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Progressive Era- Dr. Varley

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The Progressive Era was a period in American History which began during the late-1880s and lasted until the late 1910s. This brief interlude period, between the war years of 1865 and 1917, was a time of drastic change due to an every developing American landscape. During these years America saw a drastic push away from its traditional agrarian roots into a more industrialized nation. This growth from an agrarian nation to an industrial power, although responsible for many advances, brought many new challenges to the American ideal. To better understand the importance of the Progressive era you must first learn its characteristics, its role in government, and the definition of what it meant to be a Progressive.

Although the Progressive Era only lasted around 20 years, it is a very distinct period in American history that can easily be defined by its characteristics. The characteristics of the Progressive Era are: a period between 1890 and 1916 marked by a drastic increase in industrialization, immigration, and city growth, a period defined by intense activism and social, political, and economic reform, and a period marked by an increase in government control and regulations.

The first characteristic of the Progressive Era is a period in American history defined by intense growth and industrialization, particularly in the northern part of the United States. Beginning subsequent to the end of the Civil War, the US began to develop the “Machine Age” or “Industrial Revolution.” This was a period where machines were taking over industries that where once produced by hand. Innovations such as the conveyer belt were invented, horse power was transformed into steam locomotives, electric streetcars, and gasoline powered automobiles, kerosene lamps were replace by electric bulbs, and networks of railroads, more than 100,000 miles of track between 1877 and 1893, were developed to be able to transport goods nationwide.[[1]](#footnote-1) Meat packing industries, Andrew Carnegie’s steel industry, and oil industries like that of John D, Rockefellers boomed, forming monopolies on their industries and increasing the need for cheap labor.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Between the late 1890s and mid 1910s the United States saw an influx of around 15 million immigrants. The sudden growth in American industries, the Irish Potato Famine, and conflicts in Eastern Europe drew immigrants to America in search of a more promising life. The increase in foreign immigration cause a large radical growth in cities and urban living and it also provided an increasing conflict amongst American born laborers, who now had to fight for ampule housing and low wage jobs. The implementing of new technology, especially on American farms, increased production and competition which led to lower prices that drove many youth to flee their small town in search of jobs.[[3]](#footnote-3) This fight against increasing immigration, overcrowded cities, big industries, and the corruption of youth was the spark that started the Progressive Era.

This spark is responsible for the second Progressive Era characteristic intense activism and social, economic, and political reform. By the early 1890s, many Americans were becoming concerned and discontent with the development of inner cities, industrial working conditions, and the status of America as a whole. As early as 1842 you can see the first signs of activism amongst factory workers with the court case of Commonwealth v Hunt legalized the formation of labor unions. By the 1880s, 1890s America is beginning to see this activism form into radical strikes such as the Haymarket Massacre of 1886 or the Pullman Strike of 1894, and the development of organized labor such as the Knights of Labor, American Federation of Labor, and the American Railway Union. By the 1900s, these activists, who called themselves “progressives”, sought to reform American cities and the industrial society as a whole to improve better living conditions. Progressives began by targeting heavily industrial and immigrant populated areas. Progressives theorized that the cause of their strife was connected to poor living conditions, lack of personal hygiene and morals (because these are scum immigrants not real Americans), low wages, and drunkenness.[[4]](#footnote-4) A great example of social reform is the development of Hull House in Chicago, September 18, 1889, by progressives Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Addams and her Hull House were responsible for establishing playgrounds, bathhouse, medical clinics, school programs, and trash pickup in inner city Chicago. The development of “social, education, and artistic programs” was Addams way of providing social reform and Americanizing Immigrants, and it was quite successful, lasting two decades and becoming the “flagship” for all other similar civic programs.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The third characteristic of the Progressive Era is the role of government in economic and political reform. The role of government between the year of 1890 and 1916 is important because the US government saw an increase in government control and regulation. By the early 1880s, Muckrakers were exposing the corruption of local and state level governments. With these problems at the state and local levels the national government lobbied by progressive sought out to reform the United States, and it successfully did. During the Progressive Era saw the implementation of 3 amendments to the Constitution, the Sixteenth Amendment which established income tax, the Seventeenth Amendment that allowed the direct elections of Senators, and the Eighteenth Amendment which established Prohibition. Progressive Era political activism also would bring about the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment only two years after the end of the Progressive Era.[[6]](#footnote-6) Another notable Progressive Era government contribution is the protection of wildlife and the development of national parks by Theodore Roosevelt, who is responsible for protecting over 230,000,000 acres of public land.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The fourth characteristic of the Progressive Era is defining what is meant to be a “progressive.” Progressives were typically upper or upper middle class whites of non-eastern European ancestry. They were most often well educated, protestants who saw progressive reform as a kind of civic duty or even a civic burden in which they were responsible for correcting (Ida Tarbell). They were also men and women who saw a need for social, economic, and political reform, not just because they sought this reform themselves but because they were often dedicated to Americanizing the masses of immigrants flocking to America during the Progressive Era (Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Jacob Riis). Progressives, although seeming to want to help the influx of immigrants, many had other motives. Often progressive reformers saw black, Indians, and unsavory immigrants as threat to the American idea and a ruin to society that must be irradiated through means of sterilization or lynching or Americanized through means like, Indian boarding schools, Hull House and other civic organization, and settlement houses (Jane Addams). Progressives were also often advocates for women’s right to vote (white women only) which was promoted by organizations such as the Cult of Womanhood whom believed that the white women’s “pure” vote would overrule the votes of immigrant males (John Allen Campbell, Alice Paul, Lucy Burns). Many progressives, particularly white women, were supporters of prohibition, because they argued that alcohol was one of the driving forces behind the inner cities lack of morals (Women’s Christian Temperance Movement, Anti-Saloon League). And finally, progressive were often supporters of movements bent on improving, protecting, and preserving the environment (Theodore Roosevelt).

What a progressive was not. Progressives were not Black, Native American, or foreign, especially not immigrants from Eastern Europe or of Asian descent. Progressives were not Americans tied to big industries or corporations such as the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, and the Carnegies. Progressives were also not people who were tied up in corrupt, illegal organizations of politics; progressives were not mob bosses, foremans, union busters, or moonshiners. They were also not wage workers or people of little education, these people might be tied to unions or labor organization but they are not leaders of progressive reform. And finally, progressives are not extremely conservative. Progressives typically have political affiliations that are more liberal because they support reforms that involve the increase of government, the restriction of free market enterprises, and the support of civic works and publically supported social reforms.

The Progressive Era can be characterized as a short period in American history that shaped social, political, and economic reform. The Progressive Era marked a great change in American society, moving the United States forward into a decade of industrialization and increased immigration and away from its agrarian past.

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