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Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era: The Politics of Progressive Era Political Historiography

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When historians fight about Progressivism – and fight they do – they are not just arguing about events of a century ago. They are also struggling over the basic meanings of American democracy. If we could face this fact more directly, and begin to come to grips with the stakes involved, we would not only advance the study of the past but, even in some small and indirect ways, we might improve the practice of our current politics as well.

Politicians standing at the center of our nation's democratic dramas recognize, even if often without nuance, the value of reclaiming the Progressive Era. Cheerfully blurring historical distinctions, Bill Clinton announced as he left office, "I always felt that the work we did the last eight years made us the heir of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson." In turn, Al Gore's communications director saw his candidate's "message more in the tradition of progressives such as Theodore Roosevelt, who confronted powerful trusts, rather than the populists who railed broadly against elites of all stripes." Several years earlier the vice-president's main Democratic opponent, Bill Bradley, wrote, "I've always admired the progressives, such as Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who enabled the private sector to flourish but in a way more responsive to national purpose."[1]

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*I dedicate this essay to my chief comrade in re-democratizing the Progressive Era, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore. I would like to acknowledge Richard L. McCormick and James Livingston for being such excellent, and tolerant, tutors in my first attempts to grasp Progressivism, as well as Maureen Flanagan for providing the opportunity to compose this essay as well as for her excellent editing. Thanks too to James Connolly, Joel Fishman, Brett Flehinger, Sarah Henry, Jonathan Holloway, Benjamin Johnson, Kevin Mattson, Michael Mullins, Daniel Rodgers, Adriane Smith, and Nancy Unger for their advice, criticism, and encouragement.

[1]*Washington Post*, October 29, 2000 and August 24, 2000; Bill Bradley, *Time Present, Time Past: A Memoir* (New York, 1996), 409.

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Nor has it been only Democrats who have laid claim to the legacy of Progressivism's dynamic duo. As I write, John McCain, proclaiming himself a latter-day TR, is considering leaving the rightward-drifting Republican Party. Conservatives seek the progressive mantle as well. Irving Kristol commented toward the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency, "it is no accident that Ronald Reagan chose a noted biographer of Theodore Roosevelt to be the official historian of his Administration. Clearly, he sees himself belonging, in some sense, to an activist Republican tradition, and one, moreover, whose 'conservatism' is not wholly orthodox." (No matter that Dutch didn't quite realize that he had gained such a vigorous partner in time travel when he hooked up with Edmund Morris.)[2]

Eldon Eisenach contended in 1994 that "political intellectuals of all persuasions today seem hesitant to claim Progressivism as a worthy inheritance." If true in the early Clinton years, Eisenach's statement certainly no longer continues to hold. For political theorists and publicists, at least of a social democratic bent, have begun over the last decade to portray the Progressive Era as an inspiring Democratic Moment. For example, John Judis celebrates, although not uncritically, Herbert Croly as the key figure inaugurating modern American progressivism. Although Alexander Hamilton and Franklin Roosevelt are Michael Lind's chief heroes, he also draws on Croly as one of the most important philosophical architects of what he calls an egalitarian and colorblind liberal nationalism. More generally, E. J. Dionne predicts a second progressive era right around the corner, with progressives fulfilling their tradition of "the careful but active use of government to temper markets and enhance individual opportunities." Searching for the best in American civic life, Michael Schudson also asks us to lay claim to the legacy of Progressive Era politics, which — despite being "less politically engaging" — was "more democratic, inclusive, and dedicated to public collective goals" than public life during the Gilded Age. And the distinguished political philosopher Michael Sandel even dares to rehabilitate the petit bourgeois nature of

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[2]*Newsday*, July 8, 2001; Irving Kristol, "Don't Count Out Conservatism," *New York Times Magazine*, June 14, 1987; Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1979); Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York, 1999). For an argument about how little the current White House lives up to the Theodore Roosevelt tradition, see Daniel Justin Herman, "What TR Would Have Made of Bush/Cheney," *History News Network*, June 27, 2001, http://historynewsnetwork.org/articles/article.html?id=109

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radical Progressivism. Sandel asks us to reconsider for our own day the link Progressives such as Louis Brandeis made between small-scale enterprise and participatory democracy during "the transition from a political economy of citizenship to one premised on consumer welfare."[3]

Historians tend to scorn such accounts, allergic, at the very least, to these generalists' tendency to see the Progressives as a unitary movement. Yet historians are dismissive for more substantive, or at least more significant, reasons. Far too many of them have simply abandoned hope in the democratic legacy of, and possibilities within, Progressive Era politics. In a cynical age, and given the leftist politics prevalent in the academy, it is easy to see that progressives did not address many of the age's fundamental issues of social justice. Indeed, they clearly made many of them worse. On matters ranging from race to empire, from gender relations to the increasingly corporate economy, scholars have formulated a compelling case against Progressivism. Nancy MacLean offers a summation of recent thinking along these lines with her declaration: "Throughout the country ... the central attribute of American politics in the first two decades of the twentieth century was a mounting élitism."[4]

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[3]Eldon J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence, KS, 1994), 6; John B. Judis, *Grand Illusion: Critics and Champions of the American Century* (New York, 1992), 23-45; Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York, 1995), 301; E. J. Dionne, Jr., *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era* (New York, 1996), 15; Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York, 1998), 147; Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 201-49 (quote, 207). For a work that "implies the irretrievability of Progressivism per se, contrary to a considerable recent literature betting on its imminent resurrection," see Eric Rauchway, *The Refuge of Affections: Family and American Reform Politics, 1900-1920* (New York, 2001), 28.

For a critique of much of this literature, see Jeffrey C. Isaac, "The Poverty of Progressivism," *Dissent* 43 (Fall 1996): 40-49. Of course, not all political theorists agree about how to interpret early twentieth-century politics. While respecting the "populist" democratic impulses that underlay Progressivism, James Morone argues that in the end "the Progressives left behind a fragmented, unresponsive public administration dominated by narrow, private groups and self-interested state officials." James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New York, 1990), 99. Similar skepticism of the Progressives pervades Russell L. Hanson's *The Democratic Imagination in America: Conversations with Our Past* (Princeton, 1985), 223-56 and, generally, Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, eds., *Progressivism and the New Democracy* (Amherst, 1999).

[4]Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York, 1994), 44.

