



A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920

Michael McGerr

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With America's current and ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor and the constant threat of the disappearance of the middle class, the Progressive Era stands out as a time when the middle class had enough influence on the country to start its own revolution. Before the Progressive Era most Americans lived on farms, working from before sunrise to after sundown every day except Sunday with tools that had changed very little for centuries. Just three decades later, America was utterly transformed into a diverse, urban, affluent, leisure-obsessed, teeming multitude. This explosive change was accompanied by extraordinary public-spiritedness as reformers--frightened by class conflict and the breakdown of gender relations--abandoned their traditional faith in individualism and embarked on a crusade to remake other Americans in their own image.

The progressives redefined the role of women, rewrote the rules of politics, banned the sale of alcohol, revolutionized marriage, and eventually whipped the nation into a frenzy for joining World War I. These colorful, ambitious battles changed the face of American culture and politics and established the modern liberal pledge to use government power in the name of broad social good. But the progressives, unable to deliver on all of their promises, soon discovered that Americans retained a powerful commitment to individual freedom. Ironically, the progressive movement helped reestablish the power of conservatism and ensured that America would never be wholly liberal or conservative for generations to come.

Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent* recreates a time of unprecedented turbulence and unending fascination, showing the first American middle-class revolution. Far bolder than the New Deal of FDR or the New Frontier of JFK, the Progressive Era was a time when everything was up for grabs and perfection beckoned.

A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920 Details

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Stuart says

History is often about a series of wars, so American history focuses on the Revolution, the Civil War, WWI, WWII, etc. To get a handle on the 19th Century (outside of the Civil War) I recommend 2 books. "The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln" by Sean Wilentz which is an excellent history of the 1st 1/2 of 19th century America. And this book, "A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920" to cover the period between Reconstruction and WWI.

The Progressive movement gave us anti-trust battles, food and drug regulation, the protection of forests, child labor laws, the progressive income tax, and the women's right to vote. Unfortunately they also gave us prohibition, segregation, and many progressives found themselves to be enthusiastic supporters of World War I.

Since Republicans have been rolling back many of the gains that their party supported 100 years ago, it's good to take a fresh look back at that period. If you call yourself a progressive, you should find out just what that used to mean.

Zack says

A good read, and pretty enjoyable considering it was one that was used for an upper level history course on the time frame(those readings are often quite dull). For what it contains, the book could be 4 stars. However, it shows a heavy bias towards unions, which is alright in the abstract but not as a work for historical learning and such. Also, it doesn't present the non-McGerr view on just about anything, so if a reader doesn't have a background in the subject, it can lead to a very skewed view of the time. Overall, a good read if balanced out by other knowledge. However, if one wants a "go-to" book on the era, this is likely not going to fit the bill.

Erik says

A very good introduction to the Progressive Era and its reformers' utopist ideal of creating a sustainable and disciplined middle class paradise in the US.

Dan Gorman says

While largely a synthesis of existing research, McGerr's "Fierce Discontent" is a marvelously readable account of Progressivism in American history. McGerr does make an argument in the book, so the book is not a total rehash of earlier histories: Progressive leaders wanted to reform society, but also to transform the morality of individuals, so that the whole country would reflect middle-class values. To McGerr's credit, he shows the coziness of many white Progressives with racism and eugenics; the Progressives aren't praised for their reform ideas at the expense of their prejudices. Very useful as a general introduction to the Progressive Era, although for a deeper dive one should consult James Kloppenberg and Daniel T. Rodgers.

Michael says

Good

Kristi says

This is a fantastic survey of an important historical era, as well as a remarkable synthesis - interesting, informative, and easy to read. The resonance of this time in American history with our contemporary political, economic, and social situations is both striking and useful. I would highly recommend this book.

Kevin Godfrey says

Interesting take on progressive era

I read this book as part of my year long reading of US history. Along side this book i am reading a 3 part biography of Theodore Roosevelt so this book helped add some context to Roosevelt's life and times.

AskHistorians says

Classic/textbook account of the Progressive Era and Movement.

