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Alan Dawley: Changing the World

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Introduction



“**W**e dedicate ourselves to Peace!”

With this vow ringing in their ears, women from some twenty countries gathered in Zurich, Switzerland, in May of 1919 hoping to free the world from the death grip of war. Yet peace was not the only thing on their minds. Most of the delegates were also veteran campaigners for social causes ranging from women’s suffrage to labor standards. When one of them proclaimed, “Only in freedom is permanent peace possible,” they knew they had found the right name for the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.¹

The women’s league was a perfect example of the new internationalism that arrived on the scene in the early twentieth century. At a time when visions of social progress were clouded by violent upheavals on the world stage, a growing body of reformers came to believe that cooperation among the peoples of the world was part and parcel of the quest for social justice. What was the point of making a better world if it was only going to be blown to smithereens?

To American reformers in this period, changing the world always carried the double meaning of combating the evils afflicting their own society, while also improving the wider world. That was the view of the growing group of social reformers such as Jane Addams and reform politicians such as Theodore Roose-

velt who started calling themselves “progressive” around 1910. “The adjective ‘progressive’ is what we like,” wrote young journalist Walter Lippmann, “and the word ‘new.’ ”²

No sooner had the founding generation of American progressives come on the scene than revolutionary movements began to shake the earth in the vast agrarian belt from Mexico to Russia, while simultaneously the empires and nations of Europe began to lunge at each others’ throats in what became the Great War. For American progressives, there was no escaping these world-historical events, and from that time forward, the dual quest for improvement at home and abroad was at the heart of what it meant to be a progressive.

The dual effort of American progressives to change the world is the subject of this book. Starting in the years before the Great War, I have followed the progressives through the turbulent years of war and revolution into the conservative 1920s. I have tried to make sense of their responses to the major questions of the day—social injustice, economic inequality, war and peace, imperial intervention—in an effort to better understand the past. At the same time, I have also tried to link past and present in a way that might help a later generation think about the relation between American reform and world affairs in the twenty-first century.

Certainly, the founding generation of progressives has given us much to ponder. In a hectic round of activity, they set out to regulate big business, rid money-driven politics of corruption, secure a place for industrial workers in American life, and give the New Woman room to grow. As if dealing with issues of class and gender were not enough, they also tried to improve relations among ethnic groups—what they called “races”—with mixed results. Although a good many progressives were ready to include Catholic and Jewish immigrants in the American family, others tried to impose narrow Protestant values on immigrants, or else exclude them altogether. Despite some achievements in civil rights, including the formation of the flagship National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, white progressives fell woefully short in pursuing racial equality.

Although this eclectic collection of reforms hardly made for a unified movement, progressivism found a certain cohesion in three overlapping aims: winning social and economic justice, revitalizing public life, and improving the wider world. We will take them in turn. In addressing the social evils of the day, progressives pursued such reforms as wage and hours laws, the prohibition of child labor, and the regulation of business, all in an effort to bring order to the unregulated marketplace. It is important to recognize the international dimension of this effort. In a world knit together by far-flung markets and the international state system, progressives confronted social problems that crossed national boundaries, and their solutions did the same. Whether battling for women's suffrage, temperance, or labor standards, they commonly joined forces with their counterparts from Europe to Australia.³

In the process, they drew many ideas from the left. The left is defined here as the political stance, whether Marxist or not, that blamed inequalities in wealth and power on the workings of the capitalist system. That serves to distinguish leftists from progressives, who, for the most part, did not see capitalism behind every wrong, but it also establishes points of overlap between them. During the prewar heyday of socialism, many progressives could be found supping at the socialist table, sampling ideas of municipal ownership, social legislation, and redistribution of wealth. In some ways, American progressives resemble England's Fabian socialists and what were later called social democrats. European social democrats were partisans of mixed economy who combined support for private ownership with public regulation of business and modest redistribution of wealth, and many progressives did the same.⁴

The quest for social justice shaded over into a second aim—the revitalization of public life. In a host of ways from women's suffrage through public commissions, progressives aimed at replacing the existing politics of patronage and power with a new politics of civic engagement. In the process, they drew heavily on republican ideas. Heaping scorn on selfish private interests,

they embraced, instead, the republican principle of civic engagement in service to the public interest. In progressive campaigns for good government, direct election of senators, and, most important, women's suffrage, the republican emphasis on active citizenship was very much to the fore.

