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Activism and Reform in American Society, 1893–1917

Karen Pastorello

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The Progressives

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The Progressives

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Introduction

Anyone reading the news in the winter of 1890 might easily have missed a short *New York Times* article announcing the upcoming World's Columbian Exposition, scheduled to open in Chicago in 1893 to celebrate the anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America. Nonetheless, the article boldly predicted that the Exposition would be "a grand success, at least as a display of American genius." When it opened three years later, the Exposition, or Chicago World's Fair as it became more commonly known, surpassed expectations. Twenty-seven million "excursionists" attended the ten-month event, which returned more than one million dollars in profits to its investors. In his *Book of the Fair* (1893), historian Hubert Bancroft pronounced, "The Fair has been to the world a revelation, to Americans an inspiration. It has shown, as no written or spoken works could show, the power and progress of a nation where all are free to strive for the highest rewards that energy and talent can win." In addition to touting American ingenuity, the Fair marked Chicago's future as a metropolis and foreshadowed the rise of the Progressive Era.

The Progressives: Activism and Reform in American Society, 1893–1917, First Edition.
Karen Pastorello.

By 1890, the population of Chicago had surpassed one million, as newcomers flocked to the city to take advantage of job opportunities in its many factories; forty percent of the city's population was foreign-born. Chicago became a major transportation hub connecting the East to the West. Union Stock Yards, with its vast network of rail lines, housed meat packers like Swift and Armour, employing more people than any other industry. The men's garment industry was the city's second largest employer, with McCormick Reaper Works, Illinois Steel Company, Crane Elevator Company, and Montgomery Ward's retail mail-order business also ranked among companies that employed large numbers of workers.

The fact that Chicago prevailed over New York, Washington, and St. Louis in the Congressional contest to host the World's Fair seemed fitting. Chicago had literally been enhanced for the purpose of hosting the event. City promoters had held an election in 1889 to bolster the size of the city so that it could compete on a more equal level with its archrival, New York. The election resulted in the immediate incorporation of 125 square miles and 225,000 people. Virtually overnight, Chicago became the country's second largest city.

Quick to recognize the sudden demand for new housing created by the Fair, industrialist George Pullman seized the opportunity by erecting Market Square in Pullman, Illinois, fourteen miles south of Chicago. Pullman, who made his fortune manufacturing luxury sleeping and dining railroad cars, built apartments to house fairgoers and ran trains directly into the fairgrounds. Chicago's dramatic growth, coupled with the promise of banker Lyman Gage to raise several million dollars in seed money in a twenty-four-hour period, spelled victory for the city intent on displacing New York as the epicenter of the nation.

From the Fair's opening day on May 1, 1893, patrons marveled at the fourteen neoclassical "great" buildings situated on more than 600 acres. The fairgrounds, seven miles south of the Loop, were designed by renowned landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel H. Burnham and constructed by over 40,000 workers, featured grand vistas and exquisite landscaping in an

attempt to present the ideal city. Cultural displays and artistic exhibits featured countless technological innovations, including over 90,000 incandescent lamps. The reflected light bouncing off the gleaming white facades of the buildings intensified the glow of what became known as the "White City."

Fairgoers bore witness to a scientific and technological revolution. Massive industrial growth also meant that business interests were more visible than ever before. Americans and visitors from abroad gawked in wonder at the new items manufacturers unveiled at the Fair. It was there that a young Henry Ford glimpsed his first industrial engine. Perhaps the most impressive new technology, electricity, ran everything from the Ferris wheel to massive fountains and merited its own building, the Electricity Building, where visitors were introduced to telephones, phonographs, typewriters, electric lamps, sewing machines, laundry machines, and irons. Consumer products such as dishwashers, doorbells, carpet sweepers, dental drills, picture postcards, carbonated soda, Cream of Wheat, Shredded Wheat, Juicy Fruit gum, and zippers made their debuts. Customers stood in long lines to purchase everything from electric appliances to gadgets, or to taste hamburgers and hot dogs, or to sip Pabst Beer for the first time. The inescapable message that equated the purchase of commodities with the enjoyment of life struck a definitive chord in American consciousness.

