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An Obituary for “The Progressive Movement”*

“WHAT WAS THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT?” THIS DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE question, posed in different ways, holds prominent rank among the many controversies which have consumed historians’ patient energies, spawned a flurry of monographs and articles, and confused several generations of students. Progressivism has become surrounded with an abundant variety of scholarly debates: did it derive from agrarian or urban sources? was it a liberal renaissance or a liberal failure? was it liberal at all? was it nostalgic or forward-looking? when did it end, and why? Into this already busy academic arena Richard Hofstadter introduced his theory of a “status revolution” in 1955, generating even more intensive argument and extensive publication. Yet one wonders whether all this sound and fury does indeed signify something. If sustained research has produced less rather than more conclusiveness, one may suspect that the issue is enormously complex. Or one may suspect that it is a false problem because historians are asking a false question. This essay seeks to prove the latter suspicion—more precisely, seeks to prove that “the progressive movement” never existed.

Before entering such an overgrown and treacherous field of historical controversy, one should take a definition as guideline—a definition of “movement.” Significantly, historians have neglected the second half of their concept. They have been so busy trying to define “progressive” that they have overlooked the possibility that the word “movement” has equal importance and ambiguity. According to most sociologists, a social movement is a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society. On the one hand, it has more organization, more sustained activity and more defined purpose than a fad, panic, riot or other

*I am indebted to Frederick A. Bode and Donald G. Mathews, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for their valuable suggestions.

kind of mass behavior. On the other hand, it has a more diffuse following, more spontaneity and broader purpose than a cult, pressure group, political party or other voluntary association. Like such associations, however, it consists of persons who share a knowing relationship to one another. The members of a social movement combine and act together in a deliberate, self-conscious way, as contrasted to a noncollective or "aggregative" group (such as blondes or lower-income families) which has a common identity in the minds of social scientists or other observers rather than in the minds of members themselves.¹

Having distinguished a social movement from other forms of collective behavior, one can then analyze its internal characteristics along four dimensions: program, the values which underlie this program, membership and supporters. Of these four, the program or purpose is indispensable, for otherwise there would be no reason for persons to combine and to undertake action. Amid their many disagreements, historians of the progressive movement seem to disagree least on its goals. In fact, they maintain substantially the same definition as Benjamin De Witt offered in 1915: the exclusion of privileged interests from political and economic control, the expansion of democracy and the use of government to benefit the weak and oppressed members of American society.² More specifically, the standard list of progressive objectives includes: constraints on monopolies, trusts and big banking interests; regulation of railroad rates; lower tariffs; the direct primary; initiative, referendum and recall; direct election of U.S. Senators; women's suffrage; child- and female-labor laws; pure food and drug laws and conservation.

But as soon as some of these issues are examined in detail, the progressive profile begins to blur. For either the historians or their historical subjects have differed sharply as to whether a "real" progressive subscribed to one or another part of the program. The most familiar debate focused on federal policy toward trusts and has been immortalized in the slogans of "New Nationalism" versus "New Freedom." In 1911 Theodore Roose-

¹Ralph M. Turner and Lewis M. Killian, *Collective Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1957), pp. 308-9; Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, *Collective Dynamics* (New York, 1961), pp. 493, 496-97; Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York, 1969), pp. 76-79.

²Benjamin Parke De Witt, *The Progressive Movement: A Non-partisan Comprehensive Discussion of Current Tendencies in American Politics* (New York, 1915), pp. 4-5; Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York, 1954), pp. 1-2, 59; George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America, 1900-1912* (New York, 1958), pp. 41-42, 81-82; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), pp. 5-6, 168, 227, 238, 240, 254, 257; Russel B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870-1958* (East Lansing, Mich., 1959), pp. 183-88; Irwin Yellowitz, *Labor and the Progressive Movement in New York State, 1897-1916* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1965), p. 83.

velt bitterly rebuked those of his alleged fellow-progressives who wanted to split industrial giants into small competitive units. This kind of thinking, he claimed, represents “rural toryism,” a nostalgic and impossible desire for an economic past. Roosevelt preferred to recognize big business as inevitable and to create a countervailing big government. But alas, he lamented, “real progressives are hampered by being obliged continually to pay lip loyalty to their colleagues, who, at bottom, are not progressive at all, but retrogressive.”³ Whether Roosevelt or the rural Tories were the more “real” progressives depends, presumably, on which side of the argument one stands. In any case, subsequent historians have echoed the Bull Moose by typically describing the big-business issue as “one of the more basic fault lines” and as “uneasiness and inconsistency” in “the progressive mind”—although this singular split mentality suggests at least schizophrenia, if not two minds.⁴

