

The Refounding of America

The “progressive” label is back in vogue; politicians of the Left routinely use it to describe themselves, hoping to avoid the radical connotations associated with being “liberal” in the post-Reagan era. The irony in this is manifold, especially because the aim of the movement to which the name refers, the late-19th- and early-20th-century progressive movement, was anything but moderate.

If the progressive label seems less radical today, it is only because progressivism is less well known than its liberal progeny. It was initially an academic phenomenon far removed from American politics. Particularly in the post-Civil War American university, professors – many of whom had obtained their graduate training in German universities, and whose thought reflected the “intoxicating effect of the undiluted Hegelian philosophy upon the American mind,” as progressive Charles Merriam once put it – articulated a critique of America that was as deep as it was wide. It began with a conscious rejection of the natural-rights principles of the American founding and the promotion of a new understanding of freedom, history, and the state in their stead. From this foundation, the progressives then criticized virtually every aspect of our traditional way of life, recommending reforms or “social reorganization” on a sweeping scale, the primary engine of which was to be a new, “positive” role for the state. As the progressives’ influence in the academy increased, and growing numbers of their students sallied forth into all aspects of endeavor, this intellectual transformation gradually began to reshape the broader American mind, and, in time, American political practice. “A new regime in thought,” as Eldon Eisenach writes, “began to become a new regime in power.”

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