

The Square Deal: Theodore Roosevelt and the Themes of Progressive Reform

by Kirsten Swinth

Theodore Roosevelt giving a speech in Waterville, Maine, 1902



Progressivism arrived at a moment of crisis for the United States. As the nineteenth century came to a close, just decades after the Civil War, many feared the nation faced another explosive and violent conflict, this time between the forces of industrial capitalism and militant workers. Armed conflict between workers and government and private militias broke out repeatedly. The great railroad strike of 1877 triggered armed confrontation; the 1892 strike at Andrew Carnegie’s Homestead, Pennsylvania, steel plant included a bloody battle; and just two years later, the strike at Pullman Palace Car Company brought Army troops into a violent clash with workers on the streets of Chicago on the Fourth of July. In the same period, cyclical economic downturns spawned massive protests, including marches by millions of largely rural farmers drawn into the populist movement. Citizens even marched on Washington as workers unemployed in the depression of 1893–1894 formed “industrial armies” to demand relief. To increasing numbers of Americans, something seemed dreadfully wrong.

These economic and social crises stemmed from the rise of industrial capitalism, which had transformed America between the Civil War and 1900. By the turn of the century, American factories produced one-third of the world’s goods. Several factors made this achievement possible: unprecedented scale in manufacturing, technological innovation, a transportation revolution, ever-greater efficiency in production, the birth of the modern corporation, and the development of a host of new consumer products. Standard Oil, Nabisco, Kodak, General Electric, and Quaker Oats were among those companies and products to become familiar household words. Many negative consequences accompanied this change. Cities, polluted and overcrowded, became breeding grounds for diseases like typhoid and cholera. A new unskilled industrial laboring class, including a large pool of child labor, faced low wages, chronic unemployment, and on-the-job hazards. Business owners didn’t mark high voltage wires, locked fire doors, and allowed toxic fumes to be emitted in factories. It was cheaper for manufacturers to let workers be injured or die than to improve

safety—so they often did. Farmers were at the mercy of railroad trusts, which set transport rates that squeezed already indebted rural residents. Economic growth occurred without regard to its costs to people, communities, or the environment.

Many were appalled. Even middle-class Americans became outraged as the gap widened between the working and middle ranks of society and wealthy capitalists smugly asserted their superiority. A new class of muckraking journalists fed this outrage with stunning exposés of business exploitation and corruption of government officials. Lincoln Steffens's 1902 *The Shame of the Cities*, for example, demonstrated the graft dominating politics in American urban centers. To many, such a society violated America's fundamental principles and promises. Progressivism grew out of that dismay and a desire to fix what many saw as a broken system.

Progressivism emerged in many different locations from 1890 to 1917, and had varied emphases. Sometimes it had a social justice emphasis with a focus on economic and social inequality. At other times an economic and political emphasis dominated, with primary interest in moderate regulation to curtail the excesses of Gilded Age capitalists and politicians. It was, in short, a movement that is very difficult to chart. Historians most conventionally trace its movement from local initiatives through to the state and national levels. But it is potentially more useful to think of progressivism as falling under three broad areas of reform: efforts to make government cleaner, less corrupt, and more democratic; attempts to ameliorate the effects of industrialization; and efforts to rein in corporate power.

Despite their anxieties about the problems in all three areas, progressives accepted the new modern order. They did not seek to turn back the clock, or to return to a world of smaller businesses and agrarian idealism. Nor, as a general rule, did they aim to dismantle big business. Rather, they wished to regulate industry and mitigate the effects of capitalism on behalf of the public good. To secure the public good, they looked to an expanded role for the government at the local, state, as well as national levels. Theodore Roosevelt declared in a 1910 speech that the government should be "the steward of the public welfare." Progressivism was a reform movement that, through a shifting alliance of activists, eased the most devastating effects of industrial capitalism on individuals and communities. Except in its most extreme wing, it did not repudiate big business, but used the power of the state to regulate its impact on society, politics, and the economy.

These progressive reformers came from diverse backgrounds, often working together in temporary alliances, or even at cross-purposes. Participants ranged from well-heeled men's club members seeking to clean up government corruption to radical activists crusading against capitalism altogether. They swept up in their midst cadres of women, many of them among the first generation of female college graduates, but others came from the new ranks of young factory workers and shop girls. Immigrant leaders, urban political bosses, and union organizers were also all drawn into reform projects.