If this were the only divisive issue within the progressive program, it would not raise serious doubts about the movement’s identity. But it is just one of many. The Federal Reserve Act of 1913 created, according to Arthur Link, a conflict between “uncompromising” and “middle-of-the-road” progressives.⁵ In another sector of the economy, legislation on behalf of workers split the movement into two factions, whom one historian distinguishes as the more conservative “political Progressives” and the more liberal “social Progressives.” But even the latter group disagreed occasionally on the extent and the tactics of their general commitment to social welfare on behalf of labor.⁶ A final example of progressive disunity concerns the struggle to achieve women’s suffrage, a cause that has generally been attributed to the progressive movement. Yet progressive Presidents Roosevelt and Wilson entered late and grudgingly into the feminists’ ranks; William Borah preached states rights in opposition to enfranchisement by federal action and Hiram Johnson never reconciled himself to the idea under any circumstances.⁷ More general evidence

³Roosevelt to Alfred W. Cooley, Aug. 29, 1911, quoted in Mowry, *Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, p. 55.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 55; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, p. 245. Recently some historians have claimed that Wilson actually shared Roosevelt’s basic economic views, at least before 1913, and that the New Freedom—New Nationalism dichotomy is illusory. So far, however, this revisionist view has not been widely adopted. See James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State: 1900–1918* (Boston, 1968), pp. 162–66; and Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of American Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916* (New York, 1963), pp. 205–11.

⁵Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, p. 55.

⁶Yellowitz, *Labor and the Progressive Movement in New York State*, pp. 2, 78, 112, and chaps. v–vi, *passim*.

⁷Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), pp. 276–79, 307–10; Alan P. Grimes, *The Puritan Ethic and Woman Suffrage* (New York, 1967), pp. 101–3, 129–30; Claudius O. Johnson, *Borah of Idaho*, rev. ed. (Seattle, 1967), pp. 180–83.

emerges from a study of two Congressional votes in 1914 and 1915, both of which temporarily defeated the future 19th Amendment. Using a recent historian's list of 400 "progressives," one finds progressive Congressmen almost evenly split for and against women's suffrage.⁸

Thus, several central items in the progressive program divided rather than collected the members of that movement. This fact alone should raise questions and eyebrows, given the definition of a social movement as a "collectivity." Two other issues also deserve attention because their role in the progressive movement, significantly, has divided historians as much as the progressives themselves. Nativism offers a prime instance. Hofstadter, George Mowry, Oscar Handlin and William Leuchtenburg stress the progressives' more or less vehement repugnance toward the immigrants crowding into urban slums; Mowry even perceives a distinct strain of racism. But Eric Goldman and John Higham dispute this portrait. Although conceding that many progressives were troubled by the influx of foreigners and that a few favored restrictive laws, these two historians claim that progressive sentiment tended to look favorably upon the newcomers. Higham does find a swerve toward nativism among many progressives after 1910; yet Handlin uses the same date to mark increasing progressive cooperation with the immigrants. Still another scholar has at different times taken somewhat different positions. In 1954 Link claimed that immigration restriction was advocated by "many" reform leaders, while in 1959 he attributed it to the entire movement.⁹

The prohibition issue has fostered an equally bewildering disagreement. A few historians refer to prohibition of liquor simply as a progressive measure.¹⁰ Most others, however, discern division within the movement, but they do not draw their dividing lines in the same ways. James H.

⁸Counting votes paired, 19 of 46 progressives voted against the Amendment. Otis L. Graham Jr., *An Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal* (New York, 1967), pp. 213-17; *Congressional Record*, vol. 91, pt. 5, 63rd Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 5108, and vol. 52, pt. 2, 63rd Cong., 3rd Sess., pp. 1483-84.

⁹Mowry, *Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, pp. 92-94; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, pp. 179-81; Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People*, pp. 217-20, 224-25; William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago, 1958), pp. 126-27; Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York, Vintage ed., 1958), p. 60; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1955), pp. 116-23, 176-77; Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*, p. 60; Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's?" *American Historical Review*, LXIV (July 1959), 847. An analyst of Iowa progressives infers from the larger percentage of foreign-born in his progressive than in his non-progressive sample that the progressive movement was not anti-immigrant: E. Daniel Potts, "The Progressive Profile in Iowa," *Mid-America*, XLVII (Oct. 1965), 261, note 19.