Lauren Albert says

A good basic introduction to the era. I found interesting his discussion of the way WWI aided progressivism by giving the federal government unprecedented powers to regulate society and business. I thought McGerr had some unusual (to me anyway) perspectives that I don't recall reading about elsewhere. He believes that progressives promoted segregation.

“True to their mission to create a safe society for themselves and their children, the progressives turned to segregation as a way to halt dangerous social conflict that could not otherwise be stopped.” 183

Brianna says

This book read like a college student's thesis in my mind. It started out fairly well but increasingly felt like simply a one-sided presentation of the Progressive Movement. Great overview of the movement and its ideals, but not an in-depth look at the era.

Megan says

This is the second book I had to read for my seminar on the progressive and populist movements in America. Compared to the Hofstadter book I read last week this one is leaps and bounds ahead of that. I am not a huge fan of non-fiction as anyone who knows me can tell you, but this book was actually decent. The author really drug you into the story whether you wanted him to or not. He portrayed famous faces of the progressive movement as well as people who were simply affected by it. This book really filled in the blanks for me as to what the specifics of this movement were and how the progressives started as idealists and ended up being as manipulative as the "big business" they so adamantly fought against. I also thought that most progressives like Jane Addams were the truest form of hypocrits. They stood around preaching "association" between all the classes but they were the first ones to vote for segregation between the races. The progressive movement almost makes you glad that the first "Red Scare" happened otherwise who knows how much further the progressives would have pushed their legislation. This book also pointed out how terrible a president Woodrow Wilson was, he literally turned the U.S. into a dictatorship where the slightest infraction could get you sent to jail. People think of World War I as this great time in America where everyone came together for the war effort. The only reason people would think that is because Wilson made speaking out against his administration and the war punishable by law. I also found it amusing that the progressives outlawed "wine, women, and song" for the men over seas. For one they thought they could control EVERYTHING for second those boys were fighting for us and our country how dare they try to tell the soldiers what the could and couldn't do in their spare time. I find it really rather shameful.

Caitlin Marineau says

The early twentieth century was a period of great social upheaval. More and more people began questioning the power of big business in the country, questions about morality increasingly came to the forefront, and issues relating to immigration and segregation affected the entire country. In the midst of all these issues, progressives sought to remake the country into a "middle-class paradise," and attempted to mold society in their image. In *A Fierce Discontent* McGerr demonstrates the radical changes sought by progressives in society, as well as the eventual disappointment when the great experiment eventually failed after World War I.

McGerr argues that progressives sought change in several major areas, including transforming other classes of society (both the rich and the poor) to be more in line with middle class social expectations; ending conflict between the upper and lower classes that plagued the country during this period, including attempting to create more harmonious relations between the workers and the business owners; reducing the power of big business; and maintaining segregation in society, because they believed it was the best way to maintain peaceful relation between the different races. Ultimately, though the progressives brought about many changes in laws and government, the attempt to remake society failed in a country that prized individualism, and increasingly sought out pleasure.

On the downside, McGerr's claim that "It is the argument of this book that progressivism created much of our contemporary political predicament," seemed to be largely unproven by the end of the book, as he only briefly touched on the topic in the conclusion. Despite this, McGerr effectively illustrated the goals of the progressives, and why the movement eventually ended.

Sydney Robertson says

There is a lot of great information in here, but the narrative style is a little dry and verbose for me.

Peter Mcloughlin says

An era of reform and labor activism, the most racist era after the civil war with lynchings and Jim Crow often called the race nadir of the modern period. The era of Teddy Roosevelt and trust-busting, of temperance and campaigns for moral purity. An era of mass immigration. The progressive era. a lot of good things but a lot of bad things. Still not a time for my particular taste but then again neither is the present moment.

Cindy Leighton says

The Progressive Movement has long been one of my favorite periods of US History - this book somewhat ruined that for me as I gathered a less idealistic image of the period. The first half of the book was fascinating and I couldn't put it down. Unfortunately the second half dragged. . . as if the author just needed to be sure he crammed in all the research he had done whether it was interesting and relevant or not.

Still love Teddy, despite his flaws.
