

The Progressive Era to the New Era, 1900-1929

by Daniel T. Rodgers



Members of the National Woman's Party picket the White House, Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-31799 DLC

We should not accept social life as it has “trickled down to us,” the young journalist Walter Lippmann wrote soon after the twentieth century began. “We have to deal with it deliberately, devise its social organization, . . . educate and control it.” The ambition to harness and organize the energies of modern life of which Lippmann spoke cut through American economy, politics, and society in many different, sometimes contradictory ways between 1900 and 1929, but it left virtually none of its major institutions unchanged. The modern business corporation, modern politics, the modern presidency, a modern vision of the international order, and modern consumer capitalism were all born in these years.

More than in most eras, Americans in the first years of the twentieth century felt the newness of their place in history. Looking back on the late nineteenth century, they stressed its chaos: the boom-and-bust cycles of the economy, the violent and exploitative aspects of its economy and social life, the gulf between its ostentatious new wealth and the lot of its urban poor and hard-pressed farmers, and the inefficiency of American politics in a world of great nations.

A REVOLUTION IN ORGANIZATION

The pioneers in the reorganization of social life on more deliberate and systematic lines were the architects of the modern business corporation. In the aftermath of the 1890s depression, they undertook to supplant the unstable partnership and credit systems of the past with the forms of the modern corporation: broadly capitalized, more intensely managed, and national in scope and market. The reorganization of Andrew Carnegie’s iron and steel empire by the J. P. Morgan banking house into the mammoth US Steel Corporation in 1901 was a sign of the trends to come. By the 1920s, corporate giants in production, communications, finance, life insurance, and entertainment

Lake Ridge Academy – US History – Mr. Isherwood

dominated the economy; the two hundred largest corporations in 1929 owned nearly half the nation's total corporate wealth.

The new scale of economic enterprise demanded much more systematic organization. On the shop and office floor the systematization of work routines was intense, from the elaborate organization of clerical labor at Metropolitan Life to the subdivision of automobile making at Ford in 1913 into tasks that workers could repeat over and over as an assembly line dragged their work past them. In the showcases of "welfare capitalism," a new cadre of personnel managers undertook to smooth out the radically unstable hiring and firing practices of the past, creating seniority systems and benefits for stable employees. By the 1920s the corporate elite was heralding a "new era" for capitalism, freed of the cyclical instabilities of the past. Its watchwords now were efficiency, permanence, welfare, and service.

With similar ambition to escape the turbulence of late nineteenth-century economy and society, progressive reformers undertook to expand the capacities of governments to deal with the worst effects of barely regulated capitalism. Their projects met far more resistance than those of the corporate managers. But between 1900 and 1929 they succeeded in bringing most of the characteristics of the modern administrative state into being. More professionalized corps of state factory inspectors endeavored to safeguard workers from dangerous working conditions, physically exhausting hours, and industrial diseases. Public utility commissions endeavored to pull the pricing of railroad shipping, streetcar fares, and city gas and water supplies out of the turmoil of politics and put them in the hands of expert-staffed commissions charged with setting fair terms of service and fair return on capital. New zoning boards, city planning commissions, and public health bureaus sprang into being to try to bring more conscious public order out of chaotic land markets, slum housing, poisoned food, polluted water supplies, and contagious diseases.

PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

The energy of the new progressive politics was most intense at the state and local levels where civic reform associations of all sorts sprang up to thrust the new economic and social issues into politics. Women's leagues, labor federations, businessmen's good government lobbies, social welfare associations, and investigative journalists led the way, borrowing on each other's techniques and successes.

Despite the more sharply defined constitutional limitations on federal power in this period, visions of more active government filtered up into national politics as well. Theodore Roosevelt set the mold for a much more active, issue-driven presidency than any since the Civil War. Roosevelt brought an anti-trust rhetoric and a powerful interest in environmental conservation into politics. In the national railroad strike of 1894, President Cleveland had dispatched federal troops to break the strike; now in the national coal strike of 1902, Roosevelt offered the White House as a venue for mediation. Pushed by its farm and labor constituencies, the Democratic Party, too, moved toward more active and effective governance. The era's impetus for the creation of a more centralized banking system to stabilize the nation's credit system had come first from elite bankers. Woodrow Wilson and the Democratic Congress incorporated their plan for a central bank into the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, sliding a publicly appointed board of governors over the bankers' plan for self-regulation. Congress took its first steps toward nation-wide child labor restriction, though the Supreme Court struck down the act on a narrow reading of the Constitution's "commerce clause."

The relationship of these progressive reforms to democracy was complex. To break what they saw as the corrupt alliance between business wealth and political party bosses, progressive reformers succeeded in moving the election of US Senators from the state legislatures to the general electorate and, in some states, instituting new systems of popular referenda, initiative, and recall. They championed votes for women, bringing the last states holding out against women's suffrage

Lake Ridge Academy – US History – Mr. Isherwood

into line in the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. But they also tightened up voting registration systems to curb immigrant voters, and they acquiesced in disfranchisement measures to strike African Americans off the voting rolls that had swept through southern states between 1890 and 1908.

