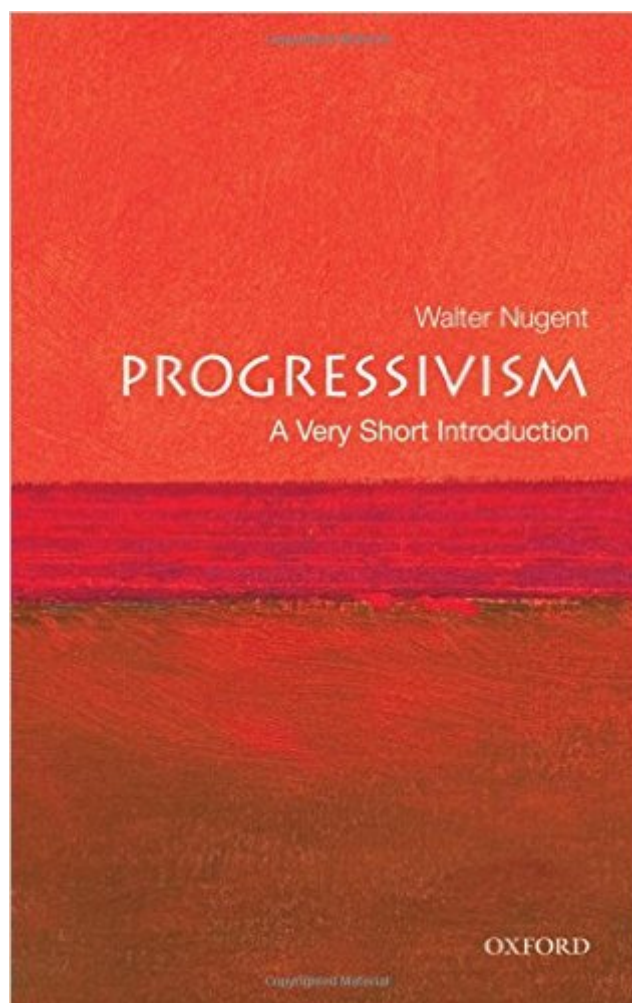


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Progressivism: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

As a professional historian, I am torn about this volume. It does have substantial virtues. It covers a great deal of territory in 125 pages of text. Perhaps more important, it makes a strong case for continuity between the various reform movements of the late 19th century (particularly Populism) and Progressivism. This stance puts it at odds with most histories of the era, and serves as a valuable corrective to the idea that political reform in the United States started over in 1900. The author also contends, I think correctly, that Progressivism is best understood as a response to the problems created by rapid economic change and growth in the late 19th century, not as a specific program. Yet too often, this volume goes off the rails. For instance, after stating that Progressive reform is perhaps best understood by the problems with which it dealt rather than specific proposals, the author often speaks of what is "truly Progressive" without defining the term--for instance, stating, "progress had been achieved in 1906, though it still did not quite add up to Progressivism" (p. 44). Certainly, more reforms came after 1906, but exactly what made them more Progressive, and their predecessors less Progressive? The only common thread cited by the author is the belief by Progressives that a "public interest" exists, and that government should serve it. Yet the same can be said of most political movements--the question is how the public interest is defined. The author clearly thinks that Progressive efforts to lessen economic inequality and improve the lot of the poor are in the public interest, which is reasonable enough. Yet what about the efforts of southern Progressives to strengthen segregation, or of many Progressives nationwide to exclude immigrants, secure Prohibition, and sterilize people in mental homes (eugenics)? No doubt, those behind these measures believed they were serving the public interest, but their understanding of the matter presumably differed with the work of people like Jane Addams for social justice. The author is clearly a partisan of the Progressives, which is fine, as long as he does not overlook the questions that some have raised about them. Unfortunately, he does just that. For instance, Progressives devoted a huge amount of time to railroad regulation--perhaps more than to any other national political issue. Yet most historians who have delved into the subject in detail have concluded that

