

7.2 The Progressive Era

As the 1800s came to a close, only a handful of people enjoyed wealth and prosperity while immigrants and poor laborers continued to live and work under harsh conditions. Meanwhile, the country was riddled with government corruption at all levels. As a result, many citizens and government officials demanded reforms in government, business, and society in general. The turn of the century marked the beginning of the Progressive Era and was a time of political, social, and economic change in the United States. Progressives (those who supported reforms during the Progressive Era) tended to be white, middle-class, Protestants. They believed that things could be made better through government regulation of society. They called for more regulation of business, improved wages for workers, and regulations over work environments, laws governing morality, defined standards for education, and stricter regulation of professions like doctors, teachers, and lawyers. Meanwhile, the progressives raged against the upper class as being exploiters of the poor and slaves to self-indulgence. Many historians look back on the progressives with both praise and criticism. They praise the progressives for their ambition and drive to make society better, as well as for accomplishing a number of positive reforms. However, they also criticize the progressives for their arrogance. Progressives tended to assume that those of lower economic or social status were helpless without guidance from the middle-class and needed the help of "more sophisticated" people to decide for them what was truly best.

The Muckrakers

A number of leading intellectuals and writers came on the scene during the progressive era. Many of these writers wrote stories exposing abuse in government and big business. President Theodore Roosevelt labeled these authors and journalists the muckrakers because they stirred up and uncovered much of the "muck" in US society. Among the muckrakers were a number of respected writers. Lincoln Steffens exposed political corruption in St. Louis and other cities. Meanwhile, Ida Tarbell revealed the abuses of the Standard Oil trust. Her writings about Standard Oil helped throw fuel on an already burning fire calling for reforms in US business and campaigns against monopolies. Perhaps the most famous muckraker was Upton Sinclair who published a novel called *The Jungle* in 1906. The book horrified readers as it uncovered the truth about the US meat packing industry. Its impact helped lead to the creation of a federal meat inspection program.

The Role of Women in the Progressive Era

In addition to the muckrakers, there were other notable reformers as well. Many of these reformers were women. In fact, women became major players in the progressive movement. Jane Addams (nicknamed the "mother of social work") opened Hull House as a settlement house in Chicago. Settlement houses were houses established in poor neighborhoods where social activists would live and from which they would offer assistance to immigrants and underprivileged citizens. By 1910, there were more than 400 settlement houses in the United States. Hull House served as a launching pad for investigations into economic, political, and social conditions in the city. It also provided needed help and education for the poor and immigrants, and eventually helped fight for and win new child labor laws and other legislation meant to help those in need.

The Temperance Movement

During the Progressive Era, momentum continued to grow for the temperance movement. This was a movement that originally wanted to limit, and eventually advocated eliminating, alcohol. Many of its leaders were churchgoers and women. One of its most colorful figures was Carrie Nation. Already into her mid-50s by the turn of the century, Nation made a habit of entering saloons and smashing bottles of liquor with a hatchet while her supporters prayed and sang hymns. Although most were not as radical as Nation, the temperance movement continued to gain strength. Ratified in 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment prohibited the making, selling or transporting of any alcoholic beverage in the United States. Commonly referred to as "Prohibition," this amendment later proved to be a failure and was repealed.

Women's Suffrage

Even more lasting in its impact than the temperance movement was the women's suffrage movement. Ever since the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, women had demanded suffrage (the right to vote). By the 1870s, Susan B. Anthony was arguably the most recognized leader of this movement. Along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others, Anthony helped establish the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) which she led until 1900. Initial attempts to win a constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote failed, although women did win the right to vote in a few states. Finally, in 1920, Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment and sent it to the states for ratification. On August 21 of that same year, Tennessee became the last state needed to make the "Anthony Amendment" part of the Constitution. At last, women had the right to vote nationwide.