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The current wave of scholarship detailing the crimes of Progressivism is impressive, in fact seemingly unrelenting. Yet such work still falls far short of expunging the period's vigorous democratic impulses. Indeed, this essay asks us to look those crimes fully in the face and yet still question any simple assumptions about the anti-democratic legacy of Progressivism. My primary goal in this essay is to provide a review, albeit somewhat brief and therefore eclectic, of historians' treatments of progressive reform, with my lens focused on issues relating to politics. I will admit that I have a stake in this debate. I opt for hope over despair – or cynicism. In the end, I believe that scholars who have emphasized democracy over hegemony, tyranny, coercion, and hatred have generally – although certainly not always – had the best of what are now decades-long arguments. Or to put the matter a tad more cautiously, we as historians make a great mistake in allowing the era's many kinds of oppressions to override the era's vast democratic potential.[5]

We are in a particularly interesting moment in this debate right now, one of the most important in our profession. As scholars we must hope above all for the persistence of a vigorous interchange of ideas, listening carefully to all perspectives. As citizens, though, the improvement of our public life depends in part on continuing to re-democratize the Progressive Era.

Constructing the Case against the Progressives

Progressives themselves searched for considerable inspiration in the American past. Herbert Croly spent roughly a quarter of *The Promise of American Life* reviewing, in an openly partisan fashion, the battles fought over national governmental activism from the Federalists through Lincoln. The first history of the period's politics, Benjamin Parke De Witt's 1915 *The Progressive Movement*, did not just describe

[5]I thus also do not provide here an exhaustive set of citations to the vast literature on the Progressive Era. For the best recent bibliographies on the subject, concluding excellent texts, see Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York, 1998) and John Whiteclay Chambers, II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920*, 2nd ed. with a new preface and updated bibliography (New Brunswick, NJ, 2000). Also see the introduction to Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, ed., *Who Were the Progressives?* (Boston, forthcoming). The textbook that most emphasizes the democratic possibilities of the age is Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York, 1987).

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the previous decade's tumultuous political life but inserted the Progressives into the never-ending historical struggle between the forces of privilege and the advocates of justice. Before World War II an occasional writer rained on the Progressives' parade, as did John Chamberlain when he accused the Progressives (with the exception of Bob La Follette) of doing little to stave off the tendency toward a regimented socialism, or even fascism. Otherwise, Charles and Mary Beard hailed progressive reform as a move "towards social democracy," and Harold Faulkner articulated common wisdom in his upbeat *The Quest for Social Justice.*[6]

The confidence in forward-looking liberalism ended abruptly with the end of World War II. As Charles Forcey remarked at the beginning of his study of the founders of *The New Republic*, "This book grew out of my strong sense during World War II that the world we live in had become the plaything of madmen." As a result, the Progressives' fortunes almost immediately took a tumble. In many ways George Mowry inaugurated the modern study of Progressivism in 1951 with *The California Progressives.* Mowry forged there, and in his 1958 *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt*, the thesis that "the great majority of the reformers came from the 'solid middle class,' as it then was called with some pride." With this class position, claimed Mowry, came a fairly fixed, and fairly pinched, set of social and political ideas. Middle-class reformers were "supreme individualists." Such a character was naturally "himself a capitalist," and "for the most part, the progressive was content with the basic concepts of the economic system under which 1910 capitalism awarded its profits and its pains." Suspicious of those above and below, the progressives' "main concern was to remove class consciousness from politics." When the class struggle did nevertheless intensify, the middle class fell in safely on the side of order, for "the progressives' bias against labor was always greater than against the large corporation." Intensely moralistic, "there was but one law for him – that

[6]Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York, 1909); Benjamin Parke De Witt, *The Progressive Movement* (New York, 1915); John Chamberlain, *Farewell to Reform: The Rise, Life, and Decay of the Progressive Mind in America* (New York, 1932); Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, vol. III, rev. ed. (New York, 1933), 538-608; Harold Underwood Faulkner, *The Quest for Social Justice, 1898-1914* (New York, 1931). For a complex argument that also upholds La Follette as a, perhaps *the*, central player in democratic Progressivism, see Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

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of the church-going middle class." A handful of Progressives "completely identified themselves with their constituents. But most progressives set themselves apart from the crowd." Indeed, the "worship of the unfettered individual, the strong pride of self, the strain of ambition, and the almost compulsive desire for power ran through progressive rhetoric like a theme in a symphony." Although Mowry was by no means wholly unsympathetic to the Progressives and their liberal legacy, his chief task was to unmask them, to uncover the priggish, undemocratic, pro-capitalist middle class that lay at the foundation of reform.[7]

Arthur Link responded to such mild muckraking with a decades-long celebration of Woodrow Wilson. Fellow "conventional liberal" John Blum also upheld, albeit in a more judgmental fashion, the legacy of Woodrow Wilson and even more that of Theodore Roosevelt.[8] The historiographical future, however, lay with the critical spirit, no more famously encapsulated than in Richard Hofstadter's twin indictments of the Progressives. Hofstadter offered caustic treatments of (especially) Roosevelt and Wilson in 1948's *The American Political Tradition*, and he influentially diffused Mowry's template of middle-class status anxiety in *The Age of Reform*. This 1955 classic remains the one book about the Progressive Era that all American history graduate students must, or at least should, read for their orals. Yet what do those aspiring scholars learn from Hofstadter's masterpiece? Certainly, the elegance of urbane 1950s historical prose. But also, primarily, a sense that Progressivism, for all its moralistic rhetoric, was harmless to the status quo and not particularly democratic. "The insulation of the Progressive from ... the most exploited sector of the population," noted Hofstadter, "was one of the factors that, for all his humanitarianism, courage, and

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[7]Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippman, and the Progressive Era, 1900-1925* (New York, 1961), vii; George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America, 1900-1912* (New York, 1958), 86, 89, 88 and *The California Progressives* (Berkeley, 1951), 96, 104, 100, 102, 92, 99. Unfortunately, William Deverell and Tom Sitton, eds., *California Progressivism Revisited* (Berkeley, 1994), does not directly engage Mowry's argument about the middle class or the general democratic potential of reform.

[8]Besides Link's multi-volume biography, his most important work was *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York, 1954); John Morton Blum, *The Progressive Presidents: Roosevelt, Wilson, Roosevelt, Johnson* (New York, 1980), 9, *The Republican Roosevelt* (Cambridge, MA, 1954), and *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality* (Boston, 1956). Eric Goldman's *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York, 1956 [1952]) is a breezy narrative in the proud liberal reform tradition.

