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American Progressivism: Transnational, Modernization, and Americanist Perspectives¹

“We are doing very different things in this country; we are animated by different motives; we are living in different ages”, remarked urban affairs writer Frederic Howe at the end of his 1913 book, *European Cities at Work*². During the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century, Howe was an influential advocate for American cities emulating European initiatives in urban social services, public administration, and planning. Yet even self-consciously cosmopolitan writers such as Howe emphasized that European innovations needed to be adapted to conditions and traditions distinctive to the United States. American observers of European reform did not always understand the context and details of the German, British, and French ideas and measures they wrote about. Moreover, American reform writers were aware of their vulnerability to the charge of importing foreign statist, authoritarian, and collectivist ideas, and so they did not always present European debates in unvarnished terms. Still, the insistence of progressives such as Howe that while American progressivism overlapped with European social democracy, American reform movements had historical roots and qualities distinct from European counterparts arose from observation, understanding, and choice more than from patriotic pandering, dissimulation, or self-referential exceptionalism.

This essay takes a skeptical look at the transnational interpretations of American progressivism put forth by prominent historians during the late twentieth century. While recognizing the usefulness of a transnational analysis of this major episode in American political development, the essay draws attention to alternate perspectives that have remained popular and retained analytical utility. One durable mode of interpretation, familiar to scholars in different countries, arises loosely from modernization theory and emphasizes the comparative – as opposed to transnational – study of reform movements in different modernizing countries. The second alternate mode of analysis, which I label *Americanist*, was perhaps more vibrant and was certainly more reflective of the day-to-day practice of his-

¹ The author thanks Ian Tyrrell and Walter Nugent for lengthy comments on an earlier draft. He also thanks Robert D. Johnston for sharing with him relevant work-in-progress.

² *Frederic Howe, European Cities at Work* (New York 1913) 360.

tory in the United States than transnational or comparative methodologies. In many countries, the word *Americanist* refers to anyone who studies the United States in an academic way, but here I mean studies of progressivism (or other matters) animated by concerns *internal to* the United States. The overall point is that transnational research and argument has deserved the attention it has received for broadening the context of American history and combating intellectual and popular parochialism. Nevertheless, American scholars in practice continue to follow alternate frameworks and agendas.

In this international book of skeptical essays about modernity, the word *progressive* can be a distraction. The word and criticism of it have an international history intertwined with myriad modernist discourses on modernity. Despite stereotypes of the country as heedlessly devoted to progress with few doubts or even reflection, the United States has produced a powerful literature of misgivings, represented by writers as diverse as William James, Henry Adams, Lewis Mumford, and Christopher Lasch³. Nevertheless, an overriding tendency to identify aspects of American society with progress itself has long existed, and this became a volatile element in transnational history as United States influence expanded beyond North America. Embraced by American social and political reformers early in the twentieth century, *progressive* did suggest an identity between American institutions, culture, and technology – at least aspects which progressives saw as modern-minded and not retrograde – and the advance of civilization. Against such a background, many foreign and American readers cannot encounter *progressive* applied to an era of United States history and resist the impulse to deconstruct the notion in a way that highlights its triteness, presumptuousness, ethnocentrism, and frequent amorality. For the moment, one might leave aside the question of whether the United States has stood for progress defined as the advance of humane values. The question at hand is how to analyze the reform movements that gave the Progressive Era its name in relation to analogous movements elsewhere.

Transnational Perspectives

The 1990s and 2000s saw an upsurge in efforts to apply the concept of transnationalism to progressivism, among other aspects of United States history. The notion of a *transnational* analysis has suffered the defect of being fashionable and tied to intellectual good causes; people spread the term so readily onto whatever they write about that it threatens to lose analytical usefulness. The defining characteristic of a transnational approach, according to Ian Tyrrell, the excellent Australian historiographer and practitioner of transnational history, is de-emphasis on

³ See *Christopher Lasch*, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York 1991). For a critique, *Andrew Hartman*, *Christopher Lasch: Critic of Liberalism, Historian of Its Discontents*, in: *Rethinking History* 13 (2009) 499–519.

events and trends within the boundaries of the nation-state in favor of cross-border events, trends, and movements that reveal a country to be “culturally, economically, and socially porous”, shaped by interactions with other parts of the world. Transnationalism stresses “the movement of peoples, ideas, technologies, and institutions across national boundaries” and envisions the national-state as “not the only historical ‘actor’”, but as only one, albeit an important locus of activity and power in a world that is “multilayered, including regional and global dimensions”⁴. As Tyrrell explains, starting with Progressive Era scholars such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard, many American historians did try to place the United States in a broad geographic, economic, and political context. Still, transnationalists are correct to charge that for much of the twentieth century, Americans often wrote and talked as though the main shaping factors of United States history were internal, with even neighboring countries such as Mexico only episodically impinging on developments within the country’s borders.

Starting in the 1980s, the Organization of American Historians gave significant support to initiatives such as the La Pietra conferences to work through the conceptual problems of transnationalism and to develop professional frameworks to sustain such research. Some reasons for the turn within United States history toward transnationalism arose from internal developments in fields such as foreign relations, immigration and ethnic history, cultural and intellectual history, slavery and race, economic, environmental, and urban history, and so on. But the overarching context was a strong sense among an influential group of American academic historians that insufficient intellectual integration with scholars around the world analytically impoverished the study of the United States. Projects to upgrade international connections arose amid politicized scholarly debates within the United States over globalization and world-systems theory, the nation-state and its future, and the costs of the West’s and America’s self-referential, arrogant sense of an exceptional mission and character. Transnational perspectives on the United States perform a “civic purpose”, writes Thomas Bender, another formidable advocate. By encouraging “a cosmopolitan appreciation of American participation in a history larger than itself”, historians could help “imbue our national history and civic discourse with appropriate humility”⁵.

