those problems, but no other generation of Americans has done conspicuously better with the political and social conditions it faced.

### Lewis Hine and the Two Faces of Progressive Photography

ROBERT WESTBROOK

No one contributed more to the iconography of American industrialization than Lewis Hine; yet Hine died a penniless and unappreciated artist. Even today, despite the widespread familiarity of his photographs, few people are much aware of who Lewis Hine was or of the ways in which his work reflected a consistent moral vision

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Robert Westbrook, "Lewis Hine and the Ethics of Progressive Camerawork," *Tikkun* 2 (April/May 1987), 24–29. Reprinted with permission of Tikkun Magazine, a bimonthly Jewish critique of politics, culture, and society based in Oakland, Calif.