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Eldon J. Eisenach, ed. *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006. v + 330 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87220-785-1; $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87220-784-4.

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A Progressive Primary Reader

While there are many topics that historians seem to return to time and time again, one of the more interesting is that of the Progressive Era. After all, the Progressives have been described as the greatest generation of reformers that America has ever produced, whose ideas helped create the modern United States out of the chaos of the urbanization, immigration, and industrialization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, eventually including the New Deal as well. Conversely, the Progressive movement has also been described as a mostly academic creation, a vast array of reforms, some positive, some negative, that had mixed success at best, and that despite their chronological proximity to one another were largely unrelated until historians got involved.

Into this debate arrives Eldon J. Eisenach's splendid volume, *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism* that takes the debate away from academics and instead returns it to the participants themselves. According to Eisenach, the problems that modern historians have with understanding the Progressive movement are creations of a later time. The Progressives themselves did not have such issues with the complexity of their movement. In support of his contention, Eisenach has assembled an impressive collection of primary sources that he believes lays out a coherent Progressive ideology, and that leaves readers with a good sense of the movement, the ideas, and the people who come with the label "Progressive."

Eisenach's collection of forty-three primary sources includes some produced by people who are quite recognizable and some from people who are likely familiar only to specialists. Regardless, readers find the common Progressive traits of adoration of Abraham Lincoln, religious zeal, and belief in the power of higher education to shape new ideas quite evident in the selections. They will also find acknowledgement of the diversity of thought that existed within the Progressive movement, including the tension between those attempting a top-down approach to reform and those who were more populist in seeking to enact the same reforms. Readers will also discover the importance of women to the movement, who brought new perspectives, new power, and new energy to the cause of reform.

The glue holding this coalition of reformers together, as Eisenach sees it, was the Progressives' belief in the power of American democracy to achieve moral ends. They sought a consensual society where individuals all advanced the greater common good because it was also good for them. As such, Progressives conceived of reforms in grand ways, seeking, for example, to eliminate poverty and clean out the corruption that seemed to be growing in American life. They pushed education both as a means to transform society and as a way to create future generations of good citizens.

Perhaps the largest attempted Progressive reform, both in terms of rhetoric and attempts to alter common practices, was in the area of industry. Progressives argued that companies did not understand righteousness

(p. 119). They believed that public opinion needed to be heard when it came to the law, that "the people," not the Constitution, was the true power (p. 124). It was not enough to talk in terms of unions and management. Progressives believed that issues like child labor, women as part of the workforce, housing conditions for the working class, overtime, Sunday work, night shifts, leisure time, and unsafe workplace environments were interrelated issues that had to be addressed in a comprehensive way in order to Americanize the new industrial reality. Doing so would require both public and private energies to be harnessed. If this happened then all would benefit from the resulting prosperity. In short, Progressives were sure that even their loftiest goals were achievable if they could convince their fellow Americans to support their efforts.

The beauty of Eisenach's book is that he lets the Progressives speak for themselves. Hence, readers learn that according to Herbert Croly, the Progressive political view was one of Hamiltonian means and Jeffersonian ends being merged within American democracy. Perhaps just as interesting is Mary Parker Follett's argument that individuals and the state have the same goals. These Progressive notions stand in conjunction with and apart of the Social Gospel that swept America's Protestant churches during these years. People like Walter Rasuschenbusch could thus advocate that it was possible to save both man and society, that laws could be crafted to advance the Kingdom of God, and that Christianity was the epitome of progress and order. The Progressive banner thus marched forward on as many different fronts as there were reformers.

In many ways, the presidential election of 1912 was the high tide, and perhaps even the culmination of the Progressive movement, for Progressives were able to show that they were bigger than any one party. Indeed, their ideas had permeated all the political parties: Democrats, Republicans, Socialists, Progressives, and Prohibitionists all advocated some version or aspect of Progressive ideology. While after 1912 there seemed to be few newer ideas coming out of Progressive circles, Progressive ideology went international after World War I. Whether this took the form of Woodrow Wilson's Presbyterian foreign policy, the ill-fated Interchurch World Movement, or attempts at making Prohibition a global reality, Progressives believed that the degree to which their ideas advanced in making the world more like America, the better it would be.

While Eisenach's book is very useful in discussing Progressive ideology, it does have its limits. As a primary source repository, it is perhaps second to none, but it is not a secondary work that is going to advance very far the larger argument that those sources are seemingly assembled to make. Likewise, when it comes to the Progressives, there is still much work to be done. For example, scholars need to better explore how both the myth and reality of Abraham Lincoln influenced Progressives. Further work needs to be done as well on race and the Progressives, for while notions of equality are discussed, race relations appear to only have been thought about in passing. Likewise, the concept of regionalism, largely missing in Eisenach's examples, needs to be fleshed out more. Did Southerners, Northerners, Easterners, and Westerners mean the same things and seek the same goals as part of the Progressive movement? Was there just one Progressive ideology? Discussing these things was, of course, not Eisenach's goal with his book, but they are some of the questions that remain to be squared with his primary-source argument. Readers should be aware as well that Eisenach's book is organized thematically, not chronologically. Hence, they are presented with an argument, not the actual development of the movement. This is something of a flaw and is something else that scholars could hash out more in another venue.

Still, Eisenach offers a wonderfully concise argument by using the Progressives' own voices. His introductory remarks to each section are excellent, as are his offerings of further readings. That his selections are able to speak to the complexity of the times without reducing or overly simplifying his or their arguments is also of note. Eisenach's argument follows in the wake of such notable works on the Progressives as Robert Crunden's and Michael McGerr's, and so, in some ways, it offers little that is new to the scholarly debate.[1] But it is a welcome addition for scholars in need of being reminded that there was such a thing as the Progressive movement and it is an excellent way to do the same for undergraduates. Thus, this book is perfect for both the bookshelves and the classroom.

Note

[1]. Robert Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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