In 1991, Tyrrell defined the debate in an *American Historical Review* essay that began by asserting that “nation-centered history” had proved especially “resilient” in the United States. From nineteenth-century German historiography, which had enormous influence on the American historical profession in its formative phases, Americans absorbed the idealistic-nationalistic concept of history as the unfolding story of the nation and “grafted [it] onto an existing tradition of exceptionalism”. In a spirited response, political historian Michael McGerr

⁴ Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (Basingstoke 2007) 2–4. Also Ian Tyrrell, *Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice*, in: *Journal of Global History* 4 (2009) 453–474.

⁵ Thomas Bender, *Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York 2006) 298.

laid out what became a standard critique of the transnationalist approach. Few first-rank American historians took seriously the exceptionalism of popular discourse, McGerr protested. Most insisted that the United States shared much with other industrial, capitalist countries but also had distinctive features that had to be taken into account. "Perhaps a more rigorous comparative history", McGerr argued, "scrupulous in its assessment of national difference, could shield us from the toxic effects of exceptionalism and allow us to continue with our work as American historians."⁶

Progressivism offered an obvious area for transnational scholarship. During the decades before World War I, reform groups in the United States were aware that the problems they dealt with had parallels elsewhere. Experts on social welfare, urban affairs, and public administration, among other concerns, communicated with counterparts in other countries and reported on measures attempted abroad. Equivalent migrations and interchanges across the Atlantic took place among labor, socialist, and radical activists. On an intellectual level, Robert Kelley's 1969 book, *The Transatlantic Persuasion*, established the cosmopolitan character of Victorian liberalism⁷. Historians have long understood both the Social Gospel and its nemesis, social Darwinism, as transatlantic tendencies. Historians of higher education and the social sciences routinely cited Jürgen Herbst's 1965 book, *The German Historical School in the United States*, though not until Robert Crunden's *Ministers of Reform* (1982) and Dorothy Ross's *Origins of American Social Science* (1991) did the extent of the influence of German-trained academics on progressive thought sink home with historians of progressivism⁸.

The first major book in the current transnational approach to progressivism was James Kloppenberg's *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought* (1986), a reconstruction of the interconnections among British, French, German, and American formulators of social democratic theory. Kloppenberg's skill in placing American pragmatist and progressive thought within the Euro-American attack upon formalist liberalism, neoclassical economics, and Hegelian idealism brought the United States to the center of the story of intellectual and political modernism⁹. Subsequent transnational studies of

⁶ Ian Tyrrell, American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History, in: American Historical Review 96 (1991) 1031; Michael McGerr, The Price of the "New Transnational History", in: American Historical Review 96 (1991) 1056, 1062.

⁷ Robert Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion: The Liberal-Democratic Mind in the Age of Gladstone* (New York 1969). Also: Murney Gerlach, *British Liberalism and the United States: Political and Social Thought in the Late Victorian Age* (New York 2001); Leslie Butler, *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill 2007).

⁸ Jürgen Herbst, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship: A Study in the Transfer of Culture* (Ithaca 1965); Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization* (Urbana 1984); Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York 1991).

⁹ James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York 1986).

progressivism built upon Kloppenberg's account by tracing the movement across the Atlantic of institutions, professions, and policies, as well as ideas. Both Daniel Rodgers, in *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (1998), and Axel Schäfer, in *American Progressives and German Social Reform, 1875–1920* (2000), depict the pre-World War I decades as fluid culturally and politically, a period of experimentation when reform-minded American scholars and professionals were open to the socially based ethics of Gustav Schmoller or the state-centered economics of Adolph Wagner¹⁰.

Yet even before World War I, American reformers with an international perspective recognized that the political practices and social class relations of Imperial Germany were unpalatable in the United States, where a classless, republican society remained an ideal and the transcendence of class consciousness and interest a widely espoused goal. Reformers accepted that they would need to adapt German schemes for cooperative housing or town planning to American philanthropic culture and property law¹¹. And then, amid the xenophobia, nationalism, and intolerance of the World War I era, Schäfer and Rodgers argue, foreign ideas and policies became tainted by association. To cite probably the most important example, the Progressive Era campaign for universal health insurance ran aground against the difficulty of recasting social insurance to conform to American traditions of private-sector control and individual self-reliance. American advocates of social insurance had long based their case on German-derived notions of social interdependence, theories now identified with Prussian authoritarianism. After World War I, the United States did tend to revert to the exceptionalist vision of itself as the most progressive nation, with little to learn from the decadent world and much to teach it. Still, the xenophobia, intolerance, reaction, and sullen nationalism of World War I and its aftermath were also transnational phenomena.

Research such as that of Kloppenberg, Rodgers, and Schäfer takes the analysis of progressivism in a direction that can discomfort American historians, with their ideological bias toward grassroots as opposed to elite reform. To the extent that progressivism was a transatlantic phenomenon, these writers imply, it was a top-down, diffusionist one. That is to say, professionals, activists, and academics brought back ideas and programs and reformulated them for American conditions, at which point they diffused across the country and down in the social scale. With the partial exception of the labor and radical ideas carried into the United States by working-class immigrants, most transnational analyses of American reform concentrate on prominent, privileged people whose foreign experiences gave direction to their activism back home.