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vision, reduced the social range and the radical drive of his program and kept him genteel, proper, and safe." Fundamentally, the Progressive was "visibly, palpably, almost pathetically respectable." Samuel Hays added to the late 1950s attempt to knock the moral smugness out of the Progressives, making it clear that only the foolish would take seriously reformers' rhetoric of "the people" versus special corporate interests. The Progressives were scientific centralizers at heart, intent on taking away as much power as possible from the grassroots. And Louis Hartz had time only to laugh at the Progressives, holding their pseudo-radical pronouncements up to the cold light of Marx and finding simply "intellectual tragedy." Grow up, Hartz instructed them in the present tense: "The Progressive mind is like the mind of a child in adolescence, torn between old taboos and new reality, forever on the verge of exploding into fantasy."[9]

Conservatives – or Worse?

Disillusioned liberals, however, would not administer the most thorough thrashing to the Progressives. That would come in the following decade, with the blossoming of the New Left. The decade began with Charles Forcey's important study of Croly, Walter Weyl, and Walter Lippman. Forcey viewed these three intellectuals as ambivalent avatars of democratic socialism, but even more he bemoaned – well before the intensification of the Vietnam War – how nationalism, ugly and vicious, had completely disfigured the era's liberalism. Open season on liberalism, though, had actually begun the year before in 1960 with an obscure article that with considerable force swept radical circles

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[9]Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948) and *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York, 1955), 184, 131; Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (Chicago, 1958) and *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Cambridge, MA, 1959); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955), 236-37.

Among a voluminous critical literature on Hofstadter's book, see perhaps the best commentary: Alan Brinkley, "Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* Reconsidered," in Brinkley, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (New York, 1998), 132-50. Hays continued his hard-nosed critique of Progressive rhetoric throughout the 1960s and 1970s, most impressively in his 1964 article "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," reprinted along with other important essays in Samuel P. Hays, *American Political History as Social Analysis* (Knoxville, TN, 1980), 205-32.

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in Madison, Wisconsin, and then beyond. Martin Sklar, like Forcey a student of the great progressive historian Howard K. Beale, gently coined the term "corporate liberalism" to best conceptualize Woodrow Wilson's policies on behalf of regulated corporate growth at home and Open Door imperialism abroad. This, according to Sklar, was the essence of modern reform. Liberalism did not represent a more ethical, or less materialistic, brand of politics; instead it had become over the course of the twentieth century the proper name for Power. Sklar spoke almost matter-of-factly about these issues, only occasionally referring to injustice, immorality, and exploitation. There was apparently no point to being shrill about the betrayals of liberalism. Better to face the facts scientifically, in the best tradition of Marx, and recognize the corporate imperialist enemy with a cool head. Decades later, Sklar would provide another significant intervention in the politics of Progressive Era historiography, although one of a very different kind.[10]

Gabriel Kolko took New Left themes public, and with full force, in 1963 with his much angrier book *The Triumph of Conservatism*. Kolko's commitments could not be clearer. He begins *Triumph* in an admirably unapologetic manner: "This is a book that is motivated by a concern with the seemingly nonacademic question of 'what might have been.'... And there is no more provocative question than: Could the American political experience in the twentieth century, and the nature of our economic institutions, have been radically different?" He closes the book with a meditation on "The Lost Democracy." In between, Kolko casts TR, Taft, and Wilson into the same boat, arguing with great force that all were architects of a "political capitalism" that first saved, and then served, the interests of, corporate capitalism. Scorning even the term liberalism, Kolko asks us to see these and other elite reformers as servants of the status quo: that is, as fully conservative. Even worse, no one – not petit bourgeois Populists nor centralizing Socialists – proposed an alternative able to recognize that "democracy could be created only by continuous mass involvement in the decisions that affected" people's lives. In the end, Kolko became a kind of Kafka,

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[10]Forcey, *Crossroads of Liberalism*; Martin J. Sklar, "Woodrow Wilson and the Political Economy of Modern United States Liberalism," *Studies on the Left* 1(1960), reprinted as "Woodrow Wilson and the Developmental Imperatives of Modern U.S. Liberalism," in Sklar, *The United States as a Developing Country: Studies in U.S. History in the Progressive Era and the 1920s* (New York, 1992), 102-42. Sklar unveils the term "corporate liberalism" almost in passing on 142.

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blaming the Progressives for laying the foundation of a twentieth-century reform tradition that was anti-democratic at its core, but at the same time almost impossible to escape.[11]

Sharing Kolko's openly avowed radical politics, James Weinstein solidified this interpretation in his compelling 1968 *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State*, which focused more on politics than economics and emphasized the co-optation of working-class radicalism by corporate elites. Also examining the Progressives through the lens of radical democracy, but highlighting the relationship between psychology, family, and politics, Christopher Lasch – at this time a friendly critic of the New Left – condemned the Progressives in his 1965 *The New Radicalism in America.* The fashionable cultural politics of the early twentieth century, when not veering toward a "manipulative" "technique of totalitarian control," according to Lasch "ended in a design for 'adjustment' which was almost as innocuous, in the challenge it posed to the political and economic *status quo*, as the genteel and effete liberalism" that preceded it. Aileen Kraditor added to this indictment the same year with her castigation of the woman suffrage movement's racial bigotry and abandonment of claims for universal justice. As Lyndon Johnson savored his overwhelming defeat of conservatism in 1964 and yet still went on to fight his vicious Asian war with the help of the best and the brightest, the enemy, according to writers like Kolko, Weinstein, Lasch, and Kraditor, became stunningly clear: liberals. Because liberals had, it turned out, never been anything but fundamentally conservative. Thus did Woodrow Wilson, and even Jane Addams, come to seem worse than Barry Goldwater, and the Progressives come to break many a leftist American heart.[12]

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[11]Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York, 1963), 1, 279, 305. The second most influential book in the historiography of Progressivism, Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York, 1967), did not engage contemporary civic debates or comment directly on the democratic qualities of Progressivism. Yet one can get a sense of Wiebe's take on the issue at the very least through the title of one of his chapters, "The Illusion of Fulfillment." In any case, when Wiebe returned to the period in 1995, he furiously denounced Progressivism for destroying nineteenth-century mass democracy. See Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of Democracy* (Chicago, 1995).

