

HOPE, DESPAIR, AND BUREAUCRACY: AMERICAN PROGRESSIVISM AS A RESPONSE TO THE CRITICAL REALISTS

A Working Paper

Kevin Walker, Ph.D.

The dawn of American progressivism was not a happy occasion. Rather than a brilliant new idea, it was instead, for many, the only alternative to the social void left over after a series of failed Enlightenment Era promises. The most immediate proof appeared in the Civil War, followed by the possibility of class warfare and the national ills that constitutional government seemed unable to address. Those tensions reached their highest point in the Election of 1896. For the laboring classes, William Jennings Bryan's defeat finalized the loss of faith in the existing political system; the vast political machines in the industrial centers that gave the presidency to William McKinley made the claims of Eugene Debs and other radicals appear more appealing. The lesson of progress, it seemed, was that the American Constitution simply failed to evolve and grow the way governments should. The way it harbored elite interests or undermined the people's efforts at pursuing social justice were but symptoms of that problem.

The major progressives, namely Herbert Croly, John Hart Ely, Lester Frank Ward, as well as their popular spokesmen like Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, did not defend progress on its merits, but on what seemed to be its absolute necessity. It was the *via negativa* of Darwinian thought, the last alternative to the current course of history, whose outcome only appeared in flashes like Edward Bellamy's novel. They introduced what would become the definitive feature of Western thought in modern times: that History was itself the fundamental order or reality, and that it contained a purpose to which all human things must be carefully attuned. The nation's ills could not be understood in terms of pre-modern notions about human vice or corruption, since those things presupposed a certain end for individuals, and a corresponding end for civil society; social and political problems were instead the result of stagnation, or of allowing the past to dominate the future. History moved on its own, meaning that law, politics and society had to move with it. Hence, between the radical advocates of *laissez-faire* on the one hand, and those clamoring for socialist revolution on the other, there was progressivism. It was the only plan that was truly based on History, rather than pre-modern concepts of "rights," if not short-sighted vengeance against industrialists. It offered a "third way" – or what was, in fact, the only alternative to civil warfare. The cliché was quite serious for most Americans: the only way to avoid bloody revolution was with the careful implementation of evolution.

Yet progressivism called for a certain tradeoff: it meant accepting the tenants of social Darwinism, which in turn meant letting go of the beloved American idea of natural right. "[C]onsider the doctrine of the natural, inalienable, and imprescriptible rights of the individual," columnist W.S. Lilly wrote in 1886. "How is it possible to predicate such rights of an animal whose attributes are constantly varying?" How is it possible to say such things when the original man is not an independent being in the state of nature, but "a troglodyte with half a brain, with the appetites and habits of a wild beast, with no conception of justice, and with only half-articulate cries for language? Of the absolute reason, which modern democracy progresses to worship, usually under the strangest travesties, Darwinism knows nothing."^[1] It was, no doubt, an agonizing decision to accept the full scope of modernism – and it was not because of affection for old customs and religious beliefs. The mark of modern sophistication was a certain

tough-minded intellectual honesty, or the ability to look into the void and accept the truth that the world was not a life-affirming place after all. Yet accepting this also meant finding a willingness to cope with it, or to progress out of hopelessness toward a self-created goal. Where the old Enlightenment promise failed, the new promise of progressivism could be *made* to succeed.

Henry Adams, the quintessential mugwump lost and bewildered in the new century, exemplified this spirit of modern America in its early days. For him, Darwinian progress was “a dogma to be put in the place of the Athanasian creed; it was a form of religious hope; a promise of ultimate perfection.” Like many others who came of age between two colliding worlds, Adams “warmly sympathized in the object,” he wrote (writing in third person); “the idea of one Form, Law, Order, or Sequence had no more value for him than the idea of none; that what he valued most was Motion, and that what attracted his mind was Change.” The greatest truths were gone – which was no doubt a sad and terrifying thing; but, at the same time, the new way was opened up, and the possibilities were limitless, so long as modern man was willing “to discover and admit to himself that he really did not care whether truth was, or was not, true.”^[2]

This was, for all thoughtful Americans, the way the world would have to think in the future. Yet it was not entirely an intellectual thing, which flew in the face of the old Christian West: many who espoused the Darwinian-progressivism admitted that it came with a certain spirituality all its own, a sort of primordial pantheism. The popular British columnist Sidney Low, for instance, admitted that there was a

habit of endowing Nature with an anthropomorphic character, making her, in fact, a kind of supreme deity, perpetually at work to reward those who obey, and punish those who transgress, her commandments. The very men who scoff at the notion of an impersonal God have reared their alters before the image of this mighty and terrible goddess, bestowing on her will, caprice, initiative, anger, all the attributes of personality.^[3]

All of this was the inevitable outcome of “laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency,” according to John Dewey in his essay on the broader philosophic significance of Darwinism. The importance of Darwin’s teaching was far more than biological: it “introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion.”^[4] Darwinism was concerned above all at establishing a non-teleological view of living things, thus making it the most fundamental form of metaphysical atheism. A “species” was a “form” or an “idea”; it was the permanent aspect of each thing, or its condition when it realized its end. So, to say that species did not have respective ends but “origins” was to say that they were not so fixed and unchanging as the greatest thinkers had always believed: they had evolved, and that they would continue to evolve.

This was not incidental, but central the Darwinian view of the world: the highest scientific method no longer aimed at discovery, but at conquest. “To idealize and rationalize the universe at large,” Dewey wrote, referring the ancient emphasis on unchanging “ideas,” is a “confession of inability to master the course of things that specially concerns us.” Darwinism, and the broad progressive project that rose out of it, revealed that “the things that concern us” are not to be discovered as existing apart from human affairs; they are instead to be realized through social experiments. This meant that “philosophy must in time become a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life, and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them,” he wrote; it was “a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis.” True “intellectual progress” is practical progress, not growth in knowledge. “Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the

changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place,” Dewey concluded. “Doubtless the greatest dissolvent in contemporary thought of old questions, the greatest precipitant of new methods, new intentions, new problems, is the one effected by the scientific revolution that found its climax in the *Origin of Species*.”^[5] This was the new fact of life, and all subsequent thought, in philosophy, theology, ethics, and (in our own time) “the self” would proceed on its premises.

This was Woodrow Wilson’s outlook on progress, and the whole basis for his State-driven view of liberalism, which he believed essential for modern America. He did not believe progress was choice-worthy for its own sake, nor did it deserve a careful defense or promulgation on its merits; instead, like Adams, and so many others, Wilson was “forced to be a progressive.” The fact was that “we have not kept up with our change of conditions,” he wrote, “either in the economic field or in the political field.” The horrifying symptoms of the age, though, showed how dire it was to keep apace with History. The task of a progressive government was to adjust to the “facts of the case,” since they “will always have the better of the argument; because if you do not adjust your laws to the facts, so much the worse for the laws, not for the facts, because the law trails along after the facts.”^[6] To embrace tradition or to conserve any idea about the purpose of government was to ensure irrelevance – and that, for Wilson and many other progressives, was the true meaning of social injustice. Hence, not only biological and philosophic questions, but even the most important questions and dire issues a political community could face had to begin from within the proper framework. “In our own day,” Wilson wrote, “whenever we discuss the structure or development of anything, whether in nature or in society, we consciously or unconsciously follow Mr. Darwin.”^[7]

Hence, the progressive era was born from a mixture of terror at what was lost and excitement at what mankind might soon gain. It was a painful and sad experience, but one that found home in the confidence that it would soon complete itself: once progressivism was fully realized, once man was put into perfect harmony with History, and the methods of following it were given absolute power, the sorrowful aspect would disappear, as liberty and notions of human happiness would be so fulfilled that they would cease to matter. But, again, such a thing was possible only when society fully accepted the bleaker side of the proposition. With a mixture of neo-Darwinian philosophies, progressives emphasized “growth” and “development” over the ancient Western view of permanent moral truths. They looked to History rather than nature. They placed an assumption firmly in the American mind that “[d]ignity is not fixed,” and that “it has no principles or laws beyond those governing its internal evolutionary dynamic,” Bradley C.S. Watson writes. “In fact, the very act of looking for fixed principles or laws is regressive, for in so acting we cast a glance toward a past wherein dignity was, always and everywhere, less developed and more stultified.”^[8]

I argue that this dual aspect of progressivism did much to inform its political development: it was, on one hand, the only way to freedom, and the way to truly realize Edward Bellamy’s happy “Nationalism,” or what came to be called “the promise of American life”; at the same time, though, beneath that image which appealed so much to the populist classes, was a scheme that was quite un-free, and had little regard for human dignity. That dignity was no longer to be found; it therefore had to be created.

I. The Appeal of Progress for Populists

One of the settled precepts of political thought (which Darwinism showed to be not so settled after all) was the distinction between “elites” and “populists,” the Aristotelian “few” and “many.” The distance between those social classes was frightening by the end of the nineteenth century. William Jennings Bryan understood first-hand how elite interests “could act in concert on a moment’s notice, while prompt co-operation was difficult, if not impossible, among the masses.” Worse still, political education was weak among the populists, and the “campaign did not afford sufficient time to bring clearly before the people an important truth which investigation must reveal, namely, that on the money question the interests of the money-owning classes are not identical with the interests of the money-producing classes.”^[9] With progressivism, that distinction was almost entirely blurred. The new elites showed a much greater willingness to praise and maintain “democracy” – not so much the democratic principle of majority rule (since that would hardly be in their favor) but more often a sentiment expressed by their scorn for the Constitution, and the broader framework of pre-modern thought in which it was drafted. It was the sort of instrument that seemed to harbor the “other” sort of elite, from which academic and intellectual elites sought to distance themselves.

Theodore Roosevelt made the distinction especially clear: it was “between the men who, with fervor and broad sympathy and imagination, stand for the forward movement, the men who stand for the uplift and betterment of mankind, and who have faith in the people.” These were never to be confused with the other sort – “the men of narrow vision and small sympathy, who are not stirred by the wrongs of others,” he wrote. The one who doubts and questions progress is a “reactionary” – the one who “upholds privilege and favors the special interests, whether he acts from evil motives or merely because he is puzzle-headed or dull of mental vision or lacking in social sympathy, or whether he simply lacks interest in the subject.”^[10] This was no doubt a reflection on his own experience: he assumed the presidency in 1901, upon William McKinley’s assassination, aware that the Republican Party could not only appeal to the populist elements among the Democrats, but also forge a whole new concept of politics itself: it would now deliberate about the means to progressivism. In this, Roosevelt sought to redeem his party, as well as the current generation of his own social class. His friend, Herbert Croly, marveled at how Roosevelt “had never been an ordinary Mugwump.”^[11] He had lived out his progressivism: “Instead of representing a limited class in the eastern cities, he had mixed with all sorts of Americans in many different parts of the country.” In this, Roosevelt exemplified the stepping-down aspect of progressivism: though it originated with the privileged classes, it was nothing if not democratic. Reactionaries may speak of the greatness of tradition, or even the concessions that the Constitution makes for American democracy; but, according to Roosevelt and Croly, no matter how meticulous the argument, such people merely rationalized continued oppression. Progressivism therefore offered a way for social elites to accept the blame for social and economic ills, and then use their station to remedy those problems through the application of advanced education in the social sciences rather than a continued emphasis on liberty and good government. One’s progressivism hinged entirely on the willingness to renounce the old order, and the role of one’s Mugwump background in founding and maintaining it. It was an act of penance to be a progressive, it seemed.