¹⁰ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge 1998). Axel R. Schäfer, *American Progressives and German Social Reform, 1875–1920* (Stuttgart 2000).

¹¹ Shelton Stromquist, *Reinventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origin of Modern Liberalism* (Urbana 2006). Thomas Adam, *Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s–1930s* (Bloomington 2009) ch. 2.

To dwell on a significant example of this tension between top-down and grass-roots sources of reform, American scholars now concur that women activists played a huge role in defining and pushing the social reform dimensions of progressivism. Typically, American writers perceive the Progressive Era women's reform movement as originating in a vast variety of local movements for what was called "municipal housekeeping", for improved housing and working conditions, and for upgraded public health, education, social services, and morals regulation¹². This emphasis on community activism as the source of women's progressivism exists alongside a transnational narrative that stresses efforts by figures such as Jane Addams, Ellen Gates Starr, and Florence Kelley to adapt ideas encountered in Great Britain or Germany. Likewise, the transnational story of the women's suffrage movement is by its nature leader-centered. It emphasizes younger activists such as Lucy Burns and Alice Paul, who sought to reinvigorate the American suffrage campaign with a militant, direct-action approach brought back from England. Or it dwells on figures such as Carrie Chapman Catt, who hoped to build an international women's suffrage movement, or on the organizers of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Progressive Era movements for temperance and urban planning likewise had a strong foundation in local movements in different parts of the United States, as well as a transnational dimension that hinged on the diffusion of proposals and practices carried across oceans by professionals, activists, and scholars¹³.

Foreign relations history, long stereotyped as an especially elite-oriented field, has by contrast allowed for broad pictures in social terms of American interactions with the world. This is because of the range of groups besides educated professionals who participated in American ventures in Latin America and the Pacific. For example, Paul Kramer's study of American rule in the Philippines traces the dealings of mid-level Americans – officials, teachers, and missionaries – with elite and ordinary Filipinos. In *Reforming the World* (2010), Tyrrell uses missionary activity to illustrate the breadth and variety of the "networks" and "webs" that American religious activists built in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. In *The Canal Builders* (2009), Julie Greene details the work and lives of the multinational population drawn to the Panama Canal, an organizational and engineering feat that epitomizes the American Progressive Era. U.S. officials in the Philippines, Cuba, and especially the Panama Canal Zone had far more latitude for experimentation than in the United States itself. Contemporaries thus understood

¹² Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s–1920s* (New York 2007), sums up much recent research on women in progressive reform. Also, *Elizabeth Israels Perry*, *Men Are from the Gilded Age, Women Are from the Progressive Era*, in: *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (2002) 25–48.

¹³ Ian Tyrrell, *Woman's World/Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill 1991); *Anthony Sutcliffe*, *Towards the Planned City: Germany, Britain, and the United States, 1780–1914* (New York 1981); *Jon A. Peterson*, *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840–1917* (Baltimore 2003) esp. ch. 11, 14.

American imperial ventures as proving grounds for the statist version of progressivism. In the Canal Zone, Greene observed, “the government owned the railroads, the hotels, the stores, and the restaurants and even provided free housing to every resident”. Greene emphasizes, however, that this success hinged on ethnocentric methods for classifying the Canal Zone’s polyglot population and technocratic methods for managing it¹⁴.

Comparative Perspectives

As McGerr noted, the most common way that American historians have examined progressivism’s international context has not been through a *transnational* approach but a *comparative* one. The basic distinction is that transnationalists emphasize *entangled* developments that take place across national borders. Writers who espouse a transnational perspective usually intend to cast doubt upon the emphasis customarily placed upon the nation-state, national politics, and national culture. Comparativists are more apt to regard national differences of institutions, politics, and culture as crucial matters to study. They seek to trace how transnational social and economic forces have divergent manifestations in different national contexts. Most commentators in the end accept that comparative and transnational perspectives are not inherently opposed. Still proponents of applying one or the other methodology to United States history have quarreled in part because of transnationalists’ suspicion that any stress upon national difference might inadvertently reinforce exceptionalist ideas about the United States¹⁵.

Comparative analyses of the United States were well-established before the Progressive Era. In fact, a comparative understanding of urbanization and industrial capitalism animated the progressives’ search for solutions in Germany, France, and Britain. In Europe and North America, the new social science of the late nineteenth century hinged on a reform Darwinist perspective on social development. Reform Darwinists such as Lester Frank Ward lambasted the Herbert Spencer version of social Darwinism. They insisted instead that competitive individualism was not an innate characteristic, but a backward, transient stage in human evolution, which was moving toward cooperation, social awareness, and humanitarianism. This social evolutionary mindset could ratify assimilationist

¹⁴ Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York 2009) 180–186, Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill 2006). Ian Tyrrell, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America’s Moral Empire* (Princeton 2010). Also Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton 2003) 76–92.

¹⁵ Tyrrell, *Reflections on the Transnational Turn*. George Fredrickson, *From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History*, in: *Journal of American History* 82 (1995) 587–604. Ballard Campbell, *Comparative Perspectives on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, in: *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (2002) 154–177.

approaches to supposedly backward immigrants and scientific racist approaches to supposedly incompetent racial minorities. It could also reinforce a civilizing-mission, white-man's-burden outlook on non-Western societies. From a reform Darwinist perspective, laissez-faire capitalism was backward, but pre-capitalist societies were even more so.

