CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: URBAN AMERICA AND THE PROGRESSIVE ERA, 1900–1917

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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
*The political, social, and intellectual roots of progressive reform
*Tensions between social justice and social control
*The urban scene and the impact of new immigration
*Political activism by the working class, women, and African Americans
*Progressivism in national politics

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: THE HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT HOUSE:
WOMEN SETTLEMENT HOUSE WORKERS CREATE A COMMUNITY OF
REFORM Lillian Wald’s Henry Street Settlement began as a visiting nurse service, but she expanded into a new base of operation. At Henry Street she created a community of college-educated women who lived among the urban poor and tried to improve their lives. Most settlement workers did not make a career out of this work, but several of the women went on to become influential political reformers. The settlement house was in the midst of an overcrowded neighborhood. The workers served the community by promoting health care, cultural activities, and, later by promoting reform legislation. The vignette illustrates the way that improving the lives of the immigrant poor required middle class involvement and new laws.

THE CURRENTS OF PROGRESSIVISM Progressivism drew from deep roots in American communities and spread out to become a national movement. Progressives articulated American fears of the growing concentration of power and the excesses of industrial capitalism and urban growth. Progressives were not revolutionaries but they did reject the older Social Darwinist assumptions in favor of the idea that government should intervene to address social problems. Progressives drew upon evangelical Protestantism, especially the Social Gospel movement, and the scientific attitude to promote social change. By the 1890s, college-educated female reformers were establishing settlement houses to serve the immigrant communities, but this service led them to confront numerous social issues. Jane Addams founded Hull House in Chicago in 1889. Working there served as an alternative to marriage for educated women who provided crucial services for slum dwellers. Florence Kelley worked there and later wrote reports that influenced labor legislation.

Women worked outside political institutions partly because they could not vote, but also because the existing political machines were a closed and corrupt system. Machines offered jobs and other services to immigrants in exchange for votes. They also drew support from businesses (especially from the licit and illicit entertainment industry) and provided kickbacks and protection in return. By the early 20th century, machines began promoting welfare legislation, often allying themselves with progressive reformers, but reformers blamed the machines for many urban ills. Political progressivism arose in cities to combat machines and address deteriorating conditions, such as impure water. They sought professional, nonpartisan administration to improve government efficiency. Following a tidal wave in Galveston, Texas, reformers pushed through a commissioner system in which each elected official was directly responsible for a different department. Other cities adopted city manager plans. Reformers like Samuel Jones of Toledo sought municipal ownership of utilities and pursued other welfare issues.

At the state level, Progressives became a powerful political force. Governor (and then Senator) Robert La Follette of Wisconsin forged a farmer-labor-small business alliance to push through statewide reforms like tougher corporate taxes. Other state-level reforms included Oregon’s referendum and initiative amendments that allowed voters to bypass legislatures and enact laws themselves. Western progressives like California’s Hiram Johnson targeted railroad influence. Southern progressives pushed through various reforms such as improved educational facilities, but at the same time supported laws that relegated African Americans to second-class citizenship.

A new breed of investigative journalist began exposing the public to the plight of slum life.
Beginning with *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob Riis and *McClure’s* magazine, muckrakers published accounts of urban poverty, unsafe labor conditions, as well as corruption in government and business. Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* exposed the unsanitary conditions in Chicago’s meatpacking industry. Muckraking mobilized national opinion showing that reform campaigns were not limited to the local community. The intellectual community also became involved in reform as the emerging social sciences provided empirical studies used by reformers to push for reforms. Early 20th-century thinkers like Lester Frank Ward challenged some of the intellectual supports for the prevailing Social Darwinism. John Dewey’s ideas on education and John R. Commons and Richard Ely’s ideas on labor were influential in shaping public policy. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., both as a scholar and Supreme Court Justice, attacked constitutional interpretations that had prevented states from passing legislation that protected public interests. Sociological jurisprudence was used to support points instead of legal arguments.

