

Sidney Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, eds., *Progressivism and the New Democracy* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

At the heart of *Progressivism and the New Democracy* lurks a contradiction that simply won't go away. It's the tension between the ideals of what democracy can be and the reality of politics as it is played out in practice. This dialectic almost always fosters heated debate and this book is no exception. Most of the articles in the collection unpack both the ideals and practical elements within Progressivism, tracing its legacy of institutional reform throughout the twentieth century. The results of this reform are a far cry from the noble aspirations of the founders of the "new democracy."

Sidney Milkis introduces the volume by asking us to consider the essays in light of three major questions: What is similar between the Progressive period and now? Did the Progressive Era shape contemporary American politics? What might have been addressed that wasn't during that time period? He automatically sets up this book to become relevant to debates about democracy today, and on most counts, the articles do a good job in making the connection. The last question, however, often falls short of its offer. Rather than illuminating strains of thought and practice within Progressivism that might have borne more productive fruit, many of the authors in this volume prefer to focus on hindsight to judge the limitations of Progressivism. This, perhaps, is the major weakness of the volume – a tone steeped in what ifs, regrets, and embarrassment given what we now know, rather than building the future from the wisdom of history. Having understood the richness of ideas and institutions that were Progressivism, and its links to current debates, we're mostly left feeling jaded and betrayed by the inability of Progressives to resolve the tension between theory and practice.

Nonetheless, unpacking the unevenness of the development of democracy as well as uncovering the tension that marks democracy illuminates some key issues that should be heeded as we face the challenge of rethinking democracy in the twenty-first century. These issues include: clarifying the goal of democracy (is it for fair deliberation or as means to other ends, be it social control, nation building or social and economic reform?); outlining the dilemma of scale facing democracy and its (in)ability to work effectively at the state level; and focussing on the transformative possibilities of democracy (as opposed to the descriptive and regulating role that institutionalizes existing inequalities).

#### THE GOOD LIFE VS. GETTING THE JOB DONE

In the Progressive vision, politics was to return to playing its key role in the good life. After watching local party bosses control their constituencies in less than democratic ways, Progressives were searching for a return to the nobler aims of some of America's founders. A national government that transcended parochial interests and local fiefdoms in the name of the greater public was the

goal. Democracy would be transferred directly from the individual to the national government, bypassing the cynicism that party politics had come to offer.

Alongside this vision of the “good life,” however, was the need to achieve a number of social and economic goals. The transition period that bridged the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century marked the move from what Mileur calls a “simpler America” – small scale, localist and grounded in the values of small towns and the countryside – to a more “socially diverse and complex America.” Economic and social goals were grand in scale and increasingly national in focus while more professional, urban and secular in values. The new “robber barons” left the older elites restless and discontented while populist revolts erupted in the west against the bosses of the two-party political system in the east. Immigration increased dramatically at this time and the numbers of poor swelled in the slums of the growing metropolitan cities. The challenge to both control the terms of, and more equitably distribute, wealth required a new political vision.

As the twenty-first century dawns, the picture is strikingly similar in many ways. Merger mania and growing concentration of ownership mark capitalism as high tech advances threaten deep changes in the nature of production and consumption patterns. A mode of regulation that addresses the growing gap between dot-com millionaires and the service underclass is required. Both labour and consumer markets are more deeply bifurcated than they have been in the last fifty years, reflecting a partitioned world of haves and have nots. Political participation meanwhile, has dropped to all-time lows especially among marginalized communities. Politics has become synonymous with professional and organized interests and far removed from the individual. Democracy today, faces a crisis of legitimacy.

Viewed by many as the birth of the modern day welfare state, the challenge of Progressivism was to link democracy with these broader social and economic reforms. The authors in this volume, however, are cautious about heralding Progressives as the great social visionaries of their time. The results of their efforts appear minimal at best; a mix of bold social advances that erupted largely because of extraordinary circumstances, while capitalism remained largely unchanged and minimally regulated.

Morton Keller’s article suggests that the forces that propelled the development of the modern American state were all there in the Progressive period: corruption and efficiency in government; corporate consolidation and maldistribution of wealth in the economy; race and gender relations as well as immigration issues. Moreover, the techniques developed by Progressives to mobilize public opinion outside the political system (primarily the use of mass media and interest groups) are still those used today. Nonetheless, the circumstances for change in the early twentieth century were quite different from now. Major Progressive social achievements focused on Prohibition,

woman's suffrage and immigration restriction. These achievements, according to Keller, were possible for one of two reasons: because the Progressive movement was able to forge large-scale coalitions on particular issues, and because the sheer scale of World War I allowed for an expansion of national powers. Otherwise, suggests Keller, large-scale economic regulation was limited. Instead, policies in regulating the railway, the transportation industry in general and public utilities were "past-laden, incremental and particularistic in nature," forced, as they were, to face very powerful interests.

