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The Progressive Era

The Progressive Era was a time of massive reform. The United States developed at a rapid pace and had various transitions. People transitioned from rural areas to urban ones, and business moved from agriculture to a focus on industrialized big business. This developing society shaped a new way of life, and not everyone benefited from it.

Those who were not on the benefiting side of things, the “other half”, experienced poor living conditions, inadequate pay, immoral treatment, and various other issues. Seeing the negatives of an expanding nation without proper regulation sparked the desire to restore America’s initial values and guarantee proper treatment of citizens. Those who fought for restoration were the progressives.

All Progressives fought for change, typically in favor of the middle class. They each served as a representation of a demographic and argued as their demographic’s voice. Some progressives were more radical than others, but they all pushed for change in their own ways. Their protests, speeches, rallies, letters, meetings, books, articles, photographs, and voices all came together to form what we now know as the Progressive Era. This era was a push for change and spanned to include several different areas. Progressives fought for health conditions, workers, race, gender, youth, and more.

Each of these areas had key progressive leaders who served as a face of the fight. They kept their issues in the press and stayed persistent in their fight for reform. When enough attention and support was drawn to their issue, the change they desired was granted. Each movement had resulting laws and changes that aided with improvement of American life.

The more support a progressive leader had, the easier it was for them to make change. Muckrakers with the right target audience thrived on this support. Muckrakers used their research and investigative writings to inform readers; if readers were moved by what they read, they joined the push for reform. A key muckraker was Upton Sinclair. He represented a wide demographic: anyone who ate meat. His book *The Jungle* detailed his experiences in the meat packing industry. At the time, government regulation of meat factories was little to none. Government did not monitor factory activity, have strict sanitation laws in place, or require accurate labeling. All of this changed after Sinclair’s book was published.

The public was outraged when they read of the horrible conditions in the meat factories. They realized factories could not be trusted and their food was not handled in a sanitary way. This revelation and class wide disgust lead to laws such as the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food And Drug Act, both in 1906. With these laws, government increased food regulation and guaranteed that food would be handled according to the public’s standards and labeled appropriately without misleading content. Upton Sinclair was undoubtedly a progressive leader; he used his writings to generate attention and push lawmakers. As a result, American life was changed for the better.

While Upton Sinclair used his book for reform, Lewis Hine used photographs. Hine took interest in the increase of child labor and noticed the lack of government involvement. Young children worked long hours in factories with unsafe conditions. This put them at risk physically because they could easily get hurt by dangerous machines, and mentally because some children were missing school for work. Hine partnered with the National Child Labor Committee and their collaboration changed government’s absence in regulation of child labor. Hine traveled and photographed children working in factories throughout America. These photographs were a great source of persuasion during the NCLC’s lobbying. His photographs showed children working as miners, factory workers, seafood workers, and more.

The images Hine captured were moving and eventually helped lead to change. There were two attempts to get federal regulation of child labor, the first time in 1924, and the second in 1937. Both attempts were unsuccessful, but finally in 1938, regulation of child labor was put in place with the Fair Labor Standards Act. This federal law impacted not just youth workers, but all workers. With the Fair Labor Standards Act, standards were set for minimum wage and overtime pay. The act also restricted the number of hours children could work and forbid dangerous jobs for children under eighteen. Additional jobs were also banned for children during school hours.

Hine was not extremely radical, but still was a progressive. He targeted an issue and worked toward a solution for fixing it. His work is notable not just because it triggered child labor regulation, but because it lead to regulation for all labor. Minimum wage and overtime pay changed the lives of adults also. Hine set out with action for one goal and ended up impacting not only the lives of working children, but the lives of their working parents too. This spread of impact displays Hine as a powerful progressive figure.

Lewis Hine and Upton Sinclair are both examples of calmer progressives. While they serve as proof that patient progressivism works, other progressives were not as willing to wait. Some progressive figures wanted instant change and waiting was not an option. For example, WEB Du Bois and Booker T Washington had contrasting views on their time frame for change. While both Du Bois and Washington were both advocates for advancing the African American race and fighters for equality, they did not seem to agree on how to make that happen. Washington was willing to wait. He believed African Americans should wait to tackle politics. In the meantime, they should focus on vocational education. Washington urged them to get a trade then get a job.

Du Bois had a contrasting view. He wanted African Americans to have total rights and did not want to wait for them. He believed in liberal arts education and the possibilities of the “talented 10th”. Du Bois believed there were African Americans who would be wasting their talents by simply picking up a trade; there were some who were meant to do superior things. Like other progressives, Du Bois used literature as a medium; he had several books published including *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1909. The book described what it was like being an African American in the 1900s.

However, Du Bois did not wait for his books to create change; he continued to take active roles in pushing for reform. In 1909, Du Bois also joined the NAACP as director of publicity and research. By 1910, Du Bois founded *The Crisis* magazine. This publication was a representation of the African American voice and a staple in the civil rights movement. The magazine became very popular not just with black readers, but with white readers also. After reading the magazine, both races were being informed about the issues related to racism and any obstacles that slowed down their journey to equality. Some considered Du Bois’ publicity methods to be extreme and questionable. Many readers and members of the NAACP questioned why so many covers featured African Americans with lighter skin. The covers became controversial, but this controversy does not make Du Bois any less of a progressive. Although progressives served as a demographic’s voice, the demographic did not always agree with the voice that represented them.

Despite the differences of opinion, Du Bois is a progressive because he fought without altering for the change he believed was needed. Like other progressives, he represented and spoke for a demographic. His particular demographic was African Americans. Progressives keep their issues in the press. Upton Sinclair’s book was talked about in magazines, newspapers, by government officials, etc; it was constantly in the press. Lewis Hine released pictures and sparked conversation among citizens, especially mothers worried for their children. Du Bois had his own publication; not only were his views covered in the media, he also controlled some of the media. Progressives continue to fight until they see change. Partnering with the NAACP allowed him to constantly see progress toward his goal of equality. The NAACP became a powerful force and impacted significant change for the life of African Americans. He knew his demographic; he spoke for them, and fought for them, making Du Bois a key progressive figure in the pursuit of racial equality.

The Progressive Era featured numerous battles with many warriors, all fighting for different and important causes. They fought for the safety of food and children, for equality of races and gender, for equal opportunities and rights. Government’s role was constantly being altered and expanded to regulate areas and protect people. Americans’ views were constantly being challenged to accept new ideas and new types of people. Those responsible for causing these constant changes were the Progressives. They go down in history as fighters for political and social reform.