

Progressive Social and Economic Reforms

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Some things that have been consistently taught in school are the major social reforms of the progressive era such as women's suffrage, public education, public welfare, and labor reforms. These are presented as victories of oppressed minorities against established power structures and, without any real knowledge of the political power struggles of the era, this could seem very believable. All of these movements were outgrowths of progressive applied Christianity but they all also had motives linked to demographics and collective evangelism. Support for the reform movements followed a geographical pattern reflecting migration from New England to the Midwest and then the West, although never establishing a clear majority for any length of time, that pietist historian Jackson Turner explained as follows:

"In the arid West these pioneers have halted and turned to perceive an altered nation and changed social ideals... If we follow back the line of march of the Puritan farmer, we shall see how responsive he has always been to the isms.. He is the prophet of the "higher law" in Kansas before the Civil War. He is the Prohibitionists of Iowa and Wisconsin, crying out against German customs and an invasion of his traditional ideals, He is the Granger in Wisconsin, passing restrictive railroad legislation. He is the Abolitionist, the anti-Mason, the Millerite¹, the Women Suffragist, the Spiritualist, the Mormon, of Western New York." (1 pp. 97-98) (2 pp. 239-40)

We will now look at the individual reforms noting that there is a great deal of commonality amongst the reformers.

Prohibition

There are traces of a prohibition movement in Puritanism arguably as far back as the mid 1600's in New England. Prohibition as an organized and continuous movement traces back to the American Temperance Society that was founded in 1826 which expanded to 1.5 million members by 1836 with a large percentage of women members (but not definitively quantified). This was a movement principally of the Northern pietist and evangelical church and was the principal crusade up until the 1850's when it was, for a short period of time, arguably displaced by slavery. By way of comparison, abolitionist society roles in 1860 never exceeded 200,000 (3 pp. 45-46) in total so as a grassroots movement it was clearly significant accounting for at least 20% of the adult population from its inception.

It lost momentum during and immediately after the war which saw a slight decline in religious participation in general and then started to rise again by 1870 as the practical cynicism of the experience wore down. Temperance movements were never as strong in the South as they were in the North prior to the spread of pietist fundamentalism from the North to the South which happened gradually starting around 1890.

¹ Millerite refers follower of a prophet who forecast a date for Christ's return that didn't happen and was referred to as the "Great Disappointment". Some of his followers formed the 7th Day Adventists

Prohibition was advanced by a substantial number of groups and organizations that in most cases were bundled with other progressive causes. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is probably the most prominent but its charter and objectives defined much wider goals covering virtually all areas of progressive activism and for that reason it is addressed in the next section. Amongst temperance advocates some advocated moderation and others total abstinence while a few saw it as a voluntary crusade and others mandatory but those advocating complete temperance by way of government dictate drove the movement. Prior to the national effort to totally ban alcohol, efforts started locally targeting saloons and distributors. There were some Catholic temperance groups generally associated with an Irish clergyman referred to as Father Mathew but this seems to have made no headway amongst the Germans. Below is a summary of some of the most significant groups:

Anti-Saloon League: The League was the most powerful pro-prohibition lobbying group of the period pushing legislation targeting both consumption and production of alcohol prior to their ultimate victory with the passing of the 18th amendment in 1920. They originated out of Oberlin, Ohio in 1893 and were highly organized with a disciplined hierarchical structure that created a strong national presence. It was founded by Howard Hyde Russell and other notable leadership figures were Wayne Wheeler and William E. Johnson all being stereotypical Yankee pietists from the Midwest. They were deeply associated with both the Klan and WCTU. An Alabama newspaper editor wrote "In Alabama, it is hard to tell where the anti-Saloon League ends and the Klan begins". (4)

Federal Council of Churches: This was an association that had representatives from a wide range of denominations that was active in temperance and prohibition and also advocated for a variety of other progressive causes generally related to welfare and labor reform. It was founded in 1908 in Philadelphia and evolved into the National Council of Churches in 1950. (5 p. 403)

Prohibition Party: The Party was founded in 1869 by John Russell and James Black and accepted women as members. Russell was a northern Methodist preacher and Black was the party's first presidential nominee. While starting around a single issue, its platform rapidly expanded to encompass a full progressive agenda and got over 2% of the national presidential vote in 1888 and 1892. They remained relevant as a third party through the 1920's.