**SOCIAL CONTROL AND ITS LIMITS** Many middle-class progressives worried about the increased numbers of urban immigrants and sought methods of social control. Temperance groups like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League pushed for restrictions or bans on alcohol. Native-born, small town, and rural Protestants generally supported prohibition while recent immigrants opposed it. Reformers also attacked prostitution, an illicit trade that was connected with corrupt city machines. A national movement used the media to try and ban the “white slave” traffic allegedly promoted by foreigners. Progressives investigated prostitution and documented its dangers, though they were unable to understand why women took it up. Progressive reform helped close down brothels, but they were replaced by more vulnerable street-walkers.

Reformers also sought to “improve” recreational activities. They were aghast at the new urban commercial amusements, such as amusement parks, vaudeville, and the most popular venue: the movies. Seeking profits and middle-class support, reformers and movie producers and exhibitors in New York City established the National Board of Censorship to review movies and pressure filmmakers to avoid sensational subjects. For many progressives, the school was the key agency to break down the parochial ethnic neighborhood and “Americanize” immigrants. Expansion and bureaucratization characterized educational development as students started earlier and stayed later in school. High school evolved as comprehensive institutions that offered college preparatory and vocational education.

**WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITIES AND PROTEST** The early twentieth century saw a tremendous growth in the size of the working class. This group added their voices to those calling for social justice. Sixty percent of the industrial labor force was foreign-born, mostly unskilled, workers from southern and eastern Europe. Driven out by the collapse of peasant agriculture and persecution, the new immigrants depended on family and friends to help them get situated. Many worked long hours for pay that failed to keep them out of poverty. Non-European immigrants included French-Canadians who worked in New England textile mills. Many Mexican immigrants came as seasonal farm workers, but a large number stayed and established communities throughout the southwest. The Japanese worked in fishing and truck farming. In large cities, immigrants established communities in densely packed ghettos. New York City became the center of Jewish immigrants, many of whom worked at piece-rates in the ready-to-wear garment industry. A general strike by 20,000 workers contributed to the growth of the
International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the organization of unskilled workers. The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City killed 146 woman garment workers and led reformers to join forces with political bosses to create a factory investigation commission and to enact laws to protect workers.

Some industrial workers lived in communities often dominated by a single corporation that owned the houses, the stores, and regulated life. Still, ethnic groups maintained many cultural traditions. Factories were dangerous places with high accident and death rates. Women supplemented the family income by taking in boarders and raising food. Immigrants resisted the discipline of the factory by taking time off for cultural activities. They learned to spread out the work by slowing down and became increasingly involved in unions. In the mining communities of the West, corporate power and violent labor conflict was most evident. In 1914, a clash between private guards and strikers in Ludlow, Colorado left 14 dead.

The leading labor organization at the turn of the century was the American Federation of Labor (AFL) that generally represented skilled workers in trade unions. With the exception of the mineworkers, most AFL unions were not interested in organizing unskilled immigrants, nor did it admit women or African Americans. The AFL was on the defensive from open shop campaigns promoted by trade associations such as the National Association of Manufacturers and court injunctions that barred picketing and boycotting. Radical workers, especially from the mining camps in the West, organized the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Led by “Big Bill” Haywood, the IWW tried to form unions of the unorganized lowest paid workers. The IWW used direct action, including strikes. The IWW gained temporary power in the east but remained a force in the West. A small community of middle-class artists and intellectuals, “Village bohemians,” supported the IWW and other radical causes, including birth control and free sexuality. From their haven in Greenwich Village, New York City they attacked middle-class morality and supported working-class radicalism.

WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS AND BLACK AWAKENING Middle-class women’s lives were changing rapidly. More were receiving an education, more were becoming involved in various clubs involved in civic activities that brought members in contact with working-class women and with the world beyond their homes. As a result, women become involved in numerous reforms, from seeking child labor laws to consumer safety and sanitation. Margaret Sanger promoted wider access to contraceptives and opened a birth control clinic in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn.

