

**SUMMARY:** Progressivism was the reform movement that ran from the late 19th century through the first decades of the 20th century, during which leading intellectuals and social reformers in the United States sought to address the economic, political, and cultural questions that had arisen in the context of the rapid changes brought with the Industrial Revolution and the growth of modern capitalism in America. The Progressives believed that these changes marked the end of the old order and required the creation of a new order appropriate for the new industrial age.

There are, of course, many different representations of Progressivism: the literature of Upton Sinclair, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, the history of Charles Beard, the educational system of John Dewey. In politics and political thought, the movement is associated with political leaders such as Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt and thinkers such as Herbert Croly and Charles Merriam.

While the Progressives differed in their assessment of the problems and how to resolve them, they generally shared in common the view that government at every level must be actively involved in these reforms. The existing constitutional system was outdated and must be made into a dynamic, evolving instrument of social change, aided by scientific knowledge and the development of administrative bureaucracy.

At the same time, the old system was to be opened up and made more democratic; hence, the direct elections of Senators, the open primary, the initiative and referendum. It also had to be made to provide for more revenue; hence, the Sixteenth Amendment and the progressive income tax.

Presidential leadership would provide the unity of direction -- the vision -- needed for true progressive government. "All that progressives ask or desire," wrote Woodrow Wilson, "is permission -- in an era when development, evolution, is a scientific word -- to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing and not a machine."

What follows is a discussion about the effect that Progressivism has had -- and continues to have -- on American politics and political thought....

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, a large majority of Americans shared a set of beliefs concerning the purpose of government, its structure, and its most important public policies. Constitutional amendments were passed abolishing slavery and giving the national government the authority to protect the basic civil rights of everyone. Here was a legal foundation on which the promise of the American Revolution could be realized in the South, beyond its already existing implementation in the Northern and Western states.

This post-Civil War consensus was animated by the principles of the American founding. I will mention several characteristic features of that approach to government and contrast them with the new, Progressive approach. Between about 1880 and 1920, the earlier orientation gradually began to be replaced by the new one. In the New Deal period of the 1930s, and later even more decisively in the 1960s and '70s, the Progressive view, increasingly radicalized by its transformation into contemporary liberalism, became predominant.

## 1. The Rejection of Nature and the Turn to history

The Founders believed that all men are created equal and that they have certain inalienable rights. All are also obliged to obey the natural law, under which we have not only rights but duties. We are obliged "to respect those rights in others which we value in ourselves" (Jefferson). The main rights were thought to be life and liberty, including the liberty to organize one's own church, to associate at work or at home with whomever one pleases, and to use one's talents to acquire and keep property. For the Founders, then, there is a natural moral order -- rules discovered by human reason that promote human well-being, rules that can and should guide human life and politics.

The Progressives rejected these claims as naive and unhistorical. In their view, human beings are not born free. John Dewey, the most thoughtful of the Progressives, wrote that freedom is not "something that individuals have as a ready-made possession." It is "something to be achieved." In this view, freedom is not a gift of God or nature. It is a product of human making, a gift of the state. Man is a product of his own history, through which he collectively creates himself. He is a social construct. Since human beings are not naturally free, there can be no natural rights or natural law. Therefore, Dewey also writes, "Natural rights and natural liberties exist only in the kingdom of mythological social zoology."

Since the Progressives held that nature gives man little or nothing and that everything of value to human life is made by man, they concluded that there are no permanent standards of right. Dewey spoke of "historical relativity." However, in one sense, the Progressives did believe that human beings are oriented toward freedom, not by nature (which, as the merely primitive, contains nothing human), but by the historical process, which has the character of progressing toward increasing freedom. So the "relativity" in question means that in all times, people have views of right and wrong that are tied to their particular times, but in our time, the views of the most enlightened are true because they are in conformity with where history is going.

## 2. The Purpose of Government

For the Founders, thinking about government began with the recognition that what man is given by nature -- his capacity for reason and the moral law discovered by reason -- is, in the most important respect, more valuable than anything government can give him. Not that nature provides him with his needs. In fact, the Founders thought that civilization is indispensable for human well-being. Although government can be a threat to liberty, government is also necessary for the security of liberty. As Madison wrote, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." But since men

are not angels, without government, human beings would live in "a state of nature, where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger." In the Founders' view, nature does give human beings the most valuable things: their bodies and minds. These are the basis of their talents, which they achieve by cultivating these natural gifts but which would be impossible without those gifts.

