Social Tensions and the Origins of Progressivism

DAVID P. THELEN

Recent historians have explained the origins of the Progressive movement in several ways. They have represented progressivism, in turn, as a continuation of the western and southern farmers’ revolt, as a desperate attempt by the urban gentry to regain status from the new robber barons, as a thrust from the depths of slum life, and as a campaign by businessmen to prevent workers from securing political power. Behind such seemingly conflicting theories, however, rests a single assumption about the origins of progressivism: the class and status conflicts of the late-nineteenth century formed the driving forces that made men become reformers. Whether viewed by the historian as a farmer, worker, urban elitist, or businessman, the progressive was motivated primarily by his social position; and each scholar has painted a compelling picture of the insecurities and tensions felt by the group that he placed in the vanguard of progressivism. Pressures and threats from other social groups drove men to espouse reform. In these class and status conflicts can be found the roots of progressivism.

How adequately does this focus on social tensions and insecurities explain the origins of progressivism? Since some of these scholars have invoked concepts from social science to support their rejection of earlier approaches, the validity and application of some of the sociological and psychological assumptions which make up the conceptual framework for the

Mr. Thelen is assistant professor of history in the University of Missouri.

1 John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party (Minneapolis, 1931), 404-23; George E. Mowry, Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Movement (Madison, 1947), 3-35.
idea that social tensions impelled the progressive require analysis. Is the focus on social classes relevant to the rise of political movements like progressivism? Is it useful to rely upon a narrow, untestable and unproved conception of motivation when other approaches are available? How much of a concrete situation does an abstract model explain?

First, theories borrowed from one discipline are not designed to encompass the data of another. In questioning the application of models from physiology and physics to psychology, the noted personality theorist George A. Kelly explained: "We are skeptical about the value of copying ready-made theories which were designed for other foci of convenience"; and he urged his fellow psychologists to resist the temptation of "poking about in the neighbors' back yards for methodological windfalls." Just as physiology and physics encompass only part of the psychologist's realm, so psychology, sociology, and political science are concerned with only part of the historian's realm.

Those historians who have borrowed the idea that social stratification explains the rise of political movements like progressivism illustrate the dangers inherent in borrowing theories from other fields. Most sociologists and political scientists now doubt the relevance of social stratification to the emergence of political movements. Reinhard Bendix, for example, maintained that "the study of social stratification, whether or not it is adumbrated by psychological analysis, is not the proper approach to an understanding of the role of cumulative political experience." In their pleas for more pluralistic approaches to political power, such political scientists as Nelson W. Polsby and Robert A. Dahl have found that social stratification is largely irrelevant to the exercise of political power. So severe were these criticisms of the assumption that social class determined political power that one sociologist, reviewing the literature of the field in 1964, concluded that "the problem has simply been dropped."

But an even greater problem with placing emphasis on social tensions is

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that it is ahistorical. Even sociologists like Seymour M. Lipset and Bendix have complained about the "increasingly ahistorical" drift of the focus of this field. After analyzing the major models of social change, another sociologist concluded that the fundamental error of these models was their failure to incorporate the dimension of time. Few scholars would deny that social tensions exist at all times and in all societies. For at least twenty years before 1900, various business groups had tried to take political power away from workers and bosses. But to focus on the social class motivation of businessmen is to obscure the basic historical problem of why progressivism emerged when it did. Conflicts between businessmen and workers were hardly unique to the years around 1900. The emphasis on social tensions obscures chronology. When sociologists are disturbed about this problem, historians should be wary indeed.

The assumption that progressivism derived from social tensions is at least as vulnerable to attack by psychologists. If the kinds of questions historians generally ask about the origins of political and social movements are reduced to the psychological level, then the theories of class and status motivation would seem to be premised on very debatable assumptions about individual motivation. Most historians would want to know the conditions that existed before a change occurred, why the change happened, and what were the results of that change.

The first problem—the conditions before a change occurred—reduces in psychological terms to the way an individual perceives himself, his self-image. Psychologists have approached this question in many ways, but a theory of change which assumes that social tensions were the basic cause implicitly accepts only one of these approaches. It assumes that an individual defines himself primarily in terms of his particular social role, that his behavior is motivated mainly by his class and status role perceptions. Only about one out of every three psychologists, however, would accept this premise to any real extent. Even some sociologists and anthropologists, who have traditionally seen individual behavior as primarily determined by culture, have retreated from that position and now see a more symmetrical inter-

11 See, for example, Wilbert E. Moore, "Predicting Discontinuities in Social Change," American Sociological Review, 29 (June 1964), 337.
12 Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey, Theories of Personality (New York, 1957), 26, 548. Gordon W. Allport, for example, attacked role theory in "What units shall we employ?" Gardner Lindzey, ed., Assessment of Human Motives (New York, 1958), 244-46.
action in which personality also influences culture.  