In a sense, the Fair symbolized the country's evolution from an agrarian land of rugged, highly independent farmers and westward settlers to a modern, more urban one characterized by an industrial culture of workers controlled by management responding to a national, even international marketplace. Frederick Jackson Turner, then a young professor at the University of Wisconsin, delivered the keynote address at a special convention of the American Historical Association held to mark the Fair's commencement. In his magisterial paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner informed his audience that the nation's western frontier had closed in 1890 – the seemingly endless supply of land had run out. According to Turner, the great many Americans and immigrants who had ventured west to start

a new life had defined the democratic and innovative nature of the nation's character. This romanticized version of the Western settlement experience would settle in the nation's historical consciousness for nearly the next hundred years.

As the economy shifted from a traditional, agriculturally based one to a modern industrial system, Chicagoans, like other Americans, grappled with the effects of urbanization. The country began to pull free from its deep agrarian roots and to redefine itself as an urban nation with an urban conscience. City peripheries expanded outward in concentric circles as they grew into commercial and cultural centers. The changing nature of urban life became a popular subject for writers like Theodore Dreiser, who, at the age of twenty-one, moved from his small Indiana hometown to Chicago and experienced firsthand much of the material that made its way into his work. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* became the first of many "urban novels" to reveal the darker side of city life, one depicting the sense of alienation and frustration unwelcome newcomers often experienced. Naïve newcomers often found themselves hardened by the harsh realities of big-city living.

Cities assumed new meaning as centers of production and consumption that served urban residents as well as those in outlying areas. Private enterprise placed a firm hold on the urban industrial economy and fostered the growth of powerful corporations. Business interests brought vitality to the marketplace, but at the same time, their seemingly unending pursuit of ever-rising profits gave rise to a demand from the American people for some type of economic regulation. Labor reacted to the grip of corporate control over the workplace by attempting to organize unions to fight for workers' basic rights, including a fair wage, reasonable hours in the workday, and safe conditions.

Following the well-worn paths of those who permanently migrated to the United States, people traveled from across the globe to attend the Fair. Nineteen foreign nations participated in the event. While select foreign governments established their headquarters in the dignified White City, non-white nations were relegated to the outlying section of the Fair, an area set aside for entertainment and amusement known as the Midway

Plaisance. Ethnological exhibits replete with artifacts lined the "Midway" depicting daily life in African and Asian cultures. Visitors marveled at the recreated African Village and Streets of Cairo.

Subtle changes that many observed for the first time at the Fair were also gradually integrating into American life. Activist Chicago women established a formidable presence in the Women's Building at the Fair. The vibrant women's political network, which had its roots in various Chicago women's clubs and then expanded into the city's premier settlement house, Hull House, continued its work at the Fair. Two women in particular, art collector and philanthropist Bertha Palmer and clubwoman and reformer Ellen Henrotin, took center stage. Palmer was appointed president of the Board of Lady Managers, which was in charge of overseeing the Women's Building exhibits and programs. Henrotin served as the Board's vice president. Both women were committed to women's equality. Dedicated to the idea that women could become empowered through becoming economically self-sufficient, Henrotin assigned over 30 chairwomen to the various Women's Congresses at the Fair. At these Congresses, women could speak on labor, education, suffrage, the arts, medicine, household economics, and religion.

Through her work at the Fair, Henrotin catapulted to fame and leadership in a number of other national organizations, including the Women's Trade Union League and the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Their experience at the Fair showed women how far they had come but also revealed how far they still had to go. Women realized that if they were to effect meaningful social change, their political empowerment was necessary. To accomplish that goal, they began enlisting male politicians and the support of male voters who sympathized with the cause of women's suffrage.