¹⁰Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's?" pp. 847-48; Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, pp. 126-27; George B. Tindall, "Business Progressivism: Southern Politics in the Twenties," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XLII (Winter 1963), 93-94.

Timberlake, for example, argues that the liquor question cut the progressive movement into two fairly homogeneous groups: the old-stock middle classes, who favored prohibition; and those identified with the lower classes, who opposed it. When the Senate overrode President Taft's veto of the Webb-Kenyon bill, for instance, nearly all of the midwestern progressives voted dry, whereas half of the wet votes came from the urban-industrial northeast. Studies of progressivism in California, Ohio and Washington confirm this class differentiation.¹¹ But Andrew Sinclair describes instead a rural (dry)—urban (wet) split within the progressive movement.¹² Recent investigations by a political scientist and a sociologist propose a third typology, namely that prohibition was supported by those who were rural *and* old middle class.¹³ Meanwhile, Hofstadter offers the most ambiguous analysis. On the one hand, he exculpates progressives from the taint of dryness, stating that "men of an urbane cast of mind, whether conservatives or Progressives in their politics, had been generally antagonistic, or at the very least suspicious, of the pre-war drive toward Prohibition." On the other hand, he acknowledges that most progressive Senators voted for the Webb-Kenyon bill in 1913 and that prohibition typified the moral absolutism of the progressive movement.¹⁴

In the flickering light of these myriad disagreements about progressive goals, both among progressives and their historians, the concept of a "movement" seems very much like a mirage. Not so, replies Hofstadter. "Historians have rightly refused to allow such complications to prevent them from speaking of the Progressive movement and the Progressive era," he contends. "For all its internal differences and counter-currents, there were in Progressivism certain general tendencies, certain widespread commitments of belief, which outweigh the particulars. It is these commitments and beliefs which make it possible to use the term 'Progressive' in the hope that the unity it conveys will not be misconstrued." Thus Hofstadter finds an integral movement by turning to the values underlying the specific goals. Optimism and activism—these, he says, are the ideological or temperamental traits distinguishing progressives.¹⁵

¹¹James H. Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement, 1900–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 2–5, 152, 163; Spencer C. Olin Jr., *California's Prodigal Sons: Hiram Johnson and the Progressives, 1911–1917* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), p. 54; Hoyt Landon Warner, *Progressivism in Ohio, 1897–1917* (Columbus, Ohio, 1964), pp. 153, 191, 473; Norman Clark, "The 'Hell-Soaked Institution' and the Washington Prohibition Initiative of 1914," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, LVI (Jan. 1965), 10–15.

¹²*Prohibition: The Era of Excess* (Boston, 1962), pp. 95–96.

¹³Grimes, *Puritan Ethic*, pp. 132–34; Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana, Ill., 1963), pp. 7–8, 98–105, 108–9.

¹⁴Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, pp. 287 and note, pp. 290, 16.

¹⁵Hofstadter, ed., *The Progressive Movement, 1900–1915* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), pp. 4–5; similarly, Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, pp. 64–65; Graham, *Encore for Re-*

Discrepancies emerge quickly, however. As Hofstadter himself notes, threads of anxiety cut across the generally optimistic pattern of the progressive mind. Mowry describes the ambivalence even more emphatically: "the progressive was at once nostalgic, envious, fearful, and yet confident about the future," he writes. "Fear and confidence together" inspired progressives with a sense of defensive class-consciousness.¹⁶ Of course, human attitudes are rarely all of a piece, and certainly not the attitudes of a large group of persons. Moreover, this mixture of ideological mood—this ambivalence—fits well into Mowry's and Hofstadter's description of progressives as status-threatened members of the middle class.

