



Progressivism: A Very Short Introduction

Walter Nugent

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After decades of conservative dominance, the election of Barack Obama may signal the beginning of a new progressive era. But what exactly is progressivism? What role has it played in the political, social, and economic history of America?

This very timely Very Short Introduction offers an engaging overview of progressivism in America--its origins, guiding principles, major leaders and major accomplishments. A many-sided reform movement that lasted from the late 1890s until the early 1920s, progressivism emerged as a response to the excesses of the Gilded Age, an era that plunged working Americans into poverty while a new class of ostentatious millionaires built huge mansions and flaunted their wealth. As capitalism ran unchecked and more and more economic power was concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, a sense of social crisis was pervasive. Progressive national leaders like William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, Robert M. La Follette, and Woodrow Wilson, as well as muckraking journalists like Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, and social workers like Jane Addams and Lillian Wald answered the growing call for change. They fought for worker's compensation, child labor laws, minimum wage and maximum hours legislation; they enacted anti-trust laws, improved living conditions in urban slums, instituted the graduated income tax, won women the right to vote, and laid the groundwork for Roosevelt's New Deal. Nugent shows that the progressives--with the glaring exception of race relations--shared a common conviction that society should be fair to *all* its members and that governments had a responsibility to see that fairness prevailed.

Offering a succinct history of the broad reform movement that upset a stagnant conservative orthodoxy, this Very Short Introduction reveals many parallels, even lessons, highly appropriate to our own time.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, **Very Short Introductions** offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

Progressivism: A Very Short Introduction Details

Date : Published December 1st 2009 by Oxford University Press, USA

ISBN : 9780195311068

Author : Walter Nugent

Format : Paperback 144 pages

Genre : Politics, History, Nonfiction

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Walaa Fathi says

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Rachel M. says

This is a concise summary of the Progressive Era, including its accomplishments, shortcomings, and major reformers. It is very informative, and I highly recommend reading it if you are interested in knowing the basic facts about historical Progressivism.

Paul D. Miller says

Biased and incomplete.

Bojan Tunguz says

"Progressive" is a term that has recently come to be used as a synonym for "liberal" or "left wing" in the US politics. However, this is not a book about current liberal politics not even about progressivism in general. This book deals with a very particular period in US history when progressivism was a major political force that more or less straddled political demarcation lines. The progressive moment coincides with the first two decades of the twentieth century, and the two presidents that it's most closely associated with are Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. The Progressive Era was marked by some major shifts in the ways that the capital was treated, and with the increasing regulation of many industries. There were also major social

changes, many with decidedly mixed legacy. This was the period when women were finally allowed to vote, but the end of the period was also marked with the introduction of prohibition. The race relations were also not exactly an unmitigated success story of this era: while many blacks improved their lot in life (primarily by moving north), this is also the period that witnessed the resurgence of the Klan.

This book is an informative and interesting expose of one of the most important periods in the twentieth century US history. Many of the ideas and policies that had been first discussed then had a major influence on many of the subsequent politicians and presidents. Their impact is still being felt today, and anyone who wants to understand more about what is really meant by progressivism ought to read this book.

Usgenhao3gmail.com says

This short introduction is well written, it gives rich details about the origin, development and peak of the progressivism in a way not too boring to read. Besides writer's excellent historiography narrative, the book also provide quite objective analysis in a way that being helpful for readers never touch this subject before. Although it was short on explaining the die down of progress movement and contemporary remarks on this movement, it is a great introduction and it serve the main purpose of the introduction, draw your attention with concise information and let you explore more.

Tom Darrow says

I read this for a conference I was attending on the Progressive Movement in New York City. It is clear and to-the-point. The usual cast of charcters is there (Teddy Roosevelt, Wilson, Jane Adams, etc) but other, lesser-known, individuals are included as well. Give you enough info to get the general gist of the period, but also leaves some questions unanswered so you will want to read more detailed works about the movement.

Cat says

A solid introduction. Doesn't go into great depth but is broad enough to give a reader on overview of Progressivism and its origins. As "a very short introduction", it does what it says.

Emily Herberich says

Excellent Summary. Truly inspiring book.

Daniel Wright says

In political discourse, as George Orwell was probably not the first person to observe, there are always some words which get overused to the point where they lose any meaning they originally had. 'Progress' is one such word, not just now, but for most of the twentieth century. It is what Richard Weaver calls a 'god word' - a word which is meant to mean something undefinably good. Along with progress go its cognates -

progressive and progressivism.

In this book, Walter Nugent, an emeritus professor of history at Notre Dame, chronicles the defining movement in a period of American history - roughly, the first twenty years of the twentieth century - known as the Progressive era. This is apparently a term widely used by historians, to judge by his 'further reading' list given at the end, but I admit I had not heard it before. That only makes me glad that I have been illuminated about a very important period I knew almost nothing about before. Everyone has heard of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and (to a lesser extent) William Jennings Bryan, but fewer can say what they are actually famous for.

It is, I have to say, rather refreshing to escape from the many revisionist modern historiographers who approach their subject in an un-systematic way, thus losing sight of actually teaching something to their readers. Professor Nugent's approach is simply chronological: he introduces his subject matter with some context then divides it up into five distinct periods. (It is worth noting at this point that a couple of his chapters could do with being divided in their turn into more digestible sections). He chronicles the rise of the political movement against the enormous power of the corporations - the oil and railroad giants - its successes and failures, its internal disputes, culminating in the 'annus horribilis' of 1919, with the end of a bloody war, the influenza epidemic, a plethora of industrial disputes (which Nugent rather grandiosely refers to as 'capital-labor' disputes) and the failed hopes in the League of Nations.

These reformers had quite definite and practical aims for the common good of the nation. The progress they wanted and achieved was not nebulous at all. However, I would like to have seen some sort of discussion of the etymology of the movement's name. It seems to come from the name of Roosevelt's 'National Progressive' party which he formed after dramatically walking away from the Republicans during Taft's presidency. You would not guess this from Nugent's text, since he refers to the party mostly by its nickname, the 'Bull Moosers'. Moreover, this cannot be the only reason for the name, since 'Progressivism' clearly existed long before its namesake party, and plenty of contemporary Democrats were part of the movement as well.

To his credit, Nugent does not shy away from discussing the darker side of the movement. What he diagnoses as a streak of 'social and moral authoritarianism' led to the disasters of prohibition on the one hand and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan on the other. He acknowledges that many progressives were involved in 'racial science' and eugenics. The apparently egalitarian Wilson was a frank segregationist. Nugent does make the mistake of seeing everything through the eyes of a modern-day one-dimensional liberal, though. To many progressives, these values of social conservatism combined with economic redistribution were simply what they found in their Bibles. The author comes close to realising this in his discussion of the movement against alcohol, but not quite as close as he could.

Indeed, the liberal undertones to his commentary are perhaps the major failing to the book. I can agree with him that it was right for government at the time to iron out some of the gross inequalities of American society at the time, and that the racism that was so much part of the culture of the time was wrong, but it should not be for the historian to pass moral judgement. Nugent's political sympathies are perhaps a little too obvious.

Anna Tatelman says

Very concise and informative for such a little book. I would have liked to know more about the "backwards" movements of the Progressives, e.g. their dislike towards immigrants and blacks and how those affected their actions, but otherwise have no complaints.

