

## Where Historians Disagree - Progressive Reform

Few issues in the history of twentieth-century America have inspired more disagreement, even confusion, than the nature of progressivism. Until about 1950, most historians were in general accord about the nature of the progressive "movement." It was, they generally agreed, just what it purported to be: a movement by the "people" to curb the power of the "special interests."

In the early 1950s, however, a new interpretation emerged to challenge the traditional view. It offered a new explanation of who the progressives were and what they were trying to do. George Mowry, in *The California Progressives* (1951), described the reform movement in the state not as a protest by the mass of the people, but as an effort by a small and privileged group of business and professional men to limit the overbearing power of large new corporations and labor unions. Richard Hofstadter expanded on this idea in *The Age of Reform* (1955), in which he described progressives throughout the country as people suffering from "status anxiety"—old, formerly influential, upper-middle-class families seeking to restore their fading prestige by challenging the powerful new institutions that had begun to displace them. Like the Populists, Hofstadter suggested, the progressives were suffering from psychological, not economic, discontent.

The Mowry-Hofstadter thesis was never without critics. In its wake, a bewildering array of new interpretations emerged. Perhaps the harshest challenge to earlier views came from Gabriel Kolko, whose influential 1963 study *The Triumph of Conservatism* dismissed the supposedly "democratic" features of progressivism as meaningless rhetoric. But he also rejected the Mowry-Hofstadter idea that it represented the efforts of a displaced elite. Progressivism, he argued, was an effort to regulate business. But it was not the "people" or "displaced elites" who were responsible for this regulation.

It was corporate leaders themselves, who saw in government supervision a way to protect themselves from competition. Regulation, Kolko claimed, was "invariably controlled by the leaders of the regulated industry and directed towards ends they deemed acceptable or desirable." Martin Sklar's *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism* (1988) is a more sophisticated version of a similar argument.

A more moderate challenge to the "psychological" interpretation of progressivism came from historians embracing a new "organizational" view of history. Particularly influential was a 1967 study by Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*. Wiebe presented progressivism as a response to dislocations in American life. There had been rapid changes in the nature of the economy, but there had been no corresponding changes in social and political institutions. Economic power had moved to large, national organizations, while social and political life remained centered primarily in local communities. The result was widespread disorder and unrest, culminating in the turbulent 1890s. Progressivism, Wiebe argued, was the effort of a "new middle class"—a class tied to the emerging national economy—to stabilize and enhance their position in society by creating national institutions suitable for the new national economy.

Despite the influences of these interpretations, some historians continued to argue that the reform phenomenon was indeed a movement of the people against the special interests,

although some identified the "people" somewhat differently than earlier such interpretations. J. Joseph Huthmacher argued in 1962 that much of the force behind progressivism came from members of the working class, especially immigrants, who pressed for such reforms as workmen's compensation and wage and hour laws. John Buenker strengthened this argument in *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform* (1973), claiming that political machines and urban "bosses"

were important sources of reform energy and helped create twentieth-century liberalism. David P. Thelen, in a 1972 study of progressivism in Wisconsin, *The New Citizenship*, pointed to a real clash between the "public interest" and "corporate privilege" in Wisconsin. The depression of the 1890s had mobilized a broad coalition of citizens of highly diverse backgrounds behind efforts to make both business and government responsible to the popular will. It marked the emergence of a new "consumer" consciousness that crossed boundaries of class and community, religion and ethnicity.

Other historians writing in the 1970s and 1980s attempted to link reform to some of the broad processes of political change that had created the public battles of the era. Richard L. McCormick's *From Realignment to Reform* (1981), for example, studied political change in New York State and argued that the crucial change in this era was the decline of the political parties as the vital players in public life and the rise of interest groups working for particular social and economic goals.

More recently, a number of historians have sought to revive a broader view of progressivism rather than breaking it down into its component parts. Daniel Rodgers's *Atlantic Crossings* (1998), a remarkable study of how European reforms influenced American progressives, suggests that the movement was not just an American phenomenon but had roots in a global process of change as well. Alan Dawley's *Struggles for Justice* (1993) characterized progressivism as the effort of liberal elites to manage the new pressures of the industrial era—and the problems of capitalism in particular—in ways that would modernize the state and undermine pressures from socialists. And Michael McGerr, in *A Fierce Discontent* (2003), portrayed progressivism as an essentially moral project through which reformers sought to remake not just government and politics, but also the ways Americans lived, thought, and interacted with each other.

Given the range of disagreement over the nature of the progressive movement, it is hardly surprising that some historians have despaired of finding any coherent definition for the term at all. Peter Filene, for one, suggested in 1970 that the concept of progressivism as a "movement" had outlived its usefulness. But Daniel Rodgers, in an important 1982 article, "In Search of Progressivism," disagreed. The very diversity of progressivism, he argued, accounted both for its enormous impact on its time and for its capacity to reveal to us today the "noise and tumult" of an age of rapid social change.

At the same time, many historians were focusing on the role of women (and the vast network of voluntary associations they created) in shaping and promoting progressive reform and were seeing in these efforts concerns rooted in gender. Some progressive battles, such as those argued by historians as Kathryn Sklar, Linda Gordon, Ruth Rosen, Elaine Tyler May, and others argued, were part of an effort by women to protect their interests within the domestic sphere in the face of jarring challenges from the new industrial world. This protective urge drew women reformers to such issues as temperance, divorce, and prostitution. Many women mobilized behind protective legislation for women and children workers. Other women worked to expand their own roles in the public world. Progressivism cannot be understood, historians of women contend, without understanding the role of women and the importance of issues involving the family and the private world within it.