Where Keller considered some of the social advances "bold" in nature, Eileen McDonagh sees a "policy paradox." Institutional advances had the effect of limiting and further marginalizing political participation for large groups of marginalized Americans. Progressives, she argues, developed an institutional capacity for both increasing the welfare of those individuals who had become victims of capitalism (workman's compensation, minimum wage, urban housing codes, child welfare and labour laws, mother's pensions, etc.), and expanded the tools for governing (the use of the referendum, recall, direct election of senators, the use of the primaries and other electoral legislation). These institutional practices, however, were developed within a "centrist progressivism" that carried with those advances, other goals of social control. Women's suffrage, for instance, wasn't so much about giving women the same rights as men, as it was a means to reinforce women's domestic and maternal identities, while Prohibition was a form of social control over immigrant and black communities. It wasn't until the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that a "left progressivism" developed to counteract the exclusionary elements of earlier Progressive attempts. The focus for political change during this time period (weakening the seniority system in Congress, increasing congressional control of the budget process and opening congressional hearings to the public) was the informal process of how politics operated. As a result, she sees this time period as one in which participation at the base was successfully enlarged.

If Keller and McDonagh believe that Progressivism held at least had some aspirations towards greater social and economic reform, Eisenach's article on Progressive Internationalism suggests a much more straightforward link between Progressivism and nation building. Using the religious and spiritual language of Progressive Internationalism, a language that focused on the morality of personal responsibility, social justice and democratic community, the Progressive movement was largely about articulating the American nation in all areas of life – government institutions, academic life, religion, public education, small business and international investment. Progressivism was not a series of ad hoc reforms, nor was it solely a focus on building a "new democracy," but a cohesive platform for building the great American nation. The war facilitated the process and the Depression of the 1930's further consolidated the nation in a number of areas of daily life. The legacy, however, came to favour

material progress over the more spiritual project of building the “city on a hill” thus hollowing out the soul of Progressivism and making it vulnerable to attack from a number of different moral angles as time wore on.

The desire then to build a more noble form of politics that would engage citizen debate and leave behind corrupt power systems, would only face limited success when faced with the paralleled task of actually bettering the lives of millions of Americans. The legacy of Progressivism suggests that the ends became far more important than the means to those ends, a legacy that has plunged democracy into its current crisis.

#### DEMOCRACY’S DILEMMA OF SCALE

If being unable to balance the tension between the good life and getting things done resulted in both a limited level of regulating capitalism and an even more questionable legacy of democracy, so too did the issue of scale. One of the major legacies of Progressivism was to transform federalism from a straightforward constitutional arrangement to a political ideology. In the name of nation building, Progressives used amendments to change the constitution. They expanded national power (especially inter-state commerce regulation) and enhanced the role of the federal judiciary indirectly by limiting other political forms like parties. Politics moved from the level of the states to the national level. Underlying this shift was a political ideology that moved from the more conflictual notion of federalism outlined by the founders to a form of popular sovereignty. This latter model presumed noble participation and cooperation rather than conflict, a goal which Jerome Mileur views as naïve and incompatible with the political realities of the day.

Unlike the present, where direct democracy is often articulated as an absence of government, Progressives saw citizenship (through unions, reform movements, universities and other groups) extending beyond traditional politics and bypassing the corrupt role of political parties. Constitutional and institutional changes in this period fundamentally altered the business of politics such that individual and extra-political interests overrode political parties. The referendum was introduced during this period to enhance individual participation in politics. The right to recall, the development of the primary for use in political party elections, and the direct election of senators all enhanced individual involvement at the expense of political parties. In many instances, the mass media was used as a direct conduit to the mass audience, appearing more democratic at the time than existing political institutions.

Ironically, the great Progressive vision of politically engaged individuals fostered a legacy of political cynicism and a turning away from politics. The very instruments Progressives used to develop a strong state that wasn’t governed by local political chiefs but by individuals, became the instruments used to undermine that goal. The mass media mixed politics and advertising into a potent stew of entertainment that privatized and trivialized real political

discourse and handed it back to people in sound-bite pieces. As a result, the tone of democracy changed. And while the tone changed, so too did the more formal political process. Undemocratically elected interest groups began to play a more significant role as political parties, constrained by a century of reforms that limited their effectiveness, waned.

As democracy moved from the local to the national level, virtually bypassing the middle ground of the states, problems of representation were bound to erupt. How could the national state, so far removed from the individual, actually represent those interests in a fair and effective manner? Overcoming parochialism, though a noble goal in and of itself, was simply not enough to effectively replace local representation. Whether viewed as having an inadequate institutional apparatus or offering tools that could be turned against them (referenda, interest groups) Progressives denied that there was a problem of scale. As a result, the backlash came from the state level, where initiatives like California's Proposition 13 invoked democracy as a means to lessen the state's influence in favour of expressing individual preferences on key social issues through regular referenda.

#### DELIBERATIVE VS. PLURALISTIC DEMOCRACY

Does this mean that the institutions developed by Progressives were inadequate for the challenge? Did their naivete in fostering a high maintenance democracy actually create a vacuum at the state level for power brokers to institutionalize a form of democracy that simply maintained existing power relations? This question is now at the centre of many debates around democracy. Social democrats insist that we need a practical and realistic vision of democracy that invokes democracy but focuses more on social reform. Meanwhile, radical socialists and communitarians insist that democracy should be built outside the state and inside civil society groups. The goal, in the latter case, is to avoid balancing the tension between the state and democracy altogether focusing, instead, on building a democracy movement of diverse voices that challenges, rather than defends, capitalism.