Nevertheless, even this more precise generalization about progressive values encounters difficulties, primarily because it is not precise enough. It generalizes to the point of excluding few Americans in the prewar era. As Henry F. May has remarked, the intellectual atmosphere before World War I consisted of a faith in moralism and progress—and almost everyone breathed this compound eagerly. In order to distinguish progressives from others, then, one must specify their values more strictly. Activism, Hofstadter's second progressive trait, at first seems to serve well. Unlike conservatives of their time, progressives believed that social progress could and should come at a faster rate via human intervention, particularly governmental intervention.¹⁷ Yet this ideological criterion works paradoxes rather than wonders. It excludes not simply conservatives, but Woodrow Wilson and all those who subscribed in 1913 to his "New Freedom" philosophy of laissez faire and states rights. In order to salvage Wilson as a progressive, one must expand the definition of progressivism beyond optimism and activism to include a belief in popular democracy and opposition to economic privilege. Wilson's adherence to three of these four values in 1913 qualified him as a progressive, according to Arthur Link, but not as an "advanced progressive." In the latter faction of progressives, who demanded a more active federal government, Link includes socialists, New Nationalists, social workers and others.¹⁸

This expanded definition of progressive values performs the job required of any definition: distinguishing something from something else. But at the same time it recreates the very subdivisions within the "progressive movement" concept which Hofstadter had sought to overcome. Indeed, this internal fragmentation of the concept does not stop with "advanced" and unadvanced progressives. Robert H. Wiebe and other

form, pp. 10–14; Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912–1917* (New York, 1959), pp. 20–25.

¹⁶ *Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, p. 103.

¹⁷ May, *End of American Innocence*, pp. 9–21.

¹⁸ *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, N.J., 1956), pp. 241–42.

historians, for example, have discovered numerous businessmen who qualify as progressive by their support for federal economic regulation and civic improvement. But these same individuals diverged sharply in ideology. They doubted man's virtuousness, believed that progress comes slowly, trusted in leaders rather than the masses as agents of progress, and generally preferred to purify rather than extend democracy. In short, their progressive activism blended with a nonprogressive skepticism and elitism. Do these reform-minded businessmen—"corporate liberals," as James Weinstein calls them—deserve membership in the progressive movement? Wiebe claims that they do, despite the ideological exceptions. Weinstein and Gabriel Kolko go further, arguing that these businessmen formed a salient, if not dominant, thrust of influence and ideas within progressivism; they were not merely supporting actors but stars, even directors.¹⁹ Regardless of their exact role in the cast of progressives, their presence introduces still more disconcerting variety into the already variegated historical concept.

The ideological identity of the progressive movement provokes confusion in one final way. "To the extent that they [the Wilsonian Democrats] championed popular democracy and rebelled against a *status quo* that favored the wealthy," Link has asserted, "they were progressives."²⁰ Yet many progressives, self-styled or so-called or both, spoke in less than wholeheartedly democratic tones. Louis D. Brandeis, for instance, called upon his fellow lawyers to take "a position of interdependence between the wealthy and the people, prepared to curb the excesses of either." Henry L. Stimson nominated for the same mediating role his colleagues in the Republican Party, whom he described as "the richer and more intelligent citizens of the country." Numerous other progressives, drawing upon Mugwump ancestry or teachings, tinged their democratic creed with similar paternalism. As defenders of the middle class, they shared none of the essentially populist fervor expressed by William Jennings Bryan or Samuel (Golden Rule) Jones.²¹ They flinched from such unreserved democrats as Robert La Follette, who once declared: "The people have

¹⁹Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), pp. 210–12; Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State*, esp. pp. ix–xv; Kolko, *Triumph of American Conservatism*. The enigmatic status of these businessmen also holds true for certain politicians. Massachusetts before 1900 instituted many of the democratizing and regulatory laws which progressives would later struggle to achieve elsewhere. In terms of practice, then, Bay State leaders like Henry Cabot Lodge belonged in the progressive movement; but in terms of political philosophy they did not qualify. See Richard M. Abrams, "A Paradox of Progressivism: Massachusetts on the Eve of Insurgency," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXV (Sept. 1960), 379–99.

²⁰Wilson: *The New Freedom*, p. 241.

²¹Quoted in Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, p. 264. See also Mowry, *Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, chap. v, esp. pp. 89, 103–4.

never failed in any great crisis in history."²² Their misgivings toward immigrants, labor unions and women's suffrage accentuate the boundaries within which many progressives hedged their democratic faith.

Considering this mixed set of values which can be ascribed to the progressive movement, it is hardly surprising that old progressives later diverged drastically in their evaluation of the New Deal. Otis Graham has studied 168 individuals who survived into the 1930s and whom contemporaries or historians have considered "progressive." (He confesses, incidentally, that "we cannot define what the word 'progressive' means with precision. . . .") Of his sample, he finds five who were more radical than the New Deal, 40 who supported it, and 60 who opposed it. The remainder either retreated from political concern or left insufficient evidence for evaluation.²³ This scattered, almost random distribution reiterates indirectly the fact that progressives espoused, at best, a heterogeneous ideology.

