Background to Progressivism
Early Twentieth Century American History

A paradox is a statement that seems contradictory or untrue but may in fact be true. For the nation, the late nineteenth-century's economic growth produced many paradoxes. Men like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie basked in tremendous wealth, while working people huddled in city tenements. The Statue of Liberty first welcomed newcomers in 1886, four years after the United States barred further Chinese immigration. The number of farms and the acreage farmed increased but so did tenancy rates as more and more farmers labored on the land of others. Americans believed fervently in progress, and yet many felt their way of life was threatened by it. Labor unions and the Populist and Socialist parties were examples of groups formed in an attempt to resolve the paradox of progress and poverty.

Continued industrialization of the U.S. economy after the Civil War dramatically reduced self-employment, creating a nation of wageworkers. In 1870, only half of those employed were wage earners, but thirty years later two-thirds of all Americans worked for wages. During the early decades of industrialization, skilled artisans enjoyed some autonomy but mechanization stripped that power as it allowed unskilled workers ruled by a time clock to produce by performing simple repetitive tasks. Industrialization and mechanization of production changed the relationship between employee and employer. Laborers toiled for ten or twelve hours, six days a week, often in unhealthy and even dangerous work places and faced periodic unemployment as the U.S. economy rode a roller coaster of booms and busts. A national labor movement grew out of both some workers’ abhorrence of the wage system and others’ desire to improve conditions and above all to reduce hours.
Workers recognized the power of numbers in their attempts to organize, but until the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 they possessed no federally protected right to bargain collectively. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, employers opposed to unionism increasingly sought and received government help to defeat strikes. Labor history during that time recorded battles between owners and workers that ended when private armies, state militia, or federal troops broke strikes. You read about when President Rutherford B. Hayes called in federal troops to suppress the railroad strike of 1877, how first the Homestead steel plant's owners hired a private army of Pinkerton detectives to drive off striking workers and then Pennsylvania's governor called in the state militia in 1892, and then in the labor conflicts in northern Idaho's Coeur d'Alene Mining District in 1892 and 1899 how the mine owners used Pinkerton detectives, private armies, state militia, and federal troops to crush labor activism. The combined power of the corporation buttressed by governmental authority repeatedly spelled doom for many unions.

The failure of the Populist Party left the United States without a potent critic of the inexorable concentration of corporate power. Shortly after the turn of the century, however, a reform spirit again infused the nation. Called Progressivism, its ethos involved advocacy against political corruption, for social justice, against corporate concentration, and for a more activist government. Progressives abandoned the lip service paid to a laissez-faire philosophy and urged the government at local, state, and national levels to work for social justice. [In an effort to ease confusion about "progressive" in its generic meaning, I use "Progressive" to refer to the reform movement and its adherents that dominated American political discourse from 1900 to around 1920.]
Some Progressives represented old middle-class families who felt their status threatened and their version of Americanism undermined by the flood of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, many of whom were Catholic or Jewish and whose cultural customs differed significantly from those of America's earlier immigrants from northern and western Europe. Other Progressives belonged to the ranks of a new professional middle class, burgeoning as a result of industrialization. Members of this new middle class believed fervently in the principles of scientific management and in the ability of trained experts, like themselves, to solve issues. Although its initial base of support rested with the reform wing of the Republican Party and in the urban middle class, Progressivism attracted adherents from the Democratic Party as well and from rural reform groups such as the Grange. Social reformers such as Jane Addams of Hull House, political reformers such as William S. U'Ren of Oregon, Cleveland mayor Tom L. Johnson, and Wisconsin governor later US Senator Robert LaFollette, and prohibitionists were Progressives.