Ku Klux Klan: The 2nd Klan and its relationship with Evangelical Protestant Christianity of the time period is a subject that will be addressed separately and in more detail but they were deeply linked to prohibition and nativism. They also acted as enforcers of prohibition. (6)

World War I effectively implemented prohibition ahead of the 18th Amendment with all food production being placed under Food Administration Czar Herbert Hoover. At the time less than 2% of American cereal production went to alcohol. As asked in the progressive weekly *The Independent*, "*Shall the many have food, or the few have drink*". Congress wrote an amendment to the Lever Food and Fuel Control Act of 1917 that prohibited the use of grains to produce alcohol. Beer and wine were initially excluded at the request of President Wilson but the allowed alcoholic content was gradually reduced. (5 pp. 404-06)

The anti-Saloon League was specifically targeting producers so the brewing industry tried to strategically protect itself by moving away from and deemphasizing hard liquor in favor of beer and wine. However, beer in particular was largely associated with Germans, both Catholic and Lutheran, who had been thoroughly villainized and marginalized by that point so their fate for the time being was effectively sealed.

Having been victorious over the demon rum in America the pietist prohibitionists turned their sights on the world. This of course reflected an almost incredibly naive understanding of other cultures and the uniquely influential position the Evangelical Christian progressives held in American politics and culture. This predictably went absolutely nowhere. The following excerpt from a speech by Rev A.C. Bane from the Anti-Saloon League's 1917 convention expresses this vast vision.

"America will 'go over the top' in humanity's greatest battle and plant the victorious white standard of Prohibition upon the nation's loftiest eminence. Then catching sight of the beckoning hand of our sister nations across the sea, struggling with the same age-long foe, we will go forth with the spirit of the missionary and the crusader to help drive the demon of drink from all of civilization. With America leading the way with faith in Omnipotent God, and bearing with patriotic hands our stainless flag, the emblem of civic purity, we will soon bestow upon mankind the priceless gift of World Prohibition" (7 pp. 180-81)

In looking back at prohibition as a single topic apart from the broader progressive movement, alcohol consumption and alcoholism did drop somewhat when comparing before and after data points but there are technological factors to consider here as well. Soft drinks gradually became available and distributed in bottles, refrigeration also gradually became available although many households didn't have refrigeration for several decades, and non-narcotic pain medication also became available. For all of history prior to that alcohol was the only stable transportable beverage available. Prohibition also greatly expanded organized crime, along with the law enforcement infrastructure to counter it, both of which created direct and indirect costs on society. More importantly, it expanded the realm of government control of individual decision making and blurred a line that had been relatively clear.

"'Personal Liberty' is at last an uncrowned, dethroned king, with no one to do him service. The social consciousness is so far developed, and is becoming autocratic, that institutions and government must give heed to its mandate and share their life accordingly. We are no longer frightened by that ancient bogey – 'paternalism in government.' We affirm boldly, it is the business of government to be just that – Paternal. Nothing human can be foreign to a true government"

Rev. Josiah Strong from the monthly journal, The Gospel of the Kingdom published by Strong's American Institute of Social Service. (7 p. 179)

Women's Suffrage

The Suffrage movement didn't have broad appeal to women and a quick look at the renowned leaders provides a very solid clue as to why.

Susan B Anthony: Born in Massachusetts in 1820 to a Quaker family who were social activists, she along with other family members, were radical abolitionists who developed ties to prominent Northern political figures. Two of her brothers fought with John Brown in "Bleeding Kansas". She founded the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which was considered more radical than the competing American Women's Suffrage Association (AWSA), and was initially the smaller of the two organizations. She is the iconic figure of women's suffrage. Note that in 1893 the NWSA had only about 7,000 dues paying members. (8)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Stanton was born in 1815 in Johnstown New York and from 1851 on she was a lifelong friend and co-worker of Susan B Anthony and was a co-founder of the NWSA. Her early religious background was Calvinist Presbyterian but eventually came to reject all religions as degrading to women. Her cousin Garret Smith was a member of the "Secret Six". She opposed the 14th and 15th amendments which led to a schism in the women's rights movement. (8)

Lucy Stone: Born in 1818 and died in 1893 she was a prominent abolitionist and suffragist who helped establish the AWSA. She was from Massachusetts with a Congregationalist background but left the church due to controversies regarding her abolitionist activities after moving away from other basic church doctrines and became a Unitarian. She was a school teacher who went on to attend Oberlin College (which is a recurring theme).