An overwhelming majority of psychologists have rejected role theory as an adequate explanation for the way an individual who enlists in a reform movement forms his self-image.

The second problem—why the change happened—reduces in psychological terms to the mechanism by which an individual feels impelled to join a political movement like progressivism. Here again those scholars who emphasize social tensions have implicitly chosen only one of several alternatives offered by psychologists. They assume that the threat from some other social group frustrated the would-be progressive who, in turn, reacted aggressively against that threat. Very few psychologists, however, would claim that social tensions are the main source of frustration. Furthermore, individuals are generally capable of reacting to new roles without experiencing any major frustrations. The different ways in which Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge, for example, remade the role of the presidency to fit their own personalities suggest how flexible roles can be without deeply frustrating an individual. Furthermore, different members of the same social class will perceive social challenges in different ways; many will experience no frustration at all.

Even if historians concede that social stresses can frustrate an individual, does it follow that he will react aggressively toward the source of that frustration? The frustration-produces-aggression model is one of the most debated propositions in psychology. Other critics have called it "nonsensical." Others have shown that frustration more often produces anxiety, submission, dependence, or avoidance than aggression. Even presumably simpleminded creatures like rats and pigeons do not necessarily react

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15 The original statement of the frustration-produces-aggression model is John Dollard, Neal E. Miller, and others, Frustration and Aggression (New Haven, 1939).

16 Karl Menninger, Love Against Hate (New York, 1942), 295.

aggressively when they are frustrated.\(^\text{18}\) If some psychologists have shown that aggression is only one possible result of frustration, others have shown that frustration is only one possible source of aggression. Indeed, prior to 1939 most psychologists accepted Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which contended that aggression derived from the Death Wish.\(^\text{19}\) Others have found the source of aggression in neither frustration nor the Death Wish.\(^\text{20}\) The assumption that social tensions will frustrate an individual and drive him to react aggressively has been riddled by the artillery of a great many psychologists.\(^\text{21}\) For historians to continue to assume that men react primarily to social threats is to ignore an impressive body of psychological literature.

The third problem—what were the results of that change—reduces in psychological terms to the way an individual outwardly expresses the internal change. If an individual felt angry following threats from another social group, how would he express that anger? The idea that he will sublimate his aggressive propensities into cries for political reform is one which is endorsed by many Freudians who follow *Civilization and Its Discontents.*\(^\text{22}\) But even some psychoanalysts claim that Freud never adequately explained sublimation. Other personality theorists have asserted that "everyone recognizes . . . that at present we have no theory which really explains the dynamics" of sublimation.\(^\text{23}\) Many psychologists have seen sublimation as only one possible way of expressing aggressive proclivities. Political reform is only one of hundreds of directions an individual can channel hostile impulses. But most personality theorists are so unimpressed by the concept of sublimation that they simply ignore it in their own theories.\(^\text{24}\)

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\(^\text{21}\) Studies which accept the basic outlines of the frustration-aggression thesis while insisting on modifying it significantly are Berkowitz, *Aggression*; Nicholas Pastore, "The Role of Arbitrariness in the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 47 (July 1952), 728-31.

\(^\text{22}\) Menninger, *Love Against Hate*, 126-33.


\(^\text{24}\) Of all the approaches analyzed by Hall and Lindzey, *Theories of Personality*, only those of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Harry Stack Sullivan, Kurt Lewin, and Raymond B. Cattell incorporate sublimation.
By assuming that social tensions produced progressivism, historians have approached the basic questions about social and political movements from a very narrow psychological viewpoint. Even more important, the psychological underpinnings of this assumption are either disproved, disputed, ignored, or "untestable" by modern psychologists.

Moreover, the whole psychological framework which includes these theories has recently come under attack. Both behaviorists and psychoanalysts had previously assumed that individuals were motivated by "a state of tenseness that leads us to seek equilibrium, rest, adjustment, satisfaction, or homeostasis. From this point of view, personality is nothing more than our habitual modes of reducing tension." Gordon Allport reported that the trend in motivational theory was away from the tension reduction approach and toward an emphasis on the rational and healthy side of individuals. By stressing the rationality of free choice, these psychologists have argued that a commitment to reform, for example, may in fact be the ultimate expression of a mature personality and reflect a man who is capable of getting outside of his self-preoccupation. Indeed, Erich Fromm has said that the revolutionary leader might well be the only "sane person in an insane world." The decision to embrace progressivism may simply represent a conscious choice between alternative programs, not an attempt to reduce tensions which grew out of a man's efforts to maintain his social position.