A. The New Elites

F.A.P. Barnard was a prime example of social privilege used to advanced education, in turn used to serve the public interest. The long-time President of Columbia University wrote in 1887 that “the experiment has been made,” and that American republicanism was a success. But the success was more for the Constitution itself than it was for the nation. The original Constitution “has given us a government *of* the people, but not a government *by* the people, nor a government *for* the people.” Beneath the republican surface, the American regime had become a plutocracy. This was not an accident: all its checks and balances, and all its limitations on the popular will, served to make it the refuge of the wealthy few who naturally exploited the many in the absence of government control; the people had no hope in the Constitution because the oppressors could insist on the neutrality of republican government whenever regulations appeared to threaten their interests. According to Barnard, “we are governed for the benefit of this oligarchy, which employs the dignities and emoluments of political place, for its own private advantage, or to reward the services of its henchmen.” The concept of liberty continued, despite the flaws inherent in the system: the people were still viewed as “the sovereign,” who were, as always, the alpha and omega of American political life. And it was true that the people had consented, again and again, to their established form of government, and partaken in the deliberative process of selecting their public officials. Representation, however, was the sort of thing that opened itself up to vast amounts of corruption, not only among those who held office, but among the people who elected them. It was, of course, a timeless complaint: the people did not deliberate about candidates, but voted on party affiliations; once elected, officials only served their chosen special interests. For these reasons, the government, whether local or national, “has long since ceased to be representative of the popular sovereignty,” but had passed into the hands of the wealthy elites, who hid behind its republican forms. For this reason, Barnard concluded: “our presumably democratic system of government has, thus far, proven a failure.”^[12]

This was no doubt a spectacular claim. But it is worth noting that it came from a man who had no political experience, nor was he a member of the humble masses he addressed. Barnard’s formal training was in physics, chemistry, and the natural sciences, and a professional life devoted primarily to the fund-raising duties of a university president.^[13] It was a lofty position in society that caused no small amount of self-consciousness on his part.

Still, his rhetoric directed at the common folk had a curious tone: “If the people generally can be induced to *think*,” he wrote, “the resultant conclusions of the mass, whatever may be the varieties of individual opinion, will usually be right.” The lack of “thinking,” he was sure, came from the willingness of so many to “borrow their opinions from others, accept, with blind faith and without inquiry, the dictation of those whom they have been taught to regard as authorities.” Such enduring faith in American constitutionalism even seemed to have a biological explanation: “too many – perhaps even a very large proportion – inherit the political views, as they inherit the features and other physical qualities (it may be even the diseases) of their fathers,” Barnard wrote. “All this we must get rid of. We shall never have a healthy, honestly genuine public opinion, until authority, tradition, [and] prescription, cease to govern habits of thought, and men learn to think for themselves.” The Constitution, which the American people still revered, not only failed to restrain “great political evils”; it also “encourages, and even stimulates their growth,” indicating that the causes of the ills in modern times were “lurking within the folds of that revered instrument itself.”^[14] It did not seem likely to Barnard that “thinking people” would recover the value in American republicanism; true mass-enlightenment meant rejecting those things.

Hence, the entanglement of popular and academic thought that was a chief feature of

progressivism – while at the same time, it proceeded on quite specific expectations about the people themselves. James Madison had insisted that in “a nation of philosophers,” there was no need for designing laws so they could command the favor of popular opinion,” because they would be well enough ruled “by the voice of an enlightened reason.” But a “nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato. And in every other nation, the most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage to have the prejudices of the community on its side.”^[15] Prejudices and opinions, though, were only mere imitations of real knowledge, and now the elites believed that sort of knowledge really could be passed down to the whole public. The bulk of academic writing sought to address and instruct the public, while much of the popular writing began to espouse the ideas of the new sort of elite. And, of course, there was a growing abundance of such elites, many of them former Mugwumps who jettisoned their heritage for the sake of a newer American identity.

This was no doubt a response to the criticism like that of Thorstein Veblen; the privileged members of the “leisure class” who came of age witnessing violent strikes, and feeling no small amount of guilt, began to renounce their status and think of ways to put their leisure to use for the public good. Theodore Roosevelt insisted that “[a] leisure class whose leisure means idleness is a curse to the community, and in so far as its members distinguish themselves chiefly by aping the worst – not the best – traits of similar people... they become both coming and noxious elements in the body politic.”^[16] There was a new kind of civil servant, or at least a new school of thought that could make progressive civil service work – one that could not be corrupted by wealthy special interests on one hand, nor succumb to administrative incompetence on the other.

Columnist William V. Rowe agreed, claiming that “much can be done to stem this tide of discontent, and to satisfy this existing public opinion,” not through reform measures per se, but by the privileged classes offering themselves as the servants of the people, who were fully equipped to implement those measures. Constitutional governments, both state and national, lacked the sort of expertise necessary for realizing such a goal; the change needed to occur all the way down, in the deepest depths of social consciousness. Only a radically new civil service, staffed by highly educated administrators, could bring such a thing. This was how the “possessors of wealth, in wisely chosen ways,” might give back what they owed to the people.

[They] not only will return to the public service a fair share of their accumulations, but also will devote themselves to the creation of a leisure class, of wide culture, training and experience in the affairs of state, whose lives shall be given to public service and to the general welfare, and upon whom the workers of the community may learn confidence to rely for skilled and expert guidance in public affairs, and for an efficient, clean and decent performance of their duties of public office.

To think of one’s social status any other way was to become lumped together with the upper classes of privilege, who, as everyone believed, benefited quite unfairly at the expense of the poor and unprivileged. “This is the real use, as distinguished from the selfish abuse, of wealth,” Rowe claimed. “Let the gospel of service become the gospel of wealth, and purely obstructive distrust will give place to an uplifting of mutual confidence.”^[17] This was, of course, an appealing image: the wealthy would not squander their time on frivolous pursuits, but would instead step down, Publius-Valarius-like, and directly serve the people. At the same time, though, they would in practice occupy positions of power far greater than those the capitalist classes ever held. To be responsive to the people, they had to make the people whole, unified and articulate – a conditioning that went far beyond merely listening and serving.

Herbert Croly gave progressivism its popular appeal in a book whose title said it all: *The Promise of American Life*, first published in 1909. The book pulled together the strands of both Nationalist and progressive thought – again, of both the populist and elitist impulses – into a single whole, and summed up completely the new concept of American identity for the new century. It was, in many ways, the bedrock book for American liberalism. Croly spoke very directly to the post-Civil War generation, and its descriptions of the “promise” were always overshadowed with the lesson of that conflict, and the enduring sense among nearly all Americans that the original system had failed, just as the advocates of judicial absolutism did. “The only fruitful promise of which the life of any individual or any nation can be possessed, is a promise determined by an ideal,” Croly wrote. “Such a promise is to be fulfilled, not by sanguine anticipations, not by a conservative imitation of past achievements, but by laborious, single-minded, clear-sighted and fearless work.” There was no real gift to posterity according to Croly. In this, he was in perfect agreement with the school of critical historians. Tradition was void of any real promise; it was the sort of thing that a people made for themselves – and it was only real for those who could admit that, and let go of all notions of inheritance from the Founding. Arduous work was the thing that would fulfill the new promise. Such an accomplishment, though, meant admitting one devastating truth: “An individual has no meaning apart from the society in which his individuality has been formed.” There were no rights aside from those the community decided to construct for itself. It is only when all impulses are unified around a single goal that a people can claim such a thing – and even then, they can only claim it for the community, never for themselves, however far the community may seek to deprive them of it. “The growing and maturing individual is he who comes to take a more definite and serviceable position in his surrounding society he who performs excellently a special work adapted to his abilities,” Croly wrote. “There is no way in which a higher type of national life can be obtained without a corresponding individual improvement on the part of its constituent members.”^[18] Only in this way could a people truly progress into their own self-made promise. All other concepts of that promise were merely stagnant, disorganized, and more often façades that hid the true misery from view. People were to find the American promise, above all, in each other – or, more specifically, they had to be *made* to find it in each other.

The Constitution was, of course, the single greatest obstacle to realizing that end according to Croly. The success of the American Founding was indeed monumental in human history; but it was a success that came at tremendous cost to later generations of Americans. The fundamental law, he insisted, was framed on the basis of the old elites’ distrust of the people. It was “not as the expression of a democratic creed, but partly as a legal fortress against the possible errors and failings of democracy,” he wrote; it was “the expression not only of a political faith but also of political fears.” As the social elites of their day, the Founders viewed all democratic impulses as hostile and turbulent. The task was therefore to frame a document that could control them, and let it be ratified, so as to trick them into believing it was their own. In truth, though, the Founders “sought to surround private property, freedom of contract, and personal liberty with an impregnable legal fortress; and they were forced by their opponents to amend the original draft of the Constitution in order to include a still more stringent bill of individual and state rights.” These were certainly good things; but their inclusion was unnecessary, given the true nature of democracy, which was finally realized in modern America. It was not, however, that democracy had learned to respect the rights of individuals; it was instead the ability of Americans to create a general will. Such a will, should it finally be

allowed to emerge, would “in the end and after a necessarily prolonged deliberation, possess the power of taking any action which in the opinion of a decisive majority of the people is demanded by the public welfare,” he wrote.^[19] Plainly, though, this was not the intent behind the Constitution, which meant the time for national transcendence of that law had come.

The development of pure democracy was slow and had occurred quite in spite of the Founders constitutionalism, which was largely imposed on the people through a false sense of consent. The current task for the new elites, in their absolute devotion to public service, was to fully expose that latent democratic will, and then perfect it.^[20] The task, according to C. Lloyd Morgan, was to understand natural selection in order to better *defy* it, and empower “the fittest in raising the level of the less fit.”^[21]

B. The New Democracy

This was the crux of Theodore Roosevelt’s campaign in 1912, as he ran for president for the Progressive Party. For him, it was the only party, and the only school of American political thought, which still maintained the most obvious principle of American national life: “the right of the people to rule.” There was, as always, the threat of the “tyranny of the majority.” But for Roosevelt, that was the unenlightened concern of centuries past. In truth, the real problem, the modern problem, was “the tyranny of minorities,” he claimed in a campaign speech (delivered, of all places, in Carnegie Hall). “It is a small minority that lies behind monopolies and trusts,” he declared. “It is a small minority that stands behind the present law of master and servant, the sweat-shops, and the whole calendar of social and industrial injustice.” If the majority were given its true blessing, and seen in light of history rather than classical political theory about the nature of regimes, there would be no need for such concern. The majority would rule peacefully – and, more importantly, it would absorb the few into itself. This would happen, he believed, through a variety of sensible reforms: initiatives and referendums, direct primaries, and the recall of judges. The Constitution, and the whole framework of political thought that went into it, was, after all, “a straight-jacket to be used for the control of an unruly patient – the people,” he claimed.

Now, I hold that this view is not only false but mischievous, that our constitutions are instruments designed to secure justice by securing the deliberate but effective expression of the popular will, that the checks and balances are valuable as far, and only so far, as they accomplish that deliberation, and that it is a warped and unworthy and improper construction of our form of government to see in it only a means of thwarting the popular will and of preventing justice.^[22]

Real freedom, it seemed, did not come from checks and balances designed to contain society’s mob-like impulses against individual rights. It was instead the recognition that the people themselves, through some historical process, had become quite good – so good, in fact, that pure democracy was now the truly desirable political arrangement in the United States. Representation, elections, and term of office were beginning to appear more obsolete. It was believed that just beneath the surface of the political institutions, left over by old men who had unfounded and absurd views of mankind, one could find a multitude fully capable of governing itself on its own. The ability to see it, and allow it to rule the way it should, rested entirely on the people’s willingness to adopt a progressive point of view, which Herbert Croly explained at length in his later work, *Progressive Democracy*, published in 1914. Despite the

obstructions to democracy, or the “certain forms of representation,” which were “imposed upon progressive nations by conditions of practical efficiency,” democracy grew and developed in its own way; it reached its pinnacle in America, where it “become not merely possible but natural and appropriate.”^[23] There were great doubts about the abilities of democracy, which were perhaps even more justified than they had been in the earlier part of American history.

