**The Progressive Movement (1900-1918)**

For Eleanor Roosevelt and others of her generation, early 20th century America was the training ground for a transformation of the relationship between a democratic government and its people. Perhaps the best known results of this era are the 18th and 19th Amendments, Prohibition and woman suffrage respectively. But this legislation really came at the tail end of the period which has come to be known as the "Age of Reform." The amendments were actually the byproducts of an immense social and political upheaval which changed forever the expectations of the role government would play in American society.

It was during this brief interlude, 1900-1918, that America was completing its rapid shift from an agrarian to an urban society. This caused major anxiety among the country's predominantly Yankee, Protestant middle-class because it introduced "disturbing" changes in their society. Large corporations and "trusts," representing materialism and greed, were controlling more and more of the country's finances. Immigrants from southeastern Europe -- "dark-skinned" Italians and peasant Jews from Russia -- were flocking to major industrial centers, competing for low wages and settling in the ethnic enclaves of tenement slums. Party bosses manipulated the political ignorance and desperation of the newcomers to advance their own party machines. To the native middle-class, these ills of society seemed to be escalating out of control. In the name of democratic ideals and social justice, progressives made themselves the arbiters of a "new" America in which the ideals of the founding fathers could find a place within the nation's changing landscape.

The progressives came from a long tradition of middle-class elites possessing a strong sense of social duty to the poor. The social hierarchy wherein blue-blooded, native stock was at the top and the poor along with the "darker-skinned" were at the bottom, was accepted by the elite. But inherent in their role as privileged members of society was a certain degree of responsibility for the less fortunate. Growing up in this social class, Eleanor Roosevelt remarked, "In that society you were kind to the poor, you did not neglect your philanthropic duties, you assisted the hospitals and did something for the needy." The Progressive Era is unique in that this impulse spread to foster an all-encompassing mood and effort for reform. From farmers to politicians, the need for change and for direct responsibility for the country's ills became paramount and spread from social service to journalism. During his presidency, Theodore Roosevelt commented on the need: "No hard-and-fast rule can be laid down as to the way in which such work [reform] must be done; but most certainly every man, whatever his position, should strive to do it in some way and to some degree."

Applying this sense of duty to all ills of society, middle-class reformers attempted to restore democracy by limiting big business, "Americanizing" the immigrants, and curbing the political machines. Theodore Roosevelt, wanting to ensure free competition, was particularly instrumental in curtailing monopolistic business practices during his time in the White House. He extended the powers of the executive branch and the powers of the government within the economy, departing from the laissez-faire attitude of previous administrations. By supporting labor in the settlement of the Anthracite Coal Strike in 1902, Roosevelt became the first president to assign the government such a direct role and duty to the people.

The immigrant "problem" was handled for the most part by white, middle-class young women. Many of these female reformers had been educated in the new women's colleges which had sprung up in the late nineteenth century. Possessing an education yet barred from most professional careers, these women took to "association building" as a means to be active in public life. Among these associations were the Women's Trade Union League, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the National Consumers' League, and a vast system of "Americanizing" centers known as settlement houses. These organizations were meant to "purify" the public sphere of men in which vice and corruption were bred. The WTUL and the NCL sought to cleanse the largely male-owned garment factories in which female workers were harshly exploited. The Temperance Union sought to eliminate the dominantly male immigrant worker's drinking habits and with them, saloons and prostitution. With settlement houses, women such as Jane Addams and Lillian Wald set out to uplift the immigrant masses and to teach them "proper" ways of life and moral values. These houses, of which there were 400 in America by 1910, instructed immigrants on everything from proper dancing forms (intentionally steering them away from more popular and sexually suggestive dances like the "cakewalk") to proper housekeeping and civic reforms. Settlement house work influenced woman and child labor laws, welfare benefits, and factory inspection legislation.

By helping the immigrants, female reformers hoped to curb the influence of the political bosses in the urban slums. Ironically, however, their efforts only added to the bosses' popularity. Many immigrants saw the reformers as meddlesome outsiders with little regard or respect for their ways of life. Such nuances as temperance and woman suffrage meant far less to them than issues of subsistence: securing a vendor's license for their pushcart or obtaining false birth certificates so that their children could contribute to the family income. The political boss could provide these services while the reformer only hampered them.

Also working to expunge the ills of society were progressive, "muckraking" journalists. Jacob Riis exposed the poor living conditions of the tenement slums in How the Other Half Lives (1890) and inspired significant tenement reforms. In The Shame of the Cities (1904), Lincoln Steffens revealed the political corruption in the party machines of Chicago and New York. Most shocking to contemporary readers was Upton Sinclair's The Jungle (1906) in which he traced an immigrant family's exploitation and downward spiral in Chicago's meat packing industry. The novel resulted in the Pure Food and Drug and the Meat Inspection Acts in 1906, the first legislation of its kind.

At the outset of the First World War, the progressive spirit turned from domestic issues to international concerns. Extending their democratic sensibilities and sense of moral duty to the situation in Europe, the pro-war progressives approached the conflict with the same moralizing impulse. Under Woodrow Wilson's leadership, America entered WWI in order to extend democracy and spread its ideals beyond its own borders. When this could not be achieved -- the death of the League of Nations and Wilson's failing health being significant setbacks -- the reforming spirit significantly lessened. The nation was tired of war and it lacked the widespread desire for change to carry on the moralizing crusade.

The window of time that the Progressive Era inhabits is a brief one, but not at all insignificant. Its reforms introduced a new role for government. In dealing with the problems of urbanization and industrialization, the country's democratic institutions had to address problems on a very local level. This precedent would provide the backbone for the New Deal and would inspire the reforming spirit of the nation's leaders during the Great Depression.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/eleanor-progressive/

**Now answer the following questions in your group and write them down in your notebook (we will discuss them as a class)**

1. What do you think it means to be *progressive*?
2. What were the progressive reformers hoping to change? Give at least 3 examples.
3. How did the progressive reformers change society? Give at least 3 examples.
4. What other social movements or eras throughout history and the world would you label as *progressive*? Name at least 3 and explain how they fit the *progressive* classification.
5. Does the progressive era represent top-down or bottom-up approach to social change? Explain.
6. Do you think social change is more successful using a top-down or a bottom-up approach? Explain using at least 3 examples.
7. Who is responsible for social change?