The Progressive Movement and Race

Following Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws became common throughout the South. These laws required the segregation of blacks and whites. In other words, blacks and whites were not allowed to share public spaces. They could not sit in the same dining rooms at restaurants, were not to share railway cars, and were restricted from using the same public facilities. In 1896, the Supreme Court actually upheld such laws as constitutional in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The case involved a 30 year old man named Homer Plessy. Plessy, who was one-eighth African American, violated a Louisiana law by sitting in a "whites only" railway car. After being arrested, he eventually sued, claiming the law was unconstitutional. After considering the case, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was lawful as long as the separate facilities and services were equal. The case set the precedent that segregation was legal so long as separate facilities held to the standard of "separate but equal." In reality, however, the facilities for whites were usually far superior to those of blacks. Ironically, many white progressives actually supported segregation and thought it was necessary. They believed that African Americans could only develop and advance culturally in their own, segregated society. Since, in reality, conditions in the "black world" were not equal to those in the "white world," many disagreed with the progressives stance. One such person was W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois was the first black Ph.D. graduate from Harvard University and adamantly rejected justifications for segregation. He argued that blacks should pursue occupations in the humanities and in white collar (managerial or professional) fields. Unlike some other African-American leaders, DuBois believed that blacks must be politically, legally, and socially active in order to obtain true equality. DuBois helped to organize a group of black intellectuals known as the Niagara Movement. Their goal was to outline an agenda for African American progress in the United States. In 1905, these leaders met on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls after being denied hotel accommodations in the US. In 1909, DuBois was instrumental in founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The organization devoted itself to the progress of the African-American community. It also founded an official magazine called *The Crisis*, which featured journalism, editorials calling for social reform, and even poetry. Today, the NAACP continues to be a prominent political voice among the African-American community.

Labor Laws and Living Conditions

One area where progressives called for reform was in the living conditions of poor, urban laborers and immigrants. One of the key figures in this reform movement was Jacob Riis. Riis, himself an immigrant from Denmark, wrote books like *How the Other Half Lives* that exposed the horrible conditions under which immigrants worked and lived. His writings revealed the cramped space, filthy conditions, and often dangerous hazards that existed in inner-city tenements (small, low-income apartments lived in and often shared by more than one family). Riis' efforts contributed largely to New York passing its first laws aimed at improving urban tenements.

Labor laws were another area of concern. Most workers' wages were low. As a result, men, women, and even children often had to work long hours for little pay. In addition, workdays tended to run from sunrise to sundown and usually involved dangerous conditions. Many progressives called for shorter workdays, higher wages, and safer work environments for employees.

Eventually, reformers succeeded in convincing a number of states to pass minimum age laws. These laws set limits on how young employees could be (ages ranged from 12 to 16). Some states also passed laws restricting the hours and occupations in which women could work. Progressives claimed such legislation was necessary to protect the

US home and the important role women played as wives and mothers. Legislatures also passed laws restricting work hours and requiring safer working conditions as a result of progressive reforms. One event that especially contributed to the call for better workplace safety was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City. Many of the exit doors to the factory were locked to prevent employees from stealing. The fire killed 146 people and led to increased demands for safer working conditions.

Political Reforms

During the late nineteenth century, government became known for political scandal. Corruption existed in city and state governments, as well as at the federal level. Most progressives believed that the solution was to make government officials more accountable to the general public. They believed government officials were corrupt because it was too easy for people to gain political office through favors and corrupt dealings behind closed doors, rather than having to win the support of the people. As a result, several political reforms won popular support during the progressive era. Some even prompted changes to the Constitution. For instance, the Seventeenth Amendment established that US senators would be elected directly by the people, rather than by state legislatures. Progressives applauded this change because it meant that senate seats would have to be won in open elections rather than awarded as part of a political deal among state legislators. Other political reforms included the initiative, recall, and referendum. The initiative allowed citizens of a state to force a vote on a certain issue without having to wait for public officials to bring it up. If enough citizens signed a petition and/or made their voices heard, then the legislature could be compelled to address a particular concern. The recall gave citizens the power to hold special elections to remove corrupt officials from office before their terms were up. Finally, the referendum meant that public officials would be elected by popular vote, rather than by party bosses or state legislatures.

Constitutional Amendments during the Progressive Era

Sixteenth Amendment (1913) Congress now had the power to collect taxes on the incomes of businesses and individuals. This amendment increased the federal government's revenue and eliminated the need to tax according to the proportions of state populations. Progressives viewed this reform as important for curbing corrupt business practices that kept tons of profits in the hands of big business owners while paying very little to laborers. Progressives also wanted to see more money from business go to the government so that it could afford to expand and regulate more of society.

Seventeenth Amendment (1913) This law established that US senators would be elected directly by the people of a state, rather than by state legislatures.

Eighteenth Amendment (1919) The government prohibited the making, selling, or transporting of alcoholic beverages. This amendment was later repealed.

Nineteenth Amendment (1920) Gave women the right to vote.