Still, the evolutionary outlook helps to explain why progressives understood themselves as progressive: They believed that they were pushing forward the evolution of civilization. Social evolutionism also encouraged a sense of commonality with other developing nations and a search for answers in them. Only at the end of the Progressive Era did serious critiques of such evolutionary models filter into American social and political thought. For example, neither Franz Boas's anthropology, with its relativistic denial of a hierarchy of cultures, nor Max Weber's sociology, with its haunting picture of dehumanizing modernity, as yet exerted widespread influence¹⁶.

After World War I, this evolutionary outlook gradually gave way to theories of modernization, the most common comparative framework applied to American history. Modernization amounts to an alternate stage-model mode of thought that depicts urban, industrial capitalism as dissolving traditional cultures and inherited behavior patterns, status relationships, and moral systems. Social evolutionary thought, by contrast, depends on Darwinian mechanisms of variation and adaptation; advanced civilizations retain elements of their predecessors even as they build upon and diverge from them. The vogue for formulaic, politicized versions of modernization theory, such as that presented in W.W. Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960), was fairly brief. Still, in one form or other – often implied rather than explicit – modernization models endured as an undercurrent in American analysis of the great transformations of recent centuries. Especially between World War II and the 1970s, Weberian typologies such as tradition and reason or Ferdinand Tönnies's dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* or concepts traceable to Henry Maine, Georg Simmel, Émile Durkheim, or Karl Polanyi provided theoretical scaffolding in American writing on the country's development¹⁷.

By the 1950s, when the academic historiography of progressivism took definite shape, most professional historians were inclined to see it as an episode in modernization, comparable to other country's efforts to adapt their institutions to corporate capitalism and urban industrialism. Within this broad framework, histori-

¹⁶ Alan Lessoff, *Progress before Modernization: Foreign Interpretations of American Development in James Bryce's Generation*, in: *American Nineteenth Century History* 1 (2000) 69–96.

¹⁷ For overviews of the influence of modernization models on mid-twentieth-century United States history: *Walter Nugent*, *Structures of American Social History* (Bloomington 1981) esp. ch. 1. *Thomas Bender*, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore 21982); *Ian Tyrrell*, *The Absent Marx: Class Analysis and Liberal History in Twentieth-Century America* (Westport 1986). For a cross-national perspective on modernization's character and influence, *Hans-Ulrich Wehler*, *Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte*, in: *Die Bielefelder Sozialgeschichte*, ed. *Bettina Hitzer* and *Thomas Welskopp* (Bielefeld 2010) 185–251.

ans argued over meaning and emphasis. In Richard Hofstadter's iconoclastic "status anxiety" formulation, the progressives' penchant for self-defeating, moralistic gestures reflected the lingering mentality of the Anglo-American, merchant-patrician elite from which professional-class Americans in the early 1900s still generally descended. The generation of reform professionals who came of age after 1900, Hofstadter argued, had fewer psychological roots in preindustrial Protestant culture; they leaned toward the humanitarian, social-service ethic eventually identified with New Deal liberalism. Hofstadter's argument anticipated the "urban liberal" thesis of the 1970s. This influential argument portrays concrete improvements in urban life as achievable when progressives dropped their aversion to urban machine politicians and sought a fusion between their own professionalism and organization and the urban ethnic ethos – derived in theory from European village traditions but still functional in modern society – of mutuality and nonmoralizing service¹⁸.

A competing line of analysis also rooted in modernization theory depicts progressivism as an attempt by the new middle class of managers, technicians, and professionals to reshape society in its image. Whatever their family backgrounds, in this view, progressives had cast aside the premodern, merchant-patrician mindset for the ethos of efficiency and science. "Most [progressives] lived and worked in the midst of modern society", Robert Wiebe argued in his widely read *The Search for Order* (1967). "Theirs was an unusually open, expansive scheme of reform which took them further and further into modern society's hitherto unexamined corners."¹⁹ One version of this analysis, the so-called organizational synthesis, named by Louis Galambos in 1970 and linked to structural-functional sociology, saw progressivism as a trend toward rationalization in the sense intended by Max Weber or Talcott Parsons. Public-sector reforms such as municipal reorganization, upgraded education, a professional civil service, improved public health and social services, and expert regulation of business were analogous to private-sector movements for corporate restructuring, professional and scientific management, and welfare capitalism. All these rationalized a society that had transformed from being localized and small scale to interwoven and modernized²⁰.

Yet another formulation of the modernization model of progressivism – known as the "corporate liberal" school and derived from neo-Marxist and New Left thought – saw the governmental restructuring, regulatory agencies, and social welfare measures of the Progressive Era as elite maneuvers to adapt society and

¹⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York 1955) 204.

¹⁹ Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York 1967) 165. Also Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885–1914* (Chicago 1957); Samuel P. Hays, *American Political History as Social Analysis* (Knoxville 1980).

²⁰ Louis Galambos, *The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History*, in: *Business History Review* 44 (1970) 279–290. Galambos, *Technology, Political Economy, and Professionalization: Central Themes of the Organizational Synthesis*, in: *Business History Review* 57 (1983) 471–493.

politics to the requirements of corporate capital and to co-opt or assuage enough of the working class and the reformist middle class to ensure capitalism's legitimacy. Over the decades, the aura of conspiracy that surrounded early New Left writing on progressivism faded, but many American authors with left-leaning sympathies still see progressive reform as a defensive adjustment to preserve a threatened social and political system amid what Theodore Roosevelt called "the great dumb forces set in operation by the stupendous industrial revolution" of the 1800s²¹.

