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## PROGRESSIVISM, POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL TRADITION

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Professor Virginia Arbery has asked me to try to make some connections between the political philosophy that students here turn to in their fourth year of study and the politics and political thought of America's Progressives, which is where most of my own scholarly work has been done.

Historically, Progressive ideas formed a common thread among the most important American thinkers from the 1880s into the 1920s and beyond, manifesting themselves in the writings and speeches of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Croly, John Dewey, Robert LaFollette, and several others.

Why are these people worth talking about? For reasons I hope to make clear, the shape of our political institutions and the tone of our political culture today have at least as much to do with them as with the nation's founders. It was a realization of this fact that ultimately turned my own scholarly interests. My early scholarly work was on the American founding – a topic on which I wrote my first book – but I became interested in the political thought of America's original Progressives once I became curious about the fate of the founding principles in the course of American history. I became interested in American Progressivism because it seemed to me that it was the era – at least intellectually – that was most responsible for a move away from early American political principles. It's certainly the era when those principles were first challenged in a serious, direct, and comprehensive way.

It's also fascinating to see how trends in American political thought develop and to track trends in the tradition of Western political thought more generally.

Let's start with the Declaration of Independence and think, in particular, of the transhistorical nature of the document's opening. The Declaration defines the purpose and the role of government not as contingent upon historical circumstance, but instead as universal and applicable to all men by virtue of their common nature. Specifically, the Declaration says that the purpose for which "Governments are instituted among Men" is to secure "certain unalienable Rights." These rights do not come from a particular regime or tradition, which means that they do not vary from one point in time to another. Instead, the rights are granted to men by their "Creator" and therefore "entitle them" to a government that will protect their individual rights, which come from "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God."

How do these principles of the Declaration shape the 1787 Constitution? The proposition of the Declaration – that the end of government is to secure the natural rights of citizens – makes it imperative that the government be carefully restrained and checked, since it is a constant danger that the power of the state may be employed to the detriment of the rights of individual citizens.

Hence for the founders, the greatest threat to democratic government was the threat of faction – that a majority might use the power of the state to violate the rights of the minority. Majorities, therefore, had to be limited in the ways they could employ the powers of government, and government itself had to be checked and limited by a variety of institutional restraints. The Founders were also clear, as explained in *Federalist* 6 and 10, that the threat of faction is *permanent* – it does not recede with time or with the march of history, because faction is grounded in human nature. *Federalist* 10 explains that "the latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man." In *Federalist* 6, Publius criticizes those who fail to see the permanent dangers of human nature by saying that they are "far gone in utopian speculations."

To this basic outlook on the problem of government, the Progressives countered with historical contingency. Against the founding's ahistorical notion of human nature, Progressives contended that the ends, scope, and role of just

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government must be defined by the different principles of different epochs, and that therefore it is impossible to speak of a single form of just government for all ages.

This recasting of the founding rested on coupling historical contingency with a faith in progress. Progressives generally believed that the human condition improves as history marches forward, and so protections built into government against the danger of things such as faction became less necessary and increasingly unjust. Ultimately, the problem of faction is solved not by permanently limited government, but by history itself. For the Progressives, the latent causes of faction are *not* sown in the nature of man, or if they are, this human nature will be overcome by historical progress.

Where did these ideas come from? If the natural-rights principles of the founding had their roots in the Western tradition of political philosophy, so too did the historical critique of those principles that was made by American Progressives. The Progressive movement became the means by which German historicism was imported into the American political tradition.

The influence of German political philosophy is evident not only from looking at the ideas espoused by Progressives, but also from the historical pedigree of the most influential Progressive thinkers. Almost all of America's prominent Progressives were either educated in Germany in the nineteenth century or had as teachers those who were.

This fact reflects the sea change that had occurred in American higher education in the second half of the nineteenth century, a time when most Americans who wanted an advanced degree went to Europe to get one. By 1900, the faculties of American colleges and universities had become populated with European Ph.D.s, and the historical thinking which dominated Europe (especially Germany) in the nineteenth century came to permeate American higher education. Johns Hopkins University, founded in 1876, was established for the express reason of bringing the German educational model to the United States, and produced several prominent Progressives, including Wilson, Dewey, and Frederick Jackson Turner.