There is another problem in borrowing models: the more inclusive the model, the farther it is removed from the reality it is attempting to explain. The data must be squeezed and distorted to make them conform to the model. Many social scientists themselves have revolted against the top-heavy and abstract models which have prevailed in their fields. One student

of social stratification, for example, concluded from a review of 333 studies that his field suffered from "the disease of overconceptualization."30 Similarly, many psychologists have rejected the abstract personality constructs used to explain motivation because they are too far removed from the reality of individual people. Arguing for a focus on the "life style" of each person, Allport has attacked theories which emphasize "the abstract motivation of an impersonal and therefore non-existent mind-in-general," preferring "the concrete, viable motives of each and every mind-in-particular."31 In a like vein, Kelly has argued that most psychological constructs ignore an individual's "private domain, within which his behavior aligns itself within its own lawful system." These abstract constructs can only account for the individual as "an inert object wafted about in a public domain by external forces, or as a solitary datum sitting on its own continuum."32 Allport even charged that psychologists who build universal models to explain human motivation are seeking a "scientific will of the wisp"; the "irreducible unlearned motives' of men" they are seeking cannot be found because they do not exist.33

This is not a critique of any particular psychological theory or approach to behavior. Rather it is a plea to be aware of the dangers in building a conceptual approach to such a problem as progressivism upon so many rickety psychological foundations. Historians should recognize that psychologists are not that different; they are at least as divided in their interpretations as we are. For historians to accept the assumptions that underlie the idea that social tensions produced progressivism would be similar to a psychologist borrowing Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis for his research. Many of us would complain that there are other explanations for the development of American history; and a great many psychologists, in effect, are shuddering at the weak psychological underpinnings of the assumption that their social backgrounds made men become reformers.

The real test for the soundness of any approach is not theoretical, of course, but empirical. In this case the inadequacy of the sociological and psychological ideas which inform the assumption that social tensions produced progressivism becomes obvious after an examination of the types of men who became progressives and conservatives. If social tensions were rel-

31 Gordon W. Allport, "The Functional Autonomy of Motives," Stacey and DeMartino, Understanding Human Motivation, 81. See also Allport, Becoming, 19-101; Allport, "What units shall we employ?" 239-60.
32 Kelly, Theory of Personality, 39-40. See also George A. Kelly, "Man's construction of his alternatives," Lindzey, Assessment of Human Motives, 33-64.
33 Gordon W. Allport, "Motivation in Personality: Reply to Peter A. Bertocci," Stacey and DeMartino, Understanding Human Motivation, 111.
evant to the rise of progressivism, then clearly the class and status experiences of progressives should have differed in some fundamental way from those of the conservatives.

How different, in fact, were the social origins of progressives and conservatives? Following George E. Mowry’s publication in 1951 of *The California Progressives*, several scholars examined the external social class attributes of progressive leaders and concluded that the reformers were drawn from the young urban gentry. But because they neglected to sample a comparable group of conservatives, these studies failed to prove their contention that class and status experiences impelled the progressives. Subsequent profiles of both progressive and conservative leaders in the election of 1912 and the legislative sessions of 1911 in Washington and 1905 in Missouri showed that both groups came from nearly the same social background. Objective measures of their social origins failed to predict the programs and ideologies of political leaders.

Scholars may not accept this finding because they question whether the 1912 campaign reflected political ideologies so much as the personalities of leaders and the desire for office. The studies of legislatures in Washington and Missouri might be questioned because in a single session such extraneous pressures as the personality of a powerful governor or the use of bribes might have interfered with a legislator’s expression of his natural preferences. Furthermore, neither Washington nor Missouri was ever noted as a banner progressive state. Perhaps the issues in these states were not as hotly contested—and hence did not reveal as sharp social tensions—as in the more radical states.