Annie Wittenmyer: First President of WCTU. Born in 1827 in Ohio she was a Northern Methodist who attended a seminary for girls and was a lifelong social activist. She moved to Iowa at age 20 and died in 1860. By 1848 she was attending a Unitarian Church after the family moved to Rochester, New York.

Francis Willard: The Second President of WCTU she was born in 1839 and died in 1898. Born in Rochester New York originally from a Congregationalist family, the family became Methodist after moving to the Midwest. She was another lifelong social activist who attempted to expand the temperance movement in the South (she had some association with Jefferson Davis and his wife Varina) and is associated with the teachings of Christian Socialism.

Anna Elizabeth Dickinson: Born in 1842 to an abolitionist Quaker family in Philadelphia she was active in the Republican Party as early as 1863 supporting pro-Union candidates. She was considered a gifted orator and developed an association with William Lloyd Garrison. She was never married and there were rumors at the time that she was a lesbian. Her career as a lecturer declined after 1873. She was committed against her will to a hospital for the insane in 1891 and died in 1932.

Julia Ward Howard: Best known as the author of the words for the Battle Hymn of the Republic or John Brown's Hymn, she was born in 1819 to a Calvinist Episcopalian family in New York. Her father, Samuel Ward III was a stock broker and her mother, Julia Rush Cutler, a poet. Through her father she was acquainted with and had access to prominent families in banking and finance. Her brother Sam married

into the Astor family and acted to some extent as a sponsor for his sister. She married physician and activist Samuel Gridley Howe who was a member of the Secret Six. Her religious beliefs evolved to Congregationalism and Unitarianism. She was a well-known writer, commentator, speaker and political activist whose influence and activities extended to Europe.

The biographical sketches are short and the list of significant figures could be significantly expanded but this is enough to establish a very consistent demographic profile that doesn't change as the list grows. Virtually every prominent person in the Suffrage movement had a Northern pietist background although some had evolved to be "free thinkers" which was a term from the time period that generally equated to atheist or agnostic. Several were of a Quaker background which was an almost statistically insignificant group at that point but was prominent in social activism. Virtually all were full time activists requiring either sponsorship or family wealth. To say that this select group of people were broadly representative of American women of the time period or that this was some sort of grass roots movement would be like saying Entertainment industry activists of the early 21st century are statistically representative of the American public and have a keen understanding of what it's like to be an "ordinary person".

Most suffrage activists were associated with the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and most were also active abolitionists. Eventually, the WCTU's social reform causes included temperance with regard to drugs and tobacco, kindergartens, child labor, anti-prostitution, public health, sanitation, international peace, in addition to suffrage. It was sort of a hub for activist activities. Because the WCTU existed over a prolonged period of time, was relatively large in comparison to the NWSA and AWSA, and has known membership numbers by year we will focus on this organization as a useful statistical sample of Suffrage and other related reform movements.

The WCTU, along with other Christian nativist organizations like the YMCA and the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) organized "Americanization" activities aimed at liturgical immigrants including a missionary center on Ellis Island. The WCTU advocated what was referred to as a "Home Protection Ballot" that argued that women, being the superior sex morally, needed the vote to act as "*citizen-mothers*" to protect their homes and cure society's ills. WCTU also advocated the "*White Life for Two Program*" where men would reach women's higher moral standing (becoming women's equal) by engaging in lust-free, alcohol-free, and tobacco-free marriages. By 1892 the WCTU had app. 150,000 dues paying members. Using the 1890 census data this was well less than 1% of the adult female population assuming all members were from the United States. Please note at this point that these summary descriptions come directly off of commonly available material from the group itself and amount to a self-definition of beliefs and positions. (9)