[12]James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918* (Boston, 1968); Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type, 1889-1963* (New York, 1965), 146; Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York, 1965). Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management in the Progressive Era, 1880-1920* (Chicago, 1964) and R. Jeffrey Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1880-1920*

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The Death and Rebirth of the Progressives

The New Left, of course, quickly burned out, although its embers smoldered for years in many of the groves of academe. In turn, the study of Progressivism underwent something of a decline during the relatively quiescent years from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. Peter Filene went so far as to announce his intention in 1970 not to condemn Progressivism but to bury it. While most scholars were unwilling to go to the extreme of extermination, they did tend to see the Progressives as much less relevant to contemporary civic issues. For example, the best article-length historiographical synthesis of the subject, Daniel Rodgers's 1982 "In Search of Progressivism," did underscore the deep politicization of the period, but Rodgers himself sought to present a non-ideological "commonsensical view of the era." Pluralism and complexity, according to Rodgers and many other scholars, overrode any civic lessons. Some brave souls during this Nixon through Reagan interregnum did uphold the democratic practices of the Progressives. John Buenker followed in the footsteps of his mentor Joseph Huthmacher to reveal a strong liberal tradition in an unlikely place: ethnic political machines in industrial belt cities. Richard L. McCormick rehabilitated the genuine moral impulses, as well as the democratic motivations (if not consequences) of the reformers' concentration on corruption. Most significantly, David P. Thelen heroically adopted the task of highlighting the radical democratic actions of a genuinely grassroots Progressivism. Still, the overall attack on the Progressives' commitment to, and contribution to, democracy continued apace, with scholars such as Paul Boyer, J. Morgan Kousser, and Michael McGerr writing important indictments of the Progressives' often coercive moral crusades and their effective, and frequently conscious, disenfranchisement of working-class and black voters in the North as well as in the South. If by the mid-1980s Progressivism was not indeed already dead, perhaps it wished it had been.[13]

(Berkeley, 1982) are also important contributions to this scholarly tradition. A highly influential related work that underscored the ways that Progressivism facilitated the pathologies of interest-group politics is Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York, 1966).

[13]Peter Filene, "An Obituary for the 'Progressive Movement,'" *American Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1970): 20-34; Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 121; J. Joseph Huthmacher, "Urban Liberalism and the

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A trio of books during the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, firmly rejected the consensus of an anti-democratic Progressive Era. In the process they dramatically remapped the contours of how we might, indeed should, think about the democratic legacy of the period's reformers. James Kloppenberg initiated this trend with his 1986 *Uncertain Victory*, an impressive comparison of American Progressivism and European social democratic thought. Using a high intellectual history approach, Kloppenberg showed how thinkers such as Herbert Croly, Richard Ely, and John Dewey sought to develop an admirable third way between *laissez-faire* capitalism and socialism, a *via media* that dared to think of politics as promoting morality and social responsibility. These intellectuals cared deeply about equality and democracy, and they promoted an anti-authoritarian vision, even if in

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Age of Reform," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44 (September 1962): 231-41; John D. Buenker, *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform* (New York, 1973); Richard L. McCormick, "The Discovery that Business Corrupts Politics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism," in McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1986 [1981]), 311-56 and *From Realignment to Reform: Political Change in New York State, 1893-1910* (Ithaca, 1981); David P. Thelen, *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900* (Columbia, MO, 1972), *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (Boston, 1976), and "Two Traditions of Progressive Reform, Political Parties, and American Democracy," in Patricia Bonomi, James MacGregor Burns, and Austin Ranney, eds., *The American Constitutional System Under Strong and Weak Parties* (New York, 1981): 37-79; Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1978); J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven, 1974); Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York, 1986). McGerr and Kousser were following in the steps of the influential political scientist Walter Dean Burnham, who emphasized the anti-democratic nature of Progressive Era political reforms. See esp. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainspring of American Politics* (New York, 1970); for a more recent book in this tradition, see Mark Lawrence Kornbluh, *Why America Stopped Voting: The Decline of Participatory Democracy and the Emergence of Modern American Politics* (New York, 2000). Another political scientist during this period saw governmental "incoherence and fragmentation" as "the destructive consequences of constructive reform initiatives." Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), viii, 287.

A collection that "display[s] a more positive attitude toward the achievements of this period than might have been the case even a few years earlier" is Lewis L. Gould, ed., *The Progressive Era* (Syracuse, 1974), v. Other books from this period stressing the era's democratic qualities include Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, 1982) and David Danbom, *"The World of Hope": Progressives and the Struggle for an Ethical Public Life* (Philadelphia, 1987). The best recent work in the Huthmacher-Buenker tradition is James J. Connolly, *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism: Urban Political Culture in Boston, 1900-25* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

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the end many of their reflections helped legitimate the inegalitarian twentieth-century welfare state. Indeed, Kloppenberg refused to disavow these thinkers' "dream of democracy," despite their incomplete support of mass empowerment. Staring straight at those who would facilely criticize the Progressives, he noted that far too much sniping against them arises from "the slick condescension accompanying hindsight, and the easy imputation of unstated motives." Kloppenberg properly indicted this "failure of historical imagination masquerading as tough-minded savvy." Robert Westbrook took this approach even further, making John Dewey a democratic hero of an unappreciated, indeed barely recognized, "radical progressivism."[14]

Martin Sklar, in turn, had little use for Kloppenberg's idealistic historical method, nor for most of his protagonists. Still, like Kloppenberg, he returned in *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism* to another set of quite traditional issues – the vigorous debates between Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson over political economy – to recast our vision of progressive democracy. Sklar proudly maintained his staunch Marxism in the nearly three decades since he originated the corporate liberal school, and he retained his insistence that, in the end, corporate power remains the fundamental social fact of the early twentieth century. Yet by 1988, Sklar's historical world had become much more open, and much more contingent, than any previous account in the corporate liberal school, all of which had previously stressed the nearly total power of twentieth-century corporate elites. In this magnum opus, however, Sklar demonstrated how stymied the corporate control of the American economy was at the beginning of the century, with the Supreme Court and Congress staging a vigorous defense of the competitive proprietary mode of capitalism. The story might turn out largely the same in the end – after all, corporations decisively triumph by 1914 – but Sklar's new account greatly heightened the democratic drama involved in getting there. Not only that, but Sklar's political judgments had also markedly changed. Rather than seeing unrelieved economic and imperial tyranny in the rule of corporate liberals, Sklar

[14]James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (New York, 1986), 415, 5; Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, 1991), esp. 182-89. A further reflection on "generous and passionate intellectuals who expanded the very meaning of American democracy by their practical visions" is Leon Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 287.