The following profile of Wisconsin legislators was designed to avoid some of the possible objections to the other studies. Since contemporaries and historians alike have agreed on the pivotal position of Wisconsin, it is

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an ideal state to test whether social tensions were important in the development of progressivism. This sample begins with the 1897 session because it was then, for the first time, that the Progressive Republicans identified in their speeches, platforms, and votes the issues which divided them from the stalwarts, and concludes with the 1903 session, when many of their programs were enacted. The index for "progressivism" was based on votes growing out of the campaigns for a more equitable distribution of the tax burden, for regulation of quasi-public corporations, and for purification of the electoral and legislative processes. These were the issues which gave the thrust and tone to Wisconsin progressivism and served as the dividing lines between the old guard and the insurgents.36

During these four sessions there were 286 roll calls on these issues. A "progressive" legislator was defined as one who voted for more than 75 percent of the progressive measures; a "moderate" favored between 50 and 75 percent of the progressive measures; and a "conservative" opposed more than half of the progressive measures. Of the 360 Republican legislators included in this profile, 40 percent were progressives, 38 percent were moderates, and 22 percent were conservatives.37

If social conflicts were important to the emergence of progressivism, the variable which would be most likely to reveal that fact would be the occupations of legislators. Convincing generalizations from the following chart would need to be based upon large statistical differences, since the relatively small sample is divided so many ways. Occupation clearly made little difference in a legislator's vote on progressive measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Farmer</th>
<th>Merchant</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
<th>Financier</th>
<th>Worker</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progressives</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderates</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
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The extent of a man's education helps to locate his social position. In Wisconsin neither progressives (22 percent), moderates (24 percent), nor

37 The handful of Democrats, who seldom comprised over one tenth of the legislators, were excluded because they contributed no programs to the development of Wisconsin progressivism and because they used their meagre numbers primarily to embarrass the conflicting Republican factions. Because absences could be interpreted in many ways, those legislators who were absent for more than 20 percent of the roll calls on these issues were also excluded from the sample.
conservatives (27 percent) were dominated by college graduates. At a time and place where college degrees were rare, perhaps a better measure of educational aspirations would be the proportion of men who sought any kind of formal schooling—high school, business college, night school—beyond the level of the common school. Here again, however, the differences in achievement between progressives (58 percent), moderates (60 percent), and conservatives (66 percent) are insignificant.

The place of a man’s birth also indicates his social background. But the nativity of Wisconsin’s legislators failed to differentiate progressives from conservatives (see Table II).

**TABLE II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>East and New</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Canada</th>
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<td>Percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Progressives</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderates</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the Wisconsin sample corresponds roughly to those of other states in the occupations, education, and nativity of political leaders, it differs from them in two other respects. Students of the 1912 election found the progressives to be considerably younger than the conservatives in both age and political experience, a fact which led them to see progressivism as a revolt of the young, would-be politicians. In Wisconsin, however, progressives and conservatives both had an average age of forty-eight, and the moderates averaged forty-six. The median ages of progressives (49), moderates (45), and conservatives (47) likewise fail to suggest the existence of any generational conflict between progressives and conservatives.

Nor were Wisconsin’s progressives the most politically immature of the rival factions. While service in the legislature is only one measure of political experience, it does reveal the effectiveness of politicians in winning renomination from their local organizations. Although Wisconsin’s conservatives had the longest tenure in the legislature, they contrasted not so much with the progressives as with the moderates. Table III indicates the number of previous sessions attended by legislators.

The social origins of Wisconsin legislators between 1897 and 1903 clearly suggest that no particular manner of man became a progressive. Such variables as occupation, education, nativity, age, and previous legislative experience fail to differentiate the average progressive from the average
conservative. The theories that progressivism was motivated by status or class tensions felt by the urban gentry, the businessmen, the workers, the farmers, or the incipient politicians are challenged in Wisconsin by the fact that members of these groups were as likely to become conservatives as progressives. And the Wisconsin profile parallels other studies. To the extent that social class allegiance can be measured by such attributes as occupation, nativity, education, and age, social tensions were apparently irrelevant to the formation of progressivism since the "typical" progressive and conservative came from the same social background.

Collective statistical profiles can, however, obscure more than they reveal. The five more prominent early Wisconsin progressive leaders, the men who forged the issues which Robert M. La Follette subsequently adopted, were most noteworthy for their different social origins. The man contemporaries hailed as the "father of Wisconsin progressivism" was Albert R. Hall, a small dairy farmer in the western part of the state. Nephew of national Grange head Oliver Kelley, Hall was basically an agrarian radical who developed the reputation of a fearless enemy of the railroads and other large corporations.38 No less important was John A. Butler, the lengthened shadow of the powerful Milwaukee Municipal League. A sharper contrast to Hall could scarcely be found than this independently wealthy and highly educated Brahmin who seemed to spend more time in his villa than he did in his Milwaukee law office.39 Milwaukee also contributed Julius E. Roehr, organized labor's leading champion in the legislature. Born in New York City—the son of German immigrants—this hardworking lawyer and dissident Republican politician would have been extremely uncomfortable with

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38 George W. Chowne to Albert R. Hall, March 30, 1871; Hall's mother to Hall, June 7, 1873; Eugene Elliott to Hall, July 20, 1896; Sara M. Dodge to Caroline A. Hall, Oct. 29, 1909, Albert R. Hall Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison); Madison Wisconsin State Journal, April 16, 1895; Milwaukee Sentinel, Dec. 16, 1894; Weekly Madisonian, March 30, 1895; La Crosse Leader-Press, June 6, 1905; Albert O. Barton, La Follette's Winning of Wisconsin, 1894-1904 (Des Moines, 1922), 93-101; Nils P. Haugen, Pioneer and Political Reminiscences (Madison, 1930[?]), 97, 126.

