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# The Changing Meanings of the Progressive Era

Elisabeth Israels Perry

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Controversy swirls around the term “The Progressive Era.” It wasn’t always so; when I was a college student in the late 1950s, we didn’t seem to have problems with the term. There was Roosevelt and Pinchot, trustbusting, conservation, electoral and civil service reform, the Pure Food and Drug Act, Woodrow Wilson, and yes, the perennial one woman, Jane Addams. They were all “Good Things,” as far as I remember. They had led inexorably toward the nation’s “progress.”

By the mid-1970s, when I began my first research project in the field, things had changed. I soon discovered Peter G. Filene’s 1970 obituary for the progressive movement. Here I learned that the term was now too vague to be useful (1). I then surveyed some standard interpretations of the field and found that one historian’s “*progressive*” had become another’s “*regressive*.” Social “welfare” had become social “control.” In addition, social historians were informing us about all the people for whom the word “progressive” was irrelevant, if not laughable.

Yet another problem for me was that my research project was on a self-identified progressive woman, Belle Moskowitz. Except in early studies of other women, such as those by Allen F. Davis and J. Stanley Lemons, I found few secondary works that discussed her “type” of progressive (2). Women’s social reform interests were crucial to her development as a social activist, but she spent most of her public career in mixed-gender or male-dominated political environments. Where did she fit into the progressivism I was reading about?

Daniel T. Rodgers’s 1982 review essay on progressivism helped a little. Rodgers took the view that progressivism was best explained by its context, by what was happening at the end of the nineteenth century. As other historians had shown, the decline in the power of traditional political parties allowed the rise in power of multiple pressure groups. But was it possible to reconcile the social thinking

of all of these groups under one heading, *progressive*? “Progressives could be found,” Rodgers wrote, “who admired the efficiency of the big corporation and who detested the trusts, who lauded the ‘people’ and who yearned for an electorate confined to white and educated voters, who spoke the language of social engineering and the language of moralistic uplift, or (to make matters worse) did all these things at once.” Rodgers identified three “clusters of ideas” that those who called themselves progressives drew upon to “articulate their discontents and their social visions.” They consisted of the rhetoric of anti-monopolism, an emphasis on social bonding, and a language of social efficiency (3). Conceptualized in this way, the term “progressives” made more sense to me, and I could locate Moskowitz among them.

Not all of my problems were over, however. Progressive-era periodization appeared quite fluid. Setting the era’s chronological boundaries seemed to depend on the personal interests, perspectives, and values of each historian. When I had my first opportunity to teach a course on progressivism, I started with the founding of Jane Addams’s Hull House Settlement in 1889 and ended with the Great Depression. This was a wider set of boundaries than other historians generally accepted. I used them because in my approach to the period I emphasized the role played by middle-class women’s agendas for change. My primary research on women’s activism had established for me the breakthrough role that settlements had played in motivating turn-of-the-century women, as well as many men, toward reform. It had also revealed that neither 1914, 1917, nor 1920 had ended their hopes or efforts, especially at local levels, even after the focus had shifted away from reform on the national level.

In the end, like others before me, I put a personal stamp on that elusive term, “Progressive Era.” For me, it has come to mark the period from about the 1890s through the 1910s, but with the qualification that for some progressives the boundaries extended further. During this period the forces for changing the way

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government related to society were stronger than the forces for maintaining the status quo. Inspired by the power of the social sciences to devise solutions for society's problems, progressives saw themselves as searching for ways to solve persistent and potentially catastrophic social problems. Laissez-faire economic theory had lost its rationale. It claimed to be leaving the economy to free market forces while actually allowing government to support businesses with high tariffs, subsidies, and the military repression of labor unrest. The spoils system of distributing public offices would have to be replaced with a civil service system that distributed jobs according to merit. Democracy would be enhanced by making elections more direct and instituting other electoral reforms. Government needed to create a safety net for those who had been made destitute by the economic system in which they were forced to work.

Progressives believed that social classes in conflict with one another could be encouraged, by government if necessary, to cooperate for the sake of a greater good. This was a forward-looking program; it certainly was not radical. It entailed a piecemeal approach to change that preserved essential features of a distinctly American free enterprise system. It worked in some areas, and was misguided or failed in others. It made some aspects of American life "better" than they had been before.

In putting together this issue of the *OAH Magazine of History*, I had no specific plan to address these historiographical issues directly. Instead, I selected themes in the period that I thought were important and then turned to authors whose work I knew for contributions. After that, I pretty much let them make their own decisions.

As it turned out, each author has shed light on some of the themes and questions about the Progressive Era that have concerned me over the years. Steven J. Diner, author of a new survey on the Progressive Era, confronts his problems of periodization and definition by forging a creative link between social and political history. Susan Strasser touches on a topic rarely associated with progressive reform, the economic and political impact of advertised, branded

goods in American consumption. Robyn Muncy reflects upon "ambiguous legacies" of women's progressivism, focusing particularly on race relations and protectionist labor legislation. Jimmie Franklin reconsiders C. Vann Woodward's characterization of progressivism as benefitting primarily white men in the South and shows how progressive ideals and practices infused turn-of-the-century African-American self-reliance programs. In discussing that quintessential early Progressive-era event, the major labor strike, Richard Schneirov enriches the story by incorporating new research on gender and race.

The lesson plans should provoke excited student discussion of some thorny Progressive-era issues. Using Theodore Roosevelt's seemingly contradictory work for peace and militarism, Kathleen M. Dalton challenges students to analyze the labels we place on historical figures. Nancy G. Rosoff explains progressive social workers' concerns about the lack of decent leisure activities in early twentieth-century urban life and suggests ways to get students to think about similar issues in their own time. While providing detailed material on three contrasting groups of Progressive-era female industrial workers, Nancy J. Barrett helps students learn about sweated labor in the contemporary world. Conrad Pitcher's lesson uses D. W. Griffith's movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, to introduce issues of racism and nativism in Progressive-era culture and to encourage student debate about censorship and the learning of history through film.

The Progressive Era is such a vast subject that it provides many opportunities for exciting discussion. I am glad to have been able to include here the themes of race, gender, labor, foreign affairs, consumption, and historiography. Other themes—such as specific aspects of Progressive-era immigrant, cultural, and intellectual life—had been on my original list of possibilities, but will have to wait for future issues of the *Magazine*. I hope readers will find the articles and lesson plans in this issue as informative and fun to read as I did in bringing them together. □

### Endnotes

1. Peter G. Filene, "An Obituary for 'The Progressive Movement,'" *American Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1970): 20-34.
2. Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); and J. Stanley Lemons, *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).
3. See Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 113-32, especially 122-23.

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