And outside of Hopkins, the historical, evolutionary, Progressive mode of thinking was sweeping through American higher education at the time that

many of these Progressives were being educated. Robert Nisbet attributes the influence of these new ideas—I think correctly—to two central figures, Hegel and Spencer (and this means Darwin, too, by way of Spencer), and he notes their connection with the founding of the various social sciences during this same time. In fact many of the social sciences were launched in America around this time, and certainly the history of political science in America fits this pattern.

Unpacking this a little more, the dominant influence on the historical and evolutionary thinking of America's Progressives comes from two schools of thought. The historical view, in general, rejected the possibility of transcending the historical environment in order to grasp universal political principles; instead, politics had to be guided by the spirit of the current historical age, and political change was to be grounded in evolution from one historical spirit to the next. The historical view was therefore antithetical to the notion that one could permanently fix the scope and purpose of government.

There were two important strains of historical thinking prominent at the outset of the Progressive Era, both of which were influential: the *Historical School*, with roots in both England and Germany, and *historicism*, which came more squarely out of German idealism. Similar in many respects, particularly on the question of historical contingency, there are nonetheless critical differences between the two strains.

The Historical School was influenced largely by evolution, and it developed into an application of evolutionary theory to history and politics, an application made perhaps most famously by Spencer. The British authors admired by Woodrow Wilson, for instance, fall mostly into this category, especially Walter Bagehot.

Historicism became prominent through the influence of Hegel's writings. Both the English Historical School and the doctrine of historicism rest on historical contingency, denying the possibility of transcending history, tradition, or custom. But unlike the Historical School, the doctrine of historicism is idealistic. For Hegel and his fellow historicists, history is rational, and it culminates in a rational end-state.

How did these schools of historical thinking help to shape the Progressive critique of early American political thought and thus also shape critical changes in our government?

First, let's bear in mind what Progressivism is. In short we can think of it as an argument to progress, or to move beyond, the political principles of the American founding. It is an argument to enlarge vastly the scope of national government for the purpose of responding to a set of economic and social conditions which, Progressives contend, could not have been envisioned at the founding and for which the founders' limited, constitutional government was inadequate.

The Progressive Era was the first major period in American political development to feature, as a primary characteristic, the open and direct criticism of the Constitution. While criticism of the Constitution could be found during any period of American history, the Progressive Era was unique in that such criticism formed the backbone of the entire movement. Progressive-era criticism of the Constitution came not from a few fringe figures, but from the most prominent thinkers and politicians of that time. Readers are reminded, in almost any Progressive text they will pick up, that the Constitution is old and that it was written to deal with circumstances that had long ago been replaced by a whole new set of pressing social and economic ills.

The Progressives understood the intention and structure of the Constitution very well; they knew that it established a framework for limited government and that these limits were to be upheld by a variety of institutional restraints and checks. They also knew that the limits placed on the national government by the Constitution represented major obstacles to implementing the Progressive policy agenda. Progressives had in mind a variety of legislative programs aimed at regulating significant portions of the American economy and society, and at redistributing private property in the name of social justice. The Constitution, if interpreted and applied faithfully, stood in the way of this agenda.

The Constitution, however, was only a means to an end. It was crafted and adopted for the sake of achieving the natural-rights principles of the Declaration of Independence. The Progressives understood this very clearly, which is why many of the more theoretical works written by Progressives

feature sharp attacks on social compact theory and on the notion that the fundamental purpose of government is to secure the individual natural rights of citizens.

While most of the founders and nearly all ordinary Americans did not subscribe to the radical epistemology of the social compact theorists, they did believe, after the fashion of John Locke, the great English political philosopher, that men as individuals possessed rights by nature – rights that any just government was bound to uphold and which stood as inherent limits to the authority of government over individual liberty and property.

The regulatory and redistributive aims of the Progressive policy agenda, therefore, were on a collision course with the political theory of the founding. This basic fact makes understandable Woodrow Wilson's admonition – in an address ostensibly honoring Thomas Jefferson – that “if you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence, do not repeat the preface.” Do not, in other words, repeat that part of the Declaration which enshrines natural rights as the focal point of American government.