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took note of the substantial promise in the governmental activism proposed to rein in the chaos of competition. In Sklar's hands, Theodore Roosevelt even becomes a proto-socialist. Rather than bemoaning the rise of corporations, then, Sklar along with the even more emphatic James Livingston, asks us to reconsider, and perhaps even embrace, the emancipatory potential of modern life unleashed by the corporate regime.[15]

Finally, Theda Skocpol brought social science, as well as a social-democratic feminism, to the aid of the Progressives in her 1992 *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers.* Skocpol provided hope for left-liberals heretofore crying in the wilderness over the lack of an effective welfare state tradition in the United States. Look more carefully, she exhorted as a new convert to women's history, at what politicized women achieved during the Progressive Era. The United States might not have developed the kind of full-scale social democratic welfare state common in western Europe after World War II, but in many ways the U.S. had become a world leader in social provision decades earlier. The new American welfare system was, admittedly, highly gendered. Only Civil War soldiers received generous pensions, although later attempts to universalize these benefits to all male wage earners failed. Yet due to the activism of middle-class women organized in voluntary associations, during the Progressive Era a "maternalist welfare state" came into being that offered protective labor legislation for female workers, distributed pensions for needy mothers who lacked a male breadwinner in the family, and subsidized health clinics for mothers and infants. Had it not met political defeat during the 1920s, such a program could have evolved out of its foundation in separate gender spheres into "a generous and caring American welfare state," in many ways potentially more humane and egalitarian than in Europe. As had Kloppenberg and Sklar, Skocpol made it clear that the democratic

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[15]Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (New York, 1988) and *United States as a Developing Country*, chs. 1-2; James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill, 1994) and *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History* (New York, 2001). Livingston's earlier work, *Origins of the Federal Reserve System: Money, Class, and Corporate Capitalism, 1890-1913* (Ithaca, 1986) also developed in an important way the idea of the contingent origins of corporate capitalism, as does William G. Roy in *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the Large Industrial Corporation in America* (Princeton, 1997). These works represent promising exceptions to the troubling decline of economic histories of the period.

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activism of the Progressives once paid handsome dividends. And such activism also provided a legacy for future movements for social justice.[16]

The Gender of Democracy

In one crucial way, though, Skocpol was qualitatively different from Kloppenberg and Sklar, and in that way much more indicative of the direction of future scholarship on the Progressive Era. For she had decisively moved beyond elite white males as central actors, to include both sexes. Indeed, once Kloppenberg, Sklar, and Skocpol had opened the democratic door, the historians who most vigorously ran through it were historians of American women. Beyond that, the 1990s also witnessed a genuine grappling with the period's racial issues, in many ways for the first time. We therefore now know much more about the bitter early twentieth-century practices of sexism and racism. This scholarship has challenged any self-conscious democrat to think hard about whether or not there really was much promise to American life during the Progressive Era. In the end, though, democratic hopes burn even more brightly after passing through such a fiery crucible.

The clear consensus is that women's political participation increased dramatically from 1900 to 1920 – after all, the period ended with one of the most significant democratizing events in American history, women's enfranchisement. By no means, however, do all historians see these decades as enhancing gender equality.[17] For example, Paula Baker – who in many ways pioneered the study of gender and politics – argues that during the early twentieth century men took over and professionalized the kind of distinctive voluntarist moral

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[16]Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 524. For a sharp give-and-take over Skocpol's ideas, see Linda Gordon, "Gender, State, and Society: A Debate With Theda Skocpol," *Contention* 2 (Spring 1993): 138-56; Skocpol, "Gendered Identities in Early U.S. Social Policy," *Contention* 2 (Spring 1993): 157-83; and Gordon, "Response to Theda Skocpol," *Contention* 2 (Spring 1993): 185-89. Another work by a sociologist that effectively demonstrates the deepening of the era's popular politics is Elisabeth S. Clemens, *The People's Lobby: Organizational Innovation and the Rise of Interest Group Politics in the United States, 1890-1925* (Chicago, 1997).

[17]For an excellent early survey, see Suzanne Lebsock, "Women and American Politics, 1880-1920," in *Women, Politics, and Change*, eds., Louise Tilly and Patricia Gurin (New York, 1990): 33-62.

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politics that women had developed during the nineteenth century. Then, when women finally got the vote, they found it worth much less than it had been just a quarter century before because of the increasing insulation of bureaucratic power from popular control. And rather than celebrating women's active participation in the development of the welfare state, Linda Gordon and other scholars have been much more attentive to the new inegalitarian power structures that white elite and middle-class women helped to put in place over their poor and minority sisters, particularly by validating the ideal of a family wage.[18]

Given the force of these critical perspectives – and even Baker and Gordon recognize at least some of the value in progressive politics – the overwhelming sense from recent scholarship is not only that women as a general collectivity were indeed empowered by and through Progressivism, but that women were chiefly responsible for some of the most important democratic reforms of the age. Works making this argument before the renaissance of the 1990s included Allen Davis's 1967 *Spearheads for Reform*, Elisabeth Perry's warmly sympathetic biography of Belle Moskowitz, and Nancy Cott's critical appreciation of the opening of the modern debate between feminists over equality and gender difference. The 1991 publication of Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye's important anthology on gender, class, race, and reform in the Progressive Era began to show the depth, as well as the multicultural nature, of research on these subjects. The anthology thus marked the beginning of a decade where the relationship between women and Progressivism became one of the most important subjects in the study of the entire American past. That same year Anne Scott showed how thoroughly "women's organizations of many kinds had

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[18]Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 620-47; Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York, 1994); Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison, WI, 1990); Sonya Michel, *Children's Interests/Mothers' Rights: The Shaping of America's Child Care Policy* (New Haven, 1999); Joanne L. Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1929* (Chicago, 1996); Michael Willrich, "Home Slackers: Men, the State, and Welfare in Modern America," *Journal of American History* 87(September 2000): 460-89. The best review of this issue is Patrick Wilkinson, "The Selfless and the Helpless: Maternalist Origins of the U.S. Welfare State," *Feminist Studies* 25 (Fall 1999): 571-98. For two excellent recent studies of woman suffrage, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington, 1998) and Gayle Gullett, *Becoming Citizens: The Emergence and Development of the California Women's Movement, 1880-1911* (Urbana, 2000).

