Progressivism and Reform

The growth of industry and cities created problems. A small number of people held a large proportion of the nation’s wealth while others fell into poverty. Workers faced long hours, dangerous conditions, poor pay, and an uncertain future. Big business became closely allied with government, and political machines, which offered services in return for votes, controlled some city governments. As the United States entered the 20th century, demand arose to combat these problems and reform society.

Crusading journalists helped influence the public for reform. Known as muckrakers, these journalists revealed to middle class readers the evils of economic privilege, political corruption, and social injustice. Their articles appeared in *McClure’s Magazine* and other magazines. Cartoonist Thomas Nast drew political cartoons exposing the corruption of politicians. Some muckrakers focused on corporate abuses. Ida Tarbell, for instance, exposed the activities of the Standard Oil Company. In *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), Lincoln Steffens exposed corruption in city government. Other muckrakers attacked the Senate, railroad practices, insurance companies, and fraud in patent medicine. Lewis Hine photographed laborers. Jacob Riis photographed the urban poor and wrote a book called *How the Other Half Lives*.


Progressivism in the Cities and States

*Social Progressivism*

Many people had used the ideas of the scientist Charles Darwin to explain the vast differences between rich and poor. Social Darwinism was the belief that “survival of the fittest” applied to society as well as nature - that the poor were poor because they were not “fit” enough to become rich. Social Darwinism was countered by the Social Gospel. Advocates of the Social Gospel believed that the ideas of charity and kindness emphasized in the Bible should be applied to the poor and powerless in the new cities of America.

Settlement houses offered social services to the urban poor, especially immigrants. Pioneering settlement houses, such as Hull House, founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in 1889, provided nurseries, adult education classes, and recreational...
opportunities for children and adults. Settlements spread rapidly. There were 100 settlement houses in 1900, 200 in 1905, and 400 in 1910. Settlement leaders joined the battle against political machines and endorsed many other progressive reforms. Educator John Dewey emphasized a child-centered philosophy of teaching, known as progressive education, which affected schoolrooms for three generations.

Political Progressivism

The first signs of reform in politics came as an attack on the spoils system or patronage. Under the spoils system, individuals would be rewarded with government jobs based on their loyalty to individual politicians. This led to widespread corruption and incompetence in government. In 1883, Congress passed the Pendleton Civil Service Act, which required that anyone seeking a government job to pass the Civil Service Examination. After this act was passed, only those who were qualified could get government jobs.

At the state level, progressives campaigned for electoral reforms to allow the people to play a more direct role in the political process. Progressives supported the 17th Amendment, ratified in 1913, which provides for election of U.S. senators directly by vote of the people, rather than indirectly by state legislatures.

Labor & Progressivism

Progressives also focused on labor reform at the state level. They sought to eliminate (or at least regulate) child labor, to cut workers' hours, and to establish a minimum wage. By 1907 progressive efforts had led 30 states to abolish child labor. In Muller v. Oregon (1908), the Supreme Court upheld a state law that limited women factory workers to a ten-hour day, and many states began to regulate women's working hours. Progressives also favored workmen's compensation (an insurance plan to aid workers injured on the job) and an end to home-work (piecework done in tenements). In New York's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911, many women leapt to their deaths from a burning shirtwaist factory. The tragedy resulted in new laws designed to ensure worker safety on the job.

The Rise of Unions

The factory system accounted for an ever-growing share of American production. It also produced great wealth for a few, and grinding poverty for many. Many unskilled laborers were forced to work in sweatshops - small factories where they worked under dangerous conditions for little pay. Workers began to unite to fight the power of their employers.

The Knights of Labor captured the public imagination. Formed in 1869 by Uriah Stephens and expanded rapidly under the leadership of Terrance Powdery, the Knights were an organization committed to cooperation between labor and employer. Membership was open to all workers, whether they be skilled or unskilled, black or white, male or female.

The American Federation of Labor was founded by Samuel Gompers in 1886. Gompers, born in 1850, came as a boy with his parents to America from the Jewish slums of
London; he entered the cigar-making trade and received much of his education as a “reader” (a worker who read books, newspaper stories, poetry and magazine articles to fellow employees to help break the boredom of their work in the shop) and became a leader of his local union and of the national Cigar Makers Union.

The AFL goal was “To protect the skilled labor of America from being reduced to beggary and to sustain the standard of American workmanship and skill, the trades unions of America have been established.” Congress, at the urging of the AFL, created a separate U.S. Department of Labor to protect and extend the rights of wage earners.

Farmers and Progressivism

As the United States rapidly industrialized, the American farmer began to feel overpowered by big business. After a sharp drop in income during the 1870’s, farmers began to unite to deal with their problems. Organizations such as the Grange and the Farmers’ Alliances objected to the high cost of railroad transportation and to cut out the fees charged by middlemen. Middlemen would charge farmers for storage, transportation and sale of their crops.

The issues of the farmers became a new political party, the Populists. Populist literally means of the people. The Populist Party claimed to represent the average farmer and worker, not the big businessman or the urban wealthy. The goals of the Populists were to nationalize the railroad system to control costs, introduce an income tax based on an individual’s wealth, and to coin more silver so that the average person could more easily pay their debts. William Jennings Bryan was the Populist Party’s presidential candidate in the election of 1896. He lost to William McKinley, but most of the Populist Party’s goals were eventually turned into laws.