39 National Cyclopedia of American Biography (49 vols. to date, New York, 1898-XXI, 55-56; John A. Butler to Jerome H. Raymond, Nov. 10, 1895, J. H. Raymond File, Extension Division Correspondence, University of Wisconsin Archival Series 18/1/1-4 (Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin).
the smells of either Hall's farm or Butler's villa.\(^40\) James H. Stout, the most respected of the early progressives in the legislature, was born and raised in Iowa and educated at the University of Chicago. A fabulously wealthy lumber baron, Stout used his company town of Menomonie to pioneer in vocational education and in welfare benefits for his workers.\(^41\) The orator of these early legislative progressives was James J. McGillivray, a self-made Canadian-born architect and manufacturer who lived in Black River Falls and authored the state's antitrust acts.\(^42\) It would seem almost pointless to hunt for a common social "type" in these early progressives. A Brahmin man of leisure and self-made manufacturer, an agrarian radical who knew no workers and a lawyer who never lived outside a large city and was the workers' champion, young men and old men, Yankees and immigrants, these were the leaders who made common cause in Wisconsin and developed the progressive program.

The widely scattered backgrounds of the most prominent early leaders and the remarkable collective similarity between the average progressive and conservative confirm the weaknesses in the sociological and psychological framework for the assumption that progressivism was rooted in social tensions. The widespread emphasis on social tensions is unsound sociologically because it draws upon only a narrow spectrum of personality theory, and those models upon which it does draw are either unproved or unprovable. The statistical profiles from Wisconsin and elsewhere reveal empirically that the origins of progressivism cannot be found by studying the social backgrounds and tensions of progressive leaders. Remembering Kelly's injunction to avoid "poking about in the neighbors' back yards for methodological windfalls," historians must develop alternative approaches which encompass not only the realm of sociology and psychology but also that of history.

Such an alternative approach should at least restore chronology, a major casualty in the repeated emphasis on men's class and status feelings, to a more prominent position. At this point it is possible to offer a tentative explanation for the origins of progressivism when that movement is placed in the context of the chronological evolution of both industrialism and reform.

\(^{40}\) The Blue Book of the State of Wisconsin . . . 1909, pp. 730-31; Milwaukee Sentinel, Aug. 25, 1896, Feb. 27, April 4, 1899; Madison Wisconsin State Journal, April 23, 24, 1897.


\(^{42}\) Blue Book . . . 1901, p. 738; Madison Wisconsin State Journal, Feb. 8, 1895.
Origins of Progressivism

When the Progressive era is put against the backdrop of the growth of industrialism in America, the remarkable fact about that period is its relative freedom from social tensions. If conflicts between city and farm, worker and boss, younger and older generations, native-born and immigrant are more or less natural results of industrialization, then the years between the late 1890s and the early 1910s stand as a period of social peace when contrasted with either the Gilded Age or the 1920s, when those conflicts were raw and ragged. Not competition but cooperation between different social groups—ministers, businessmen, workers, farmers, social workers, doctors, and politicians—was what distinguished progressivism from such earlier reform movements as Mugwumpery, Populism, the labor movement, and civil service reform. To the extent that men and groups were motivated by tensions deriving from their class and status perceptions, they would have been unable to cooperate with men from different backgrounds. In focusing on the broadly based progressive thrust, the real question is not what drove groups apart, but what drove them together? To answer this question, progressivism must be located in the development of reform in the late-nineteenth century.

The roots of progressivism reach far back into the Gilded Age. Dozens of groups and individuals in the 1880s envisioned some change that would improve society. Reformers came forward to demand civil service reform, the eight hour day, scientific agriculture, woman suffrage, enforcement of vice laws, factory inspection, nonpartisan local elections, trust-busting, wildlife conservation, tax reform, abolition of child labor, businesslike local government, regulation of railway rates, less patronizing local charity, and hundreds of other causes which would subsequently be identified with progressivism. Younger social scientists, particularly economists, were not only beginning to lambast the formalism and conservatism in their fields and to advocate the ideas which would undergird progressivism but they were also seeking to force governments to accept their ideas. Richard T. Ely's work on the Maryland Tax Commission in the mid-1880s, for example, pioneered in the application of the new economics to government and generated many of the programs which future reformers and politicians would soon adopt.