Expressed most simply, Progressivism arose as a response to the changes brought by urbanization and industrialization. That response was a measured one, however. Progressives saw themselves as (to paraphrase Progressive Theodore Roosevelt) “standing at Armageddon.” The mushrooming popularity of radical movements such as the Socialist Party or the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) signaled to Progressives that conditions must change in the United States or revolution would result. Unlike the Populists, who proposed fundamental economic reforms such as government ownership of the railroads, Progressives prided themselves on their middle-of-the-road approach. Populists achieved their greatest popularity during the 1893 to 1897 economic depression.
when their calls for reform appealed to suffering people. Progressivism, on the other hand, emerged during years of general prosperity and was supported by those who, for the most part, benefited from the economic system. **Progressives favored a more active government not to challenge American capitalism but to preserve it.**

On the **local and state levels**, Progressives argued for the right of citizens to **initiate legislation**, to nominate candidates in **open primaries**, to **vote on laws directly**, to elect and **recall officials**, to have **secret ballots**, and to **revise the tax system** to spread burdens more justly. In the Pacific Northwest, **women won the right to vote** in Idaho in 1896, Washington in 1910, and Oregon in 1912. Paradoxically, while Progressives attempted to reinvigorate participatory democracy, the Progressive Era witnessed dramatic declines in voter turnout.

The Pacific Northwest contributed substantively to the political reforms of the Progressive Movement. The **"Oregon System"** of political reforms originated with Oregon's William S. U'Ren and was widely copied. The **"Oregon System"** included direct legislation measures, the **initiative and referendum**, as well as **recall** of elected officials, a **corrupt practices act**, and a **direct primary** and **direct election of U.S. senators**. Each of these returned political power to the voters. For example, through the initiative, voters passed laws, and with the referendum they confirmed or rejected bills passed by the legislature. Shortly after passing the constitutional amendment for adding the initiative process in 1911, Washington voters used it to pass prohibition in 1914.

At the **national level**, Progressives supported antitrust laws, the establishment of the Federal Reserve System of currency management, lower tariffs, pure food and drug laws, imposition
of an **income tax**, the right of women to vote (**woman suffrage**) and of all voters to **elect senators directly**, the **prohibition** of the sale of alcoholic beverages, and many other reforms. Look at the US Constitution to see **Amendments XVI** (income tax - 1913), XVII (direct election of senators - 1913), XVIII (prohibition - 1919 but repealed in 1933), and XIX (woman suffrage - 1920) to see Progressive Era measures.

Presidents **Theodore Roosevelt** (Republican) and **Woodrow Wilson** (Democrat) identified themselves as Progressives. Roosevelt even founded a short-lived Progressive Party in 1912 because of his exasperation with the conservatism of his own Republican party.

The **Progressive legacy is mixed**. On the one hand, Progressives introduced scores of reforms that remain today. On the other, Progressives displayed an evangelical fervor that often blinded them to alternative views. Prohibition was an attempt to force all Americans to abide by what Progressives regarded as Protestant and therefore, in their view, American principles. Progressives imposed their vision of America on all and lashed out at those who disagreed. World War I exposed the paranoid nature of Progressives.

**Resources**

**Take advantage of some online resources made available by the National Archives to learn more**: "The Way We Worked" is an online exhibit of photographs from the National Archives. Play the 4.5 minute video (plays in your browser) that begins the exhibit to see film from the National Archives about different occupations. Though many of the clips fall outside the time period of this week, you gain an appreciation of working conditions in different occupations including coal miners in 1919.
and automobile assembly-line workers in 1920.
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/twww/

The National Archives also makes available documents connected with the woman suffrage movement that culminated in the Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920. The 19th Amendment states simply: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."
http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/woman-suffrage/

In 2010, Washington celebrated the centennial of granting women the right to vote. Look at the Web exhibit created by the Washington Women's History Consortium and sponsored by the Washington State History Museum. [Spokane's Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture is a co-sponsor of the traveling exhibit.]
http://stories.washingtonhistory.org/suffrage/

The Secretary of State's "Washington History" Website offers some related materials.
http://www.secstate.wa.gov/elections/timeline/suffrage.htm

Here you can view some early newspaper articles about Washington women and the right to vote:
http://www.secstate.wa.gov/history/newspapers_subjects.aspx?s=134

This poster about the history of woman suffrage is furnished by the Washington Secretary of State's office and opens in a new window as an Adobe PDF file:
Woman Suffrage History Poster(pdf)