Taking Wilson's advice here would turn our attention away from the timelessness of the Declaration's conception of government and would focus us instead on the litany of grievances made against George III; it would show, in other words, the Declaration as a merely practical document, to be understood as a specific, time-bound response to a set of specific historical circumstances. Once the circumstances change, so too must our conception of government.

Like Wilson, the Progressive academic Frank Goodnow (the very first president of the American Political Science Association), acknowledged that the founders' system of government sought to secure individual natural rights, and that this goal came out of their basic “social compact” understanding of government. In a 1916 lecture, he explained:

The end of the eighteenth century was marked by the formulation and general acceptance by thinking men in Europe of a political philosophy which laid great emphasis on individual private rights. Man was by this philosophy conceived of as endowed at the time of his birth with certain inalienable

rights. . . . Society itself was regarded as based upon a contract made between the individuals by whose union it was formed. At the time of making this contract these individuals were deemed to have reserved certain rights spoken of as natural rights.

Goodnow then contrasted this original view with the philosophy he himself prefers, which was then popular in Europe. In contrast to the American system, Goodnow praised the trends in 19<sup>th</sup> century European thought:

Man is regarded now throughout Europe, contrary to [this] view, as primarily a member of society and secondarily as an individual. The rights which he possesses are, it is believed, conferred upon him, not by his Creator, but rather by the society to which he belongs. What they are is to be determined by the legislative authority in view of the needs of that society. Social expediency, rather than natural right, is thus to determine the sphere of individual freedom of action.

Goodnow, Wilson, and other Progressives championed historical contingency against the Declaration’s talk of the permanent principles of just government. The natural-rights understanding of government may have been appropriate, they conceded, as a response to the prevailing tyranny of that day, but, they argued, all government has to be understood as a product of its particular historical context.

The great sin committed by the founding generation was not, then, its adherence to the doctrine of natural rights, but rather its notion that that doctrine was meant to transcend the particular circumstances of that day.

It was this very facet of the founders’ thinking that Abraham Lincoln recognized and praised in 1859 when he wrote of the Declaration and its primary author: “All honor to Jefferson – to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.” Recognizing the very same characteristic of the founders’ thought, John Dewey complained about it in his essay “Liberalism and Social Action.” It was a relic, Dewey argued,



of the older liberalism in America, the brand of liberalism that focused on natural rights. Yet this focus on natural rights as a permanent reality in American government (the way Lincoln focused on them, in other words), ignored the fact that history had changed things. Dewey wrote:

The earlier liberals lacked historic sense and interest. For a while this lack had an immediate pragmatic value. It gave liberals a powerful weapon in their fight with reactionaries ... But disregard of history took its revenge. It blinded the eyes of liberals to the fact that their own special interpretations of liberty, individuality and intelligence were themselves historically conditioned, and were relevant only to their own time. They put forward their ideas as immutable truths good at all times and places; they had no idea of historic relativity, either in general or in its application to themselves.

The idea of liberty was not frozen in time, Dewey argued, but had instead a history of evolving meaning. The history of liberalism, about which Dewey wrote in *Liberalism and Social Action*, was Progressive – it told a story of the move from more primitive to more mature conceptions of liberty. Modern liberalism, therefore, represented a vast improvement over classical (or what Dewey called “early”) liberalism.

If the earlier generation of Americans was misguided in its understanding of liberty, what then was the proper way to understand it? Here is one of the places where we see the influence of the German thought that I mentioned earlier, since the Progressives took their organic or “living” notion of the national state from Hegel and his disciples.

Wilson, in reflecting on what it meant to be a Progressive, wrote of government as a “living thing,” which was to be understood according to “the theory of organic life.” This “living” notion of a constitution, Wilson contended, was far superior to the founders’ model, which had considered government a kind of “machine” which could be constantly limited through checks and balances. In fact, Wilson used the language of evolutionary science to describe the Progressive desire for a “living” interpretation of the Constitution:



The Constitution of the United States (was) made under the dominion of the Newtonian Theory. You have only to read the papers of *The Federalist* to see that fact written on every page. They speak of the “checks and balances” of the Constitution, and use to express their idea the simile of the organization of the universe, and particularly of the solar system ... Politics in their thought was a variety of mechanics. The Constitution was founded on the law of gravitation. The government was to exist and move by virtue of the efficacy of “checks and balances.”