Analysis of a social movement begins with its goals and its values because without them there would be no movement. Progressivism lacked unanimity of purpose either on a programmatic or on a philosophical level. Nevertheless, these pervasive disagreements need not automatically preclude the use of a single concept, "the progressive movement," to embrace them all. If the differences of opinion correlate with different socio-economic groupings among the membership, then the incoherence would be explained and rendered more coherent. If progressive opponents of women's suffrage, for example, derived entirely from the South (which, by the way, they did not), one could deny that "the progressive movement" vacillated on the issue. One could instead argue that their "southernness" caused some members of the movement to deviate from progressivism on this particular question. The exception would prove the rule. Multivariate analysis would thus find a collective pattern in a seemingly incoherent group of men and ideas.

Historians have indeed sought to extract such correlations. Russel B. Nye suggests a geographical criterion: "The reason for the Midwest's failure to produce a national leader," he writes, "lay in the fact that the movement itself was a distinctively Midwestern thing that developed regional politicians who were chiefly concerned with regional problems. Progressivism in its Eastern phase—as represented by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—attained national power and dealt with national issues, but it was not the same thing."²⁴ Unfortunately, this regional

²² Quoted in Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, p. 186.

²³ *Encore for Reform*, pp. 187, 191–93.

²⁴ *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, p. 184.

dichotomy solves only the problem of leadership; by joining the ideologically incompatible Roosevelt and Wilson, it does nothing to explain how they belong in the same movement.

Mowry offers a more complex geographical categorization when he suggests that the Wilsonian "New Freedom" type of progressive came from regions of farms and small towns in the South and West. Men like Bryan, La Follette and Governor Albert Cummins of Iowa differed from Roosevelt by fearing strong federal government and preferring to destroy rather than regulate trusts.²⁵ Yet this analysis also collides with the facts. A biographical profile of several hundred Progressive Party leaders and their Republican opponents in Iowa in 1912 indicates no clear-cut geographical pattern. On the one hand, 70 per cent of the Cummins progressives came from rural or small-town areas. On the other hand, 54 per cent of the Roosevelt progressives came from the same types of places. The difference does tip slightly in favor of Mowry's thesis, but too slightly to sustain his argument.²⁶

Attempts to establish a coherent pattern of multiple correlations between progressive factions and progressive ideas apparently lead to a dead end. In fact, even the less ambitious research simply to generalize about the movement's membership has produced baffling inconsistencies. The more that historians learn, the farther they move from consensus. In the 1950s Mowry and Alfred D. Chandler drew the first systematic profiles of progressive leaders in California and the Progressive Party respectively. Their studies produced similar results: progressive leaders were overwhelmingly urban, middle-class, native-born, Protestant, young (often under 40 years of age), college-educated, self-employed in professions or modest-sized businesses, and rather new to politics. Almost none were farmers or laborers.²⁷ Subsequent composite biographies of progressives in Mas-

²⁵*Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, pp. 54–55.

²⁶Potts, "The Progressive Profile in Iowa," p. 262. The complete table, in absolute numbers rather than percentages, is as follows:

Progressives			
Roosevelt	Cummins	Standpats	
13	23	23	Rural
56	57	56	Towns 500 to 10,000
36	23	27	Cities over 10,000
12	2	15	Cities 30,000 to 50,000
11	10	5	Des Moines

²⁷Alfred D. Chandler Jr., "The Origins of Progressive Leadership," in Elting Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), Vol. VIII, Appendix III, pp. 1462–65; Mowry, *The California Progressives* (Berkeley, 1951), pp. 87–89.

sachusetts, Washington, Iowa and Baltimore have found virtually identical traits.²⁸ On the basis of such data, Mowry and Hofstadter have devised their famous theory of "the status revolution": the progressive movement, they say, resulted from the attempts by the old urban middle class, whose status was threatened by the plutocrats above them and the workers and immigrants below, to restore their social position and to cure the injustices in American society.²⁹