But this fertility of reform in the Gilded Age did not conceal the basic fact that individuals and groups remained fragmented. There was no common program which could rally all groups, and the general prosperity tended to reassure people that industrialism might cure its own ills. As late as 1892 one editor, reflecting this optimistic frame of mind, could state that
“the rich are growing richer, some of them, and the poor are growing
richer, all of them.” Men and groups seeking major changes, whether eli-
tists or Populists, were generally stereotyped as cranks who were blind to
the vast blessings and bright future of industrialism. Circumscribed by such
problems and attitudes reformers were understandably fragmented in the
Gilded Age.

The catastrophic depression of 1893-1897 radically altered this pattern of
reform. It vividly dramatized the failures of industrialism. The widening
chasm between the rich and the poor, which a few observers had earlier
called a natural result of industrialism, could no longer be ignored. As sev-
eral tattered bands of men known as Coxey’s Army tramped from town to
town in 1894, they drew attention to the plight of the millions of unem-
ployed and vividly portrayed the striking contrasts between the way of life
of the poor and the “conspicuous consumption” of the rich. Furthermore, as
Thorstein Veblen observed, they showed that large numbers of Americans
no longer cherished the old gospel of self-help, the very basis for mobility
in a democratic society. As desperation mounted, businessmen and politi-
cians tried the traditional ways of reversing the business cycle, but by 1895,
they realized that the time-honored formulas of the tariff and the currency
simply could not dispel the dark pall that hung over the land. Worse still,
President Grover Cleveland seemed utterly incapable of comprehending, let
alone relieving, the national crisis.

The collapse of prosperity and the failure of national partisan politi-
cians to alleviate the crisis by the traditional methods generated an atmos-
phere of restless and profound questioning which few could escape. “On
every corner stands a man whose fortune in these dull times has made him
an ugly critic of everything and everybody,” wrote one editor. A state uni-
versity president warned his graduates in 1894 that “you will see every-
where in the country symptoms of social and political discontent. You will
observe that these disquietudes do not result from the questions that arise in
the ordinary course of political discussion . . . but that they spring out of
questions that are connected with the very foundations of society and have

43 Milwaukee Sentinel, Oct. 22, 1892.
44 Thorstein Veblen, “The Army of the Commonweal,” Journal of Political Economy,
II (June 1894), 456-61. See also Douglas W. Steeles, “The Panic of 1893: Contemporary
Reflections and Reactions,” Mid-America, XLVII (July 1965), 155-75; and Samuel Rezneck,
“Unemployment, Unrest, and Relief in the United States During the Depression of 1893-
1897,” Journal of Political Economy, LXI (Aug. 1953), 324-45, for other aspects of the
depression.
45 Walter LaFeber, The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion: 1860-
1898 (Ithaca, 1963), 150-96, suggests that many businessmen recognized the failure of
traditional methods when they began the aggressive search for world markets in 1895.
46 Superior Evening Telegram, March 21, 1896.
to do with some of the most elemental principles of human liberty and modern civilization.” 47 Was the American dream of economic democracy and mobility impossible in an industrial society? Would the poor overthrow an unresponsive political and economic system? Such questions urgently demanded answers, and it was no longer either wise or safe to summarily dismiss as a crank anyone who had an answer. “The time is at hand,” cried one editor, “when some of the great problems which the Nineteenth century civilization has encountered are crying for a solution. . . . Never before in the history of the world were people so willing to accept true teaching on any of these subjects and give to them a just and practical trial.” 48 A man’s social origins were now less important than his proposals, and many men began to cooperate with people from different backgrounds to devise and implement solutions.

This depression-inspired search for answers sprouted hundreds of discussion groups at which men met, regardless of background, to propose remedies. These groups gave men the habit of ignoring previously firm class lines in the face of the national crisis. When Victor Berger urged the Milwaukee Liberal Club to adopt socialism as the answer, for example, his audience included wealthy bankers, merchants, and lawyers. 49 In the same city, at the Church and Labor Social Union, banker John Johnston urged a “new society” where “class privileges will be abolished because all will belong to the human family,” and the discussion was joined by Populists and Socialists as well as clergymen and conservative editors. 50 In this context, too, all types of people sought the wisdom of the men who had made a career of studying the social and economic breakdown. No one was surprised when unions, Granges, women’s clubs, and other groups wanted University of Wisconsin economists like Ely to address them. 51 Maybe they had an answer. The social unrest accompanying the depression weakened class and status allegiances.

