

Daily Life in the Progressive Era

by Steven L. Piott

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The Progressive Era (roughly defined as the 1890s to about 1920) was a watershed period in American history in which technical improvements, socio-political reforms, as well as economic and demographic transformations altered American life profoundly. In other words, as Stephen L. Piott points out in his book *Daily Life in the Progressive Era* it ‘was the time when modern America was really born.’ (Piott, xi)

This book is part of the Greenwood Press *Daily Life Through History Series* which seeks to provide a narrative history of specific periods, people, or places. This series does not give highly specialized accounts of, for example, the experiences of one single minority group. Instead, it strives to give an account in which people of numerous different backgrounds are equally represented and examined in the context of the overall theme through a ‘from the bottom up’ approach. In the case of *Daily Life in the Progressive Era*, this approach manifests itself through a close scrutiny of a variety of people living in the USA on the eve and at the beginning of the 20th century; urban factory workers and Appalachian coal miners, immigrant farmers and black sharecroppers, women suffragettes and muckraking journalists are all part of Piott’s narrative.

If there is one main point of criticism, it has to be made about ‘Chapter 1: Rural America.’ The chapter is a concise historical account of the different forms of agricultural life in America, divided into different regions and economic statuses. Piott’s main attempt here is to depict how rural America inserted itself into the national sphere as a pivotal part in modern America. Yet somehow, this chapter feels diminished by the other chapters in so far as the portrayal of the progress made in rural areas seems miniscule when compared to the dynamics of advancements that Piott illustrates in the

following chapters. However, this poses the question: if this discrepancy was not caused by rural America itself and its failure to keep up with the progress and societal growth of the rest of the country.

The weaknesses of the first chapter become evident through the strength of ‘Chapter 2: Workers.’ The complexity and connections of the social, economic, and work-place advances which Piott intertwines successfully emphasise the reform spirit of the progressive era and this captures these dynamics of change. Piott describes the working and living conditions for workers in different industries under unregulated industrial capitalism and the challenges to that economic order. For example, the horrific *Triangle Shirtwaist Fire*, killing 146 women and exposing hazardous working conditions led directly to New York State laws regulating industrial work. While an increased number of strikes and the heightened publicity of workplace conditions were an effort to change the situation from within, it was jurisprudence and federal protective labor legislation which eventually instituted change on a national level.

Probably more than any other, ‘Chapter 3: Popular Culture’ firmly grasps the progressive *Zeitgeist*. By illuminating the impact and accessibility of baseball, music, film, and media to people of all economic standings, Piott makes a convincing case for the Americanization of society. Though some of the media output was certainly anti-immigrant, it perhaps contributed to the desire of immigrants to immerse themselves faster into American society. The spread of popular culture bridged some class and ethnic divisions as it reshaped how Americans spent their free-time – such free-time being in itself a new achievement for most workers.

‘Chapter 4: Citizen Activism and Civic Engagement’ gets to the heart of both the grassroots and legislative reform movements which made the progressive era such a distinct period of social advancement. Piott’s interconnection of factors established in Chapters 2 and 3 such as strike and reform movements and the impact of mass-media on social issues, come together in this chapter to highlight a number of issues of profound concern to citizens from all backgrounds. Women’s suffrage, impure food and drugs, or the call for better public transportation are but some of the key concerns that citizens addressed in their efforts to improve society.

While Piott champions the reform spirit of progressives in the previous chapters, he justifiably criticizes their failure to confront racism in ‘Chapter 5: The Progressive Era

and Race.’ This chapter is an abridged synopsis of the entire book focused exclusively on the lives of black Americans. Piott describes living and working conditions in both rural and urban areas; covers Black leaders and icons, mass-culture, and reform movements. Yet while these aspects demonstrate an impulse of the same progressive spirit in Black communities, hope for substantial reforms remained bleak for most Black Americans. Like the rural populations in America, they remained outside the main currents of American Progressivism.

The end of the progressive era came with World War I. ‘Chapter 6: The First World War and American Society’ is a fitting final chapter in which Piott explains how the War challenged and compromised the achievements of the progressive mindset, and ultimately put the progressive achievements on trial. Increased prices, food shortages, the great influenza pandemic, combined with the draft changed life as it was in all corners of the nation. Although the nation was united in the war-time efforts through such factors, others like the Red Scare, racial and gender discrimination in the war industry, and restrictions on free speech disunited the nation. While experiencing a wave of patriotic unity in defeating evil abroad, America was interrupted by the war in its efforts to defeat evil at home. Modern America had been born, but it was still a long way from finishing the tasks it had set out to tackle.

While Piott relies rather heavily on the transcription of statistics, he often uses passages from representative fiction to give humanized examples which underline his arguments, convey the lives of people in the progressive era, and transcribe the *Zeitgeist*. The complexity of issues is addressed by more than the mere reproduction of historical facts; social, economic, and political aspects; ethnic and racial issues; events and currents in society are inextricably connected and impact each other. In the series foreword, series editor Randall M. Miller invokes the unique problems of capturing the daily life of Americans by pointing out the mobile and dynamic nature of a nation always seeking to reinvent itself. How do you capture the essence of American life without simplifying and losing sight of the complex diversity of heterogeneous people and places? Steven L. Piott embraces this very complexity and, by centering the diversity of the American people around the common goal of shaping modern America. He succeeds in invoking the essence of the progressive era in this commendable historical narrative

which is appropriate for both a general readership as well as students in need of a comprehensive introduction to the topic.

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