IMMIGRATION

The immigrant-filled cities were a focal point for the progressives' mixed feelings about mass democracy. Between 1900 and the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, more than thirteen million immigrants arrived in the United States, pouring into industrial cities largely from the rural regions of central and southern Europe. The new economy, in which six out of every ten industrial workers in 1914 was born abroad, was built on their cheap labor. Out of this new urban working class sprang not only new forms of poverty and overcrowded, tenement living but also powerful political machines, vigorous labor unions, and a socialist party that on the eve of the First World War rivaled any outside of Germany. Middle-class progressives sometimes took the urban masses as political allies. More often, however, the progressives saw the urban poor as objects of social concerns: as populations to be assimilated, improved, and protected from the employers, landlords, and political bosses who exploited them. Progressives inclined less toward talk of class justice than toward faith in a unitary public good; they thought less in terms of protected rights than of mediation and efficient management. They may have placed too much trust in experts, science, and the idea of the common good, but they brought into being the capacities of the modern state to push back against accidents of social fate and the excesses of private capital.

THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

In all these state-building endeavors, early twentieth-century Americans moved in step with their counterparts in other industrial nations. That meant increasing the capacity of the nation to project its interests more forcefully abroad. In the Philippines, seized as a collateral asset in the war to free Cuba from Spanish rule in 1898, a commission led by William Howard Taft undertook to establish an American-style model of imperial governance. In Latin America, where American economic interests were about to eclipse Britain's, US muscle flexing became routine. On a dozen different occasions between 1906 and 1929, US administrations dispatched troops to Mexico and the Caribbean to seize customs houses, reorganize finances, or attempt to control the outcome of an internal revolution.

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 brought these state-building ambitions to a peak. Once the Wilson administration's efforts to trade neutrally with all the belligerents collapsed in 1917, the administration entered the war determined to turn the nation into an efficient social machine for its promotion. Manpower was recruited through a wartime draft. Funds were raised through income tax levies and a public crusade for war bond sales, orchestrated with the best techniques that advertisers and psychological experts could muster. The nation's railroads were temporarily nationalized to coordinate transportation; farmers were organized for war production; the War Industries Board undertook to coordinate industrial production; labor representation rights were granted to boost production and morale; and social workers and psychologists undertook to sort out and ease the transition into war for the almost three million new military recruits. It was only thirteen months between the arrival of US troops in France in October 1917 and the Armistice, but the war gave Americans a model for the efficient mobilization of resources in a common cause that early New Dealers, in particular, would remember.

The First World War gave Americans their first vision of a more effectively managed international order as well. The idea of reorganizing the world for the more efficient management of international disputes had many sources in this period. "Wilsonianism," as it has come to be called, was not

Lake Ridge Academy – US History – Mr. Isherwood

uniquely Woodrow Wilson's idea, though he pushed more strongly for it than any of the other great power leaders who met at the peace conference at Versailles in 1919. When the Senate failed to muster the two-thirds necessary to ratify US entry in the new League of Nations, the defeat came as a major blow to progressives. But the application of the label "isolationist" to the period disguises the heightened role that the United States actually played in the organization of international affairs in the 1920s. The nation cooperated with the other great powers in the era's arms-limitation agreements. American banker Charles Dawes won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1925 for engineering a more sustainable international plan for German war reparations payments, soon further eased by the US government's orchestration of new loans to German borrowers. Although the United States was not a participant in the new World Court created under the terms of the peace treaty, an American jurist served on its panel of eleven judges.

POSTWAR AMERICA

Domestically, the break between the prewar and postwar years seemed much sharper than on the international stage. The year 1919, in which the war economic machine ground suddenly to a halt, was one of the most volatile years of the twentieth century. Demobilization unleashed a wave of labor strikes unprecedented in their scale and the radical character of their demands. Workers tried to expand their wartime gains against employers who were determined to drive back unions and reassert management's prerogatives of control. Fearful of revolution abroad and at home, the Justice Department rounded up and deported hundreds of aliens whom it judged, without trial, to be radical and disloyal. Violence erupted along race lines as white mobs in more than twenty cities poured into African American neighborhoods to attack homes and persons. A new Ku Klux Klan emerged in both the North and South with the goal of intimidating not only blacks but also Catholics, immigrants, and radicals. In the aftermath of 1919's turmoil, Calvin Coolidge, a Republican presidential candidate committed to returning the nation to "normalcy," swept the election in a landslide.

Still, many of the managerial ambitions of the earlier years survived into the "new era." Coolidge was no friend of energetic government, but his commerce secretary and successor, the engineer Herbert Hoover, held much more ambitious ideas of the role of government in promoting business and public ends than he is generally credited with. The massive Hoover Dam public works project was a product of the Coolidge and Hoover administrations; the most important Depression-era agency for financial restabilization, the Reconstruction Finance Administration, began as a Hoover initiative. The drive to prohibit the production and sale of alcohol for consumption undertaken in 1919 and the shuttering of the borders to new European immigration in 1921 were driven in part by moral conservatives' recoil against the mores of the urban, immigrant city. But there were progressives who saw in both measures the promise of a better-organized society, deliberately managing its population movements and curbing the wasteful effects of drunkenness on labor efficiency and on abused wives and children.