Similarly, the embattled presence of African Americans at the Fair foreshadowed their painful experiences in a Jim Crow South. A dispute erupted between civil rights activist Ida B. Wells, who wanted fellow blacks to boycott the Fair because they had been excluded from its planning and execution, and the black educator

Booker T. Washington, who encouraged their attendance at the high-profile event. Wells was particularly perturbed by the special "Negro Day" on August 25, which promoters encouraged blacks to attend by offering them free watermelon. In a way, the Fair foreshadowed the racist "separate but equal" doctrine that would soon become the law of the land with the Supreme Court's decision in the seminal case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896). With the sole exception of the Women's Building, the vision for the future projected at the Fair revolved around a white male-dominated world.

Indeed, the Fair straddled a watershed between eras. It bore witness to the end of the Gilded Age and forecast the hard economic times to come. Workers at Andrew Carnegie's steel mill in Pennsylvania endured a major setback in 1892, in the Homestead Strike, when Carnegie's manager, Henry Clay Frick, broke the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers Union. Violent labor strikes in New Orleans among dockworkers, among Buffalo railroad switch operators, in Tennessee among coal miners, and in Idaho among copper miners evidenced massive worker discontent. Then came the Depression of 1893, the worst economic downturn before the Great Depression. Unemployment rates climbed into the double digits as an army of jobless men led by Jacob Coxey marched to Washington to protest the federal government's indifference to the growing crisis.

In Chicago, a smallpox epidemic erupted during the last days of the Fair, ravaging the Jewish and Italian West Side by the following spring. Residents of the city also endured the tragic assassination of Mayor Carter Harrison by a disgruntled job seeker and the actions of an arsonist who set fire to the Fair's abandoned buildings. Host to labor unrest, trade unions, political bosses, settlement houses, radical politicians, and a new graduate school of social work, Chicago in many ways represented the high points and the low points of what was to become known as the Progressive Era.

Chicago's radicalism had first surfaced with the infamous Haymarket Square Bombing in 1886, an incident resulting in the conviction of seven accused anarchists on scant evidence. Less

than a decade later, in 1894, the city would erupt in chaos when 5,000 workers at Pullman Palace Car Company were fired when they struck against a wage cut. A court injunction declared the strike illegal and federal troops marched in to crush the workers' efforts. The leader of the American Railway Union, Eugene Debs, served a six-month jail term and converted to socialism as a result. In short order, Chicago seemed to have become the radical epicenter of the nation. Progressivism, like Populism before it, would radiate from the heartland.

Progressivism can be defined as the multifaceted effort of reformers to first identify and then to remedy the problems inherent in an industrializing and increasingly urban society. As times grew tougher in the wake of the Depression of 1893, reformers expanded their efforts beyond individual cities to states and then regions to try to formulate a more holistic, national approach. In the process, their work became more proactive and systematized. Influenced by the ongoing efforts of Christian charity workers and pragmatic philosophies at home, Progressive reformers also looked to Europe for direction. They also began to rely on the knowledge of experts – particularly social scientists – who emphasized the usefulness of the scientific method in solving societal problems. The new graduate program in sociology at the University of Chicago, for instance, helped train a new cadre of reformers known as social workers. These concerned professionals ventured into tenements and sweatshops where they observed and interviewed people (Figure I.1). After compiling and analyzing their data, they shared their findings in contemporary publications.

As the twentieth century commenced, a larger percentage of urban residents than ever before were immigrants who had come to the United States, primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe. By 1920, more than half of all Americans lived in industrializing urban areas. Poor working conditions and low wages plagued many city dwellers, as did the lack of housing and adequate medical care and the prevalence of child labor, prostitution, alcoholism, racism, malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, disenfranchisement, and other ills associated with poverty. In time,

Figure I.1 Laundry hung outside row of tenements, 260–268 Elizabeth St., New York, 1912. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, National Child Labor Committee Collection (LC-DIG-nclc-04208).

Progressives learned how to voice and effectively address the conditions of factory workers newly emigrated from Europe or newly relocated from family farms to cities.

Most Progressives concurred on the issues at hand but were less cohesive when it came to determining the best solutions. Many agreed that a high level of reform, sometimes in the form of governmental regulation, was necessary to improve the quality of life for those most adversely affected by industrialization. The staunchest Progressive reformers insisted that the state should step in to play a more active role in solving social, economic, and political problems. They sought to supplement private charities with public social services, settlement houses, urban reforms, and public health and labor legislation. Progressives led the call for a more streamlined and efficient activist government that involved itself in American life. The majority of reformers were not inter-

ested in advancing their own agency; instead, they were genuinely concerned with betterment for all.

