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HIS 949 A: The Making of Modern America

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Final Exam: What is the Progressive Era?

There have been few movements or events in American history that had as large of an impact on the nation as we know it today as the Progressive Era. The Progressive Era was a social and political reform movement from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that spanned across nearly every aspect of American life. Things like medicine, law, education, prohibition, female suffrage, birth control and family planning, immigration, taxation, corruption in business and politics and more were all subject to reform during the Progressive Era. Though the movements of the Era were very numerous and diverse, not all were successful in their endeavors. But as a whole they brought America into the 20th century and helped to modernize the nation under the Progressive ideals of industry, efficiency, and political reform.

In the decades leading up to the Progressive Era, the life of the average American could be defined one of two ways- either absolutely wonderful or devastating horrible. There was little to no middle stance: “While the rich wore diamonds, many wore rags… Americans had sewing machines, phonographs, skyscrapers, and even electric lights, yet most people labored in the shadow of poverty.”[[1]](#footnote-1) These decades were known as the Gilded Age, a term coined by famous American author Mark Twain. This era is marked by the decadence and extravagance of the few and incredibly rich in America at the time, and how that rich lifestyle was built on the backs of the poverty stricken masses. Fortunes were founded on economic corruption, the establishments of trusts and business monopolies. All of these factors and more would come together to create a perfect storm for the creation of a new reform movement: “By 1900 America was a tinderbox. Cities were crowded with millions of poor laborers, working conditions were appalling. From the local level to the highest institutions in the land corruption darkened politics. Something had to be done, and the progressive movement was the nation’s response.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

One of the most important aspects of the Progressive Era was political reform; the rampant political corruption of the Gilded Age meant that political reform was a very popular cause for Americans. Over the course of the Progressive Era, from the 1890’s to roughly 1916, the role of the government in American life changed dramatically. During the Gilded Age and the early stages of the Progressive Era (1890’s), the oppressed masses would turn to any outlet to relieve their terrible conditions; this gave way to a new kind of political corruption at the local level- political machines.

Most major cities were under the control of one machine or another. These machines would manipulate and control the masses to procure votes by providing jobs and civil services like food. In effect, they were bribing the public in exchange for votes, which meant power. The national government had a hard time regulating the local and state corruption, but reform groups and high ranking politicians would band together: “The federal government began to go after corruption in the cities. Progressive Era reformers at the turn of the century successfully compelled local governments to introduce civil service systems to replace party patronage in government employment.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Gradually, the role of the national government shifted into one of greater prominence. At the national level, a string of ‘Progressive Presidents’, most especially Theodore Roosevelt, made increasing the role of the national government a priority. According to those ideas, increasing the power of the national government would help to stabilize the nation and make reforming corruption easier. Government moves like ‘trust-busting’ or enacting laws to regulate state economics and business- limiting the control of big corporations over industries.

The Progressive Era was at its core a movement of the people. The many movements that came out of the progressive era were usually spearheaded by relatively well off and well educated people, and their opinions and ideas usually clashed and differed from group to group. But their overall intentions and ideals were typically the same: “…that Progressivism is about reform – fixing what’s broken, speaking for those without a voice, and holding government accountable.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Depending on the issue, the followers of these reform movements came from all classes and creeds in society from the poorest immigrants to some of the wealthiest and most educated people in society. Certain issues like suffrage or prohibition were especially popular among the women of the upper levels of society, even among the daughters and wives of the very families whose companies were behind some of the corruption. But this diversity among the followers of reform movements also meant that there were many clashes in ideologies and opinions. Everyone following a certain issue may have agreed that the issue at hand was in need of reform, but that doesn’t mean that anyone could decide upon a unified way to approach reforming it. An example of this kind of turmoil that could be found within certain progressive reform groups was the movement for women’s suffrage. Here, there were two distinct groups- the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) led by Carrie Chapman Catt, and the National Women’s Party (NWP) led by Alice Paul. Both groups wanted to achieve the same goal- suffrage for women and basic equalities among the sexes, but both groups had radically different ideas about how to approach it and why it needed to be done. Despite their differences though, woman’s suffrage as a movement was successful with the passage of the nineteenth amendment in 1920. The women’s movement of the Progressive era was a success, but not every reform movement met with the same achievements. There were some reform movements that didn’t really go anywhere during the Progressive Era. Their goals wouldn’t be achieved for years to come, though what little progress they did make would impact their history later.