Comparing the general history and basic tenants of the social activists of this era to postmodern standards for diversity and women's role in the society and economy, we see some obvious stark contrasts apart from their willingness to use the force of the state to bring about their objectives. The Suffrage movement in addition to expanding voting rights sought to impose their own moral standards across all of society and use the force of government to reshape those who were not like them to confirm. They saw no bounds in limiting the proper role of government in society and actually were

trying to stamp out diversity. While their view of the role of women extended beyond the traditional roles in that it included a very active if not dominant role in politics, in other respects, it corresponded exactly with the role of women in pietist or puritan society of the day. It should be remembered in evaluating this point that in an agricultural society, which America largely was at the time apart from Northeastern cities, the “stay at home” mother image of the 1950’s and 60’s really didn’t apply. Both marriage partners and all the kids worked in different roles based on their physical abilities. The leaders and organizers of the movement were middle to upper class and generally had free time to devote to pursuits other than economically sustaining themselves.

In looking at the very small and sectional footprint of the suffrage movement there are two basic questions. If, as would be perceived today, the vast majority of women would have benefited from the right to vote, why wasn’t the participation and support level higher? The second obvious question is why would a largely male electorate (depending on the state and election – women could vote in several western states that had a largely Yankee pietist population) support female suffrage. Looking at who favored suffrage and who didn’t can help answer the question. Progressive and heavily pietist third parties like the Greenback and Prohibition parties, who saw the Republican Party of the day as being too moderate on social issues, were heavily in favor of suffrage. Populists who tended to support prohibition and other morality related measures tended to support suffrage. The Progressive Party of 1912, which effectively caused Wilson to win the presidency over Charles Evan Hughes, was strongly in favor of suffrage and had a women delegates which was a first. Those opposed to suffrage were liturgical voters and immigrants (frequently one in the same). In Iowa the Germans voted against suffrage as did the Chinese in California. Cities where Catholics had a majority were consistently against suffrage. (5)

A more detailed analysis by a Colorado feminist of a 1877 women’s suffrage referendum revealed that the Methodists (most progressive denomination close behind or rivaling the Congregationalists) were “for us”, the Presbyterians and Episcopalians “fairly so”, and the Roman Catholics “were not all against us”. Susan B Anthony explained it this way

“In Colorado ... 6,666 men voted “Yes.” Now, I am going to describe the men who voted “Yes.” They were native-born men, temperance men, cultivated, broad, generous, just men, men who think. On the other hand, 16,007 voted “No.” Now, I am going to describe that class of voters. In the southern part of that State are Mexicans, who speak the Spanish language. ... The vast population of Colorado is made up of that class of people. I was sent out to speak in a voting precinct having 200 voters; 150 of those voters were Mexican greasers, 40 of them foreign-born citizens, and just 10 of them were born in this country; and I was supposed to be competent to convert those men to let me have so much right in this Government as they had...” (5 pp. 311-12)

Where Women were given the right to vote provides a test of the effect on participation and electoral demographics. In an 1888 school board election in Boston, large numbers of Protestant women turned out to vote Catholics off the school board while Catholic women largely didn’t participate. In Western states that gave women the right to vote as early as 1890 and as territories as early as 1870 election results were tilted towards prohibition and Blue laws. In Utah this actually favored polygamy and was amplified by the practice of polygamy. (5 p. 312)

Were the Catholics, the Lutherans, the Immigrants, and everyone else who wasn't of Anglo-Saxon puritan lineage ignorant or backward? This was observed at the time and certainly inferred today but far more likely they realized that suffrage came as a package of positions that were not in their best interest culturally or economically and those who advocated it were attempting to erase their identity and religion. It has also been argued that liturgical families didn't see how a husband and wife would vote differently in the first place as they would have essentially the same cultural and economic interests. Conversely, the supporters of suffrage saw pietist women voters as a means to gain a demographic electoral advantage in the struggle to control the country. (5 p. 408)