Modernization models of progressivism, as well as of other social and political phenomena, eventually make historians impatient for reasons that various critics have sketched. Modernization analyses can fall into the defects of both systems theories and stage models. As to the first problem, writers from a modernization perspective frequently go beyond using concepts such as the "social system" or the "political system" as analytical tools; they impute a tangible existence to these heuristic concepts. Such reification tends to underplay the significance of ambiguities, contingencies, and conflicts within societies or political systems over how to respond to and how to shape social, economic, or political change. The broad, deterministic brushstrokes with which modernization writers generalize about progressivism – a political phenomenon so diffuse and contradictory that some scholars have denied it had coherent existence at all – counts as an example of this problem.

The stage-model character of modernization can reinforce the error of treating systems as entities apart from the people who comprise them. Modernization models can envision modernity as emerging through a set of preordained steps that work roughly the same in every society. This outlook underemphasizes social change as the contingent result of people's thoughts and actions. If the political and social reforms of the Progressive Era amounted to predictable responses to urban industrialism and socio-cultural modernity, then the era's searching debates on society and politics and its intense political and policy movements would in turn amount to sound and fury that signify little. Progressive Era social and political thought stressed engagement, civic responsibility, and the efficacy of activism; it seems paradoxical for historians to treat as inevitable a series of movements devoted to the notion that people could improve society through deliberate effort. The transnational scholars of progressivism – with their emphasis on the creation and exchange of ideas and these ideas' translation into policy in different national and local contexts – have proved a healthy influence against modernization's tendency to trivialize progressive thought and activism.

²¹ Quoted in *Eric Rauchway*, *Murdering McKinley: The Making of Theodore Roosevelt's America* (New York 2003) 93. An early formulation of the New Left thesis: *Gabriel Kolko*, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916* (New York 1963). Later versions, more sophisticated in research and argument, include *James Weinstein*, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900–1918* (Boston 1968); *Martin J. Sklar*, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890–1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (New York 1988).

Nonetheless, modernization models invite a comparative approach because, as George Mowry, a prominent post-World War II historian of progressivism, explained, “As elsewhere in the world, social democracy in the United States was the obvious product of large-scale industry and modern urbanization”, even taking into account the “many idiosyncratic factors in American society that gave it a somewhat different character from its European counterparts”. Writing at the height of modernization’s influence in 1970, Mowry noted “the extensive international borrowing of American Progressives” and deplored the extent that American historians, himself included, failed adequately “to treat the institution of social democracy as an international one”²². In subsequent decades, the comparative approach continued to unfold alongside the transnational perspective. For example, the New Institutional school of the 1980s and 90s – a variant of the “political development” approach within modernization scholarship that studied the implementation of policy and the operation of public agencies – examined progressivism from the angle of comparative state development, paying special attention to the formation of American social welfare systems by comparison to European counterparts.

The modernization mindset, however, obstructs a comparative perspective on American agrarian movements, which had a huge influence during the Progressive Era in railroad and banking regulation, antitrust policy, tax reform, and governmental restructuring. Progressive political majorities and policy innovations in key midwestern states such as Wisconsin and Iowa depended on rural support, while agrarianism molded progressivism in California, the South, and in national politics, dramatically so in Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom reforms. Modernization models tend to accept the city as embodying *Gesellschaft* and the country *Gemeinschaft*. They tend as well to depict the expansion of government and social services as rationalizations in response to urban industrialism. For these reasons, analyses of progressivism founded on modernization theories overemphasize the urban professional classes. They reinforce the pre-existing inclination among U.S. historians to identify the heartland as the stronghold of distinctively American communities and traditions. Historians of progressivism have thus tended not to define agrarian reform as a matter that needs comparative study. This despite the fact that the variety and comparative strength of agrarian influences (as opposed to the urban working and professional classes) may have been the most tangible cause of the divergent state-building patterns in the United States and Western Europe²³.

After the 1980s, some historians rooted in labor and working-class history developed a comparative analysis of progressivism that owed little identifiable to modernization theories. These authors’ starting point was a revisiting of the fa-

²² George Mowry, *Social Democracy, 1900–1918*, in: *The Comparative Approach to American History*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New York 1970) 274, 276, 279–280.

²³ For a clear, succinct explanation of this issue, Walter Nugent, *Progressivism: A Very Short History* (New York 2009) 82–84.

mous comparative question posed by German sociologist Werner Sombart in 1906: “Why is there no socialism in the United States?” Scholars of labor and social reform increasingly renounced the Sombart question as a misguided distraction. These writers emphasized that the United States did produce a vigorous, indigenous socialist movement, albeit one that failed to evolve into a durable social democratic party. More important, writers on both sides of the Atlantic cast doubt on the assumption behind Sombart’s question: that working-class socialism is a logical product of modernization whose absence requires explanation. Rather than fall into the “absence fallacy”, scholars such as Alan Dawley in *Struggles for Justice* (1991) tried to reformulate the problem to invite more open-ended comparison: Why, given similarities in social and economic conditions, did American social reform veer toward progressivism and New Deal liberalism, while other countries developed divergent responses? For Dawley, the Sombart question arose from the conceptual error of defining the United States “against a model of Continental Europe, with its feudal legacy, class division, statist rule, and working-class socialist movements”. The practice of comparing the reality of the progressive United States against an abstraction of social democratic Europe was as misleading, Dawley insisted, as the German *Sonderweg* theory, which measures Germany’s troubled history against a stereotyped “Anglo-American liberal capitalism”²⁴.