Progressives wanted to believe that the republican revival at home was part of a worldwide movement toward greater self-government. In the vast belt of agrarian societies that ringed the globe, sleeping giants were awakening in Mexico, China, and Russia in sprawling social revolutions aimed at throwing off imperial yokes. It is important to note that prior to the Bolshevik revolution, rebel movements in the developing world commonly set their sights on a whole panoply of republican ideals, including popular sovereignty, written constitutions, representative parliaments, and freedom of expression. Although social revolutions could seem alien and threatening, American progressives stoked their own convictions by extending sympathy to republican movements overseas.

The key to understanding the political philosophy of American progressivism is to see it as a quarrel with liberalism. The liberal component in progressive thought is easy to spot. The terms "progressive" and "liberal" were often used more or less interchangeably, and progressives typically mounted the battlements in defense of such quintessentially liberal ideas as civil liberty and limited government. Certainly, progressives preferred modest government regulation to state ownership. Emphasizing such liberal associations, an earlier generation of scholars treated progressivism as part of the liberal tradition, which was seen to be the *only* viable political tradition in the United States.⁵

The fact is, however, that progressives had serious objections to laissez-faire liberalism. In a revealing turn of phrase, Walter Lippmann, then at the start of a distinguished journalistic career, spoke for his generation in rejecting the "drift" of the market in favor of the "mastery" of social control.⁶ While accepting the general framework of capitalist property relations, progressives had lost faith in the capacity of the free market to create social justice. Setting out to bring the market under social control, but

suspicious of coercive bureaucracy, they fashioned compacts in civil society and imposed regulations in the public sphere that went beyond the old liberalism. Although lacking a well-developed body of doctrine, progressivism was a trenchant—and still pertinent—critique of *laissez-faire*.

Progressives braided together republican, socialist, and liberal strands to create something new. Dissatisfied with social and economic inequalities that arose under *laissez-faire*, they developed a distinct set of practices pitting social justice against class rule, civic engagement against patronage, and international cooperation against balance-of-power politics.

The last point needs to be emphasized. The critique of *laissez-faire* was not intended solely for domestic consumption. It also applied to world affairs, the third arena of progressive action. Although many commentators have noted that reform did not stop at the water's edge, they have often missed the fact that progressive thinking took shape in response to events overseas. Having come of age in an era of empire, progressives attributed the things they did not like, such as "dollar diplomacy," to the same plutocratic "special interests" that had corrupted American life, and they often turned around to bless U.S. overseas expansion as social and economic progress for the less fortunate.

Likewise, they attributed the misbehavior of the European great powers to the same pursuit of raw self-interest they despised in Gilded Age Robber Barons. Rejecting the materialism of balance-of-power politics, they embraced, instead, the idealism of making the world safe for democracy as they marched off on a wartime crusade to save the world. American reform did not stop at the water's edge, but neither did world affairs stop at the U.S. border. To the contrary, revolutionary upheavals and the clash of empires and nation-states worked their way into American reform at every turn.

The fact that internal and external matters were so deeply entwined did not make life easier for the progressives, or their historians. Examining American reform in the context of world affairs requires innovative methods. If social reform and foreign policy were important to one another, then they must be in-

cluded, one with the other, inside the same frame of analysis. It is necessary to study interactions between social movements and political elites within and across national boundaries. Social history and international relations—history from the bottom up and history from the top down—must be combined in a way that incorporates both social movements and nation-states.

One fruitful result of such a method is that ordinary people take their rightful place alongside elites as history's decision makers. Every generation is forced to make decisions in circumstances not of its own choosing. That is the nature of history. But the burden of choice on the founding generation of American progressives was unusually great. Questions of war, empire, and revolution would have been immensely difficult taken one at a time, but in these years, all three arrived at once. Forced to make hard choices, progressives had to decide whether to join forces across national boundaries or let other peoples work out their own destinies in their own ways.