Ultimately World War I played a major role in sealing the deal. The idea of entering the war was not broadly popular and support for the idea was limited to a portion of the pietist progressive and fundamentalist demographics. The progressive female activists were the foot soldiers in selling US involvement in the war along with the collection of progressive objectives put in place through expansion of government during the war. Shortly after the US declared War on Germany the Council of National Defense created an advisory committee on women's activities in support of the war known as the Women's Committee. The Chairman of the Woman's Committee was Dr. Anna Howard, former president of the NWSA. Another leading member was the current chairman Carrie Chapman Catt. The first task for the committee given to them by food Czar Herbert Hoover was to identify opportunities for conservation and elimination of waste. Of course, the use of grain for the production of alcohol was an immediate target. Patriotic education was also a primary function of the committee which was targeted at ethnic immigrant women. This group sought with a fairly good deal of success to register all women nationwide. It wasn't compulsory but was made to appear to be compulsory. There was a secondary smaller women's group created by congress launched at the Congress for Constructive Patriotism in January 1917 titled the National League for Women's Service (NLWS) that was organized along military lines. The progressive writer Ida M. Tarbell, in what could almost be an iconic example of progressive Christianity's dedication to nationalism and collectivism, glowingly described the American women's role in supporting the war as follows: *"growing consciousness everywhere that this great enterprise for democracy which we are launching is a national affair, and if an individual or society is going to do its bit it must act with and under the government at Washington. Nothing else can explain the action of the women of the country in coming together as they are doing today under one centralized direction"*. (5 p. 410) Note how easily this sort of dialogue could fit into far more recent political debates.

Public Education

Progressives of the era understood the importance of organizing and acting locally and school board elections were laboratories for analyzing voting patterns and the effects of women's suffrage. In addition to the example in Boston, San Francisco in the late 1800's provides a very good case study. John Swett, Republican State Superintendent of Public Education in California during the 1860's observed, *"Nothing can Americanize these chaotic elements, breathe into them the spirit of our institutions except the public schools."* Catholics, however, proved to be worthy political adversaries. Catholics tended to prefer to send their children to Catholic schools which were then and remain today academically superior to public schools in most cases. The same can be said of conservative Lutherans although this was a smaller demographic. The cost of private education, however, necessitated that most liturgical

children be sent to public schools. Control of the school board would determine if and to what extent the public school would be used to re-educate liturgical Children and in some areas there were also attempts to provide public funding to private schools similar to voucher initiatives in more recent history. (5 p. 319)

For the last several decades separation of church and state has been used to rid public schools of, not only the teachings Christianity but also Christian history which makes it largely impossible to understand American history or Western Civilization. Those responsible for this would refer to themselves as progressives but the progressives of this time period saw religious education as central to creating a common culture. The changes over time in this regard have more to do with changes in the religious makeup of the country than any solid underlying principle of philosophical neutrality. The consistent aspect of progressivism, however, is that the public schools were to be used to shape society to what they wanted it to be.

Progressive historian Ellwood P. Cubberley of Stanford University described the problem and overall strategy this way:

“Southern and eastern Europeans have served to dilute tremendously our national stock, and to corrupt our civil life. ... Everywhere these people tend to settle in groups or settlements, and to set up here their national manners, customs, and observances. Our task is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race and to implant in their children ... the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government” (5 p. 302)

These two examples taken from Rothbard’s “Progressive Era” of Northern Methodist literature provide examples of how pietist church leadership typically viewed public education and the immigrant or Catholic problem.

The pietists were therefore incensed that the Catholics were attempting to block the salvation of America’s children—and eventually of America itself—all at the orders of a “foreign potentate.” Thus, the New Jersey Methodist Conference of 1870 lashed out with their deepest feelings against this Romish obstructionism: Resolved, That we greatly deprecate the effort which is being made by “Haters of Light,” and especially by an arrogant priesthood, to exclude the Bible from the Public Schools of our land; and that we will do all in our power to defeat the well-defined and wicked design of this “Mother of Harlots. (5 p. 300)”

Thus, the New England Methodist Conference of 1889 declared: We are a nation of remnants, ravellings from the Old World. ... The public school is one of the remedial agencies which work in our society to diminish this ... and to hasten the compacting of these heterogeneous materials into a solid nature.[7] Or, as a leading citizen of Boston declared, “the only way to elevate the foreign population was to make Protestants of their children.” (5)