Americanist Perspectives

Exceptionalist ideas about the United States thrived in the Progressive Era itself, but by comparison to other areas of United States history, they have not profoundly influenced the historiography of progressivism. More common is a mindset that can look like exceptionalism but is really something else: the posing of questions or the defining of subjects so as to address internal American concerns with little reference to how those concerns might be relevant to other countries. Many writers about American progressivism are versed in and sympathetic to transnational and comparative approaches, and in principle they repudiate exceptionalism. Still, these writers’ interpretive and political priorities lead them away from the transnational or comparative implications of their research. At the risk of confusing overseas readers, for whom the word has another meaning, the label *Americanist* may be more appropriate for this tendency than *exceptionalist*. Such writing provides insight for outsiders into the foreignness of the United States,

²⁴ Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge 1991) 10–11. Among many discussions of this issue from the 1980s–90s, see Jean Heffer and Jeanine Rovet (eds.), *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (Paris 1988). Ian Tyrrell, *The Scholarly Odyssey of an Activist Historian: Alan Dawley in Historiography*, in: *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8 (2009) 29–49.

into how Americans discuss among themselves historical issues with political implications.

For example, nearly all recent discussions of progressivism quickly bring in themes of race or gender. These themes, which of course pervade recent historical writing in the United States and elsewhere, have transnational dimensions and comparative implications. And both are not mere present-minded impositions upon the Progressive Era; they are necessary to explain the period. The early twentieth century, after all, saw the solidifying of the Jim Crow system, at times rationalized by lines in progressive social and political thought. Alternative lines in progressive thought, however, inspired the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Urban League, and other civil rights organizations founded in the period. Women activists and women's issues, as noted earlier, played an indispensable role in progressive action and thought. Still, historians of the race and gender dimensions of progressivism are often less animated by the analytical implications of their work than by its usefulness to present-day movements to spur pride among African Americans and women, overcome inequities based on race and gender, and press the country to live up to its egalitarian ideals. In this sense, this writing is new version of the so-called New History or progressive history promoted in the Progressive Era by James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard, who emphasized reinterpretation of the past in service of contemporary issues and agendas.

To cite another example, much domestic American discussion of the Progressive Era centers on dramatic political personalities who symbolize aspects of the era and stances on its problems. American writing on these pivotal figures can have an internal-conversation quality whose assumptions are hard to penetrate. Theodore Roosevelt, the public figure most identified with American progressivism, should be recognizable to Europeans, even given his belligerent chauvinism and his romantic embrace of the West and frontier lore. TR's fusion of a nationalist foreign policy with a nationalistic domestic reform agenda – along with his patrician sense of social responsibility and his imaginative engagement with the economic, social, and cultural implications of modernity – had many counterparts across Europe.

Contemporaries contrasted and historians still contrast Roosevelt with his main rival among Republican progressives, Robert La Follette, who perceived a big-city, Tory element in Roosevelt out of sympathy with the country's heartland democracy. La Follette, a figure much less known overseas and less comprehensible as well, has generally evoked affection among professional historians who are habitually ambivalent about Roosevelt. Since Turner and Beard, swaths of American historiography have originated from the American Midwest and manifest the region's mindset and concerns. As the intellectual historian David S. Brown observes, such historiography exhibits "an interior-minded historical consciousness" based upon "a typology of progressive thought and politics – democratic, populist, isolationist – different from the liberal typology – elite, urban, interventionist – favored by [eastern] cosmopolitans" such as Hofstadter.

From this midwestern intellectual perspective, La Follette and a few other regional figures epitomized “a uniquely American key” in progressivism, as Brown explains. La Follette fought for midwestern and western emphases in progressivism: direct democracy; primaries, initiatives, referenda, and recalls; the people versus the interests; antitrust; civil liberties; antimilitarism; abhorrence of Great Power politics. Few of these issues played a consistent role in Roosevelt’s New Nationalism, the most statist, collectivist, and cosmopolitan of the major syntheses of progressivism. The New Freedom of Woodrow Wilson’s Democrats likewise drew upon southern and heartland notions of the middle-class, liberal democracy that much of the country espoused²⁵.

In an influential 1982 essay, “In Search of Progressivism”, Daniel Rodgers identified three clusters of discourse that characterize American progressivism. Of these, the *social-bonds* discourse most evokes transnational interpretations of progressivism, with their concentration on the trans-Atlantic atmosphere in which social-democratic thought and policy emerged. Comparative and modernization perspectives highlight what Rodgers labeled the *efficiency* discourse, which had parallels in Great Britain’s Fabian socialism and other technocratic visions of progress in Europe as well as Latin America. Rodgers’s third discourse, the *anti-monopoly* discourse represented by La Follette and Wilson’s New Freedom, is surely the most Americanist, with weak connections and tenuous parallels elsewhere²⁶.

Progressive writers and activists strove to show that imported methods and measures could be Americanized so as to reinforce and not undermine the country’s democratic, republican, and popular traditions. Likewise, historians commonly ask where progressivism fit within the career of American republicanism and democracy. What legacies resulted and lessons can be learned from Progressive Era struggles over the theory and practice of popular government in an era of cities, class and ethnic conflict, corporations, interests groups, and bureaucracies? Robert Johnston, an articulate proponent of analyzing progressivism as an episode in American democracy, emphasizes the extent that urban progressives drew upon the antimonopoly, grassroots-mobilization mindset identified with populism, a political tendency usually understood as an outgrowth of agrarianism. Johnston’s local, urban perspective dovetails with the research of Elizabeth Sanders and others concerning agrarian influences at the national level.