Recent research, however, has raised questions both about the reliability of these biographical data and about the validity of the "status revolution" theory. Samuel P. Hays, for example, has found that the municipal-reform movements in Des Moines and Pittsburgh were led by upper-class groups and opposed by both the lower and middle classes.³⁰ Progressive leaders in Ohio also deviated somewhat from the accepted profile. For one thing, more than 10 per cent of them were laborers; furthermore, the two outstanding figures, Samuel M. Jones of Toledo and Tom L. Johnson of Cleveland, were *nouveaux riches* businessmen who lacked a college education.³¹ On a more impressionistic basis Joseph Huthmacher has claimed that members of the urban masses played a larger role in the progressive movement than has hitherto been recognized.³²

Most challenging, however, is Otis Graham's statistical survey of 140 progressives surviving into the 1930s. Contrary to the urban character described by Chandler and Mowry, 50 per cent of these men and women were raised in small towns and 20 per cent on farms. Even more noteworthy is their diversity of class origins. Fewer than three out of five progressives were born into the middle or upper-middle classes. Almost 20 per cent had "wealthy" parents, while 27 were born in lower or lower-middle economic ranks. By the time of adulthood almost all of them had climbed into or above the middle class, but the fact is that a significant proportion had not begun there.³³

These various studies refine rather than refute the conventional portrait

²⁸Richard B. Sherman, "The Status Revolution and Massachusetts Progressive Leadership," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXVIII (Mar. 1965), 59-65; William T. Kerr Jr., "The Progressives of Washington, 1910-1912," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, LV (Jan. 1964), 16-27; Potts, "The Progressive Profile in Iowa," pp. 257-68; James B. Crooks, *Politics & Progress: The Rise of Urban Progressivism in Baltimore, 1895 to 1911* (Baton Rouge, La., 1968), chap. viii.

²⁹Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, pp. 135-66; Mowry, *Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, chap. v.

³⁰"The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, LV (Oct. 1964), 159-61.

³¹Warner, *Progressivism in Ohio*, pp. 22-23, 46 note 2.

³²"Urban Liberalism and the Age of Reform," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIX (Sept. 1962), 231-41. See also the analysis of North Dakota progressives in Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 116-20.

³³*Encore for Reform*, pp. 198, 201-3.

of the progressive movement. They relieve its uniformly middle-class WASP appearance. But other research has created greater reverberations, threatening to overturn the entire theory of a "status revolution." Composite biographies of progressive leaders in Massachusetts, Iowa, Washington, Wisconsin, and Toledo, Ohio, have generally confirmed the Chandler-Mowry-Hofstadter profile; but they have found almost identical traits in nonprogressives. That is, the progressives resembled their opponents in terms of class, occupation, education, age, religion, political experience and geographical origin. The sociological characteristics which had been presumed to be peculiarly "progressive" turn out to be common to all political leaders of the era. Hence one can no longer explain the progressive movement as the middle-class response to an upheaval in status because nonprogressives also shared that status.³⁴ Conversely, many businessmen in the towns and smaller cities of the South and Midwest suffered the anxieties of status decline, but they generally opposed change more often than they sponsored it. Prospering businessmen, not languishing ones, furnished both the ideas and the impetus for reform.³⁵ In short, any attempt to interpret the progressive movement in terms of status must confront the disconcerting fact that progressive leaders were indistinguishable from their nonprogressive contemporaries.³⁶

If efforts to identify a coherent progressive program, ideology and membership shatter against the evidence of incoherence, there is still less hope for success in identifying a homogeneous progressive electorate. Historians working in the ante-computer era had to be content with impressionistic data. In general they claimed that progressivism drew political support from urban middle-class voters as well as farmers and organized labor.³⁷ So far only a few scholars have investigated this topic with the sophisticated tools of behavioral social science. According to research

³⁴Sherman, "The Status Revolution and Massachusetts Progressive Leadership"; Potts, "The Progressive Profile in Iowa"; Kerr, "The Progressives of Washington, 1910-1912"; David P. Thelen, "Social Tensions and the Origins of Progressivism," *Journal of American History*, LVI (Sept. 1969), 330-33; Jack Tager, "Progressives, Conservatives, and the Theory of the Status Revolution," *Mid-America*, XLVIII (July 1966), 162-75.

³⁵Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform*, p. 210; Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton, N.J., 1969), pp. 330-31.

³⁶The significance of status anxiety, or status inconsistency—not only in the progressive case, but in general—is very uncertain. Social scientists are earnestly debating whether it bears a reliable relationship to political attitudes. See, e.g., K. Dennis Kelley and William J. Chambliss, "Status Consistency and Political Attitudes," *American Sociological Review*, XXXI (June 1966), 375-82; David R. Segal, "Status Inconsistency, Cross Pressures, and American Political Behavior," *ibid.*, XXXIV (June 1969), 352-59; Gerard Brandmeyer, "Status Consistency and Political Behavior: A Replication and Extension of Research," *Sociological Quarterly*, VI (Summer 1965), 241-56; and Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York, 1966), pp. 86-88.