Still, some common ground existed among progressives. They generally believed strongly in the power of rational science and technical expertise. They put much store by the new modern social

sciences of sociology and economics and believed that by applying technical expertise, solutions to urban and industrial problems could be found. Matching their faith in technocrats was their distrust for traditional party politicians. Interest groups became an important vehicle for progressive reform advocacy. Progressives also shared the belief that it was a government responsibility to address social problems and regulate the economy. They transformed American attitudes toward government, parting with the view that the state should be as small as possible, a view that gained prominence in the post-Civil War era. Twentieth-century understandings of the government as a necessary force mediating among diverse group interests developed in the Progressive era. Finally, progressives had in common an internationalist perspective, with reform ideas flowing freely across national borders.

To address the first major area—corrupt urban politics—some progressive reformers tried to undercut powerful political machines. “Good government” advocates sought to restructure municipal governments so that parties had little influence. The National Municipal League, which had Teddy Roosevelt among its founders, for example, supported election of at-large members of city councils so that council members could not be beholden to party machines. Ironically, such processes often resulted in less popular influence over government since it weakened machine politicians who were directly accountable to immigrant and working-class constituents. The good government movement attracted men of good standing in society, suspicious of the lower classes and immigrants, but angered by effects of business dominance of city governments. Other reforms, however, fostered broader democratic participation. Many states adopted the initiative (allowing popular initiation of legislation) and referendum (allowing popular vote on legislation) in these years, and in 1913, the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution mandated the direct election of US Senators. Perhaps the most dramatic campaign for more democratic government was the woman suffrage movement which mobilized millions to campaign for women’s right to the franchise.

Ameliorating the effects of industrialization had at its heart a very effective women’s political network. At settlement houses, for example, black and white woman reformers, living in working-class, urban neighborhoods, provided day nurseries, kindergartens, health programs, employment services, and safe recreational activities. They also demanded new government accountability for sanitation services, for regulation of factory conditions and wages, for housing reform, and for abolishing child labor. Leaders like Jane Addams and Ida B. Wells-Barnett in Chicago as well as Lillian Wald in New York pioneered a role for city and state governments in securing the basic social welfare of citizens. This strand of progressive reform more broadly involved improving city services, like providing garbage pickup and sewage disposal. Some activists concentrated on tenement reform, such as New York’s 1901 Tenement House Act, which mandated better light, ventilation, and toilets. Laws protecting worker health and safety mobilized other reformers. Protective legislation to limit the hours worked by women, abolish child labor, and set minimum wages could be found across the country. Twenty-eight states passed laws to regulate women’s working hours and thirty-eight set new regulations of child labor in 1912 alone.

The second major area—the effort to rein in corporate power—had as its flagship one of the most famous pieces of legislation of the period: the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890. The Act outlawed

business combination “in restraint of trade or commerce.” In addition to trust-busting, progressive reformers strengthened business regulation. Tighter control of the railroad industry set lower passenger and freight rates, for example. New federal regulatory bureaucracies, such as the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Federal Reserve System, and the Federal Trade Commission, also limited business’s free hand. These progressive initiatives also included efforts to protect consumers from the kind of unsavory production processes revealed by Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*. Somewhat unexpectedly, business leaders themselves sometimes supported such reform initiatives. Large meatpackers like Swift and Armour saw federal regulation as a means to undercut smaller competitors who would have a harder time meeting the new standards.

Among progressivism’s greatest champions was Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt had a genius for publicity, using the presidency as a “bully pulpit” to bring progressivism to the national stage. Roosevelt’s roots were in New York City and state government, where he served as state assemblyman, New York City police commissioner, and governor. As governor, he signaled his reformist sympathies by supporting civil service reform and a new tax on corporations. Republican Party elders found him so troublesome in the governor’s office that in 1900 they proposed him for the vice presidency, a sure-fire route to political insignificance. The assassination of William McKinley just months into his presidency, however, vaulted Roosevelt into national leadership of progressive reform.

Although Roosevelt was known as a trust buster, his ultimate goal was not the destruction of big business but its regulation. For Roosevelt the concentration of industry in ever fewer hands represented not just a threat to fair markets but also to democracy as wealthy industrialists consolidated power in their own hands. He turned to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act to challenge business monopolies, bringing suit against the Northern Securities Company (a railroad trust) in 1902. The Justice Department initiated forty-two additional anti-trust cases during his presidency. During Roosevelt’s second term, regulating business became increasingly important. Roosevelt had always believed big business was an inevitable economic development; regulation was a means to level the playing field and provide the “square deal” to citizens, as Roosevelt had promised in his re-election campaign. He supported laws like the 1906 Hepburn Act, which regulated the railroads, and the same year’s Pure Food and Drug and Meat Inspection Acts, which controlled the drug and food industries.

