“Those Brief Buoyant Years,” the Progressive Era and the Changing of America

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The Progressive Era was tightly packed with ideals and reforms on every level. During this era, U.S. citizens took up reform campaigns on a mass scale, for almost every cause imaginable. In his book *The Good Years: From 1900 to the First World War*, Walter Lord writes, “The spirit of an era can’t be blocked out and measured, but it is there nonetheless. And in those brief buoyant years it was a spark that somehow gave extra promise of life.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Lord captures the attitude of this particular era that had forever changed the landscape of America and in cases such as the national parks, quite literally. The role of the United States government dramatically changed during the Progressive Era. Gradually beginning to institute basic reforms for laborers, minorities, and the impoverished, the government was sometimes led by questionable motives. The Progressive Era was shaped not only by the changing role of government, but also by determined idealistic individuals with powerful stances on various issues.

A progressive was anyone who strived for reform, whether it was for the availability of birth control or the prevention of “mollycoddles” in American society. Many different people could be considered a progressive; however their motivations were often derived from questionable beliefs and assumptions about society. In his book, *Political Manhood*: *Red Bloods, Mollycoddles, and the Politics of Progressive Era Reform*, Kevin P. Murphy discusses how Theodore Roosevelt, president and Rough Rider, believes that a man must exhibit strength and courage to be involved in a free society like the United States. Roosevelt believes that to be a strong and courageous man, he must practice physical work consistently. Murphy addresses Roosevelt’s implications of certain sexuality and gender significances attached to political and ideological positions, saying, “Their responses revealed the narrowness of political ideals based on masculinist assumptions.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Roosevelt and his fellows worried about the “mollycoddle” infiltrating what they saw as American society and began to take steps towards protecting what they considered to be manhood by establishing reforms that would allow men to exercise their masculinity.

Another contradictory element in the progressive era was the attainment of a limited work day and minimum wage for women. Julie Novkov explains in her book *Constituting Workers, Protecting Women: Gender, Law and Labor in the Progressive Era and New Deal Years,* that despite their good intentions, even the allies of women in the workforce spoke on their behalf not because they believed they were worth the same as men, but rather the “nonfeminist advocates for minimum wages promoted a conception of women as incompetent, while their nonfeminist opponents sought to eliminate all types of protection, not simply to level the playing field.”[[3]](#footnote-3) At the time, contradictory supporters, such as reformers who denied the importance of the thing they were trying to reform, were seen as following logical reasoning. The campaign of better working conditions for women was not seen as sexist because it was a common cultural and biological belief that women were more vulnerable than men, thus needing more protection from harsh working conditions. It was due to this kind of reasoning that women and children received wage and work day reforms before men laborers. During the Progressive Era, women were viewed as more equal to children rather than their male peers.

Margaret Sanger, the progressive pioneer of the birth control movement, was an avid challenger of the Comstock laws. The Comstock laws prohibited the distribution of contraception or information regarding contraception or sexuality. Sanger launched the first issue of the magazine *The Woman Rebel* in 1914, promising that it would contain useful information for all women. She believed that there was a direct link between the number of children poor families had and their economic hardships. She wished to ease the condition of these families, by spreading information and tools that would allow them to plan when and how many children they wanted to have.[[4]](#footnote-4) Sanger found herself on the opposing side of the law repeatedly, due to her fervor on the birth control issue. Her persistence embodied the Progressive Era, representing the spirit that many individuals had for their respective issues.

While Sanger had the intention of helping improve the quality of life for impoverished women, there were eugenicists involved in the birth control movement as well. The eugenicists were interested in helping curb the growth of populations they viewed as undesirable, either because of their race, mental or physical capabilities, or their class. Eugenicists not only put effort into the birth control movement during the early twentieth century, but also sterilization. There were two studies done by social reformers that eugenicists used to support their movement. The first was by Richard Dugdale, who extensively studied a family of social deviants he named the Jukes in 1874. In this family, he documented what he believed to be hereditary social misconduct and limited mental capabilities. Dugdale’s study was later followed by Henry Goddard who looked at a family named the Kallikaks in 1912. The study on the Kallikaks supposedly gave further proof that social misconduct was genetic. Eugenicists used these two studies to support the validity of sterilization, playing on society’s fears of social deviants.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Eugenicists were persistent, using various methods of fear mongering to achieve their ends. They also played on the fears of nativists and xenophobes, bringing attention to the dramatic increase of immigrants. They attracted attention from important political and social figures, such as Theodore Roosevelt and John D. Rockefeller, drawing financial and political backing from them. In 1907, the country passed its first involuntary sterilization law, thirteen other states following by 1913. There were 3,233 recorded cases of involuntary sterilizations between the years of 1907 and 1921. The numbers continued to increase well into the 1950’s until it abruptly ended in the 1960’s during the civil rights movement.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is an example of government’s growing interest in regulating the social aspects of U.S. citizens. However, this growing interest was led by motivations that they would later condemn.

Social politics were not the only area that government began to get involved in, as is shown by the 1915 case of United States v. E. C. Knight. The government took the sugar manufacturing company to court under the allegation that it was a monopoly and therefore illegal under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The court, desiring to curtail the power of Congress, ruled that E. C. Knight Company was not accountable to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act because the Act only applied to interstate commerce, while the sugar manufacturer was based solely in Pennsylvania. The court’s opinion, given by Chief Justice Melville W. Fuller, was that the company was under the state’s control, not Congress’s.[[7]](#footnote-7) Despite the loss at the hands of the Supreme Court, this is still an example of the federal government becoming more interested in regulating business, opposed to their previous laissez-faire stance. Following the lead of Theodore Roosevelt, congress would begin attempting to regulate monopolies, protecting the rights of small business owners. This policy of “trust-busting” regulation would be an important factor in American politics throughout the Progressive Era, creating a stark contrast with the prior noninterventionist years of the “Gilded Age.”

Alongside regulation of business, government intervention in everyday life to regulate moral behavior became a characteristic mark of the progressive era. There were various misled beliefs running rampant during the early twentieth century, such as Roosevelt’s fear of the “mollycoddle” and the even more frightening belief in eugenics. However, it was out of this era that Americans came to see that the government has a responsibility to protect its people from the worst excesses of capitalism, such as monopolies and extreme poverty among laborers. The individual progressive reformers were some of the most persistently passionate that the nation had seen. Walter Lord writes, “These years were good because, whatever the trouble, people were sure they could fix it.”[[8]](#footnote-8) During the Progressive Era, Americans once again proved to be resilient and adaptable, ready to improve society for a better future.

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1. Walter Lord, *The Good Years: From 1900 to the First World War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kevin P. Murphy, *Political Manhood: Red Bloods, Mollycoddles, and the Politics of Progressive Era Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Julie Novkov, *Constituting Workers, Protecting Women: Gender, Law and Labor in the Progressive Era and New Deal Years* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jessica Feltner, “*The Woman Rebel,* 1914” (Annotation, Meredith College, 2012), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kathleen E. Powderly, “Contraceptive Policy and Ethics,” *Hastings Center Report* 25, no. 1 (1995): S9. *MasterFILE Complete,* EBSCO*host* (accessed 3 Dec. 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kathleen E. Powderly, “Contraceptive Policy and Ethics,” *Hastings Center Report* 25, no. 1 (1995): S9. *MasterFILE Complete,* EBSCO*host* (accessed 3 Dec. 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jessica Feltner, “*United States v. E. C. Knight,* 1895” (Annotation, Meredith College, 2012), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Walter Lord, *The Good Years: From 1900 to the First World War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)