

PROGRESSIVISM (1900-1920)

Overview

Progressivism was not so much an organized movement as it was a general spirit of reform embraced by Americans with diverse goals and backgrounds during the early twentieth century (1900-20). Progressives sought the advancement of humanity (progress was defined here in Darwinian terms; i.e., the actual improvement of mankind in an evolutionary sense). Progressives sought advancement through the liberation of human energies and potential from both the fading restraints of past ages and the new restraints imposed by modern industrialism. Progressivism was, thus, both forward-looking and backward-looking in its outlook.

There were four general areas in which the progressives tried to reform American society. As you are reading Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, note the discussion of these areas and the specific reforms that were a part of each area:

Democracy

Many progressives hoped to make government in the U.S. more responsive to the direct voice of the American people by instituting the following institutional reforms:

- **Initiative**-A procedure whereby ordinary citizens could propose laws for consideration by their state legislatures or by the voters directly.
- **Referendum**-A procedure whereby citizens could vote directly on whether to approve proposed laws.
- **Recall**-A procedure by which a public official could be removed from office by a direct vote of the citizens.
- **Secret Ballot**-A procedure by which citizens could keep their votes secret. Previously, voting was a public act witnessed by others. The voting records of individual citizens were recorded and made public. Many progressives argued that public voting allowed for voter intimidation. An employer, for instance, might require his employees to vote for certain candidates on pain of losing their jobs.
- **Direct primary**-A procedure whereby political party nominations for public office were made directly by a vote of rank-and-file members of the party rather than by party bosses.
- **Direct election of U.S. Senators**-A procedure to allow the citizens in each state to directly elect their Senators. Previously, Senators were chosen by the state legislatures. Direct election of Senators was achieved with the addition of the **Seventeenth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution (1913).
- **Women's Suffrage**-Granting to women the right to vote. Women's Suffrage was achieved with the addition of the **Nineteenth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution (1920).

The progressives achieved their greatest and most enduring successes in the effort to make governments more democratic.

Efficiency

Many progressives hoped to make American governments better able to serve the people's needs by making governmental operations and services more efficient and rational. Reforms included:

- ***Elite, professional administrators***-Many progressives argued that governments would function better if they were placed under the direction of trained, professional administrators. One example of progressive reform was the rise of the ***city manager system***, in which paid, professional administrators ran the day-to-day affairs of city governments under guidelines established by elected city councils.
- ***Centralization of decision-making process***-Many progressives sought to make government more rational through centralized decision-making. Governments were reorganized to reduce the number of officials and to eliminate overlapping areas of authority between departments. City governments were reorganized to reduce the power of local wards within the city and to increase the powers of the city council. Governments at every level began developing budgets to help them plan their expenditures (rather than spending money haphazardly as needs arose and revenue became available). The drive for centralization was often associated with the rise of professional administrators.
- ***Movements to eliminate governmental corruption***-Corruption represented a source of waste and inefficiency in government. Many progressives worked to cleanup local governments by eliminating the power of machine politicians and urban political bosses. Often this was associated with the effort to restructure the ward system. Power was transferred from urban bosses to professional administrators.

Note that the progressives' quest for efficiency was sometimes at odds with the progressives' quest for democracy. Taking power out of the hands of elected officials and placing that power in the hands of professional administrators reduced the voice of the people in government. Centralized decision-making and reduced power for local wards made government more distant and isolated from the people it served. Progressives who emphasized the need for efficiency sometimes argued that an elite class of administrators knew better what the people needed than did the people themselves.

Regulation of Large Corporations and Monopolies

Many progressives hoped that by regulating large corporations that they could liberate human energies from the restrictions imposed by industrial capitalism. Progressives disagreed over which of the following four solutions should be used to regulate corporations:

- ***Laissez-Faire***-Some progressives argued that marketplace forces were the best regulators of all. A company which paid low wages or maintained an unsafe work environment would be forced to change its policies by the loss of workers. A company which made an unsafe product would eventually lose customers and go bankrupt. In the long run, a free market would best protect the public interest.
- ***Trust-busting***-Some progressives argued that industrial monopolies were unnatural economic institutions which suppressed the competition which was necessary for progress and improvement. The federal government should intervene by breaking up monopolies into smaller companies,

thereby restoring competition. The government should then withdraw and allow marketplace forces once again to regulate the economy.

- **Regulation**-Some progressives argued that in a modern economy, large corporations and even monopolies were both inevitable and desirable. With their massive resources and economies of scale, large corporations offered the U.S. advantages which smaller companies could not offer. Yet, these large corporations might abuse their great power. The federal government should allow these companies to exist but regulate them for the public interest.
- **Socialism**-Some progressives believed that privately owned companies could never be made to serve the public interest. Therefore, the federal government should acquire ownership of large corporations and operate them for the public interest.

The laissez-faire and socialist approaches were less popular among progressives than the trust-busting and regulatory approaches.

Social Justice

Many progressives supported both private and governmental action to help people in need (such action is called social justice). Social justice reforms included:

- **Development of professional social workers**-The idea that welfare and charity work should be undertaken by professionals who are trained to do the job. (Notice again the progressives' concern for efficiency through professionalism.)
- **The building of Settlement Houses**-These were residential, community centers operated by social workers and volunteers and located in inner city slums. The purpose of the settlement houses was to raise the standard of living of urbanites by providing schools, day care centers, and cultural enrichment programs.
- **The enactment of child labor laws**-Child labor laws would prevent overwork of children in the newly emerging industries. The goal of these laws was to give working-class children the opportunity to go to school and to mature more naturally, thereby liberating the potential of humanity and encouraging the advancement of humanity.
- **Support for the goals of organized labor**-Progressives often supported such goals as the eight-hour work day, improved safety and health conditions in factories, workman's compensation laws, minimum wage laws, and unionization.
- **Prohibition laws**-Progressives adopted the cause of prohibition. They claimed the consumption of alcohol limited mankind's potential for advancement. Progressives achieved success in this area with the enactment of the **Eighteenth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution in 1919.

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