²⁵ David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago 2009) 1, 20–21. Glen Gendzel, Jørn Brøndal, Nancy C. Unger and Matt Rothschild, Forum: La Follette’s Wisconsin in Perspective, in: *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10 (2011) 329–368. La Follette, likewise, viewed Europe and its problems from a thoroughly American perspective. See Nancy C. Unger, “I Want to Learn”: Meanings of the European Tour of Senator Robert M. La Follette, 1923, in: *Mid-America* 84 (2002) 5–25. John Milton Cooper Jr., *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge 1983), contrasts the cosmopolitan-patrician dimension of Roosevelt with Wilson’s middle-class liberal mindset.

²⁶ Daniel T. Rodgers, *In Search of Progressivism*, in: *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982) 113–132.

American reviewers for the most part overlooked the comparative implications of Sanders's *Roots of Reform* (1999). They stressed instead her emphasis on the continuing relevance of grassroots, Jeffersonian republicanism, which modernization interpretations – following progressive theorists like Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann – had depicted as an backward-looking antithesis of progressivism, with the latter understood as rationalistic, urban-based, and modernity-inclined²⁷.

Indicative of this vigorous interest in American grassroots traditions and their enduring relevance is Charles Postel's widely praised 2007 book, *The Populist Vision*. This intellectual and policy history of populism envisions the country's agrarian politics not as a provincial, antimodernist precursor of progressivism, but as an alternative, perhaps more democratic version of modernity. Likewise, Michael Kazin's 2006 biography of William Jennings Bryan – a heartland, grassroots democrat even more distant from Europe than La Follette – culminates a re-examination by historians of the Democratic Party's turn toward liberalism during the Progressive Era. Urban-inclined writers since Hofstadter have viewed the Great Plains and southern Democrats who supported Bryan as provincial millstones upon the party's urban, liberal wing. The new writing, by contrast, stresses the creativity and initiative of the agrarian wing and even the relative tameness of labor and the urban professionals²⁸.

A variant of this quest for progressivism's meaning for American democracy is evident in historians such as Philip Ethington, Kevin Mattson, and James Connolly, who place Progressive Era struggles over popular government not within the agrarian, populist tradition but within the civic republican tradition. This analysis does draw upon transatlantic discussions of modernity and the public sphere identified with Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, as well American theorists such as Richard Sennett. But its agenda is to revive appreciation of old republican notions of citizenship, civic culture, and deliberation. The great transformations of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, in this analysis, led to the triumph of an consumerist approach to public life and a service-delivery approach to government. The public sphere ceased even to pretend to function as a forum for engaging the citizenry in the civic activity of working out shared principles and determining the overall public good. The public sector narrowed into a mundane broker adept at satisfying the particularistic demands of a pluralistic society²⁹.

²⁷ Robert D. Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland* (Princeton 2003); and Johnston, *Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era: The Politics of Progressive Era Political Historiography*, in: *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (2002) 68–92. Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago 1999). For Johnston's review of Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, Peasants, Pitchforks, and the (Found) Promise of Progressivism, in: *Reviews in American History* 28 (2000) 393–398.

²⁸ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York 2007). Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York 2006); also *Book Forum*, Kazin's Bryan, in: *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8 (2009) 259–280.

²⁹ Philip Ethington, *The Metropolis and Multicultural Ethnics: Direct Democracy versus*

Historians with this civic-republican perspective do not dwell on comparative issues, but progressive theorists and activists did discuss the practice of democracy in a mass, urban society as a point of intersection between the American and cosmopolitan dimensions of reform. Progressives drew on the longstanding American belief that a healthy democracy relied upon the transcendence of class conflict, but all versions of social democracy stressed interdependence, mutuality, and humanitarianism, Rodgers's *social bonds* discourse. The prospects for a deliberative, democratic political culture in a diffuse, segmented urban environment preoccupied transatlantic-minded progressives, including John Dewey, Jane Addams, and Frederic Howe, whose best-known book carried the evocative title, *The City: The Hope of Democracy*. Between books on European urban governance and social welfare policy, Howe devoted himself to initiatives such as the People's Institute. This New York organization worked to rejuvenate democratic civic culture "in a city". Howe wrote, "of surging and changing population, of complex nationalities, of furious political antagonisms, of radicalism and idealism as brought by the immigrants from the oppressed nations of Europe". Howe's "interest in American democracy is", observed a close colleague, "at its fountainhead, a spiritual interest"³⁰.

Like Howe and his fellow progressives, American historians usually exhibit a civil-religious preoccupation with the quality of American democracy. The civic purposes of American history – articulated by progressive historians like Beard and Robinson – reinforce the Americanist mindset and overshadow international perspectives and methodologies. When McGerr published his own interpretive history of progressivism, *A Fierce Discontent* (2006), no American commentator noticed that the book manifested almost none of comparative concerns that the author had earlier advocated in his debate with Tyrrell. In Americanist fashion, McGerr instead portrayed progressivism not as an American manifestation of an international trend, but as a tragic "epic" in the "disappointing" career of American liberal reform. Similarly, in *Rebirth of a Nation* (2009), an interpretive history with an explicitly presentist critical agenda, the cultural historian Jackson Lears noted in passing, "Numerous Progressive reformers were more inspired by German social democracy and civic pride than by homegrown visions of moral reformation." But Lears right away sets aside the international context of developments in the United States for his main purpose: an extended exposition of spiritual/cultural anxieties, aggressions, and other maladies that the author sees as derived from deep Anglo-American cultural and religious patterns and that governed American responses to modernity. (*Causes* of modernity – whether international or indigenously American – seem of not much interest to the author.)