To understand choices made in the past, it is necessary to recover the full range of options, the paths forsaken, as well as the paths taken. Only by recovering lost options is it possible to accord a degree of freedom to historical actors, who would otherwise be mere prisoners of destiny. In the case at hand, that means we must remember those who lost the arguments over U.S. military intervention as well as those who won, out of fidelity to the historical record and to remind ourselves that things might have turned out differently.

As the United States sailed out on to the high seas of world affairs, progressives were deeply divided over which course to take. The most prominent figures—the ones best remembered a century later—went full steam ahead for intervention. Theodore Roosevelt, the nominee of the nation's first Progressive party, and Woodrow Wilson, who came to lead progressive forces after 1912, outdid one another in sending U.S. troops abroad. Roosevelt was an unabashed imperialist, and, if anything, Wilson was even more active overseas. In what has been called "missionary diplomacy," Wilson intervened in the Mexican and Russian revolutions and in several Latin American republics, and with his

famous Fourteen Points, he brought the United States to the pinnacle of world leadership at the end of the Great War.⁷

At the same time, many other progressives—ones that deserve to be better remembered—wanted to steer clear of military interventions in all these places. Instead, they set a course toward the “new internationalism” of cooperation with other peoples in pursuit of world peace and social justice. No one was more important in that regard than Jane Addams. Not only was she the venerable queen of social reform, she also devoted her considerable talents to criticizing interventions in the Caribbean and holding back support for intervention in the Great War. For her courageous stands, she was honored at Zurich in 1919 with the presidency of the Women’s International League, and later, on a much bigger stage, she would become the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, fitting tribute to the prominent role women played in the movement for world peace.⁸

Progressive internationalism⁹ found its main political champion in Robert La Follette. More than anyone else, the feisty senator from Wisconsin held the rightful claim to being the father of progressive politics. Near the end of his illustrious career in 1924, he mounted the second major presidential bid under a Progressive party banner. Having stood against the gale of super-patriotic support for the war, he also opposed imperial intervention and came out against the League of Nations. Indeed, in the troubled aftermath of the Great War, when most elites abandoned progressivism both at home and abroad, progressive internationalism was left in the safekeeping of the likes of Addams and La Follette.

In examining progressivism early in the century, we are thrust immediately into the larger realm of world history. American progressives were not the only ones wrestling with the unwanted consequences of the unregulated capitalist market and the unhappy results of nationalism run amok. Indeed, the entire world was caught up in an epoch-making conjuncture that began in the 1910s. The violent events of that decade were symptoms of a convulsive transformation in the pattern of power both within and between societies that saw the overthrow of ancient

dynasties, challenges to modern structures of authority, and the beginning of the end of European hegemony. What began then was not completed until the de-colonization movements after the Second World War.

In the early stages of this conjuncture, in a moment sandwiched between the armistice of November 1918 and the conclusion of the Versailles peace conference seven months later, the United States rose briefly to the pinnacle of world leadership behind Woodrow Wilson. It was the first American moment¹⁰ in world affairs, and it was no coincidence that the first world leader to come from the United States was also the preeminent progressive in the country. Besides U.S. economic clout, what gave Wilson moral leadership was his appeal to countless millions around the world as a reformer, a fresh answer to corruption, oppression, and militarism.

From that day forward, progressive ideas were bound up with the question of U.S. hegemony. Although hegemony rests, fundamentally, on economic and military power, the cultural element is essential, too. America won prestige for its high-consumption economy, but it also stood out to war-weary and oppressed peoples for its ideals of freedom and self-government. The attraction was not only Model Ts but also model schools.