The turn of the century was an intensely racist era. Segregation was institutionalized throughout the South. Violent attacks on blacks were supported by vicious characterizations in popular culture. Booker T. Washington emerged as the most prominent black leader. Washington advocated black accommodation and urged that blacks focus on self-reliance and economic improvement. His message won him support from leading philanthropists and politicians. W. E. B. DuBois, a scholar and activist, criticized Washington for accepting “the alleged inferiority of the Negro.” DuBois supported programs that sought to attack segregation, the right to vote, and secured city equality. He helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to struggle to overturn barriers to equality.
**NATIONAL PROGRESSIVISM** An assassin’s bullet made Theodore Roosevelt president in 1901. Roosevelt viewed the presidency as a “bully pulpit” to promote progressive reforms. He pressured mine owners into a settlement that won better pay for miners. He directed the Justice Department to prosecute a number of unpopular monopolies, actions that won him the sobriquet “trustbuster.” But Roosevelt accepted centralization as a fact of modern, economic life. Rather than trust busting, he favored regulation. Two of the most famous regulatory laws were the Hepburn Act that strengthened the Interstate Commerce Commission and the Pure Food and Drug Act. He founded the Forest Service and supported the conservation efforts of John Muir, the founder of the modern environmental movement. A bitter fight pitted developers and environmentalists over a dam in Yosemite National Park.

In his second term Roosevelt announced his Square Deal program as a way to stave off radicalism through progressive reform. His Republican successor, William Howard Taft, supported some of his reforms, but Taft wound up alienating many progressives. Roosevelt then challenged Taft for Republican leadership. In the 1912 election, Roosevelt ran for president on the new Progressive Party touting his New Nationalism program. The Democrats ran a progressive candidate, Woodrow Wilson, who promoted his New Freedom platform. The Socialist Party, which had rapidly grown in strength, nominated Eugene Debs. Wilson won 42 percent of the vote, enough to defeat the divided Republicans. Wilson followed Roosevelt’s lead in promoting an activist government. He lowered tariffs, pushed through a graduated income tax, and restructured the banking and currency system under the Federal Reserve Act. He expanded the nation’s anti-trust authority and established the Federal Trade Commission. On social reforms Wilson proved more cautious.

**CONCLUSION** Progressives had changed American life, mobilized American communities, and enhanced the role of government.

**Lecture Suggestions**

1. Many students do not understand that the progressives were not socialists. Students assume that any form of government regulation is “socialistic.” A lecture on how the progressives sought to make capitalism work more effectively will clarify the progressive viewpoint. Gabriel Kolko’s *The Triumph of Conservatism* (Free Press, 1963) overstates its case, but demonstrates how progressives sought to strengthen capitalism, not challenge it.

2. Look at the changes that progressives promoted on the local level by examining a single case. Samuel P. Hayes’s old study of Pittsburgh (*Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 1964 and reprinted in numerous places) describes how reform actually strengthened the power of elites. By creating at-large districts and centralizing power, a new elite took control of city government. This might balance some of the text’s more positive spin on urban reform.

3. Make the connection between the material on African American activism with the material in Chapter Seventeen on the decline of black status. Make the connection with the emergence of Jim Crow and Ida B. Wells’s campaign against lynching in Chapter

**Discussion Questions**

1. What was wrong with the urban machine, from the progressives' point of view? Were we better off with it than without it?

2. Why were reformers so interested in changing the behavior of the poor? Would we have been better off if they had minded their own business?

3. Who offered labor a better deal—the AFL or the IWW? Does it depend on what kind of laborer one was?

4. Whose approach seems more appropriate for African Americans—that of Booker T. Washington or that of W. E. B. DuBois?

5. Progressives are sometimes confused with socialists. What was the difference between the approaches of Theodore Roosevelt and Eugene Debs’s?

**Out of Class Activity**

The idea of “muckraking” continues to be popular with students. Many Americans like to watch television shows that purport to expose injustices and corruption. Students could present a comparison of progressive era muckraking with the equivalent of today. Many libraries have microfilm copies of *McClure’s* or other early twentieth-century muckraking journals. Students could compare these with magazines like *Mother Jones* or TV programs like “60 Minutes” or “Hard Copy.”

**If You're Going to Read One Book on the Subject**

John Milton Cooper, Jr.’s *The Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900–1920* (Norton, 1990) is an excellent overview that focuses on political changes.

**Audio-Visual Aids**

“TR and His Times” hosted by Bill Moyers. Explores Roosevelt’s life and how he affected his own age. (Color, 58 minutes, 1982)

“Eugene Debs and the American Movement” A biographical sketch of Debs. Shows strikes and government repression of worker attempts to organize. Helps students understand the difference between progressivism and socialism. (Color, 44 minutes, 1978)