One such example is the plight of African Americans in the United States during the Progressive Era. All over the country, but especially in the south, the plight of African Americans was dismal. The nation was still feeling the after effects of the Civil War and though African Americans had been given freedom, citizenship, and the vote (for males at least), they were still horribly suppressed and couldn’t really enjoy their rights. The Progressive movement changed a lot about American politics and reform, but it was primarily a white movement. Race was never really a big issue with the prominent reform groups and “Despite their zeal for reform, few progressives made race relations a priority, and in the South, leading progressives often endorsed racist policies”[[5]](#footnote-5) But the issue was far from inactive, there were some major reform groups that were fighting for the civil rights and liberties for African Americans. Their agendas surrounded the better treatment of African Americans in America, primarily in the south. Everyone wanted the same basic goals: Civil Rights and reform or the end of the southern racial policies (“Jim Crow Laws”). But the African American reform movement faced the same issue as the women’s suffrage movement. Everyone wanted to achieve the same goal but few could decide on the best way to approach it.

The two major figures of the era were W.E.B Dubois and Booker T. Washington. Both men were educated and supported the reform effort, but had vastly different ideas. Washington believed that the only way to achieve political equality for African Americans was to first achieve economic equality, and the only way to do that was through technical education and the learning of a trade. Trade skills would grant people the ability to be more independent and thus less reliant on tenant farming. Dubois had a much more radical approach, and believed Washington’s policies were encouraging African American’s to settle for what they had rather than what they were capable of achieving. He claimed that “Washington urged blacks to accept discrimination for the time being and elevate themselves through hard work and economic gain to win the respect of whites.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Racial reform in the Progressive era took a back seat to much more persistent issues, and though it made some very important progress (like the founding of the NAACP) that would impact later movements, no real reforms were made in the overall agenda of African Americans during the Progressive Era.

Another example of the Progressive reform in the era was the movement surrounding Child labor. Child Labor was a huge problem during the Progressive Era. During this period, the idea of childhood as an actual concept was just beginning to develop, but stayed primarily within the upper and middle classes of America where life expectancy and new technology (like the car) enabled more people more free time and healthier lives. But among the poor, life stayed relatively the same, if not worse. Tenement housing sprang up in every major city and life was crowded, filthy, and without most of the basic amenities like water or windows.

People looked for relief and work wherever they could find it, and if that meant sending children as young as four or five to roll cigars or to work in factory then that was what they did. Any extra income that was brought in could mean the difference between life and death for some families, and the means to acquire it didn’t matter as much: “The 1890 census revealed that more than one million children, ten to fifteen years old, worked in America. That number increased to two million by 1910. Industries employed children as young as five or six to work as many as eighteen to twenty hours a day.”[[7]](#footnote-7) During the Progressive Era, reform for the working classes was a major issue, and for some the issue of Child Labor in particular was extremely important. Working conditions for children were usually just as bad as those of adults. There are many stories of children loosing limbs or coming down with terrible (sometimes fatal) sicknesses as a result of the conditions that they work under.

The working conditions of children became attached to other reform movements surrounding family and child reform, like the movement behind the settlement houses. Like the racial reforms of the south, though the child labor movement did make a few important changes during the Progressive Era, it was ultimately a failure. Many other reforms were made in the form of minimum wage laws and working and safety standards (which were abysmal prior to the Progressive Era).

The Progressive Era only lasted for a little under three decades, but in that time; change and reform swept across the nation and laid the foundation for the political, economic, and social world as know it today. Though not all reforms were successful like the African American movement, or the child labor reforms, but they created progress that would be important for the implementation of other movements once the Progressive Era was over. Some movements, like women’s suffrage or The Pure Food and Drug Act were successful and were key to some of the most important movements of the Progressive Era. Progressive reform touches nearly every topic from medicine to education to politics and its impact on American history is undeniable.

1. “Gilded Age”, *American Experiences- PBS,* 1999, accessed December 3, 2012

   <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carnegie/gildedage.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Henry J. Sage, “The Progressive Era: The Great Age of Reform”, *Academic America,* 2010, accessed December 3, 2012. <http://www.academicamerican.com/progressive/topics/progressive.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Political Machines”, *The Social Studies Help Center,* 2001, accessed December 3, 2012.

   <http://www.socialstudieshelp.com/usra_pol_machines.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “What it means to be Progressive”, *Political Progressives: Twice-Weekly Updates On Political News From A Progressive's Viewpoint,* February 28, 2011, accessed December 3, 2012

   <http://www.politicalprogressives.com/2011/02/28/what-it-means-to-be-progressive/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Progressivism and Reform: African Americans in the Progressive Era”, *Countries Quest,* accessed December 4, 2012 <http://www.countriesquest.com/north_america/usa/history/progressivism_and_reform/african_americans_in_the_progressive_era.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Jim Crow Stories: W.E.B Dubois”, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow- PBS,* 2002, accessed December 4, 2012,

   http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\_people\_dubois.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Progressive Era Reform- Child Labor”, *Photography and Social Reform- University of Virginia,* 2003, accessed December 4, 2012, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/davis/photography/reform/progressive_era.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)