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HIS 949 – Final Essay

What Were the Main Characteristics of the Progressive Era?

The Progressive Era was one of the most important time periods in modern American history. Lasting from approximately 1890 to 1920, it changed the way government and people relate to each other, and what is now expected as far as helping the lowest members of society. In the decades leading up to the Progressive Era, the term “Gilded Age” came to be used to describe the conditions of the country. The Gilded Age was referred to as such because as America was beginning its age of industrialization, a select few were rising to the top of society and controlling almost every aspect of it. Corruption spread to business practices as well as government, immigration of new types of people soared, and the middle-class of America began to call for reforms and protections to keep their values alive in society.

The Gilded Age left many people in America feeling disillusioned and unhappy with how society, the government, and the business world were developing. Immigrants from more eastern and southern parts of Europe brought new languages and cultures to the United States. Cities developed around growing centers of business, and the gap between the richest Americans and the poorest grew to an extreme level. Politics became very corrupt, with party bosses buying votes or intimidating people into them. Conditions for the poorest Americans worsened – at home and at work. As all parts of society seemed to be less moral, and industrialization was changing the way Americans lived, many in the middle-class and lower-class became disillusioned and unhopeful that they could ever obtain the “American dream.” The rise of great corporations and “trusts”, like Rockefeller’s and J.P. Morgan’s businesses, left the small businesses of the country in the dusty past. Sons could no longer expect to take over their small family business upon coming of age. As the monopolies consumed many small businesses, the middle-class of America found it necessary to go to “work for the man”, and accept middle-management positions rather than try and start their own successful businesses. This disconnect with the traditional path to achieving the American dream of success left Americans with a bitter taste in their mouth. By 1890, the golden luster of apparent success in the Gilded Age had worn off and calls for change could be heard all around.

Cue the rise of the Progressives. People who believed in this ideology rejected Social Darwinism – the idea that the fittest naturally rise to the top and the weakest members of a population are weeded out over time, applied to the human race, which made it okay for business tycoons like Rockefeller and Morgan to exploit their lower-class workers in order to rise even further to the top. Progressives believed that, “the problems society faced (poverty, violence, greed, racism, class welfare) could be addressed by providing good education, a safe environment, and an efficient workplace…and believed that government could be a tool for change.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This view of government would come to be very important during the Progressive Era and it helps define how people relate to the government even today. Expecting the government to help with societal changes was a new concept during this time period. Government involvement in social matters would expand the powers of the federal government, namely the office of the president, and set a historic precedent of expectations for what government was supposed to do.

One famous example of governmental powers and expectations expanding during the Progressive Era was President Theodore Roosevelt’s involvement in ending the Anthracite Coal Strike in 1902. The strike began in May as mine workers in Pennsylvania demanded more pay, a shorter work day, and recognition of their union. The mine operators refused to negotiate with the union miners and the strike became so prolonged that it was feared coal shortages would threaten the nation as the winter months of 1902 approached. Theodore Roosevelt became concerned about the shortages and, “the potentially disastrous consequences for the party if the anthracite strike dragged into November, when elections were to be held,” upon hearing advice from fellow Republican, Henry Cabot Lodge.[[2]](#footnote-2) Roosevelt hosted the two opposing parties in a negotiation meeting and managed to get them to cooperate so the strike could end. The president’s involvement in a matter of labor and business was completely unheard of, but it set a precedent that we still expect presidents to live up to today. Other examples of expanded governmental powers and involvement in citizens’ day-to-day lives include the creation of the Food and Drug Administration by Roosevelt in 1906, which was in response to the outrage garnered by Upton Sinclair’s expository novel on the horrors of the meat packing industry; many laws were enacted during the Progressive Era that protected labor more and more from the tyrannical nature of large business owners, culminating in the creation of the Department of Labor in 1913. President Taft signed the act to create the new department, which would focus on the rights of employees and protections for all in the workplace. The creation of a whole new department in the federal government to deal with reform for workers was revolutionary and sums up the Progressive ideal of expanding government power to protect those that could not protect themselves.

The Progressives called for reform not only through governmental power, but through the power of individuals as well. Individuals could work at a more local level to improve conditions for those less-off than them in society. Settlement houses were one method of individual participation in the Progressive movement. Women like Jane Addams, who had been well-educated but could find no professional field in which it was acceptable to use that education, started and worked at these houses, which set out to, “uplift the immigrant masses and to teach them ‘proper’ ways of life and moral values.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Another method of individual participation in reform efforts during the Progressive Era was Muckraker journalism. These investigative journalists “set out to wage a campaign to expose corruption in business and political lawlessness.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Ida Tarbell was a muckraker and her expose of John D. Rockefeller’s company, Standard Oil Company, opened many people’s eyes to his unethical business practices and was celebrated as a landmark piece of journalism. Along with muckrakers and settlement house workers, individuals worked for moral reform in society by joining temperance groups, which supported prohibition, a method of reform which attempted to control the moral behavior of society.

Many of the individuals working for reform during the Progressive Era were, indeed, women, as the evidence of Ida Tarbell and Jane Addams shows. Women were considered the moral guides of society during the Progressive Era and this was one of the arguments they used to support their right to vote. With that vote, women could guide the political world that had been corrupted by men, back onto a sound moral path. The individuals working for reform during the Progressive Era, no matter their gender, were important in characterizing the time period as one filled with hope for change, and the belief that everyone should be working for reform, not just the government.

The Progressive Era was a bit jaded in its main quest for reform, however. While society pushed individuals and the government to work for reform and expand its powers, the reforms gained were not expected to apply to everyone in society equally. African Americans, despite the work of earlier generations in getting the Fourteenth Amendment passed, still faced severe discrimination and segregation in society, especially in the South. A “lynching epidemic” occurred during the time period of the Progressive Era and hundreds of blacks were lynched for the smallest offenses. Ida Well’s anti-lynching tours and campaigns demonstrate how big of a problem lynching had become in the South. Native Americans were discriminated against as well. As with the immigrants of Eastern and Southern Europe, middle-class Americans wanted Native Americans to assimilate to American culture, rather than accommodate any different cultures into their own. Boarding schools were started and Native American children were taken from their homes and families to be Americanized. They were given English names, the hair of the boys was cut, and an attempt was made to strip their native cultures from them. White, Protestant, middle-class Americans wanted reform in the business and political realms, but the reform they wanted required assimilation of all other cultures to fit the values and goals of their own culture, which they deemed to be the most evolved and morally correct. This jaded nature of the reforms brought about during the Progressive Era demonstrates that, the time period was not necessarily as successful as some may believe. The change and spirit of reform present during the Progressive Era were good things, but not for all in society.

The main characteristic of the Progressive Era was reform. A majority of American society seemed to agree that major upheavals were needed in the business and political worlds to ensure safety for citizens of cities, laborers in factories, and children of the poorest immigrants. Reform brought about the expansion of government and what citizens expected of this system. Individuals also came to be expected to fight for reform and implement their rights as citizens to help others. Reform did not apply to all sections of society though. Things remained the same or worsened for minority groups like African Americans and Native Americans during the Progressive Era. While the reforms wrought during this important time period were good and necessary, the Progressive Era was not complete in bringing all the necessary changes. World War I rolled around and Americans turned their attention abroad, instead of inward for a time, bringing an end to the era of reform.

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