In 1982, historian Daniel Rodgers asserted in his seminal essay, "In Search of Progressivism," that to begin to assess Progressivism accurately, one must first understand what was happening at the end of the nineteenth century. Rodgers's piece implies that historians studying the era would benefit by employing the tools and methods of social history to gain insight into how all Americans, no matter how ordinary, tried to make sense out of the chaotic world around them.

Until about forty years ago, most historians tended to present a somewhat romanticized, monolithic interpretation of the nation's past through their studies that concentrated on the political and intellectual elite, in most cases powerful men and momentous events. Enlightened by the Civil Rights movement, historians in the 1960s and 1970s began to focus more astutely on the experiences and actions of ordinary Americans. These practitioners of what became known as social history began to seek some relationship between everyday life, the values and behaviors of ordinary people, and the larger mechanisms of change that evolved over a long period of time. Social historians sifted through the details of individuals' lives to determine how those living at the time understood the meaning of their lives.

This emphasis on ordinary Americans meant that previously unrecognized or marginalized groups attracted the attention of historians who respectfully recognized cultural differences while attempting to understand the power of diversity. Women, Native Americans, African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and industrial workers became subjects of historical inquiry. Historians like Thomas Bender considered them actors who shaped the meaning of "public culture."

Social historians have become adept at gathering and interpreting quantitative data to answer questions about demographic and mobility patterns and community composition. The trends that they have revealed, taken in conjunction with the analysis of formal institutions of social control such as schools, churches, and political structures, answer questions about how individuals

resist or succumb to social control. Historians of the Progressive Era have probed the nature and strength of traditional culture and explored the texture of daily life through diaries and unique sources of imagery like parade banners and strike slogans and songs. They have examined demographic transitions using reports of charity institutions and immigrant presses. They have used records of home ownership by race and ethnicity to demonstrate patterns of social and even occupational mobility. While social historians have successfully linked many major historical events to the experiences of ordinary people, it does not mean that they have overcome all the challenges that this type of work presents. Fragmentation is a big problem, and the lack of synthesis is another.

Most striking was the plight of the poor urban population, most of whom were recent immigrants. In the decades following the Civil War, those seeking moral reform and charitable relief for individuals began to demand social and economic justice for the masses. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Americans stood poised on the brink of modernity with the Progressives combating the ills associated with industrial life.

While the Progressive Era arguably marks the most transfiguring time in American history, it remains one of the most elusive periods for historical inquiry. The fundamental question of how to define progressivism continues to perplex scholars to this day. Students of the era quickly come to realize that progressivism is not a cohesive, unified movement but, instead, the sum of a variety of reform efforts.

Since the concept of progressivism remains fluid, it also is challenging to date definitively the era. It lays, as historian Melvyn Dubofsky informs us, "in the center of a historical continuum that runs from the Civil War to the establishment of mass bureaucratic order in the wake of WWII." Dating the Progressive Era from 1893 to 1917, as I have chosen to do in this volume, helps sharpen one's analysis of the period. The three phenomena that shape the era – industrialization, urbanization, and immigration – are evident by the early 1890s. More specifically, 1893 marks the beginning of a major depression; the opening of the

World's Columbian Exposition; the ascendency of Populism or agrarian discontent and a related third-party movement in the national political arena; the completion of the immigration induction center Ellis Island; the inauguration of Democrat Grover Cleveland as President; and the rise of the first national labor union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The April 1917 entry of the United States into World War I stalled and, some have argued, brought the Progressive thrust to an abrupt end.

This book poses several questions. Who, exactly, were these Progressive reformers? What were their origins, causes, and goals? When were they most active? How did they establish their agency? And, most important, what in their accomplishments leaves a legacy for twenty-first-century Americans?

