

Reform Movements of the Progressive Era

by Steven Mintz

The turn of the twentieth century witnessed a sudden clamor for social, political, and economic reform. Progressives boldly challenged the received wisdom in every aspect of life.

BIRTH CONTROL

Of all the changes that took place in women's lives during the twentieth century, one of the most significant was women's increasing ability to control fertility. In 1916, Margaret Sanger, a former nurse, opened the country's first birth control clinic in Brooklyn. Police shut it down ten days later. "No woman can call herself free," she insisted, "until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother." Sanger coined the phrase "birth control" and eventually convinced the courts that the Comstock Act did not prohibit doctors from distributing birth control information and devices. As founder of Planned Parenthood, her work resulted in the development of the birth control pill, which appeared in 1960.

CIVIL RIGHTS

The publication of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* heralded a new, more confrontational approach to civil rights. "The problem of the twentieth century," Du Bois's book began, "is the problem of the color line." In his book, Du Bois, the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, condemned Booker T. Washington's philosophy of accommodation and his idea that African Americans should confine their ambitions to manual labor. The *Nashville Banner* editorialized: "This book is dangerous for the Negro to read, for it will only excite discontent and fill his imagination with things that do not exist, or things that should not bear upon his mind." In 1908, after anti-black rioting took place in Springfield, Illinois, Du Bois and a group of African Americans and whites convened a convention in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, that became the basis for the first country's first national civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. By 1914, the NAACP had 6,000 members and offices in fifty cities.

CONSERVATION

In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt said:

We are prone to speak of the resources of this country as inexhaustible; this is not so. The mineral wealth of the country, the coal, iron, oil, gas, and the like does not reproduce itself, and therefore is certain to be exhausted ultimately; and wastefulness in dealing with it today means that our descendants will feel the exhaustion a generation or two before they otherwise would.

During Roosevelt's presidency, 148 million acres were set aside as national forest lands and more than 80 million acres of mineral lands were withdrawn from public sale.

GOVERNMENT REFORM

A Republican governor in Wisconsin, Robert LaFollette, put into effect the "Wisconsin idea," which provided a model for reformers across the nation. It provided for direct primaries to select party nominees for public office, a railroad commission to regulate railroad rates, tax reform, opposition to political bosses, and the initiative and recall devices to give the people more direct control over government.

LABOR RELATIONS

In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt became the first president to intervene on the side of workers in a labor dispute. He threatened to use the army to run the coal mines unless mine owners agreed to arbitrate the strike. The President handpicked a commission to mediate the settlement.

MEDICAL EDUCATION

Abraham Flexner's 1910 study of American medical colleges transformed the training of doctors. His report led to the closing of second-rate medical schools and to sweeping changes in medical curricula and teaching methods.

PHILANTHROPY

John D. Rockefeller revolutionized philanthropy by setting up a foundation staffed by experts to evaluate proposals and support programs to solve critical public problems. His foundation and others funded social surveys—systematic, non-partisan examinations of subjects by experts.

RADICAL TRADE UNIONISM

"One Big Union for All" was the goal of the radical labor leaders and Socialists who met in Chicago in 1905 and who formed the International Workers of the World. Rejecting the approach of the American Federation of Labor, which admitted only skilled craft workers to its ranks, the IWW opened its membership to any wage earner regardless of occupation, race, creed, or sex.

SOCIALISM

The American Socialist Party was founded in 1901. At its peak in 1912, the party had 118,000 members. The largest socialist newspaper, the *Appeal of Reason*, published in Girard, Kansas, had a weekly circulation of 761,000. In the 1912 election, Socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs received 800,000 votes and Socialists captured 1,200 political offices, including the mayors of 79 cities.

TRUST-BUSTING

In 1902, President Roosevelt instructed his attorney general to file suit against Northern Securities, a railroad holding company, and the beef trust in Chicago, for illegal constraint of trade. The US Supreme Court ultimately ruled on the government's behalf.

State Reforms	
Secret Ballot	Privacy at the ballot box ensures that citizens can cast votes without party bosses knowing how they voted.
Initiative	Allows voters to petition state legislatures in order to consider a bill desired by citizens.
Referendum	Allows voters to decide if a bill or proposed amendment should be passed.
Recall	Allows voters to petition to have an elected representative removed from office.
Direct Primary	Ensures that voters select candidates to run for office, rather than party bosses.

Progressive Era Federal Legislation	
Newlands Reclamation Act (1902)	Encouraged conservation by allowing the building of dams and irrigations systems using money from the sale of public lands.
Elkins Act (1903)	Outlawed the use of rebates by railroad officials or shippers.
Pure Food and Drug Act (1906/1911)	Required that companies accurately label the ingredients contained in processed food items.
Meat Inspection Act (1906)	In direct response to Upton Sinclair's <i>The Jungle</i> , this law required that meat processing plants be inspected to ensure the use of good meat and health-minded procedures.
Hepburn Act (1906)	Strengthened the Interstate Commerce Commission, allowing it to set maximum railroad rates.
Federal Reserve Act (1913)	Created 12 district Federal Reserve Banks, each able to issue new currency and loan member banks funds at the prime interest rate, as established by the Federal Reserve Board.
Clayton Antitrust Act (1914)	Strengthened the Sherman Antitrust Act by outlawing the creation of a monopoly through any means, and stated that unions were not subject to antitrust legislation.
Federal Trade Act (1914)	Established the Federal Trade Commission, charged with investigating unfair business practices including monopolistic activity and inaccurate product labeling.

Progressive Era Amendments	
16th (1913)	Granted Congress the power to tax income.
17th (1913)	Provided for the direct election of U.S. Senators.
18th (1919)	Prohibited making, selling, or transporting alcohol.
19th (1920)	Provided women suffrage (voting).