The “township,” as Alexis de Tocqueville knew it, was far closer to Croly’s democratic ideals than anything in modern America. “The freedom of a township in the United States,” the French observer wrote, “flows from the very dogma of the sovereignty of the people.” Yet democracy was something that could only work on the local level: it was not a national democracy, but the sum of “all American republics” – and even then, such democracy was only complete in New England. The whole scope of American political life “was born in the very bosom of the townships; one could almost say that each of them at its origin was an independent nation.” The national or even the state government held their power only because “it was they that seemed to relinquish a portion of their independence in favor of the state,” he wrote. They were close communities of citizens who knew how to connect and sympathize with each other; and they had deep, old habits of public deliberation and respect for collective reasoning about important public questions. They knew how to distrust themselves, always aware of their tendencies of drifting back into mob behavior. “See with what art they have taken care in the American township, if I can express myself so, to *scatter* power in order to interest more people in public things.”^[24] But by the twentieth century, it seemed the township was gone, lingering only in cultural small-town life, as public affairs accumulated in the national interest far more than in the local one. Americans now lived primarily in cities instead of towns, and their sense of community was defined far more by national consciousness, which itself consisted of a variety of conflicting and colliding factions. It did not at all seem wise to allow any sort of township-style democracy to rule from the top down: it would cause those factions to fragment, and most certainly turn the power of one major faction against others.

But according to Croly, American democracy had not broken down at all; instead, it was “still in its early youth.” Most of its doubts were self-imposed, and caused by society’s irrational attachment to “legalism,” which was not only constitutionalism, but the idea that democratic power must be justified, or follow the classic rules of majority rule and minority rights. None of this was necessary according to Croly:

if, as a consequence of its rupture with legalism, the American democracy undergoes a change of spirit, if the attempt to discharge new and responsible activities in connection with its own government brings with it a positive inspiration and genuine social energy, the result may be to renovate American representative institutions and afford novel and desirable opportunities for effective political leadership.

Even the friends of direct democracy were blinded to the possibilities, because they held on to those old legalisms of classic political thought. William Jennings Bryan, for instance, held that “[c]hanges of opinion will go on until the best solution of every question is found”; opinion, in other words, would move in cycles, and the current approach to democratic life would continue as it always had. The task was therefore to simply make the best of it. Even as he lost the critical election, which embodied the hopes of millions of laboring Americans, he remained confident that given the unchanging nature of politics, the American form of government was still the best possible; the Constitution was, in fact, “based upon the theory that the people are capable of self-government” in Bryan’s view.^[25]

For Croly, though, true self-government meant seeing that those ideas were “merely

another expression of the old superstitious belief in political mechanics against which progressive democracy is bound to protest.” The mark of progress, of “renovated representation” or “effective political leadership,” appeared when all people were “resolutely pursuing a vigorous social program,” he insisted; it was a program “whose object is fundamentally to invigorate and socialize the action of American public opinion.”^[26] Giving the nation a clear goal, and presenting it with the most dire urgency, would overcome the problem of factions and create a general will – a majority that would essential swallow up the minority.

The greatest obstacle for progressive democracy was one “legalism” in particular: natural, individual rights. The sort of unified democracy that Croly envisioned could have no place for such guarantees, either among citizens in general, or for the minority who required protections. It had to rise above the “abstract legal individualism of Jeffersonian democracy” – a democratic notion which knew nothing of progress, but only mathematically certain concepts of the “rights of man.” The government that sprang from these ideas, no matter how Jeffersonian, was anti-democratic; they showed how Jefferson himself carried with him the “legalisms” that made his own efforts futile. The American political system, however popular it was in its day, “was not intended to be the instrument of important popular social purposes,” Croly wrote; it was hopelessly derived “from the old individualistic social economy.”^[27] By contrast, progressivism meant admitting that there were an abundance of “vigorous social programs” for which people would surrender their rights; but such crises only appeared sporadically. The task was to create an enduring sense of public action that would persuade the people to relinquish those rights for good. That, Croly believed, would break the final barrier to pure democracy: the whole would become the only individual that mattered, and all would learn to rest in that, instead of anything above or beyond political life.

C. Nationalism: Elites and the People Together

The idea of “Nationalism” grew out of “Americanism” as it was understood at the end of the nineteenth century. It was rooted, above all, in the anthropological notion of an “American culture,” or the Anglo-Protestant identity which critical historicists (discussed in Chapter 5) traced back to ancient Teutonic folk-minds. With that primordial basis for American identity uncovered, it took a modern political movement to complete it, progressives believed; something had to realize the potential that the people had within themselves. If human dignity could not be found in anything permanent or fixed in mankind, as the Darwinian revolution proved, it had to be made for itself – and the way to do it was a racial, imperialist, ethnocentric notions that took such hold of modern America at the time.

For Theodore Roosevelt, that “Americanism” was only realized when it became reform-minded – a point he believed was proven again and again in national life since the time of the Founding. It had to be rescued, Roosevelt believed: there were, as always an abundance of demagogues who wished to manipulate public patriotism. “[B]ut this does not alter the fact that the man who can do most in this country is and must be the man whose Americanism is most sincere and intense.” One must not say patriotic things; one must *mean* it – or live it fully. Those are the people who find reform as the central thing in American life. There were “many evils,” he said, yet each must be approached with the same “intense and fervid Americanism.”^[28] Culture was the solution to all economic and social problems for Roosevelt – a culture that could transform all minds into a common purpose.

Such a cultural transformation became clearer, though, when it merged into Nationalism. Edward Bellamy's concept of the future, with its peaceful, happy, communal society – achieved through peaceful means, rather than violent revolution – had, no doubt, an irresistible appeal. Any public figure who espoused it was not only making a promise, but showing himself to be on the right side History, and attuned to the way of thinking which that history dictated. Roosevelt declared Nationalism as the goal of Ward's view of social progress most prominently in his articles and speeches leading up to the 1912 campaign. Nationalism was the new name for the democratic ideal, which had been developing into its present form all along. But that democracy could not find its way alone: it required a government that was "thoroughly efficient in Nation, State, and municipality," so as to make "government action absolutely responsive to the need and will of the people." It was, above all, the thing that could overcome all class divisions in society, precisely as Bellamy had envisioned it, by offering the appeal of a "third way." All the same impulses would be there, but rather than causing the class distinctions that could lead to social warfare, those impulses could be channeled and shaped into the perfect sort of common good. This had been Abraham Lincoln's task, according to Roosevelt – to rise above secessionist and unionist alike, so as to bring them back together under one progressive vision. While this involved a radical new role for government, it was not "over-centralization," Roosevelt insisted; it was simply a way of empowering democracy to serve the whole. "We are all Americans," he wrote, and plainly "[o]ur common interests are as broad as the continent." Accordingly, the government ought to belong "to the whole American people, and, where the whole American people are interested, the interest can be guarded effectively by the national government." As always, though, this was the only way, because History demanded it. If the critics of progressive nationalism do not approve, "do they wish to leave things as they are? If not, what alternative do they propose?"[\[29\]](#)

The ideal social project was the sort of domestic mobilization that usually came with war. Roosevelt's summoning of Lincoln was not metaphorical: the nation was as divided as it had been in the Civil War, meaning it fell to great men – namely himself – to carry America through. Roosevelt presented this in his most famous speech, "The New Nationalism," delivered at the 1910 Progressive Convention. "I ask that civil life be carried on according to the spirit in which the army was carried on," he wrote, meaning free of politics, with action over deliberation – and with no dissent. The "effort in handling the army" – no doubt an authoritarian thing, when that army is the whole of society – "was to bring to the front the men who could do the job," Roosevelt wrote. Such a militaristic rule would certainly distribute "punishment for the coward who shirked his work. Is that not so?" The "Grand Army," as he called it, could not persist in the mode of normal civilian life, given the immediate necessities it faced. The Civil War taught the lesson best: "You could not have won simply as a disorderly and disorganized mob," i.e., the conditions of peacetime politics. "You needed generals; you needed careful administration of the most advanced type; and a good commissary – the cracker line." More importantly, though, was the broader public support: "it would all have been worthless if the average soldier had not had the right stuff in him. He had to have the right stuff in him, or you could not get it out of him," Roosevelt wrote. The influence of Edward Bellamy was abundantly obvious: all the energy that would go into warfare, particularly civil warfare, could be used for nationalistic ends. But that required a certain amount of conditioning: the productive capacity had to be turned away from self-interest, and toward the common interest; people had to be as greedy for the whole as they were had been for themselves. It called for the "right type of good citizenship, and, to get it, we must have progress, and our public men must be genuinely progressive."[\[30\]](#)

Such a re-education would of course require coercion; but it was an error to think of such force as oppressive or unjust from a progressive point of view. The meaning of “oppression” rested on the precepts of justice; but once those precepts were understood as historical, there could be no objection to the force used, because it was used to realize History itself. No legitimate criticism could exist without drawing from the same source – nor would the new Nationalism even feel coercive.^[31]

Lyman Abbott, one of Roosevelt’s strongest religious supporters, insisted that “[t]he New Nationalism is simply a later stage in the development of a continually developing Nationalism.” Accepting it was not any sort of discontinuity with the American promise at all: “it was never the intention of the founders that it should always be in its cradle.” The strongest opponents of Nationalism were, of course, the capitalist classes who viewed individual economic rights as the core of the American promise. But Abbott placed greater blame on the perpetuation of state governments, which were little more than a separation of power that prevented the growth of a progressive government. The Founders were never entirely clear on the nature of federalism anyway, nor were immediate developments in American political life in the favor of local governments. In fact, “[i]f the opponents of the New Nationalism in the successive stages of its development could have their way, the Constitution would never have been accepted by the colonies, and the Federal Union would not have been formed.”^[32] Abbott saw the steps toward the Nationalist state early on, even in the free market’s spontaneous “division of labor,” as Adam Smith described it. While that spontaneous organization is a miraculous thing, it could not perpetuate itself alone; the state, so far as it merged with society, had to maintain it. “What limit shall we put on the development of man; on his power and his right to combine and co-operate for the common welfare?” Abbott asked. “No limit. Absolutely none.” It was, quite simply, what human beings did to show their nobler capacities. The times had taken modern civilization to its present point, which meant that “[w]e cannot go back to the older order of we would; we would not if we could.” The world had realized, in a variety of ways, that palpable truth, articulated best by Edward Bellamy, that

[i]ndustrial interdependence is better than industrial independence. Combination and co-operate are better than isolation and competition. The way to destroy monopoly is not to destroy combination, but to take from combination the power which makes it monopoly... When it can neither induce nor compel such service, then it should undertake the service itself. Disorganization of industry is not a remedy for industrial justice.^[33]