As it turned out, the American moment was fleeting, because the national establishment reversed course in 1919. Uneasy about wearing the crown, which, in any case, Britain was not eager to relinquish, American elites retreated from world leadership at the same time as they abandoned reform. Their retreat was due, in part, to fear that events were spinning out of control in a moment of millennial excitement as movements for labor and women's rights flooded back onto the world stage, colonial peoples rushed forward to claim the right of self-determination, and the threat of revolution spread westward out of Russia. In the face of all this discontent, American elites feared that entanglement overseas would somehow worsen the class and racial conflicts that wracked their cities back home. Although progressivism retained a few staunch supporters in Congress, the Wilson administration was jailing dissenters, suppressing

strikes, and spurning calls for postwar reconstruction, and, as a result, progressivism at the top collapsed in a heap.

Contrary to many historical accounts of the period, however, that did not mean the death of progressivism. Instead, it was born anew in movements for world peace and economic justice. Universal revulsion against war laid the moral foundation for the most significant peace movement of the twentieth century, and, despite some lingering sentimentality, the movement contained more hard-headed realism and vigorous anti-imperialism than its prewar predecessor. That was due, in part, to the economic turn of the postwar years, as progressives set aside moral crusades against drink and prostitution to focus on economic reforms of direct benefit to working people, including the right to organize unions, rural development, and production for use instead of profit. Reborn in the harsh environment of the 1920s, the new progressivism, leaner and tougher, was better positioned than the old would have been to address the problems of the Great Depression, enabling it to return to center stage in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

All of this is laid out in the following chapters, followed by an epilogue that carries the story up to the turn of the twentieth century. As mentioned, one of my goals is the recovery of lost options in the past, and that does not mean recovering only the alternatives we like. Progressives had a very mixed record in dealing with the challenges of their time. In some respects, they rose to the occasion, took courageous stands, and fought the good fight. In other cases, they failed to heed the better angels of their nature, succumbed to fear, and betrayed causes they had once supported. There are many cautionary tales in their shortcomings and failures, including their zeal for solving political questions through military intervention, their excessive moralism, and their weakness on racial justice. Even participation in the First World War can be seen as a misguided attempt to improve the world.

At the same time, there are also positive lessons. Progressives were ready to take on the problems of the world because they believed local problems had international roots in the social con-

flicts of the marketplace and the militarized competition of the international state system. It takes an effort of the imagination to recapture all its bighearted vitality, but it is worth remembering the progressive vision at its best, of a world of interdependent peoples cooperating to promote justice and peace.

Remembering these historical options is not merely a scholastic exercise in reconstructing the past. My aim in recovering lost alternatives in the past is to better understand both past and present. In piecing together the documentary record, I have made every effort to reconstruct the era in a way that would be fully recognizable to participants. Yet historical narrative is, inescapably, a dialogue between past and present, and I have no wish to conceal the fact that this study is partly motivated by present concerns. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, globalization has brought back *laissez-faire* with a vengeance, helping to create global polarizations within and between nations on a scale the founding generation of progressives could not have imagined. Meanwhile, all eyes look to the United States, standing astride the world like a colossus, for leadership in addressing the explosive issues of the day.

At a time when other political philosophies are in retreat or, in the case of communism, in total collapse, progressivism has undergone something of a revival. Seeking some historical foundation for a more vibrant public life, a small army of American neoproggressives have rediscovered the civic ideals of the Progressive Era. For example, *Democracy's Discontent* by Michael Sandel calls for a return to the progressive spirit of civic engagement, and *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam argues that a civil society of the sort that flourished earlier in the century is the necessary precondition for a vibrant democracy.¹¹ Historians have contributed their share by setting aside an older view, in which progressives were seen as a technocratic elite bent on social control, in favor of a more friendly view which recognizes the founding generation as pioneers of social reform and participatory democracy.¹²

What is needed to extend such work is greater understanding of how world affairs worked their way into progressive ideas of

social reform and civic engagement. If the founding generation of the 1910s established a progressive tradition in American politics, it is important to know why it originated and what it was all about, and that means looking at the full range of progressive practices, overseas as well as at home, and the full range of options, internationalist as well as imperialist, for bringing the United States onto the world stage.

I believe there is some urgency in recovering these options. In some ways, progressives faced choices a century ago that were quite different from ours. In others, the choices look quite familiar. In either case, the decisions made then have something to teach contemporaries seeking to be both good citizens of their own country and good citizens of a troubled world.