Deliberative Democracy in the Progressive Era, in: *Progressivism and the New Democracy*, ed. Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur (Amherst 1999) 192–225. James Connolly, *Democratic Visions: The Urban Political Imagination in Industrializing America* (Ithaca 2010).

³⁰ Quotations from Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy in the Progressive Era* (University Park 1998) 42–43. Also Stromquist, *Re-Inventing "The People"*.

These patterns account for the perverse sides of progressivism, Lears argues, as well as some of its admirable aspects. They then survived, in the author's view, as an aggressive, moralistic set of psycho-political impulses underneath American politics³¹.

Such preoccupations with the spiritual/moral condition of the republic – which seem to put historical study to the service of national group psychotherapy – can flummox advocates of an international perspective. The inclination within American historical writing, critical as well as celebratory, toward inward conversation is so persistent that transnationalists and comparativists might in turn feel inclined to try to drain American history of any moral or spiritual character, good, bad, or mixed, apart from modern human history generally. This would be an exaggerated response, leading to its own distortions. American republicanism and democracy and American debates over them – which often do fall into the Protestant-epic, degeneration-and-redemption pattern explicated by Lears – amount to central episodes in the transnational and comparative history of democratization and popular rights, if only because of the international influence of the United States and the example of its political system. Moreover, the Americanist tendency itself needs to be comprehended as an intellectual history phenomenon rather than merely deplored as stubborn self-absorption. As McGerr warned in his debate with Tyrrell, distinctiveness is real too, and intellectuals and activists operate in absorbing local environments.

Over the last decade, experience should have driven home to observers of the United States in Europe and elsewhere that major aspects of the mindset of American conservatism do not have reliable analogues elsewhere, that deliberative communication with this formidable element in American society is not a straightforward affair. American progressive and liberal mindsets are more accessible to foreigners and easier to abide, but only to a point. In 2008, American voters brought to power the most cosmopolitan political movement that the country is likely to produce. American writers noted that the reformers of 2008–09 espoused the adjective *progressive*, not just as a code word for *liberal*, but because they meant it. In its first two years, the Barack Obama administration indeed seemed neoprogressive in its social and civic outlook on the country's problems, as well as in its penchant for governance by professionals and for data-driven policymaking, Rodgers's *efficiency* theme reawakened. As quickly became evident through intense domestic debates, mystifying to outsiders, the movement that Obama represented contained perplexing Americanist features from the start. In any case, these neoprogressives came under withering attack precisely on account of their progressivism, let alone the dash of transnational consciousness that they displayed.

³¹ *Michael McGerr, A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York 2003) xiv, 316. *Jackson Lears, Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York 2009) 10.

Many Americans will continue to champion the cosmopolitan perspective, but the United States will keep losing itself in insular disputes over its democratic and republican ideals and how to live up to them.

Summary

Im Zentrum der Untersuchungen stehen die internationalen Wechselwirkungen der Reformbewegung in den USA, die Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts als *Progressivism* bekannt wurde. Nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg haben theoretisch interessierte amerikanische Historiker häufig – wenn auch oft nur implizit – auf Spielarten der Modernisierungstheorie zurückgegriffen, wenn sie diesen erklären wollten. Aus dieser Perspektive erschien die Reformbewegung, analog zu sozialdemokratischen oder neo-korporatistischen Bewegungen in Westeuropa, als Reaktion politischer Institutionen und der Zivilgesellschaften auf die Herausforderungen der Urbanisierung, des entwickelten Industrialismus und des „entfesselten“ Großkapitalismus. In den letzten 25 Jahren hat eine engagierte Gruppe von Historikern transnationale Ansätze für die Interpretation des *Progressivism* fruchtbar gemacht. Ihre Analysen haben die strukturalistischen und mechanistischen Verengungen der Modernisierungsmodelle gesprengt und die Aufmerksamkeit auf die lebendigen transatlantischen Netzwerke und die intensiven intellektuellen und politischen Debatten gelenkt, die die amerikanischen Reformbewegungen prägten wie ihre europäischen Entsprechungen. Trotzdem behalten Modernisierungsmodelle einen gewissen Wert, wenn es gilt, die vielen vergleichbaren Elemente des *Progressivism* und der Sozialdemokratie zusammenzubringen, die ohne greifbare Verbindung untereinander entstanden waren. Ungeachtet dessen, so die Argumentation, hätten die meisten amerikanischen Historiker den Problemen einer komparativen Sozialwissenschaft, wie sie durch Themen wie Modernisierung und Transnationalisierung aufgeworfen werden, nur sporadisches Interesse entgegengebracht. Auch diejenigen Historiker, die sogenannte „exzeptionalistische“ Argumente für die Erklärung des *Progressivism* zurückweisen, haben überwiegend die lange amerikanische Tradition fortgeschrieben, die Vergangenheit als Fortschritt bei der Verwirklichung der demokratischen und republikanischen Ideale des Landes zu deuten. Diese Perspektive auf die amerikanische Geschichte, hier als *Americanist* bezeichnet, bleibt letztlich einem inneramerikanischen Selbstgespräch verhaftet, das für komparatistische und theoretische Fragen der Geschichtsschreibung wenig Relevanz besitzt. Amerikanische Geschichte nach solcher Rezeptur wird selbst zum Zeugnis einer *fractured modernity*.