

The Origins of Progressivism

The Progressive Movement (1890-1918) emerged during a period of profound and, for many Americans, bewildering economic/demographic change. For the first time in the nation's history, large numbers of Americans found themselves living not on farms or in small rural towns, but in crowded, unsanitary, and often dangerous industrial boomtowns. At the same time, a massive wave of immigrants--most of them Southern and Eastern European in origin--began arriving in the United States, altering the nation's ethnic landscape beyond recognition while simultaneously introducing new (and for many natives, threatening) political traditions. As if this were not reason enough for anxiety, an emergent capitalist class had, by the early twentieth century, amassed fortunes of a scope seldom seen in the United States--often on the backs of poor immigrant workers--tipping the balance of social and economic power away from traditional elites such as the clergy, lawyers, and academic professionals and into their own hands. This "plutocracy" of industrial barons was perceived by many as a corrupting force in American life, particularly in the political realm, and one that had to be stopped if traditional values of individual achievement and Republican government were to be preserved and passed on to future generations.

And so, with a missionary-like zeal, "Progressives" set out to save their nation from what they perceived to be its political, economic, and ethnic disintegration. Predictably, the movement drew the majority of its leadership from the ranks of the "old elite:" clergymen who had seen their moral and economic prestige wane in the face of labor unrest and conspicuous consumption; lawyers who resented the intrusion of commercial interests into their once-independent profession (corporations began hiring lawyers during this period); and academics, fearful of the "predatory and immoral" industrialists who, with ever-increasing regularity, found

their way onto college boards of trustees. As for the movement's foot soldiers, Progressivism attracted large numbers of urban, middle class, white Protestants -- both male and female -- from the cities of the Northeast and upper Midwest. This, of course, should come as no surprise either, for it was the native white urbanite who, according to Hofstadter, "found himself outnumbered and overwhelmed [by immigrants]," and who "felt himself pushed into his own ghetto, marked off . . . by the political powerlessness of its inhabitants." (177-178)

But what was it that the Progressive Era reformers hoped to accomplish? The answer is actually quite simple. According to Hofstadter, they sought "to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine [a political form preferred by immigrants]; and with that restoration to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost." In other words, Progressive reformers sought to rescue traditional, one might even say rural, American values--or at least, what they *imagined* were traditional American values--from the dustbin of history, and then to apply these values to life in the emerging urban landscape. That this "earlier America" may never truly have existed--historians generally accept that nineteenth century American farmers were as capitalistic and profit-oriented as any industrial baron--was beside the point; Progressives believed in it wholeheartedly, and in fact, "believed [it] more . . . tenaciously as it became more fictional."

How Progressives intended to accomplish their goals, however, was another matter altogether; for although as a whole they adhered to what historian Samuel P. Hays refers to as the "Gospel of Efficiency," meaning that they believed in the value of scientific methods and top-down management as a means to cure social and economic ills, male and female Progressives

differed considerably from one another on how best to apply this “gospel” to the problems of every day life. Men, for example, had long since enjoyed near-universal access to the formal political process. It was only natural, then, that they sought direct political solutions to reform issues--solutions that authorized government officials and unelected bureaucrats to root out corruption, promote traditional values, and otherwise work towards the common good. Women, on the other hand, were only just beginning to enter the realm of politics (it would be 1919, near the end of the Progressive Era, before American women were granted suffrage), and so had little choice but to use indirect, highly-personalized tactics when seeking needed reforms. It was, therefore, not uncommon for female Progressives to work directly with the poor, such as in the case of settlement houses and schools, or to use their “moral authority” as wives and mothers to place pressure on male government officials.

In one form or another, Progressives took their unique brand of reformism to virtually every corner of the United States. Whether it was the bureaucrat in New York seeking to root and expose political corruption; the settlement house woman living and working amid the nation’s squalid immigrant neighborhoods; the missionary seeking to inject Progressive Christian values into the Chinese, Mormon, and Native American communities of the American west; the professional educator who sought to bring systematization and standardization to American public school curricula; or the vocational school advocate who sought to provide education and economic assistance to African Americans in the post-bellum South, Progressives left few, if any, stones unturned in their quest to restore America to its “former glory.” Eventually, their zeal to bring social justice to educationally and economically “benighted” Americans, as well as their quest to discover “pure American types” amid the ethnic fragmentation of the late

nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, would lead them into the isolated, impoverished Southern Appalachian backcountry.

It was this impulse that led the Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for Women to establish its settlement school in the mountains of East Tennessee. For a thorough account of this event, please see “The Founding of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School.”