Although not always successful in achieving his goals, Roosevelt brought to the federal government other progressive causes during his presidency, including support for workers’ rights to organize, eight-hour workdays for federal employees, workers’ compensation, and an income and inheritance tax on wealthy Americans. Under his leadership, conservation of the nation’s natural resources became a government mandate. He encouraged Congress to create several new national parks, set aside sixteen national monuments, and establish more than fifty wildlife preserves and refuges. Through the new Bureau of Fisheries and National Forest Service, Roosevelt emphasized efficient government management of resources, preventing rapacious use by private businesses and landowners.

After leaving the presidency in 1909, Roosevelt initially withdrew from politics. But his dismay at the slow pace of reform under his successor, William Howard Taft, prompted him to return for the 1912 election. When Republicans failed to nominate him, he broke with the party and formed the Progressive Party. He campaigned under the banner of a “New Nationalism.” Its tenets united the themes of his leadership of progressivism: faith in a strong federal government, an activist presidency, balancing of public interest and corporate interest, and support for a roll-call of progressive reform causes, from woman suffrage and the eight-hour work day to abolishing child labor and greater corporate regulation.

While progressives guided the country down the path it would follow for much of the twentieth century toward regulation of the economy and government attention to social welfare, it also contained a strong streak of social control. This was the darker side of the movement. Progressive faith in expert leadership and government intervention could justify much that intruded heavily on the daily lives of individual citizens. The regulation of leisure activities is a good example. Commercial leisure—dance halls, movies, vaudeville performances, and amusement parks like Coney Island—appeared to many reformers to threaten public morality, particularly endangering young women. Opponents famously deemed Coney Island “Sodom by the Sea.” Seeking to tame such activities, reformers, most of whom were middle class, promoted “Rules for Correct Dancing” (no “conspicuous display of hosiery”; no suggestive dance styles) and enacted a National Board of Censorship for movies. These rules largely targeted working-class and youth entertainments with an eye to regulating morality and behavior.

Eugenics also garnered the support of some progressive reformers. Eugenics was a scientific movement which believed that weaker or “bad” genes threatened the nation’s population. Eugenicists supported laws in the name of the rational protection of public health to compel sterilization of those with “bad” genes—typically focusing on those who were mentally ill or in jails, but also disproportionately affecting those who were not white. Any assessment of the progressive movement must grapple with this element of social control as reformers established new ways to regulate the daily lives of citizens, particularly those in the lower ranks of society, by empowering government to set rules for behavior. It was often middle-class reformers who made their values the standard for laws regulating all of society.

Progressive reform’s greatest failure was its acquiescence in the legal and violent disfranchisement of African Americans. Most progressive reformers failed to join African American leaders in their fight against lynching. Many endorsed efforts by southern progressives to enact literacy tests for voting and other laws in the name of good government that effectively denied black Americans the right to vote and entrenched Jim Crow segregation. By 1920, all southern states and nine states outside the South had enacted such laws.

Progressivism’s defining feature was its moderateness. Progressives carved out what historian James Kloppenberg describes as a “via media,” a middle way between the laissez-faire capitalism dominant in the Gilded Age and the socialist reorganization many radicals of the period advocated. It was a movement of accommodation. Some regulation of business joined some protection of workers, but no dramatic overhaul of the distribution of wealth or control of the economy occurred.

Instead, progressives bequeathed the twentieth century faith in an active government to moderate the effects of large-scale capitalism on citizens and communities. Government would secure the public claim to unadulterated food, safer workplaces, decent housing, and fair business practices, among many other things. Theodore Roosevelt epitomized progressive rebuke of the outrageous excesses of capitalists and their cronies, but also typified progressive accommodation of the new order. He opposed unregulated business, deemed monopolies antithetical, defended labor unions, supported consumer protections, and initiated government protection of natural resources. Yet he never believed we could turn away from the new economy and the transformation it had wrought in American society. The balancing act of reform and regulation that Roosevelt and other progressives pursued led the nation through the moment of crisis at the end of the nineteenth century and accommodated it to the modern industrial society of the twentieth century.

Kirsten Swinth is associate professor of history at Fordham University and the author of *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870–1930 (2001)*.