Historical Background of the Progressive Era

Historians do not seem to agree on their interpretations of the Progressive Movement or Progressivism – even disagreeing on the use of these terms. Some point to the disunity of this movement and the contradictions within it, while others are uncomfortable with a term that connotes “goodness” and “enlightenment” – features that Progressivism in practice did not always possess. Some scholars see liberal themes in this period, while others have focused on the reactionary strains, such as coercive efforts to regulate people’s lives. Yet even with its limitations, the concept of Progressivism is part of both the language of contemporaries and the writings of historians.

Who were the Progressives and what problems did they hope to solve? Some historians of Progressivism have argued that virtually every group in American society had a hand in the many efforts to solve the problems caused by urbanization and industrialization. Yet for all the disagreement, many historians seem to concur that the spirit and methods of Progressivism came from the native-born, urban middle and upper-middle classes: from doctors, lawyers, ministers, journalists, teachers, college professors, engineers and social workers – and from their spouses. And, while this movement received support from rural Americans, from the immigrant working class, and from the top leaders in business and finance, the Progressive ethos was rooted in Protestantism.

As to where they focused their attention, many Progressives argued for, and indeed achieved, significant political changes at the local, state and national levels that increased popular control of government. These changes include direct primaries, the elimination of boss rule, the direct election of Senators, the first regulations on campaign finances, the adoption of the referendum, initiative and recall in many state legislatures, prohibition of the sale and production of liquor, and women’s suffrage. Progressivism also produced three presidents – Theodore Roosevelt, William H. Taft and Woodrow Wilson – whose achievements comprise what some consider to be this movement’s most important legacy.

In what did the Progressives believe? Some historians have argued that the Progressives’ context was political only on its surface – that at its core it was religious, an attempt by Americans from 2 all social classes, but chiefly the middle class, to restore the proper balance among Protestant moral values, capitalistic competition, and democratic processes, which the expansion of business in the Gilded Age seems to have changed in alarming ways. Progressives wanted better and fairer competition and they wanted every citizen to participate in the polity. Such views can be either reactionary or enlightened, depending on context, and among themselves Progressives disagreed on practically every specific proposal. In other words, they agreed on the need to foster more morality in society, but disagreed about how to accomplish it.

What methods did Progressives use to solve these problems? In dealing with nearly every cause, Progressive leaders began by organizing a voluntary association, investigating a problem, gathering relevant facts, and analyzing according to the precepts of one of the newer social sciences. From such an analysis a proposed solution would emerge, be popularized through campaigns of education and moral suasion, and – as often as not, if it seemed to work – be taken over by some level of government as a public function. The Progressives’ approach reflected both their confidence that social science could remedy the conflicts of an industrial society and their growing faith that government could be trusted to solve problems.

These tactics were pioneered in many cases by women who had time to devote to activities outside the home—something experienced by more and more women in this era. These women had fewer children than their mothers and were increasingly freed from full-time housework by laborsaving devices and by society’s absorption of some of the family’s traditional economic and educational functions. – They also had the inclination to do so. Women recognized that in an urban, industrial setting, care of the home and family – “their” sphere – was no longer just a private matter. Most men still gave them little encouragement to participate in public life, so they invented their own means to improve the world. Beginning before the high point of Progressivism but connected to this movement, women formed many single-sex associations, the largest and most important one being the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Founded in 1874 and led by Frances Willard, the WCTU began by focusing on a range of problems including the welfare of children, but later narrowed its focus to the issue of temperance. In 1889, Jane Addams founded Hull House and thus began one of the most creative products of the women’s movement (and its male allies) – settlement houses. In taking roles on the stage of public life, Progressive women gained unprecedented experience in the hard work of shaping public choices, and this experience intensified their demand for the vote that they finally achieved in 1920.

From outside the ranks of Progressivism, other men and women also presented programs for shaping social choices in industrial America. Sometimes they joined forces with the Progressives and adopted similar methods. One of these groups was industrial workers who, compared to the middle-class Progressives, suffered greater divisions among themselves and possessed less power over others. The Knights of Labor (1869-1890) and American Federation of Labor (that began in 1886) represent two different approaches to organizing workers, with the Knights accepting workers of all skill levels, both sexes and races, while the AFL organized only skilled workers who were male and white. Both groups shared the Progressives’ goals of abolishing child labor and establishing the eight-hour day for workers.

The Progressive Era also had a negative and coercive side. This era saw the spread of disfranchisement and segregation of African Americans in the South and even in the federal government, and the restriction of immigration. Yet these efforts – along with their positive three achievements in improving city life and working conditions, and increasing popular control over government -- all expressed (however diversely) the drive of native white middle-class Americans to improve and control the frightening conditions of industrial life.