But, much as Bellamy claimed, this was the necessary next step in human evolution. Theodore Roosevelt presented it in immediate political terms; but for other progressives, there was far more to Nationalism, or to collectivism in general, than what he portrayed for the public. Lockean liberalism of the previous century had seen itself as the end of human power, and nothing would surpass it. But there was more to do: bring about “interdependence.” Upon the year 1776, Richard T. Ely observed, there was “something axiomatic, as something belonging to the realm of natural law, that liberty is an inalienable right of all men.” From this came the truth that governments existed only to protect that liberty – and the best government was one that restrained itself in such a way that it could do nothing but protect that liberty. This “runs, as a red thread, through the entire social philosophy of that age, and must be borne in mind by one who would understand the theoretical and practical conclusions reached by that philosophy.” But the problem, Ely observed, was that such freedom was “essentially negative,” meaning it only sought to ensure the people of what the government

would not do, or what they would be free from. “The restrictions on liberty which were then noticed were restrictions of a political nature.” The American Founders, and their liberal counterparts in Europe, were doing little more than rehashing the very presuppositions they meant to escape. It presupposed as well the basic self-interest of individual persons. “Inasmuch as men were essentially equal,” he wrote, “each one could best guard his own interests individually, provided only the hampering fetters of the law should make way for a reign of liberty.”^[34]

This liberty remained hopelessly negative, constantly placing restraints and guarantees of what “none shall be deprived” of, and thus restricting the sort of positive, active freedom that had appeared in more recent times. The unfolding of history, though, showed a different story: true liberty, it turns out, means the positive, active, assertive power of the individual, albeit realized through the collective whole.^[35] This, Ely wrote, “was the “expression of the philosophy of liberty with which the twentieth century opens.” The basic facts about mankind were mere abstractions compared to the vast complexities of what truly made people what they were. Among other problems, this masks the sort of inequalities that occur behind legitimate and “free” institutions: the truth is that “in contract men who are in one way or another unequals, face each other, and that their inequality expresses itself in the contracts which determine their economic condition.” Usually, the “liberty of contract” thought to be so foundational to freedom as Americans understood it, so highly developed by the philosophers of liberty and so loved by the common people, is, in fact, “like the freedom of a slave, who chooses to work rather than to suffer under the lash.”^[36] Surely, there was a form of freedom truer than this.

II. The New Liberalism

The pursuit of Nationalism was but a method of drawing popular support to the broader progressive project; it was the hope that could be pulled out of the Darwinian despair that saturated modern America. It was meant to persuade many that Edward Bellamy’s vision of the future was achievable; that it would not require violent means, but simply modifications, which would bring out the nobler things in human nature; and that its greatest end would be the happiness of the American people. It presented to the people a vision of exactly what progressivism would do, should they choose to fully accept it. Something so unsettling obviously required a public surface, or an appearance as appealing as Theodore Roosevelt himself. Only an inspiring and visionary individual with a supremely good will and fiery patriotism could Mr. Roosevelt’s plan, as his friend Herbert Croly observed, was “either better than he knows or better than he cares to admit. The real meaning of his programme is more novel and more radical than he himself has publicly proclaimed. It implies a conception of democracy, and its purpose very different from the Jeffersonian doctrine of equal rights.”^[37] Roosevelt put a friendly face on the progressive project, to make all of its inner mysteries palatable. This was abundantly necessary, though, since those mysteries ran quite deep.

A. Civil Service for Democracy

What kind of thing was “the state” when it held such a relationship with democracy? It was quite different from the ancient city, the Roman idea of “government,” or even the Machiavellian “principality.” And, on its face, it seemed contrary to the ability of a democratic people to govern themselves. The perfection of democracy, though, would not happen on its own: it would require “mechanisms of developing and exchanging opinion,” as Croly put it, quite apart from “representative assemblies.”^[38] For American progressives, that was the true function of the state – precisely because it was un-elected, and designed to receive commands from the popular will. “Representation” was the fundamental problem: assuming that certain individuals could know the interests of the people on the basis of their personal virtue – that it could “obtain for rulers, men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue the common good of society” – was to ignore how disconnected from the people those officials could be. James Madison had been certain that “[d]uty, gratitude, interest, ambition itself, are the chords by which they will be bound to fidelity and *sympathy with the great mass of the people.*”^[39]

Still, Madison admitted that these things may be “insufficient to control the caprice and wickedness of man.” But, he asked, “are they not all that government will admit, and that human prudence can devise?”^[40] Early teachers of progressivism believed they found the superior approach in Europe, particularly the Prussian civil service. This was the means to the goal of history – and “the goal is to be realized, made actual,” according to Georg Hegel, the single most important philosopher of Historicism and the subsequent American forms of progressivism. The State was the only means powerful enough to make society evolve as it should, and keep apace with History: it is “the externally existing, genuinely ethical life,” he insisted. Hegel was convinced that “the laws of ethics” could not simply reside in individual persons, because they are “the rational itself.” The state was the purest expression human reason could ever achieve in society; it organized the public order according to the moral order of the human mind.^[41] “The proper goal of the State is to make this substantiality count in the actual doings of human beings and in their convictions, making it present and self-sustaining there.” Indeed, the State is nothing less than “the divine Idea, as it exists on earth. In this perspective, the State is the precise object of world history in general. It is the State that freedom obtains its objectivity, and lives in the enjoyment of this objectivity.”^[42]

Like many American intellectuals of his day, economist Richard T. Ely traveled to Europe to witness the wonder of the Hegelian civil service first hand, in hopes of bringing it back and finding ways to implement it in the United States. The civil service was “the one department of government in which Germany excels,” having been established under the diligent eye of Frederick the Great. It rested on the advanced science of management, which borrowed from Adam Smith’s “division of labor” in business, but applied it to the complexities of public life. More importantly, he understood that the state by its nature “existed for the people as a whole,” rather than the sovereign; the State was meant to become one with them, and, as Hegel taught, they were to find their place within it. This, of course, made tremendous demands on the Prussian civil servants, who held a truly elite social position, “ranking with the law, medicine, and theology.” This produced in them a certain honor code, which surpassed the same professional code that existed among doctors and lawyers. “They feel that they belong to an educated, honorable body of gentlemen. They have a high sense of honor, and strive to do nothing which shall bring reproach on their class.” They looked upon the downfalls of human nature as the purest evil – and something unthinkable among right-minded professionals like themselves. After “extensive conversations with civil service officers,” Ely was convinced that

the education and organization of civil servants in Prussia was, in fact, a method of arranging government that made the Madisonian system in America quite obsolete: there was no need for checks and balances on such inherently good men. “There is generally a manifest desire on the part of the authorities to secure the best man for the place,” he wrote, “and in a majority of cases the best man is found.” What he meant by “best,” however, was not the sort of character that Madison and the Founders, as well as the whole English Parliamentary system, looked to. Virtues were not as important as right principle – and above all, duty. Ely was quite aware of the difference: “While I should say that the development of morality in Germany is in some respects decidedly inferior to that in America and England, I believe it is undoubtedly superior in regard to the idea of duty accompanying a public trust.”^[43] The sort of character-based morality that persisted in the constitutions of the United States and England was, after all, the product of a world that held a cyclical view of history, and held that man’s highest end would always be something he could never attain. But Hegelian political philosophy proved otherwise, and the proof was evident in Prussia.

Still, others could not deny just how alien Prussia was from the United States.^[44] Much of this was clear in the fate of Hegel’s philosophy: the popular English translation of his work, while it may be “doubtless excellent,” was still “absolutely unintelligible to any but trained Hegelians,” according to Lester Frank Ward. Hegel’s work “consists of long, tedious passages, clothed in the most abstruse metaphysical language, which, though grammatically in construction, express to the ordinary reader no thought whatever.” And that was the least of his problems: even the handful of Americans with enough patience to labor through the old philosopher’s writings “will probably be disappointed with Hegel’s doctrines.” Indeed, the philosopher who had done so much to frame the modern mind, contribute to the metaphysical groundwork of progressivism, and give Darwinism its “spirit” and sense of direction, had himself become old – and, on the basis of his own philosophy, irrelevant. Ward confessed that in Hegel’s works, “there is nothing in them that can be considered profound, original, or even important.”^[45] Indeed, the man who foretold the end of history was unimportant to the people who were meant to receive it. Hegel provided the secret gnosis of History, which the elites knew, and the common people were expected to live.^[46]

It was Woodrow Wilson who best adapted the Hegelian teaching to the American mind. While disciple of Hegel, Wilson knew that the Prussian would never quite fit in with American democracy. Still, Wilson emphasized that the sort of administration which Hegel envisioned, and which Prussia had utilized, was not the sort of thing that characterized any particular order. “Bureaucracy” did not describe a certain kind of regime; it was instead the apparatus that made all regimes possible, even representative republics. Of each government, administration was the “most obvious part.” But that science had not developed well in the United States: as the people and their elected officials focused more on the Constitution and the institutions it created than the way those institutions carried out their tasks, administration was left to develop almost entirely by chance rather than thoughtful planning. Those who had truly meditated on administration were in Europe. “[I]t is a foreign science, speaking very little of the language of English or American principle,” Wilson wrote; it is “consequently in all parts adapted to the needs of a compact state, and made to fit highly centralized forms of government.” The United States may have been decentralized in an institutional sense – certainly a problem for a government that meant to endure when evolution taught the need for perfect synchronizing and unity. But, much like Croly, Wilson saw a more important unified body: the people themselves. Just as select bodies of servants had been gathered to aid kings, nobles, republican

officers, or even tyrants, so too would could administration be used to serve the new sovereign, who now spoke through a general will. We could “Americanize it,” Wilson wrote; administrative science “must inhale much free American air.”[47] In America, administration would not work for the body that did the ruling; it would instead directly serve the multitude. If nothing else, democracy signified a people who were no longer ruled from the outside. The people had become the sovereign itself, and were aware of their sovereignty – meaning that the administrative state was meant to serve them directly.[48]

The success of any administration was, of course, its people who staffed it. Herman Belz points out the premise in the progressive rejection of the rule of law: it was “the sense in which government affairs turned upon the political will and action of men rather than the automatic operation of impartial law.” That had always been the case, but for previous generations, it was understood that the rule of law was the rule over those men, not simply the power of law itself – for there was no such thing. [49]They had to be faithful servants devoted to their tasks; yet their basic weakness was always the way they could become infected with a special interest. Regimes could have their own priorities, but the administrators who served those regimes were, by definition, without priorities at all. But that problem existed before the advent of modern scientific education, now applied to social science with the same training in the natural sciences. It was the sort of “conscientiousness in spirit” that liberated them from the usual human passions; it gave them pure, absolute, scientific certainty rather than the old form of judgment and use of practical wisdom. Their education and professional calling “is removed from the hurry and strife of politics,” he wrote. Administration in a progressive age is “raised very far above the dull level of mere technical detail by the fact that through its greater principles it is directly connected with the lasting maxims of political wisdom, the permanent truths of political progress.” The State, as Wilson understood it, was a thing that assumes an organic character of society: all parts were perfectly adapted to the whole. “Society is not a crowd, but an organism,” he wrote, “and, like every organism, it must grow as a whole or else be deformed.” Like any organism, it must receive the conditions that would secure its growth, not according to a settled good, like the liberty of individual persons, but “by the development of its aptitudes and desires, and under their guidance.” The Madisonian representative sought something “better” than the mere desires of the public; but, for Wilson, that was a mere private judgment, or more often one shaped by the narrow-minded political forces in Washington, if not old-fashioned greed and ambition. The advantage of the State, however, was its ability to purify itself of those things by admitting those whose education had taught them the proper principles of progress. In this, it could reflect popular desires perfectly, and ensure that every one of the people’s demands and expectations were met. Wilson was aware of how even the most competent group of administrators could not always understand what the public required. This, for him, was the importance of the chief executive – not a product of the Constitution, but the individual who could become the supreme “leader of men.” An individual could be sensitive enough to the popular will to understand it, and order his administrative state accordingly. “He must read the common thought: he must test and calculate very circumspectly the preparation of the nation for the next move in the progress of politics,” Wilson wrote. That meant, of course, distinguishing the “firm and progressive popular thought from the momentary and whimsical popular mood, the transitory or mistaken popular passion.” Such a leader must always “discern and strengthen the tendencies that make for development. The legislative leader must perceive the direction of the nation’s permanent forces and must feel the speed of their operation.”[50] Wilson, like Croly and other progressives, saw within the people an inclination to develop into a

whole, despite the pessimism of the Founders and the Constitution they left behind.