³⁷E.g., Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's?" pp. 838-39.

in the state of Washington, for example, the progressive electorate tended to comprise the more prosperous and educated population, both in agricultural and in urban-industrial areas.³⁸ In South Dakota, prewar progressives also found support among the rich, but not especially the urban, native-born or Protestant rich.³⁹ In Wisconsin, on the other hand, Michael Rogin has found that the poorer the county, the higher the progressive vote.⁴⁰ His analysis of progressivism in California, South Dakota and North Dakota uncovers still another electoral pattern: namely, a shift from middle-class to lower-class support, and in California a shift as well from rural to urban. Theodore Roosevelt's campaign as Progressive Party candidate in 1912, however, did not conform to this latter pattern. According to Rogin, "the electoral evidence questions whether the Progressive Party was typically progressive."⁴¹

This intriguing, if not bewildering distinction between the legitimacies of big-P and little-p progressivism neatly capsulates the problem. At least since the time that Roosevelt claimed to represent the "real" progressives, the identity of the progressive movement has been in doubt. The more that historians have analyzed it, the more doubtful that identity. In each of its aspects—goals, values, membership and supporters—the movement displays a puzzling and irreducible incoherence. Definition thus becomes a labored process. Arthur Link's effort deserves attention because, in its very concern for precision, it dissolves "the progressive movement."

". . . the progressive movement," he writes, "never really existed as a recognizable organization with common goals and a political machinery geared to achieve them. [In short, it was not a group, or collectivity.] Generally speaking . . . , progressivism might be defined as the popular effort, which began convulsively in the 1890's and waxed and waned afterward to our own time, to insure the survival of democracy in the United States by the enlargement of governmental power to control and offset the power of private economic groups over the nation's institutions and life. [That is, the movement endured through the New Deal and at least into the Eisenhower years, when Link was writing.] Actually, of course, from the 1890's on there were many 'progressive' movements on many levels seeking sometimes contradictory objectives. [The single movement was really multiple and sought not merely various, but inconsistent goals.]" Yet "the progressive movement before 1918. . . , despite its actual diversity and internal tensions . . . , did seem to have unity; that is, it seemed to share common

³⁸Kerr, "The Progressives of Washington, 1910-1912," pp. 21-27.

³⁹Rogin, *Intellectuals and McCarthy*, pp. 144-46.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 120, 148; and Michael Rogin, "Progressivism and the California Electorate," *Journal of American History*, LV (Sept. 1968), 301-3, 305, 308-10.

ideals and objectives. This was true in part because much of the motivation even of the special-interest groups was altruistic (at least they succeeded in convincing themselves that they sought the welfare of society rather than their own interests primarily). . . .⁴²

Link's definition, climaxing in a statement which hovers between paradox and meaninglessness, suggests that historians of the progressive movement are struggling desperately to fit their concept onto data that stubbornly spill over the edges of that concept. Their plight derives largely from the fact that they are dealing with an aggregative group as if it were a collective group. That is, they move from the observation that many Americans in the early 20th century were "reformers" to the assertion that these Americans joined together in a "reform movement." But this logic is elliptical, slurring over the intermediate question of whether the reformers themselves felt a common identity and acted as a collective body. Certainly one would not assume that mystics or conservatives or conscientious objectors constitute "movements" in behalf of their beliefs. Yet students of the progressive movement have made precisely this assumption, only to find that the facts do not form a bridge leading from a progressive aggregate to a genuine progressive collectivity.

When historical evidence resists the historian so resolutely, one must question the categories being used. For those categories are constructs, artifices by which one tries to make sense of the inert and profuse evidence. When they create less rather than more sense, they should be abandoned. As Lee Benson has remarked about "Jacksonian Democracy": "If at this late date the concept remains unclarified, it seems reasonable to doubt that it is solidly based in reality."⁴³

Benson rejected the category of "Jacksonian Democracy" and confronted the historical evidence without the distorting preconceptions which it entailed. He began inductively to make a new and better order out of the same data over which historians had quarreled for so long with increasingly contradictory conclusions. "The progressive movement" deserves the same treatment. Because it does not serve to organize the phenomena in coherent ways, it should be discarded. Modifications and qualifications are not sufficient, as Link's effort demonstrates, because they modify and qualify a "movement" that did not exist in historical reality, only in historians' minds.