The changes that marked the 1900–1929 period were very unevenly spread across the nation's regions and peoples. Southern leaders were not immune to progressive political ambitions. Southern farmers lobbied hard for federal credit systems to supplement private lenders in the cash-strapped South. They turned the system of federally supported agriculture extension agents into a far-flung network of scientific advice, crop marketing assistance, and lobbying help in Congress. But southern progressive reform had its limits. Efforts to enfranchise women, or effectively ban the employment of twelve- and thirteen-year-old children in the textile mills, or enact national anti-lynching legislation met with major resistance. Although there were islands of exception, the South was visibly poorer than the rest of country, much less urbanized, farther from the new consumer society being built elsewhere, and intractably committed to cotton, low-wage labor, and management of its own racial matters.

Lake Ridge Academy – US History – Mr. Isherwood

The most striking change in the South was the massive wartime exodus to the North of African Americans, breaking the ties that had bound most former slaves to agricultural poverty and tenancy since the end of the Civil War. Animosity toward African Americans did not change in the North in this period, where racial pseudo-science flourished in both elite and popular forms, but the labor shortages of the First World War shattered northern employers' bans against African American workers, and the strenuous efforts of southern landlords to keep black labor from fleeing north were not enough to blunt the effects. Almost a half million African Americans fled between 1914 and 1920. Most were rural folk for whom the sharply defined housing ghettos and racially segregated labor markets of the urban North still seemed a major step up from sharecropping and the codes of southern racial subordination. They were joined by aspiring poets, entrepreneurs, jazz musicians, and rights advocates who helped to make Chicago's South Side and New York City's Harlem magnets for a newly self-conscious, urban, and assertive black politics and culture. New racially segregated labor patterns changed the American Southwest as well, as expanding jobs in the farms, mines, and railroads drew hundreds of thousands of workers across the border with Mexico.

Women experienced the era's changes in more complex ways than men. Northern middle-class women had played a defining role in advancing many of the progressive social reforms of the day. Even before they gained the vote, they had established themselves as important politics actors. Working out from woman-dominated social spaces in the settlement houses, women's clubs and colleges, the social-gospel churches, and the social work professions, they undertook to demonstrate women's higher moral sensibilities and their greater sense of responsibility for the larger "civic household." The campaign for political equality for women both altered and undermined those premises. By the 1920s, the settlement-house worker was a far less visible presence in the culture than the bobbed-hair, flapper-clad "new woman"—more independent, more athletic, more eager to compete with men, and more drawn to men's company.

CONSUMER CULTURE

These new women were both the objects and the subjects of the last major domains of society to be reorganized in this period, the industries of entertainment and consumption. Both grew dramatically between 1900 and 1929. It was one of the most important discoveries of the age that even pleasure could be engineered. Moviemakers like D. W. Griffith learned not simply to film a gripping story, but, through new techniques of scene cutting, to pace and manipulate the very emotions of their audiences. Psychology moved into advertisements as goods and pleasures were made to sell themselves by their brands and slogans. Music halls, chain-managed vaudeville, amusement parks, dance clubs, the glittering movie palaces of the 1910s and 1920s, and, finally, radio transformed entertainment in this period, particularly for urban Americans. By the 1920s they lived in a culture much more cosmopolitan—with its African American jazz and dance music, Yiddish comedy, and screen idols who showcased their foreignness—more sexualized, more commercial, and more deliberately organized than any before it.

Together with the new forms of pleasure, a new flood of goods poured out of the early twentieth-century economy as production emphases shifted to mass-marketed goods and household consumers. Canned foods, refrigerators and other electric appliances, factory-made shirtwaists, celluloid collars, and chemically made rayon, cigarettes and soft drinks, snap-shot cameras and phonograph records, together with hundreds of other consumer goods brought the reorganization of capital, production, and advertising into daily life. The most revolutionary of the era's new goods was the automobile, no longer a toy of the elites but a democratic commodity, thanks in part to Henry Ford's determination to make cars so efficiently and to pay his workers enough that even factory workers could own one. By 1929 there was one automobile for every five persons in the United States. Already the automobile's effects on the patterns of suburban living, recreation, status, rural isolation, and even sex were being acutely sensed.

Lake Ridge Academy – US History – Mr. Isherwood

By the end of the era, to be outside the new world of mass-marketed goods—as millions of poor and rural Americans continued to be—was for the first time to be an outsider in one’s own nation. Almost no one in the fall of 1929 thought that the bounty might be at its end.

Daniel Rodgers, the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History at Princeton University, is the author of The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920 (1978), winner of the Frederick Jackson Turner Prize; Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence (1987); Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age (1998); and Age of Fracture (2011).