Progressivism at the National Level

Regulation of Big Business

When progressives began to work for reform at the national level, their major goal was government regulation of business. The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 was the first measure passed by the U.S. Congress to prohibit trusts. The Sherman Act authorized the federal government to break up monopolies, claiming that they interfered with free trade.

President Theodore Roosevelt enthusiastically used the power of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, vigorously enforcing it to break up large trusts that reduced competition. Regulation, Roosevelt believed, was the only way to solve the problems caused by big business. A leading champion for progressive ideals, Roosevelt became known as a trustbuster. Roosevelt also attacked a railroad monopoly, took on the meatpacking trust, and attacked oil, tobacco, and other monopolies. In 1906 Roosevelt helped push through a meat inspection act, the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Roosevelt was also a leading nature conservationist who wanted to preserve the nation’s natural resources. He withdrew thousands of acres of forests, mineral lands, and waterpower
sites from the public domain to protect them from exploitation by private interests. Roosevelt doubled the number of national parks and established many national monuments and wildlife refuges.

Progressivism reached its peak during Woodrow Wilson’s first term as president. To restrict trusts, Wilson pushed through Congress the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914. The law established a commission with authority to prevent business practices that could lead to a monopoly. He also supported the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914, a law intended to strengthen the Sherman Act. The new law banned a few people from controlling an industry by serving simultaneously as directors of related corporations. It also gave workers the right to strike. Finally, Wilson appointed Louis Brandeis, a leading critic of big business, to the Supreme Court.

African Americans in the Progressive Era

Despite their hunger for reform, few progressives made race relations a priority, and in the South, leading progressives often supported racist policies. In 1900 more than two-thirds of 10 million African Americans lived in the South; most were sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Rural or urban, Southern blacks faced poverty, discrimination, and limited employment opportunities. At the end of the 19th century, Southern legislatures passed Jim Crow laws that separated blacks and whites in public places. When Jim Crow laws were challenged by a black man who was refused a seat on a train, the case went to the Supreme Court. In the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896), segregation was found to be legal, as long as accommodations for blacks and whites were the same. This became known as the idea of separate but equal, and was unchallenged until 1954.

Because blacks were deprived of the right to vote by the grandfather clause (if your grandfather couldn’t vote, you couldn’t vote), or poll taxes (you had to pay a tax in order to vote), their political participation was limited. Lynching increased, and a steady stream of black migrants moved north. From 1890 to 1910, some 200,000 African Americans left the South, and even more moved out during World War I.

As African Americans tried to combat racism and avoid racial conflict, they clashed over strategies. Should African Americans adapt or resist? Booker T. Washington, head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, urged blacks to be industrious, to learn manual skills, to become farmers and artisans, to work their way up economically, and to win the respect of whites. When blacks proved their economic value, Washington argued, racism would decline. A skilled politician, with appeal to both whites and blacks, Washington urged African Americans to adjust to the status quo. In 1895, in a speech that critics labeled the Atlanta Compromise, Washington contended that blacks and whites could coexist in harmony with separate social lives but united in efforts toward economic progress.

Northern intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois challenged Washington’s policy. In The Souls of Black Folk (1903), Du Bois criticized Washington’s call for patience and for development of manual skills. Instead, he urged equal educational opportunities and the end of discrimination. In 1909 Du Bois joined a group of progressives, black and white, to form the National Association for the
**Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).** The NAACP strove to end the disfranchisement of black people, to abolish segregation, and to promote black civil and political rights.

**The Women's Movement**

Middle-class women and progressive reformers shared common goals. In the progressive era, women made great advances in higher education, the professions, and women's organizations. By 1910, for instance, when about 5 percent of college-age Americans attended college, about 40 percent were women. Activist women joined organizations such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, a women's volunteer service organization founded in 1890. The *National Consumers' League* (1899) and the *Women's Trade Union League* (1903) led efforts to limit women's work hours and to organize women in unions. College students read *Women and Economics* (1898) by feminist intellectual Charlotte Perkins Gilman; college graduates worked in settlement houses; and homemakers joined women's clubs to promote civic improvement. Reformer Florence Kelley led the charge for child labor laws and other measures to protect workers. Margaret Sanger promoted birth control and reproductive education for women, especially the urban poor. The *temperance movement*, which supported a ban on the sale of alcohol, was led by women. The temperance movement won its battle with the passage of the *18th Amendment* in 1919.

The *woman suffrage* movement, in turn, won progressive support. Women had been fighting for the right to vote since the passage of the 15th Amendment gave voting rights to black men. In 1890 *National American Woman Suffrage Association* was formed, which led the battle in the states. As late as 1909, women could vote in only four states (Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, and Colorado), but momentum picked up. Suffragists used more aggressive tactics, such as parades, rallies, and marches, and gained ground. They won a key victory by gaining the right to vote in New York State in 1917, which helped empower them for their final push during World War I. The *19th Amendment* granting the women the right to vote, was enacted in 1920.