Philip Ethington's excellent article on "The Metropolis and Multicultural Ethics" offers an interesting description of the same tension that developed within the Progressive movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Ethington uncovers a tradition of what he calls "deliberative democracy" – a strain of Progressivism most commonly associated with the Chicago Pragmatists of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and Jane Adams, and which actually attempted to deal with the connection between democracy and diversity.

In the urban metropolises of turn-of-the-century America, intercultural conflict was inescapable. Democracy then, would need to accommodate an ethical pluralism of sorts. This strain of Progressives believed that ethics no longer needed to remain universal but could be located in a pragmatic democratic dialogue between various groups. This didn't mean democracy for

its own sake, but as a way to solve the problem of alienation. And since liberal democracy offered no vision for ethical choice, a more revolutionary form was needed.

There were limitations in these theories, however, the major being the desire to overcome socio-cultural difference and build consensus in a way that would only maintain existing inequalities. It was W.E.B. Dubois who exposed the limits of their thought. Dubois illustrated the relations of cultural power that eluded the Chicago Pragmatists. They couldn't imagine a process that involved working together on values rather than forging consensus out of the divisions. And it was this inability that made broader coalition work with marginalized groups difficult in the longer term.

Ethington suggests that the loose coalition that marked Progressivism splintered into two theoretical camps by 1920. The advocates of "deliberative democracy" were set off against the "group behavioralists" who used rational, science-based arguments to explain how democracy worked to mediate the interests of individuals. Democracy became the neutral and objective mediating force between a plurality of interests, rather than a forum in which to discuss ethical issues. As a description without prescription, it was easily molded by various groups and consolidated as a hegemonic ideology, while those who hoped to use it as a form of radical change receded into the background.

What this means for those who wish to reignite the "deliberative democratic" vision, is that the challenge has not only not gone away, it has intensified. Both the Right and the Left are caught between wanting to advance social and economic goals through existing political channels and knowing that those channels have become more and more distanced from the broader public. The tendency has been to devote resources to court challenges and class action suits that may offer quicker victories but also widen the distance between the majority of citizens and political actors.

What those in the "deliberative democratic" camp began at the turn of the twentieth century now becomes a solid footing for revisioning the work of democracy in the twenty-first. The link between democracy and diversity is key. And what we have learned since Progressives first made that link is a greater respect for difference while working in coalitions, a desire, perhaps, to forge periodic moments of democracy outside the formal functioning of the state. Greater inclusion at this level, may well avoid the "policy paradox" outlined by McDonagh. Simply changing institutions without building a solid base for that change will often result in maintaining existing power relations. This need not occur at the expense of institutional reform, but as we have learned from the Progressive legacy, institutions are only as effective as the participation upon which they depend.

Overall, Milkis and Mileur offer an intriguing and complex understanding of Progressivism as viewed through the lens of democracy. While it often raises more questions than answers, this lens makes the history more relevant to

political struggles today. Whether in America or around the world, democracy does face a deep crisis of legitimacy and attempts to combat that crisis in ways that offer greater representation are similar to the challenges facing Progressives as they struggled to revision the American nation at the beginning of the last century.

Democracy, of course, is not simply a political system. It is deeply linked to the development of capitalism. As such, the book could have offered more insight into how democracy and capitalism became intertwined, and how they may now require a separation of sorts in order to find the room to rethink a more radical democratic vision. There is an underlying assumption that lurks behind many of the articles in this volume and yet is only clearly articulated in Jerome Mileur's closing essay. It is that politics is the art of compromise and any attempts to aspire to more radical or noble ends is not only naïve, but may cause more damage in the long run. This effectively blames Progressives for the sins of those who came after them. It limits our ability to think outside the institutional box long enough to offer more a radical vision of democracy. Despite being unable to deal with this dialectic in a more constructive manner, the book describes well the dilemma facing Progressivism. It is a dilemma that will mark politics for the foreseeable future, one which may not offer an easy resolution but requires our energies all the same.

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Orin Starn, *Nightwatch: The Politics of Protest in the Andes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

For better or worse, in the 1980s and early 1990s Peru came to mean something more than Machu Picchu and the Nazca lines to the outside world. As Communist regimes around the world came tumbling down, Peru witnessed the growth of a radical, and for a while, successful, self-styled Maoist movement, the Peruvian Communist Party-Shining Path. However, as anthropologist Orin Starn shows in *Nightwatch: The Politics of Protest in the Andes*, the brutal Shining Path was not the only "movement for change" in Peru in those years. First organised in 1976, by the end of the decade peasant night patrol groups or *rondas campesinas* had spread throughout the northern Peruvian Andes, covering some 3,400 villages across over 60,000 square miles. Though by the late 1990s they had begun to unravel, the *rondas* constitute one of the most important yet little known social movements of the late twentieth century in Latin America.

Starn is clearly sympathetic to the *rondas campesinas* he studies. The *rondas* did not solve the problems of Peru's northern peasantry, most of which