Welfare and Labor Reform

Two other areas of reform commonly associated with progressive Christianity are welfare and labor which are loosely associated. A welfare safety net is alternatively seen by most in academia as either a natural outgrowth of urbanization and/or something driven by the labor movement but both of these are at best weak. There was no consistent timeline relationship between industrialization and the development of government managed and administered welfare systems either in the US or Europe and the argument seems to lack an understanding of the structure of cities from the mid 1800's which, apart from Southern migration starting in the early 1900's, continued through WWII. Cities were overwhelmingly immigrant and Catholic. The local church, and frequently the pub, was the center of social activity and charity was seen as a function of the church. Liturgical voters simply didn't support this sort of government expansion. Likewise unionization never exceeded 6% of the work force prior to WWI and then principally affected industries that were closely affiliated with the government like railroads. This affected skilled and semi-skilled workers only and not those on the bottom of the economy. This is a natural pattern in that unions require some way to control the supply of labor and for low skilled jobs, this hasn't been possible. The largest welfare or transfer program up until the New Deal was the Civil War Pension program that wasn't at all related to either urbanization or labor issues. This was also a source of rampant fraud which frequently was related to influencing elections. (5 pp. 280-94)

Apart from the liturgical church, welfare outreach in urban areas started out with settlement houses established and maintained by Yankee Pietist women who either had family wealth or wealthy sponsors. Most of the notable figures in this movement were not married and several were known to be lesbians. A case study would be Hull House in Chicago founded by Jane Adams who was iconic of the movement. Her father John Adams was a Quaker who settled in Northern Illinois and became wealthy through several business ventures. He was also a founding participant in the Republican Party and was a Republican state senator in Wisconsin for 16 years. Jane Adams graduated from one of the first all women colleges, the Rockford Seminary in 1881. Although never married, she had numerous female relationships throughout her life. Inspired by the writings of English Art Critic, Oxford professor, and Christian Socialist John Ruskin, she founded Hull House in 1889 (Ruskin was influential amongst Anglican clergy of the time). She had several prominent financial supporters including Louise de Kovan Brown, whose father was a very wealthy Chicago banker, and Mary Rozet Smith. Mary Smith and Jane Adams proclaimed themselves to be married. A close associate, Julia Crawford who descended from Congregational minister John Lathrop, founded the first Juvenile court in the country in Chicago in 1899, was the first female member of the Illinois State Board of Charities, and president of the National conference of Social Work. This progression demonstrates how the privately supported settlement houses became entwined with the government, supported by the government, and eventually part of the government in most respects. (5 pp. 280-94)

The Activist

To summarize the Progressive Christian social reform movement of the late 1800's and early 1900's we see that a small group of highly motivated, overwhelmingly female, activists over a fairly extended period of time effected very significant political changes. Considering that the demographic of the

activists themselves was very specific and very narrow and that the percent of the population that were even loosely associated with their objectives would have seemed to be insignificant based on numbers and percentages, it would beg the question “how were they successful?” The general answer to the question being that they were well connected, well-funded, used media well, and probably most importantly, provided narrative for the political events and players of the era. Turning to their common characteristics, a profile of a successful political activist becomes apparent that largely carries over to other times and circumstances:

- They were children of activists families and an activist culture
- They were either from a background of wealth (all were middle class or above) and/or connected to economic sponsors
- They frequently had high level business and political connections generally related to the family members that increased their sphere of influence
- They did not have to financially support themselves allowing them to be fully committed to their cause or causes
- They formed an integrated network that crossed multiple different but associated causes
- They were educated but in humanity disciplines as opposed to scientific, mathematical, or other technical disciplines
- Most were influenced by a small number of academics or authors who represented specific philosophies that they already were in line with and were not exposed to alternative views
- Many were prolific writers who made extensive use of print media which was the internet of the time period
- They came from a form of Christian tradition but over time this secularized and became less important relative to the cause (many abandoned all form of Christian orthodoxy)
- They were at times highly competitive with each other and didn’t tolerate philosophical variation or diversity
- They were far from “ordinary people” in any respect and knew little to nothing about the people or victim classifications they were professing to be helping
- Along with Religious heritage, the vast majority were of English Anglo-Saxon ethnic origins and had linkages to similar social circles in England; a sort of Anglo-American elite.

In looking at political and social activists today, most of these observations hold true. A full time professional activist will be far more effective than a part time supporter in terms of both time and commitment making financial support the key variable to either maximize or constrain depending on the political objective.

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