The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life. No living thing can have its organs offset against each other, as checks, and live.

How did this historical or “living” approach affect the Progressive view of the role and scope of government? As a living entity, the Progressives reasoned, government had to evolve and adapt in response to changing circumstances. While early American conceptions of national government had carefully circumscribed its power due to the perceived threat to individual liberties, Progressives argued that history had brought about an improvement in the human condition, such that the will of the people was no longer in danger of becoming factious. Combined with a whole new host of economic and social ills that called out for a governmental remedy, Progressives took this doctrine of progress and translated it into a call for a sharp increase in the scope of governmental power.

There may be no greater example of this phenomenon than Theodore Roosevelt’s speech on the New Nationalism in 1910, which became the foundation for his 1912 campaign to regain the presidency. The speech reflects Roosevelt’s turn, after his presidency, to a more radical brand of Progressivism, and reflects the extent to which other Progressives like Herbert Croly had come to influence his thinking.

Roosevelt called in the New Nationalism for the state to take an active role in effecting economic equality by way of superintending the use of private property. Private property rights, which had been serving as a brake on the more aggressive Progressive policy proposals, were to be respected, Roosevelt argued, only insofar as the government approved of the property’s social utility.

New circumstances, Roosevelt argued, necessitated a new conception of government, and natural rights were no longer to serve as a principled boundary that the state was prohibited from crossing.

Wilson had outlined a similar view of the extent of state power in a concise but revealing essay on the relationship between socialism and democracy. Wilson’s essay was entitled “Socialism and Democracy,” and it starts out by defining socialism, suggesting that it stands for unfettered state power, which trumps any notion of individual rights:

“State socialism” is willing to act through state authority as it is at present organized. It proposes that all idea of a limitation of public authority by individual rights be put out of view, and that the State consider itself bound to stop only at what is unwise or futile in its universal superintendence alike of individual and of public interests. The thesis of the state socialist is, that no line can be drawn between private and public affairs which the State may not cross at will.

After laying out this definition of socialism, Wilson explained that he found nothing wrong with it in principle since it was merely the logical extension of genuine democratic theory. It gives all power to the people, in their collective capacity, to carry out their will through the exercise of governmental power, unlimited by any undemocratic idea like individual rights. He elaborated:

For it is very clear that in fundamental theory socialism and democracy are almost if not quite one and the same. They both rest at bottom upon the absolute right of the community to determine its own destiny and that of its members. Men as communities are supreme over men as individuals. Limits of

wisdom and convenience to the public control there may be:  
limits of principle there are, upon strict analysis, none.

In this view, rights-based theories of self government, such as the republicanism to which the American founders subscribed, are far less democratic than socialism. As Wilson and his fellow Progressives believed, rights-based theories of government limit the state’s sphere of action, thus limiting the ability of the people to implement their collective will, and thus represent something less than a real democracy.

Much of what Progressives sought to change about American government took its inspiration from this belief. It would be the topic for another lecture to go through the nuts and bolts of these changes to American institutions, brought on by successive waves of Progressivism during the course of the twentieth century (first in the original Progressive era, then in the New Deal, then in the Great Society – and most recently, one could argue, in the Obama presidency). Suffice it to say, Progressives’ reforms proceeded along two major fronts, in some degree of tension with one another: First, to break down the checks and balances of American institutions and bring them much closer to raw public opinion, replacing representative democracy with direct democracy; and second, in spite of this democratic veneer, to shift most real governing power away from political institutions altogether and into the realm of bureaucracy, where Progressives believed that an educated elite could better administer progress free from the self-interestedness of ordinary politics – and free from the need for electoral consent.

While these goals were not completely achieved, they met with enough success that the original Progressive vision I just described bears much in common with any straightforward observation of how our government operates today.

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