the effort was a disaster. The federal government prevented railroads from increasing their rates in line with the rising cost of labor and other supplies, squeezing profits to the point where the railroads were not able to invest enough to accomodate increasing traffic. (Tom McCraw's "Prophets of Regulation" is perhaps the best statement of this argument.) Perhaps this interpretation is wrong, but the author does no deal with the question at all. A cynic might say that he fails to address the concern because he does not want to consider anything that might cast Progressivism in a negative light. Certainly, accounts like McCraw's indicate that Progressives worked in the interest of one particular group, shippers, to keep railroad rates down, even though that defeated the general interest in a railroad system able to accomodate rapid economic growth. (Notably, TR was concerned after 1908 that limits on railroad rates were too rigid, but on this issue, he had little impact.) The most disturbing example of this tendency to whitewash Progressives involved William Jennings Bryan's stance on race. The author writes in the conclusion, "Bryan had tolerant words for most groups and 'a certain discomfort with white supremacy,' but he seldom protested Jim Crow laws, which would have risked his political strength in the South." (p. 125) The quote comes from Michael Kazin's biography of Bryan, "A Godly Hero," a generally favorable account of Bryan's life. Kazin, however, is very critical of Bryan's racial attitudes. The "certain discomfort with white supremacy" appears, according to Kazin, only in a poem that Bryan wrote and is buried in his personal papers, never published and apparently not read until Kazin came along. In practice, as Kazin notes, Bryan expressed public support for segregation--for instance, denouncing Theodore Roosevelt for inviting Booker T. Washington to the White House for dinner--and never even complained about lynching. This last is particularly damning, because some white southern politicians did denounce lynching without destroying their careers, and a strong statement by Bryan might have strengthened their hand. Bryan did not simply, as many northern Democrats did, ignore the racial attitudes and policies of southern Democrats, but he often endorsed them. Although this book does not technically quote Kazin out of context, it uses his writing in a dishonest way.

This is a nice and very concise introduction to the Progressive movement. Nugent provides a concise narrative of the rise and decline of the movement, discusses many of the major Progressive leaders, and sketches out the major achievements of the Progressives. The genesis of the Progressive movement in the enormous social changes in the second half of the 19th century is laid out well, particularly the threats middle class and rural Americans perceived from large corporations and the increasingly heterogeneous industrial work force. Nugent is particularly good on the complex relationship between the Progressive movement and rural Populism. These 2 were often

synergistic, with much Progressive legislation accomplished with rural voter support, but also antagonistic at times. The considerable heterogeneity of the Progressives, including such figures as John Dewey and Jane Addams, as well as racist demagogues like Ben Tillman, is another theme highlighted by Nugent. Nugent argues well that the Progressives were united not only by what they opposed but also by a general concern with social welfare and an "instrumentalism" that involved expanding democracy and using government power to improve society. Nugent is also very good on the significant limitations of the Progressives, such as the prominence of racism among many members of the movement and the enthusiasm of many Progressives for imperialist adventures. He is also quite good at describing the powerful conservative forces resisting Progressive era reforms. Written well with a nice bibliography.

I think that every review of every book on the Progressive Era should be 3 stars. And on average that might in fact be the mean score. But to give Nugent's book -- one that seems to embrace the spirit of Progressivism while disavowing some of its less savory (by today's standards) dynamics -- is to betray your own certain fundamentalism. The same is perhaps true for a 5-star review. Progressivism is a strange beast because of how plural it really was, both in its agents and in the broad political spectrum that it covered. But the essence of it all was a belief in fair play and a "square deal" for each individual. If you have any grain of empathy, and if you can entertain the notion that there is room for empathy in history, then you should be able to take any given Progressive initiative, understand why it was an initiative, and then find value in the process involved. With Progressivism we focus so much on the growth of government, said growth being an inherent evil. But the flipside of this is that more and more Americans were being heard and government was responding to them . . . you know, like an actual democracy. Thanks to Progressivism, gone are the days when the President or Governor will send in the militia to break up a strike on behalf of the factory owner. Gone are the days of the sweatshop. Gone are the days when animals and feces filled up our urban spaces. Gone are the days when corporate monopolies manipulate legislation and control the press? Whoops, looks like we forgot to export Progressivism with our Free Trade Agreements!

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