The direct political effects of the depression also broke down the previous rigidity and fragmentation of reform. The depression created a clear sense of priorities among the many causes which Gilded Age reformers had advocated. It generated broadly based new issues which all classes could

47 Milwaukee Sentinel, June 18, 1894.
48 Superior Evening Telegram, July 12, 1893.
49 Milwaukee Sentinel, March 4, 1895.
50 Ibid., March 2, 1894.
51 W. A. Hilton to Richard T. Ely, Sept. 6, 1893; John O’Connell to Ely, Aug. 6, 1894; Jerome H. Raymond to Ely, Nov. 14, 1895, Richard T. Ely Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison); W. A. McEwan to Raymond, Nov. 13, 1895, Raymond File, Extension Division Correspondence; Proceedings of the 24th Annual Session of the Wisconsin State Grange Patrons of Husbandry (1895), 18-19.
unite behind. One such program was the urgent necessity for tax reform. When the depression struck, individuals and corporations were forced to devise ways of economizing as property values, sales, and revenues declined precipitously. Caught between higher taxes to cover the rising costs of local government and their own diminishing revenues, many wealthy individuals and corporations began to hide their personal assets from the assessors, to lobby tax relief through local governments, and even to refuse to pay any taxes. The progressive program was forged and received widespread popular support as a response to these economies. Citizens who lacked the economic or political resources to dodge their taxes mounted such a crusade against these tax dodgers that former President Benjamin Harrison warned the wealthiest leaders that unless they stopped concealing their true wealth from the tax assessors they could expect a revolution led by enraged taxpayers. The programs for tax reform—including inheritance, income, and ad valorem corporation taxes—varied from place to place, but the important fact was that most citizens had developed specific programs for tax reform and had now agreed that certain individuals and corporations had evaded a primary responsibility of citizenship.

A second major area which proved capable of uniting men of different backgrounds was "corporate arrogance." Facing declining revenues, many corporations adopted economies which ranged from raising fares and rates to lobbying all manner of relief measures through city and state governments. Even more important, perhaps, they could not afford necessary improvements which elementary considerations of safety and health had led local governments to demand that they adopt. Corporate arrogance was no longer a doctrinaire cry of reformers. Now it was an unprotected railway crossing where children were killed as they came home from school or the refusal of an impoverished water company to make improvements needed to provide the healthful water which could stop the epidemics of typhoid fever. Such incidents made the corporation look like a killer. These specific threats united all classes: anyone's child might be careless at a railroad crossing, and typhoid fever was no respecter of social origins.

From such new, direct, and immediate threats progressivism developed its thrust. The more corporations used their political influence to resist making the small improvements, the more communities developed increasingly radical economic programs like municipal ownership or consumer-owned utilities and fought to overthrow the machines that gave immunity to the

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52 Superior Evening Telegram, Feb. 22, 1898.
53 Henry F. Bedford, Socialism and the Workers in Massachusetts, 1886-1912 (Amherst, 1966), 63-136, implies that such issues became the basis for early Socialist victories in Haverhill and Brockton.
corporations. Political reforms like the initiative, direct primary, and home rule became increasingly important in the early stages of progressivism because, as William Allen White said, men had first to get the gun before they could hit anything with it. But it was the failure of the political system to respond to the new and immediate threats of the depression that convinced people that more desperate programs were needed.

Perhaps there are, after all, times and places where issues cut across class lines. These are the times and places where men identify less with their occupational roles as producers and more with their roles as consumers—of death-dealing water, unsafe railway crossings, polluted air, high streetcar rates, corrupt politicians—which serve to unite them across social barriers. There are also universal emotions—anger and fear—which possess all men regardless of their backgrounds. The importance of the depression of the 1890s was that it aroused those universal emotions, posed dramatic and desperate enough threats to lead men of all types to agree that tax dodging and corporate arrogance had to be ended and thereby served to unite many previously fragmented reformers and to enlist the support of the majority that had earlier been either silent or enthusiastic only about partisan issues like the tariff or symbols like Abraham Lincoln. The conversion of the National Municipal League showed how issues were becoming more important than backgrounds. Originally composed of elitists who favored such Mug-wumpish concerns as civil service reform, the League by 1898 had become so desperate with the domination over political machines by utility companies that it devoted its energies to municipal ownership and to political devices which promised “more trust in the people, more democracy” than its earlier elitism had permitted. The attitude of moral indignation, such an obvious feature of the early stages of progressivism, was not rooted in social tensions but in the universal emotion of anger.