For the Founders, then, the individual's existence and freedom in this crucial respect are not a gift of government. They are a gift of God and nature. Government is therefore always and fundamentally in the service of the individual, not the other way around. The purpose of government, then, is to enforce the natural law for the members of the political community by securing the people's natural rights. It does so by preserving their lives and liberties against the violence of others. In the founding, the liberty to be secured by government is not freedom from necessity or poverty. It is freedom from the despotic and predatory domination of some human beings over others.

Government's main duty for the Founders is to secure that freedom -- at home through the making and enforcement of criminal and civil law, abroad through a strong national defense. The protection of life and liberty is achieved through vigorous prosecutions of crime against person and property or through civil suits for recovery of damages, these cases being decided by a jury of one's peers.

The Progressives regarded the Founders' scheme as defective because it took too benign [positive] a view of nature. As Dewey remarked, they thought that the individual was ready-made by nature. The Founders' supposed failure to recognize the crucial role of society led the Progressives to disparage [criticize] the Founders' insistence on limited government. The Progressive goal of politics is freedom... from the limits imposed by nature and necessity. They rejected the Founders' conception of freedom as useful for self-preservation for the sake of the individual pursuit of happiness. For the Progressives, freedom is redefined as the fulfillment of human capacities [abilities], which becomes the primary task of the state.

To this end, Dewey writes, "the state has the responsibility for creating institutions under which individuals can effectively realize the potentialities that are theirs." So although "it is true that social arrangements, laws, institutions are made for man.... They are means of *creating* individuals.... Individuality in a social and moral sense is something to be [shaped]." "Creating individuals" versus "protecting individuals": this sums up the difference between the Founders' and the Progressives' conception of what government is for.

### 3. Rejection of Consent & Compact as the Basis of Society

In accordance with their conviction that all human beings are by nature free, the Founders taught that political society is "formed by a voluntary association of individuals: It is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good" (Massachusetts Constitution of 1780).

For the Founders, the consent principle extended beyond the founding of society into its ordinary operation. Government was to be conducted under laws, and laws were to be made by locally elected officials, accountable through frequent elections to those who chose them. The people would be directly involved in governing through their participation in juries selected by lot.

The Progressives treated the social compact idea with scorn. Charles Merriam, a leading Progressive political scientist, wrote:

The individualistic ideas of the "natural right" school of political theory, indorsed in the Revolution, are discredited and repudiated.... The origin of the state is regarded, not as the result of a deliberate agreement among men, but as the result of historical development, instinctive rather than conscious; and rights are considered to have their source not in nature, but in law.

For the Progressives, then, it was of no great importance whether or not government begins in consent as long as it serves its proper end of remolding man in such a way as to bring out his real capacities and aspirations. As Merriam wrote, "it was the idea of the state that supplanted the social contract as the ground of political right." Democracy and consent are not absolutely rejected by the Progressives, but their importance is greatly diminished, as we will see when we come to the Progressive conception of governmental structure.

### 4. God and religion

In the founding, God was conceived in one of two ways. Christians and Jews believed in the God of the Bible as the author of liberty but also as the author of the moral law by which human beings are guided toward their duties and, ultimately, toward their happiness. Nonbelievers (Washington called them "mere politicians" in his Farewell Address) thought of God merely as a creative principle or force behind the natural order of things. Both sides agreed that there is a God of nature who endows men with natural rights and assigns them duties under the law of nature. Believers added that the God of nature is also the God of the Bible, while secular thinkers denied that God was anything more than the God of nature. Everyone saw liberty as a "sacred cause."

At least some of the Progressives redefined God as human freedom achieved through the right political organization. Or else God was simply rejected as a myth. For Hegel, whose philosophy strongly influenced the Progressives, "the state is the divine idea as it exists on earth." John Burgess, a prominent Progressive political scientist, wrote that the purpose of the state is the "perfection of humanity, the civilization of the world; the perfect development of the human reason and its attainment to universal command over individualism; the *apotheosis of man*" (man becoming God). Progressive-Era theologians like Walter Rauschenbusch redefined Christianity as the social gospel of progress.

