H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael McGerr. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America 1870-1920.* New York: Free Press, 2003. xvi + 395 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-85975-0.

Reviewed by Brett Flehinger (Department of History, California State University San Bernardino)

Published on H-SHGAPE (June, 2005)

The Radical Center

Ahab and the Great White Whale. Sisyphus and the boulder. Charley Brown and the football. The attempt to write the Big Book of Progressivism–the single volume that synthesizes the most amorphous period in American history–is rapidly on its way to joining these other metaphors for the maddeningly unachievable quest. The length of the list of gifted historians who have attempted syntheses of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century America is matched only by the critiques of these same histories. Despite this criticism, historians' attempts to define the Progressive movement have invariably enriched our understanding of the period. And Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America 1870-1920* should find its place alongside *The Age of Reform*, *The Search for Order*, *The Triumph of Conservatism*, and other valuable, intriguing, and ultimately well-critiqued big books on Progressivism.

McGerr's subtitle reflects the scope of his ambition. In slightly fewer than four hundred pages, he explains and interprets Progressivism from its origins in the attenuation of Victorian society through the cataclysm of the Great War. This purpose is the book's greatest strength as it motivates the argument that Progressivism was simultaneously a middle-class and radical movement to redefine turn-of-the-century America. Progressivism's middle-class nature verges on accepted truth, but McGerr's claim, that the American middle-class's goals were so ambitious that they formed a radical and "utopian" challenge to the existing social order, presents a new view of the middle class and the Progressive era itself.

Focusing on class relations, McGerr argues that the turn-of-the-century American middle class found itself squeezed between a numerically-superior, largely immigrant, working class and the overtly wealthy "upper ten," whose money and position multiplied their influence and power far beyond their numbers. Fearful of being crushed between these two powerful groups in the friction resulting from the changes brought about by the corporate transformation of American society, McGerr's middle class "intended nothing less than to transform other Americans, to remake the nation's feuding, polyglot population in their own middle class image" (p. xiv). In essence the middle class, by McGerr's assessment the weakest of the classes in the United States, harnessed the raw power of industrial change both as its defense and to radically re-envision American society by its subjective standards.

An able political historian, McGerr works both from the top down and middle out. Middle-class radicals, he claims, created two potent means of change: the state, for public issues; and associationalism, for private and social changes. The book's narrative focuses on four broad campaigns: the attempt to "transform" immigrants into Americans and individualist Victorians into a homogeneous middle class; the mediation of class conflict; campaigns to control corporate power; and, the rise of segregation. The first three sections of the book all focus on

traditional aspects of the progressive narrative, but placing this transformation in tandem with changes in existing American cultural and social values presents a more extensive restructuring than can be understood through "Americanization," "trust busting," or any other category.

In writing that "segregation actually drew on basic progressive values," McGerr offers his most significant reshaping of the historiographical consensus (p. 183). A progressive culture that linked direct democracy, settlements, associationalism, and other seemingly beneficent aspects of progressive reform with legal segregation would both alter our macrohistorical understanding of progressivism and bring the synthesis in line with some emerging thoughts on Jim Crow segregation. Unfortunately, this link remains prospective. By the time McGerr declares that the progressives' "political weakness was their willingness to segregate the ballot box," the book returns to the traditional paradox between progressive commitments to a more direct democracy and the injustice of disfranchisement (p. 216). This inconsistency may reflect the nature of the work McGerr is synthesizing, but it points up an important avenue of study in Progressive era literature nonetheless.

McGerr's broader argument should be read in conjunction with classics in the literature of progressivism. Much like the new professional class in Robert Wiebe's *The Search for Order*, McGerr's middle class has both the skills and the outlook to gain power in a rapidly changing society. Unlike Wiebe's professionals, who seem more motivated by ability and skill than class consciousness, McGerr's middle class is cognizant of itself as a group and concerned with the group's position in society. In this regard McGerr's middle class reflects similar social concerns as the victims of status anxiety that both Richard Hofstadter and George Mowry described. However, unlike the status anxiety sufferers enacting symbolic reforms to build up their sense of place, the fears of McGerr's anxious class carry real weight across society. In this McGerr has created a truly novel synthesis, mixing existing explanations to achieve a new vision of the progressive middle class.

Reminiscent of the critiques of Hofstadter's analysis, McGerr's anxious middle class isn't fully sufficient as an analytical explanation for progressivism. Although many middle-class Americans did reconceive their society and their position within that society, others in the middle class remained outside the reform circle. The proprietary businessmen who made up the National Association of Manufacturers, for example, remained resolutely individualist and antiprogressive.

This split in the middle class exposes a more significant disconnect between identity and practice in McGerr's progressivism. Although radical in language and self-conception, progressives remained essentially reformist. Their goal wasn't to destroy old cultural values and replace them with new ideals, but to adapt longstanding values to rapidly changing economic and social conditions. This reformist straddle was clearly visible in Teddy Roosevelt's triangulation between mine operators and the United Mine Workers in 1903, and it was at the heart of the New Nationalism. When Roosevelt acknowledged the development of "new relations of property," he did so in service of individualism, arguing that government needed to intervene in the economy in order to provide the "worthy man" with the "chance to show the worth that is in him."[1] Similarly, as an educational reformer, John Dewey's goal was to adapt elementary education to make it relevant in a rapidly changing, corporate society. Individualism persisted not as a contradiction to progressivism, but because it remained a central value in American life, and progressives were attempting to develop new institutions to make individual values relevant again.

In explaining progressivism, Woodrow Wilson once commented that because of inability of American institutions to keep up with the pace of change, "we are not where we were when we started."[2] Living in a period of profound, and at times violent economic transformation, the progressive generation had to make drastic adjustments to their institutions simply to maintain traditional order, and because the scope of changes was so great, the progressives' means could seem radical, both in their time and today. The challenge of this change, however, should not obscure the essentially reformist goal at the center of the progressive project.

In the end, McGerr claims, progressivism promised such tremendous transformations, raised expectations so high, and offered so much that its accomplishments "generated the inevitable letdown of unrealistic expectations" (p. xiv). In this McGerr is quite right. Despite its many achievements, progressivism has bred pessimism. Having been promised perfection, observers of the progressive movement have found much to criticize. And, with its open ambition and provocative argument, *Righteous Discontent* opens itself up to the same reaction. But focusing on what McGerr doesn't achieve would do both a profound disservice to the author and to ourselves. Whatever its demerits, the book fulfills McGerr's bold

promise to "shift the balance of the conventional narrative," providing a well-considered and novel interpretation that enlivens the field and will stand among the central arguments and explanations of Progressivism.

Notes

[1]. Theodore Roosevelt, "The New Nationalism," in *The New Nationalism*, introduction by William Leuchtenburg (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 33.

[2]. Woodrow Wilson, "The Image of Progressivism," in *A Crossroads of Freedom: The 1912 Campaign Speeches of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. John Wells Davidson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 245-246.

Citation: Brett Flehinger. Review of McGerr, Michael, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America 1870-1920*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10617