The Constitution itself was not the sole obstacle to progress. Far more troubling was the “veneration which time bestows on every thing,” i.e., the oldness of the institutions it created, which had endured almost three generations and a civil war. When the things that support an opinion “are *ancient* as well as *numerous*, they are known to have a double effect.”^[51] The Constitution had lasted, though, because of its ability to check the base passions in people, which were the cause of destructive revolutions everywhere else. This, far more than oldness, commanded great respect: Americans could understand well enough by simply looking within themselves – a deep habit of Protestant faith, with its emphasis on the inherent depravity of the human will. That showed the value of a system that restricted most of the things the government might do – even the good things. It was a safety-net to the depravity of political impulses, which themselves sprung from the fallen condition of man, the scarcity of virtue, and the vast propensity toward vice, particularly when human beings are given power. But now, according to Wilson, there was a new kind of person: the public administrator, who was highly educated in the new social sciences. Such a character was pure of heart – an “angelic” type that Madison believed we would never meet, much less govern. Such a man therefore did not require any checks or restraints, because his scientific training ensured that he could only do good. Hence, the devices that would prevent us from sinking into the lows of tyranny were now the very things that prevented us from ascending to the heights of progress. The safety-net, once so wise and well-constructed, was not the greatest hindrance to the wonderful things government might do.

Herbert Croly also viewed the state as the essential apparatus for pure democracy and nationalism. Rather than represent, in the classic sense, government was meant “to provide a mirror for public opinion.” Democracy could proceed “independent of representative assemblies”; it found something “superior to that which it formerly obtained by virtue of occasional popular assemblages.” The State, just as Wilson envisioned it, was a mechanism that could become one with the people, and in that way, make them become one with each other. It would not only serve the sovereign like administrators had done for kings and aristocracies of the past; it would also help the democratic whole to improve itself. The State could become an extension of the general will – and at the same time, make the general will all the real. Croly knew that there was no small amount of danger in this: “Every precaution should be adopted to keep it in sensitive touch with public opinion,” he wrote. Any “lack of responsiveness to public opinion” could most certainly lead to a “domineering and oppressive” State. Nonetheless, such a “mechanism of direct government” was essential, and the ability to develop such a servant-State seemed very likely, given the Prussian model, and the visionary education that administrators would receive.^[52] “Though taking a cynical view of the conservatives’ rule of law,” Herman Belz observes, constitutional realists and progressives “did not relinquish altogether the constitutional symbol. What they did was to try to fill it with a different content. In general, realist critics were unreconstructed democrats who in their scholarship sought to provide an intellectual basis for political action” – i.e., to rationalize political power with the philosophy of progress – that would “revitalize constitutional government.” That meant, however, “energizing government to make it responsive to social needs and accountable to the popular will.”^[53]

This progressive turn to the State assumed that the most important feature of the Constitution was now void: there was no need for limits on political power because society could evolve beyond politics altogether; there was no need to check civil servants because they would be trained to do only the purest good. In earlier and less enlightened times, James Madison insisted that “[i]f men were angels, no government would be necessary” – or, more importantly,

if “angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”^[54] If angles came to rule over us – if even *one* angel appeared to rule over mankind in his omniscient benevolence, the most basic precepts of politics would wither away, and the system designed around those precepts would yield before the absolute rule of that perfect creature. But, of course, Madison’s point was that there are no angels, at least not when it came to framing and maintaining governments. In those tasks, mortals were alone. But progressives disagreed: education in the social sciences might turn some people into angels after all.

B. The State over the People

The difference between the active and passive principle was never clear when it came to understanding the progressive style of “democracy.” Was the state a direct reflection of the people, or were the people subject to the state? Did great leaders like Theodore Roosevelt embody their highest hopes, or did he *give* them those hopes? It did not entirely matter, though: such concepts of means and ends were, once again, pre-Darwinian notions. Once progressive methods were fully realized, there would be no reason for concern about what the people did with their government – nor would it matter at all what the state would do to the people. The state, understood in such a way, would always find justification for such actions, policies and experiments by appealing to the same sense of historical necessity from which it began. In this, progressivism was more rigid and hierarchal than the old Mugwumish elitism that existed before. Yet it was a good hierarchy, so far as it created an American democratic sense; the people would rule because the elites would serve them – and they would serve them best by shaping the public into the sort democracy it was supposed to be.

The fear of the Nationalist-progressive project came, of course, from those who saw it as “paternalism,” or the dominance of the state over the whole sphere of national life, which would not only stifle the wonders of the free market, but suffocate the human spirit. The disciples of William Graham Sumner and Herbert Spencer held that, for all its sentimentalism about human goodness, the only way for a progressive-style state to form was through coercive measures. The response to that criticism was one that would echo down into modern discourse on the role of administrative government in public life: that the current system *already* does all of the things that the capitalist class dreads, and that it should therefore progress in the direction it is already moving, rather than try to resist the obvious dictates of History. Richard T. Ely, for instance, wrote that the bulk of existing paternalism in the United States “is found in the industrial field.” The capitalist classes, who form the “modern industrial paternalism” are, in fact, no different from the feudal aristocracy of pre-modern times: they “enjoy large revenues, and they let others labor and fight and die for them. They support their own private armed troops [e.g., the Pinkertons] exactly as did the old feudal lords, and the basis of both claims is divine private rights.” There was “a paternalism of the rich.”^[55]

This was one more example of the escape from modern dichotomies, or the belief that there really was a way for society to evolve beyond politics and all of its usual distinctions. As Lester Frank Ward put it:

On the whole, there seems to be little danger that any of the extremes of popular opinion will ever prevail, but at the same time there is always a moderate, often rhythmic, drift in some direction, so that what were extremes are so no longer, and other unthought-of schemes occupy the van. It is this that constitutes social

progress.[\[56\]](#)

Similarly, Ely claimed like many others that the old perception of freedom was merely a step in the development of the current one. What progressives sought was not really “paternalism” at all. Such a word better described the older order, where the capitalist class ruled: the rich determined what was good for society, and had tremendous sway over the direction of what was supposed to be an objective, un-tainted constitutional republic. The true form of liberalism, the real severing from the past and vindication of human power, was “fraternalism.” It came from the recognition that “[t]he state and the state alone stands for us all.” Comparatively, all other institutions “are more or less exclusive, and stand for part of us – for some of us, not for all of us. As the state advances, as it becomes more ideal in its constitution and in its administration, as its fraternal, ethical essence becomes purer, its functions must ever grow wider and wider.” In modern times, though, the new stage of History was clear: “freedom implies participation in the activity of the state.”[\[57\]](#)

That was, once again, the view of Woodrow Wilson: a purified democracy had to be made, and the State was the instrument that could do it. The advantage of good administration had previously been its “definite locality, that it was contained in one man’s head, and that consequently it could be gotten at.” But now, with democracy,

the reformer is bewildered by the fact that the sovereign’s mind has no definite locality, but is contained in a voting majority of several million heads; and embarrassed by the fact that the mind of this sovereign also is under the influence of favorites, who are none the less favorites in a good old-fashioned sense of the word because they are not persons by preconceived opinions; *i.e.*, prejudices which are not to be reasoned with because they are not the children of reason.[\[58\]](#)

If the administrative state was to work for the democratic sovereign, that sovereign had to be taught to express itself in a way the state could hear. Plainly, that meant that the state would not only have to reform itself; it would have to assume a major role in reforming the public it was meant to serve, and conditioning it to speak with one voice. That, however, meant overcoming the timeless problem of democracy: the tendency of society to fragment into factions. It was a matter of “giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests,” and doing away with the things that incited people to care more about their own self-interest than that of the whole. The greatest obstacle was, of course, the fact that the “reason of man continues fallible,” according to Madison – a fact of human life that would never change, and would therefore always determine the course of politics. In every citizen, there was a connection “between his reason and his self-love,” meaning that most of what passes for reason is, in fact, mere rationalization of what he has already decided he wants.[\[59\]](#) For Wilson, though, that was not such an impossible thing after all. It was simply untried, particularly in Madison’s pre-Darwinian world, which was unaware of how malleable human beings actually were. This was an essential condition of progress: human nature had to be changed. It was a radical proposal for reform, but Wilson presented it knowing that “no reform may succeed for which the major thought of the nation is not prepared: that the instructed few may not be safe leaders, except in so far as they have communicated their instruction to the many, except in so far as they have transmuted their thought into a common, a popular thought.”[\[60\]](#) It an arduous task, no doubt, where the people underwent a drastic social transformation. It was what Croly meant by “clear-sighted and fearless work.”[\[61\]](#)

For some, the greatest obstacle for realizing that goal was the lingering effects of William

Graham Sumner's descriptive "survival of the fittest" style of Darwinism. The popular British columnist, Sidney Low pointed out that "survival" was not necessarily an indication of what was "fit." "The survival of the fittest, as everyone knows, or ought to know by this time, does not mean the survival of the best," he wrote. Rats and roaches could survive under conditions where eagles or lions could not; plainly, those who feared the "Cult of the Unfit" taking advantage of them by surviving missed the point of evolution. "It means only that those individuals and species have the best chance of living which are best adapted to their environment." Since the "best" is a highly relative term, Low insisted that the point of evolution falls far more into man's hands. It had to be admitted that Darwinism describes nothing; it only unleashes human power. It is man's business "to see that the survival of the fittest does mean the survival of the best, and to adapt the social environment to that purpose." This meant, of course, that "competition" could not be the prevailing thing. But "[c]ompetition is very far indeed from always leading to upward movement."^[62] It is a stagnant cycle, and does not show the true value of evolution the way the progressive interpretation does.