### 5. Limits on Government and the Integrity of the Private Sphere

For the Founders, the purpose of government is to protect the private sphere, which they regarded as the proper home of both the high and the

low, of the important and the merely urgent, of God, religion, and science, as well as providing for the needs of the body. The experience of religious persecution had convinced the Founders that government was incompetent at directing man in his highest endeavors. The requirements of liberty, they thought, meant that self-interested private associations had to be permitted, not because they are good in themselves, but because depriving individuals of freedom of association would deny the liberty that is necessary for the health of society and the flourishing of the individual.

For the Founders, although government was grounded in divine law (i.e., the laws of nature and of nature's God), government was seen as a merely human thing, bound up with all the strengths and weaknesses of human nature. Government had to be limited both because it was dangerous if it got too powerful and because it was not supposed to provide for the highest things in life.

Because of the Progressives' tendency to view the state as divine and the natural as low, they no longer looked upon the private sphere as that which was to be protected by government. Instead, the realm of the private was seen as the realm of selfishness and oppression. Private property was especially singled out for criticism. Some Progressives openly or covertly spoke of themselves as socialists.

Woodrow Wilson did so in an unpublished writing. A society like the Founders' that limits itself to protecting life, liberty, and property was one in which, as Wilson wrote with only slight exaggeration, "all that government had to do was to put on a policeman's uniform and say, 'Now don't anybody hurt anybody else.'" Wilson thought that such a society was unable to deal with the conditions of modern times.

Wilson rejected the earlier view that "the ideal of government was for every man to be left alone and not interfered with, except when he interfered with somebody else; and that the best government was the government that did as little governing as possible." A government of this kind is unjust because it leaves men at the mercy of predatory corporations. Without government management of those corporations, Wilson thought, the poor would be destined to indefinite victimization by the wealthy. Previous limits on government power must be abolished. Accordingly, Progressive political scientist Theodore Woolsey wrote, "The sphere of the state may reach as far as the nature and needs of man and of men reach, including intellectual and aesthetic wants of the individual, and the religious and moral nature of its citizens."

However, this transformation is still in the future, for Progress takes place through historical development. A sign of the Progressives' unlimited trust in unlimited political authority is Dewey's remark in his "Ethics of Democracy" that Plato's *Republic* presents us with the "perfect man in the perfect state." What Plato's Socrates had presented as a thought experiment to expose the nature and limits of political life is taken by Dewey to be a laudable obliteration of the private sphere by government mandate. In a remark that the Founders would have found repugnant, Progressive political scientist John Burgess wrote that "the most fundamental and indispensable mark of statehood" was "the original,

absolute, unlimited, universal power over the individual subject, and all associations of subjects."

## 6. Domestic Policy

For the Founders, domestic policy, as we have seen, concentrated on securing the persons and properties of the people against violence by means of a tough criminal law against murder, rape, robbery, and so on. Further, the civil law had to provide for the poor to have access to acquiring property by allowing the buying and selling of labor and property through voluntary contracts and a legal means of establishing undisputed ownership. The burden of proof was on government if there was to be any limitation on the free use of that property. Thus, licensing and zoning were rare.

Laws regulating sexual conduct aimed at the formation of lasting marriages so that children would be born and provided for by those whose interest and love was most likely to lead to their proper care, with minimal government involvement needed because most families would be intact. Finally, the Founders tried to promote the moral conditions of an independent, hard-working citizenry by laws and educational institutions that would encourage such virtues as honesty, moderation, justice, patriotism, courage, frugality, and industry. Government support of religion (typically generic Protestantism) was generally practiced with a view to these ends. One can see the Founders' view of the connection between religion and morality in such early laws as the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which said that government should promote education because "[r]eligion, morality, and knowledge [are] necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind."

In Progressivism, the domestic policy of government had two main concerns.

