

The Politics of Reform



Jacob Riis, Street Arabs in sleeping quarters [areaway, Mulberry Street], 1890. (From the Collection of the Museum of the City of New York)

At the turn of the twentieth century there was a resurging impulse toward social and political reform. In some ways it continued tendencies already apparent since the industrial revolution of the early nineteenth century, in which white, Protestant, middle-class Americans organized to improve the lives of the urban poor. After the Civil War, industrialization, urbanization, and immigration intensified the inequalities between industrialist and worker, white and non-white, man and woman to such an extent that Americans believed government itself should become an instrument of reform. Particularly after the Depression of 1893 and the influx of more Asians and southern and eastern Europeans into American cities, the only solution appeared to be the systematic legislating of social justice, the curbing of political corruption, and the regulating of corporate forces to keep social strife at bay.

While the focus on government as the agent of change was a hallmark of this early twentieth-century reforming spirit, there was never a singular ideology underpinning the reform activities. Activists were evangelical Christians, or Socialists, or, in the case of Emma Goldman, even anarchists. Populists fought for social justice in rural America, while municipal reformers focused

their efforts on ameliorating the living and work conditions of the urban poor. Some reformers believed in the superiority of the white race, while others fought for racial equality. Some favored the vote for women, while others thought it detrimental to American society. The reform sensibilities of the turn of the century were too varied to be described in sweeping terms.

The Progressive agenda was the most comprehensive in the end. Progressives were politicians, philosophers, historians, Supreme Court justices, and social critics. There were Republican Progressives, such as Theodore Roosevelt, and Democratic Progressives, such as Woodrow Wilson. For all their differences in politics and outlook, they tended as a whole to reject the laissez-faire social and economic policies that had prevailed since the Civil War. They generally believed, too, that modern science, methods of efficiency, and social planning could be forces of positive social change, if wielded with the right intentions and not left in the hands of a plutocratic few. Progressives tended to distrust the corporate monopolies and political interests that had come to power and wanted to keep their ability to exploit and dominate the rest of society in check.

Recognizing the social ills that came with growing disparities of wealth in the industrial world, Progressives approached the variety of problems with a wide range of solutions. Some tried to clean up municipal streets or build parks and playgrounds for the urban poor. Jacob Riis, a pioneer of photojournalism, compiled photographic images of New York City's slums in *How the Other Half Lives*. The book helped stir enough public sentiment to convince New York legislators to pass the Tenement House Act (1901), which banned the building of poorly ventilated structures. In 1911, a lack of safeguards at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in Manhattan led to a fire that killed 146 employees, most of them poor, immigrant women who were powerless against the speed-ups and cramped conditions imposed by their employers. Social worker Frances Perkins, who headed up a Committee on Public Safety, used the tragedy to press for legislation mandating the regulation of maximum work hours, better fireproofing, cleaner conditions,

and better methods of egress from workspaces. Legislators passed similar measures in major cities throughout the United States.

Progressives believed that politicians, too, had succumbed to corruption. In the name of efficiency and fairness, Wisconsin legislator Robert La Follette established the Legislative Reference Bureau, a non-partisan body of ‘experts’ in state government, created to minimize the influence of special interests. After 1901 Theodore Roosevelt brought this same proactive spirit to federal government. Touting himself as the president who wielded a “big stick” against corporations (1901–1908), he enforced antitrust laws and arbitrated between owners and miners in the Coal Strike of 1902. Woodrow Wilson continued in this interventionist vein after becoming president in 1913, trust busting, lowering tariffs, and reforming the national banking system in a program he called the “New Freedom.”

There was popular support for regulation and reform because in these years investigative journalists, often referred to as muckrakers, exposed corruption and exploitation at every turn. They went undercover as industrial workers or government employees. Lincoln Steffens, for instance, exposed municipal corruption in a column in *McClure’s* titled “Shame of the Cities.” Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* provoked so much public outrage about the quality of processed meat that Roosevelt saw to the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906.

Women were integrally involved in the social and political reform of this period, despite not having the franchise. Fellow muckraker Ida Tarbell helped Steffens along, and Sinclair’s efforts were supported by the research of social scientist Florence Kelley. Union leader Mother Jones was arrested in her efforts for industrial laborers, and settlement workers such as Jane Addams of Hull House worked “in the trenches” of immigrant neighborhoods to teach vocational skills and offer health clinics and recreational activities. Many female settlement workers came from the ranks of first- and second-generation college-educated women, who rejected Victorian expectations of

motherhood and domesticity. Reform gave them a sense of purpose at a time when there were few professional outlets for independent, educated women.

The movement that attracted the most women, however, was the one that least challenged their identities as society's mothers and moral guardians: temperance. Like settlement work, diet, education, or playground reform, temperance was yet another way for women to protect children and family values, and thus it seemed appropriately feminine in its intentions. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was foremost of the national organizations in the twentieth century, though women had campaigned against the evils of alcohol for decades. Coupled with the lobbying efforts of anti-alcohol political interests, the temperance movement succeeded in its ultimate goal of a Constitutional amendment prohibiting intoxicating beverages, which was ratified in early 1919. The Volstead Act, or the National Prohibition Act of 1919, gave the government the means to actually enforce the Eighteenth Amendment.

As conservative as many temperance workers seemed, they made up the largest contingent of yet another reform movement that picked up steam in the twentieth century: the fight for women's suffrage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton had ushered in the movement at the Seneca Falls Convention back in 1848, but only after the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was organized in 1890 and under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt (1900–1904, 1915–1920) did political parties begin to entertain the vote for women. In 1915, a more radical group gathered in the NAWSA's Congressional Union under Alice Paul and formed the National Woman's Party (NWP), hoping a campaign of civil disobedience would quicken the passing of a federal amendment.

By 1920 suffragists did indeed succeed in winning formal political rights for women, just as other reformers had regulated monopolies, improved living conditions of immigrants, and checked the exploitative practices of industrialists. But their efforts were not nearly enough to alleviate all the

social ills in modern American life. In the name of efficiency, Progressives centralized political and economic power into the hands of a bureaucratic few. Most corporate profits, too, continued to fall into the hands of a small elite at the expense of the working poor, which was increasingly also made up of African Americans coming to northern cities from the rural South. A revitalized Ku Klux Klan continued to intimidate and victimize African Americans in the South, but also included anyone they perceived as foreign—immigrants, Catholics, and Jews—in their campaign of violence. And the success of the women’s suffrage movement did not carry over into an expanded feminist agenda for equality in other spheres. Social and economic policy continued to reflect the glaring differences between Americans—whether based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, region, or culture—making social justice an elusive dream.

Nevertheless, the idealism of that era has had lasting impact, seen in the perpetuation of regulating bodies like the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), minimum wage and maximum hour legislation, worker’s compensation, and sanitation laws. Women remembered lessons learned in the suffrage movement when they picked up the torch of Women’s Liberation in the 1960s. Civil rights activists, too, summoned the lessons of Ida B. Wells’s anti-lynching campaign and the racial theories of W. E. B. Du Bois in fighting against segregation. Many of our notions about modern democracy and the welfare state have grown directly out of the Progressive era, which shaped how Americans view government’s role in protecting the human welfare.

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