The State, on the other hand, was a thing that would ensure that the whole of society would progress as it should. Indeed, Mr. Darwin himself merely offered one small idea which greatly surpassed his immediate biological teaching. As the state "moves toward completeness," Low wrote, it will surely discover its own "full and specialized functioning, of all its members by means less terrible and more effective than the ruthless 'selection' of nature, the waste and cruelty of unrestrained competition." The state is to protect people, not only from foreign enemies, but "against ignorance, poverty vice, sloth, selfishness, avarice, and cunning, as well as against disease and crime." The State, in other words, is not to "'defy' natural laws"; it will instead "employ them for the general benefit."^[63]

Hence, the ability of the people to rule over themselves in the progressive sense would require no small amount of state control and conditioning: just as the direct experience of politics could train members of the township for political life, the State could teach them to join the national township. Tocqueville's maxim, though, was a serious test of Croly's claims: he was wise to point out that the enemies of democracy, both around the world and throughout history, held that central government "administers localities better than they could administer themselves." Such a State was established on the fact that "central power is enlightened and localities are without enlightenment, when it is active and they are inert, when it is in the habit of acting *and they are in the habit of obeying*." It was quite the other way around "when people are enlightened, awakened to their interests," as only the small, local township could do. It was not that administration could be made to serve democratic will; administration was fundamentally different in kind from democracy and all of the things that made it possible. The sort of democracy that Croly and Wilson sought to produce was therefore a construction of the State, rather than the next step in popular control. Ultimately, Tocqueville wrote, "when the central administration claims to replace completely the free cooperation of those primarily interested, it deceives itself and it wants to deceive you."^[64]

C. Forced Evolution

Most progressives who might read this would, once again, declare with Herbert Croly that such warnings spring pre-Darwinian views of politics. But there is no denying that Alexis de Tocqueville was not entirely pre-Darwinian: he was quite aware of the developmental nature of things, as well as the general movement of history in his time. All progressives could agree that “[e]verywhere the various incidents in the lives of peoples are seen to turn to the profit of democracy”; all people over the last couple of centuries, he observed, “have been driven pell-mell on the same track, and all have worked in common, some despite themselves, others without knowing it, as blind instruments in the hands of God.” Hence, Tocqueville’s warning was perfectly sound: democracy could be a tremendous fraud, and the pursuit of such a finely conditioned social order might very well be the condition of a new sort of tyranny.

Charles Darwin’s own protégé, Alfred Russel Wallace, showed this well in his teachings on human evolution and society. “We have risen, step by step, on the ladders and scaffolds erected by our predecessors,” he wrote. Yet this did not mean that modern civilization was any greater than those that preceded it: no matter how high it was on the evolutionary scale, one error could always bring collapse. The greater task was therefore to discover “the conditions under which that advance may be continued in the future.” Wallace emphasized that it was dominance that brought out the “higher types” of human beings: they were only realized when they were willing to make themselves perfect successors of the lesser classes. Simply being aware of this, though, as Wallace and so many other social Darwinists were, meant understanding the dire need of perpetuating the “higher types” – “whether any agencies are now at work or can be suggested as practicable, which will produce a steady advance, not only of human nature, but in those higher developments which now, as in former ages, are the exceptions rather than the rule.”^[65]

For Wallace, the only logical step after knowing evolution was deliberately *participating* in it. This was something that progressives said again and again; but it was only people like Wallace who fully articulated what that meant: the power of some had to be made absolute over others. But there was only one entity that could leave nothing to the deadly game of chance and ensure the fullest participation: the State. So while William Graham Sumner looked to a moralized “survival of the fittest,” Wallace looked to a planned and carefully managed evolutionary process. The “fittest” were not the most moral, or those who had received Sumner’s ideal private education; they were instead the “fortunate intermingling of germ-plasms of several ancestors calculated to produce or to intensify the various mental peculiarities on which the exceptional faculties depend.”^[66] If society had such a critical dependence on the genetic morality of its members, it could not be left to mere “evolutionary drift”; it had to be planned, and coordinated by the sovereign, which had to have the competent power to manage the most intimate aspects of private life.

On this point, however, Wallace’s socio-biological jargon took a sudden turn for the political, thus allowing him to join the progressive pundits of his era. In truth, the greatest threat to the full participation in evolution and the emergence of “higher types” was none other than liberty itself. Such an aimless and unplanned condition allows for “those vicious practices and degrading habits which the deplorable conditions of our modern social system undoubtedly foster in the bulk of mankind,” he wrote. People needed to be managed, or else they would all chase after their own pursuits, and develop all sorts of practices that might very well let the “unfit” types come to dominate. The potential for self-destruction was apparent: “[t]hroughout all trade and commerce lying and deceit abound to such an extent that it has come to be considered essential to success,” he observed. It was, of course, a strange complaint: were the base aspects of business the cause of bad “germ-plasms,” or were they merely the symptom? For

Wallace, the difference was unimportant. “No dealer ever tells the exact truth about the goods he advertises or offers for sale, and the grossly absurd misrepresentations of material and quality we everywhere meet with have, from their very commonness, ceased to shock us.”[\[67\]](#)

The idea of planned, deliberate, participatory evolution had been the key feature of Edward Bellamy’s thought as well. It was Darwinism, after all, that could bring a peaceful transition into Nationalism in his view, rather than violent socialist revolution. Speaking in an age of perfect Nationalism, one could say that “humanity has entered on a new phase of spiritual development of higher faculties, the very existence of which in human nature our ancestors scarcely suspected... We believe the race for the first time to have entered on the realization of God’s ideal of it, and each generation must now be a step forward.”[\[68\]](#) But, much like Sumner, he did not admit the full extent of Darwinism in this project. To hope for a mere mass-awakening, as he described it, or to achieve any meaningful social organization, was to ignore just how deficient certain segments of society were.

This was not at all to say that progressives based the entirety of their thinking on eugenics. Eugenics itself was but one school of thought in the progressive era. Darwinism was only the framework, not the sole explanation of how human beings could evolve. The popular British social-psychologist C. Lloyd Morgan, for instance, did much to distance progressivism from such a radical approach. The greatest kind of evolution was not biological, since that was only crude sort of materialism, which left out a great deal about what human beings actually were. According to Morgan, it was human consciousness that had to evolve, regardless of genetic dispositions. He wrote: “if natural selection be still operative among the individuals which constitute a civilized community, it follows that, by survival of the better endowed *intellectually and morally*, the level of human faculty must steadily rise from generation to generation.” Morgan conceded that evolution was not inevitable, and that it needed to be managed. But that management did not require anything so coercive as eugenics. It was, instead, a matter of education. Wickedness and corruption was a moral failing, just as common among those Wallace deemed “fit” as among the “unfit.” Such education came with the realization of progress itself – that the Nationalist promise was something that people had to earn, and that the State would train them to receive it, regardless of their genetic makeup. This meant, of course, letting go of all things traditional: “The authority of to-day is not, and should not be, the authority of yesterday. If it were, social evolution would be impossible.” If human beings were as much products of their society as progressive claimed, there was no reason to locate the core problem of politics within individual genetics: even the truest signs of “unfitness” were matters of social conditioning, based on needs and desires that all could understand. The way to improve them was to focus on elevating society, and teaching all that “they are heirs to a more highly evolved social environment; they are not themselves inherently brighter, but they reflect the brightness of a more luminous social sky.”[\[69\]](#)

Morgan saw poverty as the most obvious example. One could blame it on bad genetics, as Wallace did, or one could simply study the poor in order to see very plainly their desire to do better, if only they were shown the way out of their condition. The urban slum was nothing more than the “misapplication or the thwarting of the wholesome tendencies which man inherits,” Morgan wrote; it was not at all “the hot-bed of innate inequality and the spawning ground of hereditary vice,” as Wallace and his followers believed. The way to truly progress is by bettering the environment and bringing all people under that conditioning power, “by original work in art, science, and industry, and by education,” Morgan wrote.[\[70\]](#) Consciousness of evolution was not itself an evolutionary principle; it occurred in human thought – and it would continue that

way. The science columnist E. Kay Morgan agreed, when he pointed out how much the theory of evolution itself had evolved since Darwin wrote the *Origin of Species* nearly fifty years before. He asked, “What is it which struggles for existence in each creature?” Such a “Force of Life,” as he called it, could not simply be assumed; it too needed an explanation. The “New Evolutionist” addressed it, and recognized its tendency to deny the very evolution that gave it life. Survival of the fittest, particularly as it persisted in the *laissez-faire* views of William Graham Sumner, had to be defied and resisted: only then would evolution happen as it should, bringing “a certain advance beyond the necessities of life and exhibit[ing] excellence in form or conduct which cannot be explained as the mere result of adaptation to their surroundings.” The obvious proof of this was altruism. There was no Darwinian explanation for such behavior; it did not advance those who showed it, nor did it put the “unfit” in their proper place. Such goodness “should be suicidal from the point of view of the struggle for existence, yet those types become more and more dominant as the advance of civilized humanity proceeds.” It was therefore obviously an extension of the truly advanced thing in man – and the true explanation for progress itself.

But views like these were difficult to sustain: individuals were still parts of the polity, and its overall strength depended entirely on how each of them was prepared to serve the whole. Eugenicists were quick to point out how altruism could, in fact, positively encourage the sort of behavior that made democracy, or a social order of any kind, quite unworkable. For Wallace’s American devotee, Charles Davenport, there was no more fundamental source of the problem, nor a more certain place to begin creating the social conditions that progress required, than in the genetic makeup of the couples who produced offspring. Davenport made this point especially clear: the “lower types” were the single greatest social burden, and neither Nationalism nor education nor any other social organization could succeed until they were somehow purged out of the new system. It would take something more like “experimental evolution,” or what came to be called eugenics. It was critical to see that “until recently at least, human society was founded on a fundamentally wrong assumption that all men are created alike free agents, capable of willing good or evil, and of accepting or rejecting the invitation to join the society of normal men.” Letting go of such notions as rights and equality and dignity was the way to make evolution happen as it should. It began by recognizing that there are no such generalities about human society aside from the ones that power could impose on it; in truth, “the human protoplasm is vastly more complex than their philosophy conceived, and that the normal man is an ideal and hardly a real thing.” Davenport catalogued a long list of deep-seated genetic features that made the members of society what they were – and which, in turn, determined the condition and fate of the societies in which they lived. Such features could be maximized or rightly ordered, since “[n]o amount of training will develop that of which there is no germ,” he wrote; “you may water the ground and till it and the sun may shine on it, but where there is no seed there will be no harvest.” Like Wallace, Davenport’s only solution was therefore a method of *complete* social control, all the way down to the most intimate aspects of each individual life. It was the same principle that appeared in Roosevelt’s conservationism: it came from knowing “that this protoplasm is our most valuable national resource, and that our greatest duty to the future is to maintain it and transmit it improved to subsequent generations, to the end that our human society may be maintained and improved.” Davenport allowed the same Bellamy-esque humanity and kindness of heart in such a eugenic project: since “reason cannot overcome the sentiment against destruction of the lowest-grade imbeciles,” the next best thing was mandatory sterilization, which many state legislatures implemented as an aspect of their police

powers.[71]

Wallace and Davenport captured the true condition of the progress that people like Roosevelt and Croly and Wilson were seeking: they saw that all of the talk of progressive democracy required some sort of radical alteration, not of society or government, but in the actual human beings who constituted those things. “It is no doubt true,” Herbert Croly admitted, that the progressive project depended greatly, if not entirely, on the “possibility of improving human nature by law.” Though Croly may not have embraced the full scope of eugenics, that sort of social control was latent in his thought, and he did occasionally concede it: to be “successful in its purpose,” the progressive State “would improve human nature by the most effectual of all means, that is by improving the methods whereby men and women are bred.” Indeed, there could be no doubt that “[d]emocracy must stand or fall on a platform of possible human perfectibility.”[72] The American people could find a pure democracy on the surface only when affairs beneath the surface were controlled and conditioned rightly. No amount of education, as Morgan and the more gentle progressives saw it, could ensure such a thing. Croly asked the right question, and the eugenicists gave the only plausible answer. If reform meant rejecting American natural right, the only thing that could replace it, and give justification for “progressive democracy” was power, and absolute control at the hands of those who could create the right kind of community.