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constructed the foundations for the social justice movement." Also in 1991, Robyn Muncy demonstrated in *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform* the power of connecting new feminist concerns with older issues of progressive democracy. Muncy decried the exclusionary practices of female settlement workers and bureaucrats, but at the same time she recognized the great democratic leaps that these professionals had made in "the inclusion of lay people" in substantive decision-making about welfare policy. In the next several years, Kathryn Kish Sklar went even further, arguing for our need to make women the chief protagonists for democratic reform during the early twentieth century: not just equal, but clearly superior, to men. And Philip Ethington argued that the most significant achievement of the Progressive Era was a "gradual but extraordinary movement of women across the boundary from private to public" that "portended the utter dissolution of the patriarchal public-private boundaries that had restricted the citizenship of women and sustained liberal political thought, law, and practice since John Locke."[19]

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[19]Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York, 1967); Elisabeth Israels Perry, *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith* (New York, 1987); Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye, eds., *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lexington, KY, 1991); Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana, 1991), 167; Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York, 1991); Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830-1930," in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, eds., Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York, 1993): 43-93; Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1930* (New Haven, 1995); Philip J. Ethington, "Recasting Urban Political History: Gender, the Public, the Household, and Political Participation in Boston and San Francisco during the Progressive Era," *Social Science History* 16 (Summer 1992): 301-33. For an important reflection on this issue, see Elisabeth Israels Perry, "Men Are from the Gilded Age, Women Are from the Progressive Era," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (January 2002): 25-48; see also Maureen Flanagan's vindication of women's political culture, *Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871-1933* (Princeton, 2002). It is also worth noting that even though the emphasis of this scholarship has been on non-partisan political activity, women were deeply involved in party politics of the period. See Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1997), 150-66; Melanie Gustafson, "Partisan Women in the Progressive Era: The Struggle for Inclusion in American Political Parties," *Journal of Women's History* 9 (Summer 1997): 8-30; and many of the chapters in Melanie Gustafson, Kristie Miller, and Elisabeth I. Perry, eds., *We Have Come to Stay: American Women and Political Parties, 1880-1960* (Albuquerque, 1999).

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Race, Empire, and Despair

Similar debates about the progress of progressive democracy have also occurred, often in even sharper form, among historians of the era's race relations. Indeed, perhaps the most insistent arguments about the unredeemability of the Progressive project come through explorations of the rise of scientific racism, the violent institutionalization of Jim Crow, and the cultural, political, legal, and economic rigidification of racial categories. For example, one of the most influential monographs of recent years, Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization*, seeks to reveal how early twentieth-century whites became locked into an increasingly racist and sexist set of constructions of manhood. Bederman admires the ways in which Ida Wells-Barnett turned the discourse of "civilization" against lynching, but her other characters – G. Stanley Hall, Theodore Roosevelt, and even Charlotte Perkins Gilman – worked only to construct an ever-tighter culture of white supremacy. Matthew Jacobson also points to the Progressive Era as the era when capitalism and empire conspired to forge modern racial hierarchies that Americans have found almost impossible to escape, thus leading to persistent fear and exclusion of immigrants, as well as genocidal wars abroad. And given racialized concerns about citizens' virtue, the tragic irony is that "in U.S. political culture the presumably even-handed nature of democracy itself has often been responsible for--or at least its defense has been the occasion for--the nation's most *anti*-democratic impulses." Nor have only white folks been responsible for the increasingly undemocratic nature of racial discourse, as Kevin Gaines contends in his study of the ideology of uplift among black thinkers during and beyond the Progressive Era. Middle-class black intellectuals at the dawn of the new century took a dramatically wrong turn in their quest for protection against rising racism. Instead of seeking full emancipation, they instead devised a "*moral economy* of class privilege, distinction, and even domination *within the race*, often drawing on patriarchal gender conventions." According to scholars such as Bederman, Jacobson, and Gaines, the hegemony of racial privilege during the early twentieth century had become nearly absolute.[20]

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[20]Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues:*

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Such despair, however, may stem from these historians' tendency to focus on intellectuals, with some attention to the broader culture. Those who pay heed to politics and social history, with particular concern for the masses, often relate a quite different, and much more promising, story. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, for example, offers a moral nearly the opposite of Gaines's. The middle-class black North Carolinian women whom Gilmore studies – few of whom have appeared in the history books – had their ethical lapses and their class blindness. Yet what truly set them apart was their persistent and subtly effective resistance to Jim Crow. Without discounting terror or political defeat, Gilmore insists that we see much work done by women previously invisible to historians--building playgrounds, working on public health campaigns, teaching--as not only "political," but as an ever-present potential threat to white power in the era of disfranchisement. By recovering the hope that her subjects had, Gilmore makes it clear just how important it is "to make an explicit attempt to reclaim 'progressivism,'" so that "we might build a new progressivism, this one a little less monstrous than some of those other

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The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917 (New York, 2000), 217; Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996). A biography that emphasizes the openness of the period's politics is Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill, 2001). Significant treatments of the nadir of American race relations that do not engage the issue of Progressivism include Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York, 1998) and Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1998).

Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, 1997), 410-69 (quote on 469), emphasizes how "centrist progressives" such as TR who championed "Americans as the world's greatest master race" easily overwhelmed the "left progressivism" of thinkers such as John Dewey. For a more complex reading of the Progressive Era, one that emphasizes both the racialized construction of the American nation *and* a powerful civic nationalist tradition – forged by none other than Theodore Roosevelt – that could "advance the causes of both social democracy and racial equality," see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2001), 12. In the end, the judgment of Morton Keller is sound: "The years after 1900 saw dramatic growth not only in the intensity but also in the diversity of debate over racial policy. True, Progressivism gave new life to legal segregation. But it reinvigorated the American tradition of equality before the law as well. While social and cultural pluralism fueled racial animosity, it could (and did) also reinforce policies of tolerance and inclusion." Keller, *Regulating a New Society: Public Policy and Social Change in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 257. An older book that stressed the "widening human sympathies of the progressive era" in matters of race and immigration is John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1955), 122.