Even a brief consideration of the period's historiography (the history of written history) enables students to view the Progressive Era through a multitude of lenses. Drawing on the work of diverse scholars, I will attempt to both balance competing perspectives and capture the essence of the era, providing insight into the Progressive years for today's students. The "Bibliographical Essay" at the end of the book highlights the topics covered in the book. These sections will enable serious students to learn more about the debates surrounding progressivism, as well as guide them to good sources for further study.

Not all historians are comfortable with the idea of transformational moments, which, as they point out, may seem neater and more definitive in hindsight than they were at the time. But others, myself included, are inclined to picture the American narrative as a series of ups and downs, periods of mounting internal strife crystallized by momentous events. Students will be introduced to the many people and groups who worked toward bettering society for the poor, urban, mostly immigrant workers. Learning something about the individuals involved in the Progressive Movement, some might be encouraged to imagine what their own lives might have been like if they had lived in the Progressives' rapidly changing world.

Progressive Era reformers did not refer to themselves as *Progressives*. Writers popularized the term during the 1910

Congressional elections when they applied the label to candidates who by 1910 began to advocate basic political, social, and economic reforms. Progressives ranged from those who revered the efficiency of large corporations but disliked corporate trusts to those who praised "the people" and sought a white, educated electorate who spoke the language of social order and moral uplift. Progressives did share some common characteristics. All of them had faith in social science and government to solve problems, to help improve the lives of the less fortunate.

Before the movement ran its course, Progressives and their followers came to include religious leaders, businessmen, professionals, civic leaders, settlement women, suffragists, African Americans, civil rights advocates, union members, nativists, immigrants, workers, farmers, and politicians. Assigning exclusive membership to "special interest groups" is complicated. Some categories overlap, so that some people may have belonged to more than one or even two such groups. In addition, as historian Richard McCormick points out, a focus on special interest groups often fails to account for the unorganized public. A more pertinent question when trying to identify who the Progressives were might be to ask, what effective coalitions did they form? Regardless, despite the lack of a unified, formal movement, the phenomenon that is progressivism provides a useful framework for the study of American history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, for the majority of Progressives, as for the majority of Americans, government seemed the most likely source through which to accomplish sweeping social, economic, and political change. Understanding our contemporary circumstances necessitates tracing the evolution and expansiveness of social, economic, and political institutions and policies from the turn of the twentieth century forward. Most important are the directives the Progressives left us for contemplating the way we live now.

1

Setting the Stage
The Birth of the Progressive Impulse, 1893–1900

By 1890, sixty-three million people lived in the United States, the majority of them making their homes in small towns and rural areas, living life much as they had before the Civil War tore the nation apart. Farming, especially prevalent in the Midwest and South, outranked all other occupations. In the North, however, once the war ended, the trend toward industrialization that had begun before the war resumed and gained momentum. In the three decades following the conflict, industrial output in the United States tripled. Approximately five million Americans – or thirteen percent of the population – worked in one of the more than 350,000 industrial firms located mainly in the Northeastern cities. By 1920, census records officially classified the United States as an urban nation for the first time in its history.

On the Farm

For many Americans, life on the farm symbolized a peaceful yet productive way of life. By the turn of the century, crop

The Progressives: Activism and Reform in American Society, 1893–1917, First Edition. Karen Pastorello.

production had soared. American farmers were producing more than twice as much cotton, corn, and wheat than they had in 1870. Surpluses and profitable crop prices improved the farmers' standard of living. "In the country," wrote Harvard University president Charles W. Eliot, "it is quite possible that a permanent [farm] family should have a permanent dwelling." While those who wrote about farming tended to highlight its positive aspects, in reality it was a demanding and risky business, one fraught with tensions.

Romantically perceived as a self-reliant people of plenty, American farmers were not immune from fluctuations in the economy. Expenses for supplies and animals continued to rise throughout the nineteenth century. Large and small farmers who wanted to increase or merely insure their output mechanized. While the use of farm machinery appeared to relieve farmers of some of the backbreaking physical labor, the purchase of new and replacement equipment put farmers constantly in need of cash and credit. As mechanization took hold, any profits from farming were spent on farm equipment, which took priority over household improvements.