Conclusion: Cycles of American Liberalism

Some who identified with the progressive movement showed refreshing candor about their views. One editorialist in *The Living Age* put it this way: “Of all modern ideas, the belief in progress is perhaps the one which has come nearest to the strength of a religion; and like a religion, it is exposed to the vicissitudes from the moods and circumstances of believers.” Still, all those conflicts among the faithful would never raise any doubts about one common assumption; they would only argue about the proper means of realizing progress, or meeting the new demands of History. Progressivism was, of course, an idea which fit well with the era in which it appeared. “There is something in its very nature which invites us to embrace it in passionate action, or repose on it comfortably as a fact.”[73] This revealed the inner pragmatism of the era: the truth of progress, like anything else, rested on its ability to *work* for people. It was, objectively speaking, no better than the conventional order of things it denounced; for all its claims about the reality of History, the more thoughtful progressives admitted that it did not actually lead anywhere, or offer any substantial promises. As Louis Menand put it in his study on the origins of modern American thought: “In the end, you will do what you believe is ‘right,’ but ‘rightness’ will be, in effect, the compliment you give to the outcome of your deliberations.” The whole perception of the good so central to political deliberation and the framing of government “is something that appears in its complete form at the end, not at the beginning, of your deliberations.” It boiled down to a single claim: “people are the agents of their own destinies” – not in choosing the good, but *making* the good.[74] Progressivism was preferable to all other things because progressives chose to believe in it.

For all its weaknesses, such pragmatism was the only measure of political truth left, as the American promise collapsed with the Civil War. It was not only because of the loss of faith in the Union, or the assumption that belief in absolutes of any kind leads to violence; the precepts of the Union itself had disappeared, and brought down the entire Western intellectual tradition

with it. “Stately edifices of presumption or idea have crashed into the dust, and left us with a new view of the civilization that we dwell in”; progress was plainly “the refuge men discovered when the idea of Providence was shaken... [it was] the impulse to make a shelter against an indifferent universe,” the columnist wrote. Beneath all of the calls to overcome class-struggle, cure political corruption, and seek a Bellamy-style Nationalism, or even the view of History or the next step in human evolution, there was the realization that there is no objective foundation for modern values, and that chaos is no less preferable than peace; “[p]rogress is an empty vessel till it has been filled with our ideals, and it cannot even be imagined except in terms of some value beyond itself.”^[75] But the point, once again, was to face that horrifying void – and then choose peace, because that was simply the choice of decent, rational, civilized people.

This, no doubt, is the best explanation for the second wave of liberalism to overtake the country in the 1960s. Consider the words of the Port Huron Statement, the bedrock of campus radicalism in the early Vietnam Era. The most revolting thing for these students was not “conservatism” in today’s sense (which did not fully appear as a substantial political force until the 1980s). It was instead the ideas from the *previous generation* of Wilsonian progressives, who then occupied faculty positions at the major universities. They were the intellectual decedents of what was once the “new elite,” entrusted with maintaining the administrative state in the service of democracy, so idealized by young Woodrow Wilson and Richard Ely. The campus radicals of this era took direct aim at what liberals of the previous generation preached, which had become “dominant conceptions of man in the twentieth century: *that he is a thing to be manipulated*, and that he is inherently incapable of directing his own affairs.” That idea, so central to making democracy work and ensuring that political life was attuned to history, was not the most horrific idea, which the New Left sought to disown. “We oppose the depersonalization that reduces human beings to the status of things – if anything, the brutalities of the twentieth century teach that means and ends are intimately related, that vague appeals to ‘posterity’ cannot justify the mutilations of the present.”^[76] Such a protest rings with opposition to the Wilsonian vision of the malleable society at the hands of a “leader of men” – that “men are as clay in the hands of the consummate leader” – which carried on the campus culture and understanding of curriculum they so despised.^[77] The previous generation of progressives achieved nearly everything they wanted – and the new generation of 60’s progressives revolted against them.

This happened, though, because the deeper foundation for progressive American democracy was unveiled – and it turned out there was nothing to see. With the secret out, there was a new distrust of the administrative state, however idealized it might have been among the older generation of progressives; there was only the power of the people themselves – or, rather, the youths who had the sort of explosive energy to make democracy work. It would work through radical activism, since carefully planned scientific know-how had failed to create a new kind of human dignity, and therefore needed to be destroyed.

[1] W.S. Lilly, “Darwinism and Democracy,” *Littell’s Living Age* 186, 2174 (Feb. 20, 1886): 456.

[2] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), 231-232. This mixture of terror and excitement about modernity was made especially famous in Adams’ depiction of “the dynamo,” the symbol of the new technological age. “To him, the dynamo itself was but an ingenious channel for conveying somewhere the heat latent in a few tons of poor coal hidden in a dirty engine house carefully kept out of sight; but to Adams, the dynamo became a symbol of infinity.” It was, in fact, a method of power that actually created right – “a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross.” *Ibid.*, 380. This, of course, brought an end to any fixed concept of good government. A rightly-ordered society was, as it had always been, a permanent idea, which stood unchanging against the flux of human life. For all the confusion that came with the lives of nations, there had

always been a view of the general good, which founders tried to approximate, and which reformers sought when they hoped to improve things. It was nothing they created, but a set of self-evident truths known to all. But such predetermined goals about human ends, even as they appeared explicitly in the American proposition, were “clouded by the undetermined values of twentieth-century thought,” according to Adams. In this, he spoke for his entire generation, who suffered the bleakest despair with the loss of American natural right. In all areas of life, “the American boy of 1854 stood nearer the year 1 than to the year 1900. The education he had received bore little relation to the education he needed.” Receiving the sort of education in the context of the old world – focused, as it was, on eternal things – was “no education at all,” he wrote. “He knew not even where or how to begin.” *Ibid.*, 53.

[3] Sidney Low, “Darwinism and Politics,” *Living Age* 263, 3403 (Oct. 2, 1909): 6.

[4] John Dewey, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” in *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1910), 1. Its true significance was greatly confused by the religious clamor about the way evolution conflicted with the Book of Genesis. There was far more to it than that, according to Dewey: evolution undermined both Jerusalem *and* Athens, though it was a far greater problem for philosophy than revelation; it did more damage to Plato, Aristotle, and the whole legacy of Western philosophy than it did to the Bible. He was quite correct in his assessment of Darwinism’s place in modern America. One editorialist in an 1867 issue of the *Round Table* argued that “[a]s science advances and nature is more and more penetrated, we must all be willing to admit that that our previous conception of the Deity and his modes of action... is necessarily imperfect.” The whole idea of natural selection “strengthens our faith in intelligent action, and adds to our conception of its grandeur,” he wrote. But, as always, such notions were presented not so much as descriptive methods, but as the groundwork for manipulation: “Natural selection is a law which works toward its good, and only the good, of every existing thing,” and its unfolding “will open a vista to human progress the grandest which has been presented by any philosophy of history”; in this, it was “eminently in harmony with the Christian conception of the destiny of humanity and of the supernatural power which guides the progress of the race.” “The Religious Aspect of Darwinism,” *The Round Table* 6, 129 (Jul. 13, 1867): 22. All Darwinism, it seemed, was social Darwinism, and for many Christians, it appeared to be a far clearer way of seeing God’s purposes on earth.

[5] “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” *Ibid.*, pp 17; 19.

[6] Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1918), 34.

[7] Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1917), 175. *Constitutional Government* was a series of lectures that Wilson delivered at Columbia University in 1907. The book itself received scant attention until it was reprinted in 1912, when Wilson ran for president. His publisher, Harper & Brothers, “recommend it as a ‘vivid portrayal’ of its subject,” according to one reviewer in the *New York Times*, “and, remarking that at that time ‘the author had no thought that he would occupy the great office of which he wrote,’ venture the suggestion that ‘it is of peculiar interest to note how theory and practice have met.’” Wilson’s second run in 1916 was, no doubt, an “aspiration with admirable candor. He invites general comparison of his conduct and his character with the lofty standard elaborated in his study.” “Mr. Wilson’s Study of the Presidency,” *New York Times*, Aug. 20, 1916. This demonstrates how well Wilson’s progressive vision resonated with the American people at the time, though his approach would collide with the very people the state was meant to serve in later years with the rise of anarchic protests in continued labor unrest.

[8] Bradley C.S. Watson, *Living Constitution, Dying Faith: Progressivism and the New Science of Jurisprudence* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2009), 5

[9] William Jennings Bryan, “Has the Election Settled the Money Question,” in *North American Review* 163, CCCCLXXXI (Dec. 1896): 703.

[10] Theodore Roosevelt, “Who is a Progressive?” *The Outlook* (Apr. 13, 1912): 809.

[11] Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 11.

[12] F.A.P. Barnard, “Republican Government Under the American Constitution,” *The Chautauquan: A Weekly Newsmagazine* 8, 1 (Oct. 1887): 11.

[13] His training and his status were no coincidence: “By mid-century, the synthesis of physics and chemistry in the principle of conservation of matter, new theories of thermodynamics, and advances in physiology and biology that were bringing fundamental facts of organic and human life under scientific explanation, all suggested that natural science had the power to provide a total worldview,” according to Dorothy Ross. “At the same time, through technology, science was literally remaking the world.” *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54. Plainly, such expertise did not require careful thinking about politics and society; scientific progress was, quite simply, the absolute doctrine of the day.

- [14] *Ibid.*, 12.
- [15] Federalist #49, in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, eds. Charles R. Kesler and Clinton Rossiter (New York: Signet Classic, 2003), 312.
- [16] Theodore Roosevelt, "What 'Americanism' Means," *Forum* (Apr. 1894): 102.
- [17] William V. Rowe, "National Tendencies and the Constitution," *The North American Review* 186, 615 (May 17, 1907): 149. Rowe referred, in particular, to President Theodore Roosevelt, whose "life and action" were an example, "and of his personal force and initiative in what we may term this new life of the nation." *Ibid.*
- [18] Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1911), pp. 5-6; 263.
- [19] *Ibid.*, pp. 30; 35.
- [20] John Dewey was aware of this tendency among new schools of "liberals." Precisely the same thing had happened with the older liberalism of John Locke and Adam Smith. The rise of manufacture and commerce created a whole new industrial aristocracy; but "[t]his statement does not imply that the intellectual leaders of the new liberalism were themselves moved by hope of material gain." For all their praise of the reliability of selfishness in framing a social order, "they formed a group animated by a strikingly unselfish spirit, in contrast with their professed theories." This was detached point of view was, of course, "a function that defines the genuine work of the intellectual class of any period." Still, there was no denying the flawed nature of their motive: they might have been as voices crying in the wilderness if what they taught did not coincide with the interests of a class that was constantly rising in prestige and power." *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), pp. 12-13. The first edition was published in 1935, when the older liberalism was obviously in serious question for many Americans.
- [21] C. Lloyd Morgan, "The Conditions of Human Progress," in *The Monist: A Quarterly Magazine Devoted to the Philosophy of Science* 10, 3 (Apr. 1900): 438.
- [22] Theodore Roosevelt, "The Right of the People to Rule," in *American Progressivism: A Reader*, ed. Ronald J. Pestritto (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), pp. 251-252.
- [23] Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), pp. 265.
- [24] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), pp. 62; 63.
- [25] William Jennings Bryan, "Has the Election Settled the Money Question," 709.
- [26] *Progressive Democracy*, pp. 268-270.
- [27] *Ibid.*, 271.
- [28] Theodore Roosevelt, "What 'Americanism' Means," pp. 196-198.
- [29] Theodore Roosevelt, "Nationalism and Progress," *Outlook* 97, 2 (Jan. 14, 1911): pp. 57-59.
- [30] "The New Nationalism," in *The New Nationalism* (New York: The Outlook Company, 1910), pp. 10-12; 31-32.
- [31] Richard T. Ely proposed this long before Roosevelt, when he claimed that the whole point of progressive education was to create a militaristic sense of urgency and action in the people. Earlier approaches to education, while they might train people for democracy, "did not go far enough," he wrote. "It is a more and more difficult undertaking to fit the individual for complicated modern society, and what is needed is that socially we should undertake this with as great care as a powerful military nation like Germany devotes to the preparation of each individual soldier for warfare." This was the kind of education that would prepare the people "not only for maintaining but for advancing civilization." "Social Progress," in *The Cosmopolitan: a Monthly Illustrated Magazine* 3, 1 (May, 1901): 62. Ely's article featured an elaborate illustration of a young man in front of a book, with the banner behind him saying "Social Progress." Behind him was a sphere labeled "social selection," which encompassed one that said "individualism." Beneath him were two fishermen, one with a hat that said "optimism," and another labeled "pessimism," the optimist catching the fish. It was plainly a cryptic image, which perhaps not even Ely could understand. Such was the opaque nature of progressive teachings, at least when they were presented to a popular audience.
- [32] Lyman Abbott, "The New Nationalism," *Outlook* 96, 9 (Oct. 29, 1910): pp. 484-485.
- [33] Lyman Abbott, "An Open Letter," *Outlook* 104, 17 (Aug. 23, 1913): pp. 890-891.
- [34] Richard T. Ely, *Studies in the Evolution of an Industrial Society* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), pp. 339-400.