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hulks that still walk among us." Stephanie Shaw echoes Gilmore's humane impulses in her depiction of a "socially responsible individualism" among female African American professionals during the early twentieth century that creatively linked private and public spheres. Mining the same vein, Evelyn Higginbotham has established the subversive nature of black Baptist women's "politics of respectability." Higginbotham wisely understands that her Progressive Era subjects "reflected and reinforced the hegemonic values of white America," but she does not stop with that simple cultural studies insight. Rather, she realizes how an emphasis on morality could move well beyond social control to, in the case of her heroines, a radical Christian emphasis on dignity and the righteousness of the poor that easily led to formal, and effective, cross-class political resistance to racism.[21]

A Renaissance for the Middle Class

If Bederman, Gaines, Gilmore, Shaw, and Higginbotham can agree on anything, it is the central role of "the middle class" in Progressivism. This, of course, is old news — very old news. Yet what is new and revelatory is the way social and political historians have begun to "celebrate" (Gilmore's word) these middling folks. Finally scholars have started to realize that their own guilt over being at least relatively privileged does not mean that they have to demonize the American middle class, castigating it for a supposedly pinched morality and invariably conservative politics. In fact, people in the middle – and not just African Americans – throughout our past have developed and sustained a wide variety of democratic radicalisms, perhaps no more so

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[21]Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 150; Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 187. For another generally positive perspective on middle-class black women's politics of uplift, see Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York, 1996); for a social history that is much more critical of the black middle class, see Fon Louise Gordon, *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880-1920* (Athens, GA, 1995). An important rehabilitation of rural black Progressives is Debra A. Reid, "African Americans, Community Building, and the Role of the State in Rural Reform in Texas, 1890s-1930s," in *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America*, eds., Catherine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston (Ithaca, 2001): 38-65.

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than during the Progressive Era. Although historians have by no means fully grappled with the implications of the intellectual rehabilitation of the American middling sorts, it is clear that the (still far-too-incomplete) scholarly rise of the middle class has opened up a wide swath of intellectual terrain, making it possible to talk about democracy and Progressivism in exciting new ways.[22]

The monumental book that stands as the most impressive testament to the rethinking of the middle class comes from someone who formerly was a staunch critic of the politics of the "bourgeoisie." Christopher Lasch's *The True and Only Heaven* covers far more than the Progressive Era; rather, it is a sweeping reinterpretation of all of American history, from John Locke to Martin Luther King. Seeking a source of resistance to the modern liberal ideology of progress, with its relentless emphasis on creating economic abundance for the masses at the expense of democracy, Lasch finds it in the tradition of petit bourgeois populism. Those who vindicated the egalitarian small-propertied ideal – whether Emerson, William James, or the Populists – upheld the values of responsibility, loyalty, the dignity of labor, and above all participatory democracy against disempowering centralization. Although small producers had supposedly had their last stand in the late 1800s, the Progressives hold a special place in Lasch's pantheon of hope because of the insistence of some of them, particularly Mary Parker Follett and Herbert Croly, on small-scale economic and political democracy. As a result, Lasch writes, "the ten years preceding World War I were a time of intense political and intellectual excitement, in the United States as well as Europe. The prospects for a radical transformation of the industrial system seemed brighter, on the whole, than they have seemed in any subsequent period." Lasch adds: "The value of 'progressive' social thought, the label notwithstanding, was that much of it worked against the progressive grain," thus making sure that we pay heed to the often submerged cross-currents of radical democracy swirling just beneath the surface of Progressivism.[23]

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[22]Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, xix; Robert D. Johnston, "Conclusion: Historians and the American Middle Class," in *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, eds., Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston (New York, 2001): 296-306.

[23]Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York, 1991), 330, 360. Lasch went after the middle class/bourgeoisie most insistently in *The New Radicalism*. I follow Lasch's political and intellectual insights in my forthcoming *The Radical*

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Conclusion: Hope and the Promise of Progressive Democracy

In fact, now that it has become possible to launch such a forthright defense of the democratic promise of the American middle class, we may be witnessing a genuine revolution in our vision of the Progressive Era. As scholars, we rarely know if we are really in the middle of a paradigm shift. The signs are hopeful, though, for in the last few years a series of brilliant books have appeared to make the case for the democratic – and often radically democratic – nature of much of progressive reform.

We can start with one of Christopher Lasch's own students. Kevin Mattson argues that a variety of Progressive Era activists and thinkers, including Charles Zueblin, Frederic Howe, and Mary Parker Follett, thought through the problem of democracy in some of the most innovative ways in our modern history. They sought to create a more educated citizenry not by means of paternalistic uplift, but rather by institutionalizing neighborhood social centers that would allow urban citizens from all walks of life to come together for political discussion and debate. Mattson is emphatic that we should look to their traditions of intellect and activism in our own search for a real democracy. A complementary focus on democratic *process*, and the ways that ordinary citizens during the Progressive Era appropriated the supposedly hegemonic claims of expertise in order to create a supremely contentious — and thus genuinely democratic — public realm is the subject of Jonathan Zimmerman's study of Scientific Temperance Instruction.[24]

Daniel Rodgers offers a more genteel account than Mattson's or Zimmerman's, but his *Atlantic Crossings* – which now rivals *The Age of Reform* for top spot on graduate orals lists – is likewise suffused with political hope. Rodgers takes us back into a transatlantic world where

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Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon (Princeton, 2002) but go even further in arguing for the economic and intellectual viability of twentieth-century petit bourgeois radicalism. Andrew Wender Cohen offers similar insights in "Obstacles to History: Modernization and the Lower Middle Class in Chicago, 1900-1940," in Bledstein and Johnston, *The Middling Sorts*, 189-200.

[24]Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (University Park, PA, 1998); Jonathan Zimmerman, *Distilling Democracy: Alcohol Education in America's Public Schools, 1880-1925* (Lawrence, KS, 1999).

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different kinds of cosmopolitan left-liberal thinkers came together to create a "social politics" that effectively reconstructed *laissez-faire* capitalism and bequeathed strong ideological and programmatic legacies to the New Deal. In turn, Elizabeth Sanders's protagonists, and heroes, in *Roots of Reform* are the complete opposite of Rodgers's. She celebrates the peasants with pitchforks, and their congressional representatives from the nation's periphery, who articulated, and successfully fought for, a populist agenda well into the twentieth century. Sanders compellingly argues that her angry farmers deserve credit for regulatory measures such as the Federal Trade Commission Act as well as, more generally, for a non-statist vision that dreamed of the protection of the people against the predations of corporate capitalism but without a stultifying bureaucracy. After Sanders's book, the Progressives will never again be able to shake the dirt off their horny hands, but, they will nevertheless look much better. Sanders also inspires us to reconnect Progressivism with Populism, despite the strange urge of scholars to segregate the two kinds of reform.[25]

In the end, the tide in favor of democracy has swelled so high that even scholars inspired by Marxism such as Alan Dawley and Eric Foner have over the last decade penned admiring, although not uncritical, accounts of the Progressives' struggles for justice. We certainly still need to learn much more about the era in order to understand the full contours of progressive democracy. For example, we know surprisingly little about the relationship between working-class politics and Progressivism generally, although the scholarship of Meredith Tax, Nancy Schrom Dye, Michael Kazin, Elizabeth Payne, Jacquelyn Hall, Georg Leidenberger, and most recently Richard Schneirov has begun to help us appreciate the vigorous democratic uses to which many workers, and their allies across classes, put the age's political currents. Nor do we know, despite much excellent older scholarship on this topic, enough about the substantial changes in political structure and institutions that occurred during this period. For example, we hardly understand at all the most important political innovation of the era, the initiative and referendum, despite all the

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[25]Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago, 1999). For an extended discussion of Sanders as well as Rodgers, see Robert D. Johnston, "Peasants, Pitchforks, and the (Found) Promise of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 28 (September 2000): 393-98.