*First*, government must protect the poor and other victims of capitalism through redistribution of resources, anti-trust laws, government control over the details of commerce and production: i.e., dictating at what prices things must be sold, methods of manufacture, government participation in the banking system, and so on.

*Second*, government must become involved in the "spiritual" development of its citizens -- not, of course, through promotion of religion, but through protecting the environment ("conservation"), education (understood as education to personal creativity), and spiritual uplift through subsidy and promotion of the arts and culture.

## 7. Foreign Policy

For the Founders, foreign and domestic policy were supposed to serve the same end: the security of the people in their person and property. Therefore, foreign policy was conceived primarily as defensive. Foreign attack was to be deterred by having strong arms or repulsed by force. Alliances were to be entered into with the understanding that a self-governing nation must keep itself aloof from the quarrels of other nations, except as needed for national defense. Government had no right to spend the taxes or lives of its own citizens to spread democracy to other nations or to engage in enterprises aiming at imperialistic hegemony.

The Progressives believed that a historical process was leading all mankind to freedom, or at least the advanced nations. Following Hegel, they thought of the march of freedom in history as having a geographical basis. It was in Europe, not Asia or Africa, where modern science and the modern state had made their greatest advances. The nations where modern science had properly informed the political order were thought to be the proper leaders of the world.

The Progressives also believed that the scientifically educated leaders of the advanced nations (especially America, Britain, and France) should not hesitate to rule the less advanced nations in the interest of ultimately bringing the world into freedom, assuming that supposedly inferior peoples could be brought into the modern world at all. Political scientist Charles Merriam openly called for a policy of colonialism on a racial basis:

[T]he Teutonic races must civilize the politically uncivilized. They must have a colonial policy. Barbaric races, if incapable, may be swept away. . . . On the same principle, interference with the affairs of states not wholly barbaric, but nevertheless incapable of effecting political organization for themselves, is fully justified.

Progressives therefore embraced a much more active and indeed imperialistic foreign policy than the Founders did. In "Expansion and Peace" (1899), Theodore Roosevelt wrote that the best policy is imperialism on a global scale: "every expansion of a great civilized power means a victory for law, order, and righteousness." Thus, the American occupation of the Philippines, T.R. believed, would enable "one more fair spot of the world's surface" to be "snatched from the forces of darkness. Fundamentally the cause of expansion is the cause of peace."

Woodrow Wilson advocated American entry into World War I, boasting that America's national interest had nothing to do with it. Wilson had no difficulty sending American troops to die in order to make the world safe for democracy, regardless of whether or not it would make America more safe or less. The trend to turn power over to multinational organizations also begins in this period, as may be seen in Wilson's plan for a League of Nations, under whose rules America would have delegated control over the deployment of its own armed forces to that body.

## 8. Who Should Rule, Experts or Representatives?

The Founders thought that laws should be made by a body of elected officials with roots in local communities. They should not be "experts," but they should have "most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society" (Madison). The wisdom in question was the kind on display in *The Federalist*, which relentlessly dissected the political errors of the previous decade in terms accessible to any person of intelligence and common sense.

The Progressives wanted to sweep away what they regarded as this amateurism in politics. They had confidence that modern science had superseded the perspective of the liberally educated statesman. Only those educated in the top universities, preferably in the social sciences, were thought to be capable of governing. Politics was regarded as too complex for common sense to cope with. Government had taken on the vast responsibility not merely of protecting the people against injuries, but of managing the entire economy as well as providing for the people's spiritual well-being. Only government agencies staffed by experts informed by the most advanced modern science could manage tasks previously handled within the private sphere. Government, it was thought, needed to be led by those who see where history is going, who understand the ever-evolving idea of human dignity.

The Progressives did not intend to abolish democracy, to be sure. They wanted the people's will to be more efficiently translated into government policy. But what democracy meant for the Progressives is that the people would take power out of the hands of locally elected officials and political parties and place it instead into the hands of the central government, which would in turn establish administrative agencies run by neutral experts, scientifically trained, to translate the people's inchoate will into concrete policies. Local politicians would be replaced by neutral city managers presiding over technically trained staffs. Politics in the sense of favoritism and self-interest would disappear and be replaced by the universal rule of enlightened bureaucracy.