

URBAN AMERICA AND THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

The Progressive Era was a period of reform in which many problems of industrialization were addressed and possibly solved. The progressives targeted problems in the political, social, and economic areas of the nation. These progressives fought for the poor and working class people that were being taken advantage of during industrialization. Progressives were found in all different classes, religions, and races. Progressives hoped to reform the nation and put an end to corruption. The progressive muckrakers were successfully effective at addressing the social, political, and economic issues of the era because they influenced many laws and legislations to be passed that helped improve the lives of the poor and working class.

Many writers, reporters, and social activists addressed the social problems that were created by industrialization. People especially children worked in unsafe and unsanitary conditions in factories. Muckraker Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* investigated dangerous working conditions and unsanitary procedures in the meat-packing industry. In his novel he describes how meat was treated, for example: "we saw meat shoveled from filthy wooden floors, piled on tables rarely washed...in all of which processes it was in the way of gathering dirt, splinters, floor filth, and the expectoration of tuberculosis and other diseased workers" (ch. 29 DocA1). This shows that no action was taken to such terrible unsanitary conditions and the whole nation was basically consuming this meat after all it went through. Another social reformer Robert Hunter's *Poverty* and *The Children who Toll* argued against the evils of child labor and fought to reform poverty. Social reform also took place amongst women reformers. The Henry Street Settlement House was created by the Women Settlement House Workers whom wanted to encourage and supported each other in a variety of activities. Jane Addams' "Life in the Hull House" was about reforming life for immigrants, children, and women. This led to the first settlement house: The Hull House, which was founded by Jane Addams. Residents of the House campaigned for improved housing regulations, sanitation, and public schools. The Hull House had a nursery, dispensary for medicine, medical advice, a boardinghouse, an art gallery, and a music school. Jane Addams wanted to reform child labor and put more children in schools, which is similar to what Robert Hunter was willing to do as well. Tammany Hall figures like Robert Wagner, Al Smith, and Big Tim Sullivan worked with middle class progressive groups to pass child labor laws, factory safety regulations, and worker compensation plans. John Dewey also fought for an Educational Reform in his books *Democracy and Education* and *The School and Society*. Florence Kelley wrote a report showing the conditions of sweatshops and the effects of long hours on women and children. Other women reformers fought for women rights. For example, Margaret Sanger reformed women's education about their bodies by creating pamphlets on birth control, women's health on contraception and reproductive health options. Sanger founded the first birth control clinic and

founded the organization that became known as Planned Parenthood. Other issues like the conditions of living were covered by social activist Jacob Riis in his book *“How the Other Half Lives”* which shows the living conditions of the urban poor in tenements. His book is filled with photographs he had taken in tenements, lodging houses, sweatshops, and saloons. These pictures and Riis’ comments on conditions and lives of the poor had a great impact on urban reformers. These social reforms were tools to improving the lives of many.

Economic reformers worked against big businesses and unfair monopolies. It was known that the Progressive Era was first influenced by the Granger Movement and Populist Party who organized farmers to attempt to break up the railroad monopoly that was taking advantage of farmers by overcharging them for shipping. Therefore, the Progressives were continuing the reforms the Populist Party had wished to enforce. An example of this is Republican Robert M. La Follette who led a group of angry farmers, small businessmen, and workers to attack railroads and other large corporations. Frank Norris’s *“The Octopus”* was another book that exposed the monopolistic railroad practices in California. Populist leader William Jennings Bryan who criticized using the gold standard when only the rich like the captains of industry could afford gold also influenced many other economic reformers. He believed that a silver standard would be easier and more affordable. He put the blame of the Panic of 1893 on the wealthy because there were too much land speculations and people lost money over investments. This can be seen when Albert Beveridge complains of how “our industrial industry is congested, there are more workers than work” (ch. 27, DocD3). Bryan influenced reformers like Ida Tarbell who wrote *“History of Standard Oil Company”* exposing the cruel tactics of the Standard Oil Company, which was run by a captain industry John D. Rockefeller. In this piece, Tarbell shows the methods of Rockefeller’s company in eliminating competition. Another form of economic reform took place amongst unions. Workers began to gather together and form labor unions in order to fight for better wages, shorter working hours, and safer working conditions. Lillian Wald, Mary Dreier, and other figures were leaders of the Women’s Trade Union League. Other unions included the International Ladies Garment Workers Union who was ignored like every other union until the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, which made people realize that workers’ rights were being violated by big businesses. Economic reform was necessary for the improvement of workers’ lives.

Political reformers wished to reform the political corruption that took place in the nation. Most political reformers placed the blame of corruption on machines like Thomas Nast, a Political cartoonist showed the political corruption of NYC’s political machine, Tammany Hall that was led by Boss Tweed. Through these cartoons, Tweed was convicted and imprisoned where he died. Reformer Lincoln Steffans’ *“The Shame of the Cities”* talked about the political corruption in cities across the US. He talked about how big city bosses who routinely worked hand in hand with businessmen looking for contracts for gas, water, electricity, and transit. Other political reformers like Frederic C. Howe sought to reform urban politics and

Mayor Samuel Jones advocated municipal ownership of utilities, built new parks and schools, and established 8-hour days in Toledo city. Progressive politicians such Republican Robert M. La Follette became a powerful force in state capitals by pushing through tougher corporate tax rates, an improved civil service code, and a railroad commission designed to regulate cargo charges. Another progressive politician was California governor Hiram Johnson who put forth laws regulating utilities and child labor, mandating 8-hour days for women, and providing state worker compensation plan. The presidents of the progressive era who read the works of the Progressive writers made reforms based on their writings. Progressive presidents included Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, and Woodrow Wilson. These presidents took many actions that were all the results of muckrakers and reformists fighting for a better America.

The works of muckrakers and other reformers led to many laws and regulations that the progressive presidents implemented after reading the cries of these muckrakers asking for reform. President Theodore Roosevelt was the most responsible in passing legislations to protect Americans from abuses of businesses. He passed laws like the Anti-Trust Acts, which tried to stop the spread of monopolies. He also passed the Meat Inspection Act, which enforced sanitary conditions in meatpacking plants thanks to Upton Sinclair's "*The Jungle*". He passed the Pure Food and Drug Act, which prohibit the sale of contaminated and falsely labeled foods and drugs. He also created the Square Deal against unfair monopolies. He was one of the first presidents who supported workers on strike, for he supported the coal miners on strike. President Woodrow Wilson also took measures for reform. He passed the Federal Trade Act, which had the power to end unfair business practices and legal violations by corporations. He passed another act, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act declaring certain business practices illegal. The Underwood Tariff reduced tariff rates and the Federal Reserve Act established the Federal Reserve System. Other state reforms also took place, the secret ballot, which gave privacy at the ballot box. The initiative allowed voters to petition state legislatures in order to consider bills that were wanted by citizens. The referendum allowed voters to decide if a bill or proposed amendment should be passed. The recall allowed voters to petition to have an elected representative removed from office. The direct primary ensured that voters select candidates to run for office. Many amendments were passed during the progressive era. The 16th amendment granted congress the power to tax income. The 17th provided for the direct election of the US senators. The 18th prohibited making, selling, or transporting alcohol, and the 19th provided women suffrage. Other laws like the NYS Tenement House Law was passed and required fire escapes, lights, and windows in tenements. This was the result of Jacob Riis novel. The Elkins Act strengthened the Interstate Commerce Act and the Hepburn Act authorized Interstate Commerce Commission to set maximum railroad rates the Federal Child Labor Law barred products produced by children from interstate commerce. These laws and regulations prove progressive muckrakers were successful at addressing the political, economic, and social issues of the Era.