[35] On this point, Ely quoted at length the influential Thomas Hill Green, who claimed that “[w]hen we measure the progress of a society by the growth in freedom, we measure it by the increasing development and exercise on the whole of those powers of contributing to social good with which we believe the members of the society to be endowed; in short, by the greater power on the part of the of the citizens as a body to make the most and best of themselves.” *Ibid.*, 403. No other freedom was as true as the assertive kind, which even the followers of John Locke and Adam Smith realized when it came to contracts formed for the acquisition of wealth. At the same time, no other kind of freedom was more restricted by all of the others seeking their wealth. The unleashing of real liberty came when the individual could work through the whole.

[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 403-404.

[37] *Promise of American Life*, 173.

[38] *Progressive Democracy*, 265.

[39] James Madison, Federalist #57, in *Federalist Papers*, pp. 348. (Emphasis added.) Populists like William Jennings Bryan were still confused about the possibilities of the progressive State. Those who “framed financial policy for the whole people” could not do so “unless they are entirely free from the selfishness which is generally supposed to be a well-nigh universal trait of mankind.” Hence, the only solution was to have a populist victory, or allow the people to seize the power of government through peaceful elections.

[40] *Ibid.*, 350-351.

[41] The idea that government is an expression of public reason was the Founders’ idea as well. James Madison said in Federalist #49, for instance, that “the reason, alone, of the public, that ought to control and regulate the government.” The difference, though, is the fact that reason was not meant to rule pure and simple; “the passions ought to be controlled and regulated by the government.” *Federalist Papers*, 314. Without that right ordering of law over politics – which resembled the classical reason over passion in the human soul, political factions would dominate law, and overpower a just order. For Hegel, however, and the American progressives who followed him, the problem of politics was not human passions at all. Such tendencies did not need to be controlled when they could be eliminated through the right sort of education and public conditioning. Far more dangerous was the tendency of old things to dominate new things.

[42] Georg Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Translated by Leo Rausch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), pp. 19; 41-42

[43] Richard T. Ely, “The Prussian Civil Service,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 1, 5 (May, 1883): pp. 451; 453-454; 458. The Prussian civil service was, of course, the fulfillment of William T. Rowe’s idea for American social elites. Ely quotes from one of the royal statements on civil service from October 23, 1817: “It is the object of the government to make use of the intellectual powers of the nation and of the individual in the administration, and to do this in the most simple effective manner. Opportunity will be afforded to distinguished talent, without regard to social rank or station, to employ the same for the general good.” *Ibid.*, 546. Ely’s encounter with the Prussian system inspired his call for a new kind of American university. For many years, “[t]hose who desired to pursue a course of study designed especially to enable them to become well-informed editors, skillful chemists, or thorough teachers in our highest institutions of learning, were obliged to go to Europe,” he wrote. Even those who those who wished to study their own American history and institutions went to Germany to understand them better. But “[t]he necessity of this was first removed six years ago by the establishment of Johns Hopkins University.” Johns Hopkins was, of course, the first American university based on the German model, with a variety of specialized majors, where “advanced students” take classes on “the best methods of carrying out proposed reform,” in a class called “Principles and Practice of Administration with special reference to Civil Service problems and Municipal Reform.” The concern was, of course, that the university would neglect its liberal arts curriculum, which might ensure that the next generation of reformers and civil servants would be moral. Ely promised that “[a]mong the its professors and students are to be found numerous workers in missions and Sunday-schools, particularly among the convinced in the Maryland State Penitentiary.” That was adequate guidance for the students who would no doubt wield tremendous social power, should the United States government ever appoint them to the position of civil servants. “It is safe to predict,” Ely concluded, that Johns Hopkins “will continue to satisfy in increasing degree the need of the country for a true university.” “The Johns Hopkins University,” *Christian Union* 26, 8 (Aug. 24): 146.

[44] Ely later admitted that “the role which we assign to the state as a cooperative institution will depend upon our wishes and ideals” – and those would be a reinforcement of the basic precepts that make democracy possible. Richard T. Ely, “Paternalism vs. Paternalism in Government,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* LV, 5 (Mar. 1898): pp. 783.

[45] Lester Frank Ward, "Hegel on the State," *The Social Economist* 7 (Jul. 1894): pp. 32-33.

[46] Ward knew that "this is perfectly commonplace": a philosophy that presents historicism must itself be subject to History when history moves on. Hegel "evidently believed that mankind had attained in Germany in the first quarter of the nineteenth century the highest estate that philosophy could prescribe." Such a pinnacle of intellect, though, could not be maintained; "[o]ne is perpetually surprised at the smallness of the results achieved through such heavy muffled blows. The mountain labors and brings fourth a mouse." *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

[47] Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly* 2 (July, 1887): 202.

[48] Much of this had to do with Wilson's historicist perception of human ends. James Madison pointed out that, for all its institutional safeguards, it rested "above all" on "the vigilant and manly spirit which actuates the people of America – a spirit which nourishes freedom, and in return is nourished by it." *Ibid.* For all its institutional checks, the Constitution still depended on the virtue of citizens; the capacity of personal self-government was *the* condition of self-government politically. Wilson, on the other hand, did not view man's highest end as something that rested in the individual, but as part of the collective whole, organized by the state. Hence, the qualities that seemed to make "great Americans" were not their habits and inner dispositions, but "a peculiar stamp of character," making them the "specific product of our national life." There was, in fact, "an American type of man," Wilson believed, "and those who have exhibited this type with a certain unmistakable distinction and perfection have been great 'Americans'." "A Calendar of Great Americans," *Forum*, XVI (February, 1894): 715.

This was most apparent in great leaders: their greatness was not in themselves, but in their ability to shape that whole, and change it according to their own exertions of power. Such a leader "handles questions of change: his constitution is always a-making." Accordingly, the leader's standards are set "not by law, but by opinion: his constitution is an ideal of cautious and orderly change." *Ibid.*, 717. This was the necessary consequence of rejecting virtue: character could only mean a matter of force. "We are on the eve of a great reconstruction," he wrote. "It calls for creative statesmanship [sic] as no other age has done since that great age in which we set up the government under which we live." *The New Freedom* (New York: Doubleday Page & Company, 1913), 30. That reconstruction, though, did not occur inevitably, nor, if it did occur, did it depend on the virtue of political prudence. "Those only are leaders of men, in the general eye, who lead in action," he wrote. "The men who act stand nearer to the mass of men than do the men who write; and it is at their hands that new thought gets its translation into the crude language of deeds." He wrote this several years before his presidency. His ideas on leadership were fully developed when he entered the White House, and they were deeply rooted in his philosophy of progress. Progress happened, not through deliberation, but by powerful assertion. Yet it was not so much the leader's own assertion as the way he reflected the people, particularly through sympathy. "That the leader of men must have such sympathetic insight as shall enable him to know quite unerringly the motives which move other men in the mass is of course self-evident," he wrote. He was to be the sum of their hopes and fears; the true leader was one who could understand the people as a multitude, and become the embodiment of their general will. At the same time, though, what the people actually were was something of the leader's own making. He would sympathize with the very condition that he himself engineered through his own assertive power. This was necessary in light of the diversity of views that appear in society – especially American society. The solution to the problem of faction was, quite simply, the leader.

[49] Herman Belz, "The Critique of Constitutionalism in the Progressive Era," in *Living Constitution or Fundamental Law?: American Constitutionalism in Historical Perspective* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 59.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

[51] Federalist # 49, in *Federalist Papers*, pp. 311-312.

[52] Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, pp. 264-265; 272.

[53] *Living Constitution or Fundamental Law?* 72.

[54] James Madison, Federalist #51, in *The Federalist Papers*, 319.

[55] Richard T. Ely, "Paternalism vs. Paternalism in Government," *Ibid.*, 782.

[56] Lester Frank Ward, "Plutocracy and Paternalism," *Forum*, Nov. 1895, 300.

[57] *Ibid.*, 781. Ely revealed a view of man that explained a great deal about why the state was meant to do what he claimed. An honest view of mankind was one that knew "there are many classes in every modern community composed of those who are virtually children, and who require paternal and fostering care, the aim of which should be the highest development of which they are capable." *Ibid.* This did not mean they were meant to become adults, politically or morally speaking, or that they would realize the end for which they were intended as individual persons. It was instead the sort of end which they created for themselves, as expressions of democratic ideals, and

which the state would then help make them realize. If human beings have it within them to be kind and generous and community-minded, and all the other priorities so central to democracy, the progressives asked: what is the purpose of government if not to *make* them realize those things?

[58] Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Ibid.*

[59] James Madison, Federalist #10, in *Federalist Papers*, pp. 72-73.

[60] Woodrow Wilson, "Leaders of Men," in *Woodrow Wilson: The Essential Political Writings*, ed. Ronald J. Pestritto and William J. Atto (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 221.

[61] Croly, *Promise of American Life*, 6.

[62] Sidney Low, "Darwinism and Politics," in *Living Age*, pp. 6-7.

[63] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

[64] *Democracy in America*, pp. 85-86.

[65] Alfred Russel Wallace, "Human Progress: Past and Future," *The Arena*, Jan. 1892, pp. 145-145; 149.

[66] *Ibid.*, 155.

[67] *Ibid.*

[68] Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (New York: Signet Classics, 2000), 190. These were the words of a sermon, delivered by Mr. Barton, a prominent minister in Bellamy's utopia.

[69] C. Lloyd Morgan, "The Conditions of Human Progress," pp. 423; 432; 434.

[70] *Ibid.*, 435.

[71] Charles B. Davenport, "Influence of Heredity on Human Society," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Jul. 1909): pp. 16; 20-21. The special issue was titled, "Race Improvement in the United States."

[72] *Promise of American Life*, 39-40.

[73] "What is 'Progress'?" *The Living Age* (Jul. 24, 1920): pp. 222-223.

[74] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 352; 370.

[75] *Ibid.*, 225.

[76] "The Port Huron Statement," in Peter Lawler and Robert Schaefer, *American Political Rhetoric: A Reader* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 204.

[77] Woodrow Wilson, "Leaders of Men," in *Woodrow Wilson: The Essential Political Writings*, 214.