Whether this emphasis on the results of the depression—unrest, new threats and new issues, and cooperation among social groups—has widespread relevance or validity remains to be seen, but it does help to explain the roots of progressivism in Wisconsin. The most important factor in producing the intensity of Wisconsin progressivism was the cooperation between previously discrete and fragmented social groups both in forging popular issues and getting reforms adopted. And the most important factor in defining the popular issues was the arrogance of certain corporations. In

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55 Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order, 1877-1920 (New York, 1967), 111-32, argues that growing cooperation resulted not from the depression but from modernization in general and professionalization and bureaucratization in particular.
Milwaukee the traction and electricity monopoly between 1894 and 1896 alone, for reasons ranging from extreme overcapitalization to confidence in its political powers, raised both its lighting and streetcar fares, refused to arbitrate with its striking employees, enjoined the city from enforcing ordinances lowering its fares, and used its political power—the company’s chief manager was the state’s leading Republican boss—to cut its tax bill in half, kill an ordinance which would have prevented it from polluting the air, and thwart generally popular attempts at regulation. Each time the monopoly refused to obey an order, lobbied special favors from the city or state, or prostituted the Republican party to the company, the progressive coalition grew. By the end of the depression, the coalition drew together both ends of the economic spectrum—the Merchants and Manufacturers Association and the Chamber of Commerce as well as several labor unions and the Federated Trades Council. Politically it included the country Republican Club, the Democratic Jefferson Club, and the Socialists and Populists. The Mug-wumpish and upper-class Municipal League was joined by German social clubs like the Turnvereine. So defiant was the company—so desperate were the people—that the traction managers became the state’s most hated men by 1899; and humorist-politician George Peck observed that Wisconsin’s parents "frighten children when they are bad, by telling them that if they don’t look out," the traction magnates "will get them."57 Four hundred miles away, in Superior, the story was remarkably similar. Angered by the repeated refusals of that city’s water company to provide the city with healthful enough water to prevent the typhoid fever epidemics that killed dozens of people each year, and blaming the company’s political power within both parties for the failure of regulation, labor unions and Populists cooperated with business and professional men and with dissident politicians to try to secure pure water and to overthrow the politicians owned by the company. In Superior, political debate had indeed narrowed, as an editor observed, to a fight of "the people against corporate insolence."58 The water company, like the traction monopoly at Milwaukee, stood isolated and alone, the enemy of men from all backgrounds. In Wisconsin, at least, the community’s groups continued to perform their special functions; and, by the end of the depression, they were all agreed that corporate arrogance


had to be abdolished. Their desperation made them willing to speak, lobby, and work together.

If, as the Wisconsin experience suggests, cooperation was the underpinning of progressivism, historians should focus on reformers not as victims of social tensions, but as reformers. At any given time and place, hundreds of men and groups are seeking supporters for their plans to change society and government. The basic problem for the reformer is to win mass support for his program. In Wisconsin a reformer's effectiveness depended on how well he manipulated acts of corporate and individual arrogance that infuriated everyone in order to demonstrate the plausibility of his program. Desperate events had made tax dodging, corporate defiance and control of politics the main political issues and had allowed this program to swallow the older reformers at the same time that they created a much broader constituency for reform. The question then becomes: Why did some succeed while others failed? North Dakota never developed a full-blown progressive movement because that state's progressives never demonstrated the plausibility of their programs. Wisconsin's early progressives did succeed in drawing together such diverse groups as unions, businessmen, Populists, and dissident politicians because they adapted their program and rhetoric to the menacing events which angered everyone. Reformers operate in their hometowns and not in some contrived social background which could as easily apply to New York or Keokuk, and it is in their hometowns that they should be studied. Historians should determine why they succeeded or failed to rally the support of their communities to their programs, for the most significant criterion for any reformer is, in the end, his effectiveness.

When the progressive characteristically spoke of reform as a fight of "the people" or the "public interest" against the "selfish interests," he was speaking quite literally of his political coalition because the important fact about progressivism, at least in Wisconsin, was the degree of cooperation between previously discrete social groups now united under the banner of the "public interest." When the progressive politician denounced the arrogance of quasi-public corporations and tax-dodgers, he knew that experiences and events had made his attacks popular with voters from all backgrounds. Both conceptually and empirically it would seem safer and more productive to view reformers first as reformers and only secondarily as men who were trying to relieve class and status anxieties. The basic riddle in progressivism is not what drove groups apart, but what made them seek common cause.