Nor is a shift of terminology sufficient. George Tindall has tried, for example, to escape Link's dilemma by defining progressivism as "the spirit of the age rather than an organized movement. . . ."⁴⁴ The notion of a

⁴²"What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's?" pp. 836-37.

⁴³*The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J., 1961), p. 330.

⁴⁴Tindall, "Business Progressivism: Southern Politics in the Twenties," p. 93.

Zeitgeist performs the useful function of periodization, setting these decades apart from the "eras" before and after. But its usefulness stops at the general level of analysis. To speak of a "progressivism" or "the progressive era" is to wrap the entire period within an undifferentiated ideological embrace without saying anything about the diversity within the period. One thereby overwhelms the very distinctions which are crucial to an understanding of the conflicts and changes that took place.

Salvage efforts should be resolutely resisted. A diffuse progressive "era" may have occurred, but a progressive "movement" did not. "Progressives" there were, but of many types—intellectuals, businessmen, farmers, labor unionists, white-collar professionals, politicians; lower, middle and upper class; southerners, easterners, westerners; urban and rural. In explaining American responses to urbanization and industrialization, these socioeconomic differences are more important than any collective identity as "progressives." A cotton manufacturer and "unmistakably Progressive" governor like Braxton Comer of Alabama, for example, favored railroad regulation but opposed child-labor laws.⁴⁵ Urban machine politicians like Martin Lomasney of Boston and Edwin Vare of Philadelphia, who have usually been ranked as enemies of progressivism, supported the constitutional amendment for direct election of United States senators because this reform would reduce the power of rural state legislators. Significantly, Vare's rival, Boies Penrose, whose machine controlled politics on the state level, opposed the amendment.⁴⁶ Thus the conventional label of "progressive" not only oversimplifies the facts, but handicaps effective analysis of them. One might just as well combine Jane Addams, Frances Willard and Edward Bellamy as "reformers," or Andrew Carnegie and Samuel Gompers as "advocates of capitalism."

At this point in historical research, the evidence points away from convenient synthesis and toward multiplicity. The progressive era seems to be characterized by shifting coalitions around different issues, with the specific nature of these coalitions varying on federal, state and local levels, from region to region, and from the first to the second decades of the century.⁴⁷ It may be helpful to think of this period in the way that Bernard Bailyn has characterized the first half of the 18th century. The traditional patterns of social values and political interaction gave way under

⁴⁵Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama*, pp. 122, 243, 276-77.

⁴⁶John D. Buenker, "The Urban Political Machine and the Seventeenth Amendment," *Journal of American History*, LVI (Sept. 1969), 305-22.

⁴⁷See, e.g., Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism*, esp. chaps. xii-xiii; Richard M. Abrams, *Conservatism in a Progressive Era: Massachusetts Politics, 1900-1912* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 235-38; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967), chaps. vii-viii; John D. Buenker, "The Progressive Era: A Search for a Synthesis," *Mid-America*, LI (July 1969), 175-94.

the force of American circumstances, but did not become transformed into a new pattern. Instead, political factionalism and ideological improvisation—what one might call opportunism—became more and more prevalent. Only in the face of British pressure did this fragmentation coalesce sufficiently to form something like a coherent social movement—namely, the Revolution.⁴⁸ In contrast to the 18th century, the diverse factions of the early 20th century never experienced the unifying crucible of a crisis. World War I, despite President Wilson's earnest "progressive" rhetoric, was too remote from the domestic concerns of so-called progressives. The war did not create a progressive movement; on the contrary, it served as yet another issue around which the factions formed new coalitions.

The present state of historical understanding seems to deny the likelihood of a synthesis as convenient and neat as "the progressive movement." In their commitment to making sense of the past, however, historians will continue to search for conceptual order. Perhaps, after further studies of specific occupations, geographical areas and issues, a new synthesis will appear. But if that is to occur, the "progressive" frame of reference, carrying with it so many confusing and erroneous connotations, must be put aside. It is time to tear off the familiar label and, thus liberated from its prejudice, see the history between 1890 and 1920 for what it was—ambiguous, inconsistent, moved by agents and forces more complex than a progressive movement.

⁴⁸*The Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1968).

