

CONFLICTING HISTORICAL VIEWPOINTS: NO. 10

Who Were the Progressives?

Few phenomena of American history are more controversial than the Progressive movement. For more than six decades, scholars have offered conflicting answers to such questions as: Why did the movement begin and end when it did? What were its major objectives? Was its impact on the national experience salutary or otherwise? What was its relationship to other reform movements before and since? On these topics there is so little agreement among historians that Peter Filene has written "An Obituary for the 'Progressive Movement'" (American Quarterly, Spring 1970), arguing that the very concept should be abandoned as a figment of the scholarly imagination.

The nature of this continuing historiographical debate is perhaps best suggested by conflicting assessments of the social origins of the reformers. In his analysis of The Progressive Movement (1915), Parke De Witt, the first scholar to study progressivism, accepted the interpretation offered by the reformers themselves. Like them, he viewed their movement as an uncompromising onslaught against big business. The period, he concluded, was one of conflict between "the people" and "the interests." Essentially the same idea pervaded the two most famous historical studies written during the 1920s. Vernon L. Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought (3 vols., 1927-1930) and Charles and Mary Beard's The Rise of American Civilization (1927) viewed progressivism as the lineal descendant of a reform tradition that stretched back in American history to the age of Jefferson and Jackson. Pitting the masses against business moguls and crooked politicians, the movement was the twentieth-century phase of the age-old

struggle between democracy and aristocracy, equality and privilege. The Progressives, then, were the people themselves, rank-and-file, democrats with a small d, who waged the battle for reform in defense of their national birthright.

Writing from within the progressive frame of reference, such scholars as De Witt, Parrington, and Beard were, in effect, involved participants whose sympathetic and simplistic analysis of progressivism was not shared by historians of later generations. The events of the 1920s and 1930s offered new historical vantage points from which to view the movement. To those who lived through the political reaction of "normalcy" and the economic crisis of the Great Depression, progressivism generally seemed less idealistic and much less effective than earlier scholars assumed. As early as 1932, John Chamberlain, a young Marxist, studied the era closely and then bade Farewell to Reform. The progressives, he concluded, were nostalgic conservatives seeking to restore a simpler past, not liberal reformers responding to the challenges of industrialism and urbanism. Although Harold U. Faulkner could still celebrate progressivism as *The Quest for Social Justice* (1931), most scholars from Chamberlain's time forward shared his doubts about the nature of the movement.

Thus both George Mowry's *The California Progressives* (1951) and Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* (1955) portrayed the era as one in which the urban middle class sought to restore its position of leadership. The Progressives were not selfless crusaders for popular democracy, these scholars affirmed, but bourgeois victims of status anxiety. Drawn from the old and established professional elite (lawyers, educators, ministers, editors), whose standards of morality and order had been offended by political bosses and a flood of new immigrants, and whose influence had been eclipsed by a new class of industrial and financial plutocrats, the Progressives struggled to restore traditional standards of probity and to regain their lost power and deference.

In a vein somewhat different from Mowry and Hofstadter, Samuel P. Hays in *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (1957) and Robert Wiebe in *Businessmen and Reform* (1962) cast additional doubts on the traditional view that progressivism was basically a people's crusade against big business. In fact, both argued that special interests often favored meaningful reforms that the people opposed. In their view, the Progressives were neither disinterested do-gooders nor disquieted bourgeois but realistic conservatives, a new class of bureaucratic-minded professionals who sought to bring order and efficiency to a chaotic and wasteful society. *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (1967), Wiebe's second book and the most systematic expression of this organizational interpretation, suggested that in their quest for stability and system, the new middle-class Progressives often found ready allies in big corporate managers.

Richard L. McCormick in *From Realignment to Reform* (1981) has recently suggested a variation of this organizational thesis more concerned with uncovering why reform occurred when it did than pinpointing who exactly the reformers were. McCormick found that special-interest groups

arose in New York State during the Progressive period as a result of the rapid changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization. As American citizens came to recognize how business interests often corrupted party politics in an industrial society, and as their attacks on party politicians increased, the party system declined in importance, only to be replaced by special-interest groups, many dominated by businessmen or bureaucratic professionals. Thus, in McCormick's view, progressivism developed because of a political transformation necessitated by modernization and in a direction unintended by those originally critical of existing political arrangements.

Other scholars also abandoned the attempt to trace the social origins of reform to the middle class or to any specific social group. J. Joseph Huthmacher (*Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 1962) and Michael Paul Rogin and John L. Shover (*Political Change in California*, 1970) emphasized working-class (particularly Catholic and immigrant) support for progressive programs. David P. Thelen in *The New Citizenship* (1972) went further to argue the futility of attributing social movements to particular social groups. Noting that Wisconsin Progressives, not unlike their conservative critics, drew their ranks from farmers, workers, professionals, and business people, he emphasized issues more than classes, and concluded that "no particular manner of man became a progressive."

Since World War II, then, historians have redefined the sources of progressivism and its relationship to the business community. Although delineating the conservative tendencies inherent in the progressive mind, most scholars still accept the traditional equation of progressivism with reform. New Left historians, however, have denied even that. Gabriel Kolko, for example, has described the movement as *The Triumph of Conservatism* (1963). In his view, the Progressives were not reformers at all, and the chief characteristic of the era was not orderly change in the public interest but complete control by business interests. Clearly, Kolko's is a minority view, but his total inversion of the traditional interpretation serves as a reminder that history is art, not science.