In addition to the pressure to maintain status and power by mechanizing, farmers also had to compete with increasing commercialization. The 1910 federal census confirmed that family farms continued to dominate agricultural production, but the seeds of agribusiness had already been sown. In New Jersey and Maryland, commercial farmers employed seasonal migrant labor to pick beans, peas, tomatoes, blueberries, and cranberries. Increasingly, seasonal farm hands were unrelated, even foreign. Some migrant farm workers traveled from harvest to harvest their entire lives, living in shacks or tents without any benefits or ever owning land. The children of these nomadic workers suffered, too. Their parents' transiency meant that the young usually lacked both a stable home life and a proper education.

As industrial farms began to hire more employees, they introduced mass production and new management techniques to American agriculture. These more highly commercial farms raised vast quantities of agricultural products and sold them in

distant markets. Commercial farms relied on rail transportation supported by low freight rates, and the rise of these large-scale enterprises reflected the changes taking place in the larger American society.

No longer could ordinary Americans expect to move west to take advantage of the allegedly free and open space. In 1890, the United States Census Bureau had announced the disappearance of a contiguous frontier line. In his speech to a gathering of historians at the Chicago World's Fair in May of 1893, thirty-three-year-old University of Wisconsin professor Frederick Jackson Turner expounded on the significance of the frontier in American history: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development." While Turner's characterization of the West as the most democratic region of the nation came to dominate the American mindset for the next half century, it did not accurately portray what the Western experience meant for the majority of Americans, especially Native Americans, many of whom were forced onto reservations in the West during the Trail of Tears in the 1830s and who would not even be granted U.S. citizenship until 1924. By 1900, many of the roughly 250,000 Native Americans were farmers. A small number of Indians farmed their own land in the same way as did whites, but most Indians tried as best they could to continue communal land use practices on tribal reservations. Displaced from their ancestral lands and marginalized by mainstream society, Native Americans suffered in silence.

White farmers in the Northeast generally inherited family land that had passed down through several generations. Farm families at the time were typically nucleic, consisting of a husband, a wife, and their children. Small family farmers tried to use local labor whenever they needed extra help. Regardless of the kind of farming in which the family was involved, the long production process required the cooperation of each family member. Farmers coped with challenges by maintaining strong bonds within their families and communities. Kinship ties facilitated the exchange of labor, machinery, and financial assistance. No matter how

geographically isolated their land was, farmers and their families were rarely alone.

Despite the rapid pace of change around them, the work routines of farm families changed little over time. To the casual observer, it seemed like men made the decisions when it came to deciding what type of crops to grow or when to purchase equipment, while women kept the family going on a daily basis. However, Nancy Gray Osterud's study of farm women in New York's Nanticoke Valley, *Bonds of Community* (1991), revealed that by virtue of the degree of cooperation required to run a successful farm, men and women crossed over the boundaries of gender roles to assist each other more than historians initially realized. In other words, farm wives participated in decision making at all levels.

Women's days were hard and long, but their work was not considered as important as their husband's, primarily because women's efforts were not always associated directly with income-producing labor. What was being grown or raised dictated the kind of work demanded from women. For example, since dairy farming, and more specifically, the chores associated with maintaining large herds of cows and milking them, was so intense, women as well as children had to work on the farm. Growing corn, on the other hand, required less care latter in the season, once the plants reached a certain height. Farm women's domestic labor almost always entailed preparing food, washing clothes, and spring cleaning, essential but arduous tasks, especially in light of the fact that these chores required hauling wood and water into the home.

Life on the farm meant that the whole family, including the children, maintained the same daily schedule, waking before dawn to do early morning chores in the home or barnyard. Before heading off to the fields, the family, often joined by hired hands, ate a hearty breakfast of meat, eggs, potatoes, and porridge in cold weather or cereal in warmer weather. Coffee was the adult beverage, while the children drank milk. Farmers took a lunch break at around noon and then returned to the fields to resume their work until supper time. Most farm children attended