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curses (generally given without any historical perspective) that these devices of direct democracy receive today from established academic and political figures. We also need to do more to bring together the worlds of foreign relations and domestic politics. For as Robert Johnson has pointed out, the nation's foreign policy contained a significant mass democratic orientation, with bitter conflicts over monopoly spilling easily into controversies over war and imperialism. Finally, although African Americans have become full-fledged actors in the drama of Progressivism, other non-white racial groups still generally only serve as subjects, and not as actors in their own right. A model here is Benjamin Heber Johnson's work on ethnic Mexican political figures in the area of the Texas-Mexican border. Like many other petit bourgeois ethnic leaders, the "Tejano Progressives" Johnson studies found in the political ferment of the period many opportunities to construct a distinctive culture, as well as to gain communal political power, while simultaneously embracing the full rights of American citizenship.[26]

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[26]Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, MA, 1991); Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York, 1998), 139-61; Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (New York, 1980); Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters: Feminism, The Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia, MO, 1980); Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power during the Progressive Era* (Urbana, 1987); Elizabeth Anne Payne, *Reform, Labor and Feminism: Margaret Dreier Robins and the Women's Trade Union League* (Urbana, 1988); Jacquelyn D. Hall, "O. Delight Smith's Progressive Era: Labor, Feminism, and Reform in the Urban South," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* eds., Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana, 1993): 166-98; Georg Leidenberger, "'The Public is the Labor Union': Working-Class Progressivism in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago," *Labor History* 36 (Spring 1995): 187-210; Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-1897* (Urbana, 1998). For more skeptical arguments that emphasize the class rigidity of Progressive Era politics, see David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York, 1987); Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (New York, 1998); Shelton Stromquist, "The Crucible of Class: Cleveland Politics and the Origins of Municipal Reform in the Progressive Era," *Journal of Urban History* 23 (January 1997): 197-220; and Daniel J. Johnson, "'No Make-Believe Class Struggle': The Socialist Municipal Campaign in Los Angeles, 1911," *Labor History* 41(February 2000): 25-46. See also Richard Oestreicher, "Urban Working-Class Political Behavior and Theories of American Electoral Politics," *Journal of American History* 74 (March 1988): 1257-86.

Historians critical of direct democracy include Arthur Lipow, *Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement* (Berkeley, 1991 [1982]) and *Political Parties and Democracy: Explorations in History and Theory* (London, 1996); and Thomas Goebel, *A Government By The People: The Initiative and Referendum in America,*

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In the end, the fate of democracy in the Progressive Era will almost certainly not depend solely, or even very much, on simple empirical research. Instead, Progressivism, like most eras and political movements, will be borne aloft by ever-changing political and intellectual winds. Can we forecast the future direction of those currents? Probably not. It is worth noting, however, that we now live in one of the most auspicious eras for the study of Progressivism, not only because of the range of subjects that scholars are researching but because of the relatively new, and heartening, political perspective that historians have developed on their subject. There is no use denying that plenty of political thinkers and doers during the Progressive Era lost their faith in democracy, or never had much to begin with. Yet in an age where we long ago witnessed the fall of the New Deal order, citizen-scholars have begun to recognize that Progressivism – or, to make explicit an important qualification, some of the most significant strains of progressive reform – can still help us move beyond the dead end of welfare state paternalism without succumbing to the disempowering neo-liberal mindset. Beyond specific political prescriptions, the progressive impulse at its best had a trust in the people, a respect for small-scale solutions, and a healthy moral imperative that many today find difficult to kindle in their political souls. If we seek the civic vision necessary for the deepening of democracy – a common goal, even if we can never agree exactly on what democracy is – then perhaps the past is our best resource for viewing the inevitably messy and imperfect, but

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1890-1940 (Chapel Hill, forthcoming). For a defense of direct democracy, see Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class;* Sarah Henry presents a middle ground in *Progressive Democracy: Remaking the Vote in the United States, 1888-1919* (New York, forthcoming). For an impressive study of political structure and institutions, see John F. Reynolds, *Testing Democracy: Electoral Behavior and Progressive Reform in New Jersey, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill, 1988); see also Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York, 2000). On foreign affairs, see Robert David Johnson, *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 1995) and Elizabeth McKillen, *Chicago Labor and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy, 1914-1924* (Ithaca, 1995). On the agency of non-whites, see Benjamin Heber Johnson, *America's Unknown Rebellion: The Plan de San Diego Uprising and the Forging of Mexican American Identity* (New Haven, forthcoming), as well as the still valuable Hazel W. Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (Syracuse, 1971). An important reflection on ethnicity and progressive reform, which includes a recognition of the current political uses of Progressivism, is James J. Connolly, "Progressivism and Pluralism," in *American Public Life and the Historical Imagination*, eds., Michael Grossberg, Wendy Gamber, and Hendrik Hartog (South Bend, forthcoming).

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still inspiring, ways that ordinary citizens are capable of engaging in the high drama of self-government. And in the end, few ages rival the Progressive Era in offering such opportunities to celebrate ourselves experimenting in democratic forms.[27]

The present is therefore ripe with the promise of progressive democracy. If, in the spirit of Christopher Lasch, we continue to hope against hope,[28] we might well find that re-democratizing the Progressive Era can play a significant role in re-democratizing our own lives.

[27]Michael McGerr also notes that "Progressivism, not the New Deal, may well be the most useful analog to liberalism at the end of the twentieth century." See McGerr, "Progressivism," in Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg, eds., *A Companion to American Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 549.

[28]Lasch, *True and Only Heaven*, dedication. For a compelling companion argument, see Kevin Mattson, "History as Hope: The Legacy of the Progressive Era and the Future of Political Reform in America," in Ronald Hayduk and Kevin Mattson, eds., *Democracy's Moment: Reforming the American Political System for the 21st Century* (New York, forthcoming).

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