The Progressive Era: Crash Course US History #27

Crash Course: U.S. History
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=====Introduction=====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course U.S. history, and today we're going to talk about progressives. No, Stan, progressives. Yes. You know, like these guys, who used to want to bomb the means of production, but also less radical progressives.

[past John] Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Are we talking about like Tumblr progressives, where it's half discussions of misogyny, and half high-contrast **images of pizza? Because if so, I can get behind that.**

Me From the Past, your anachronism is showing. Your internet was green letters on a black screen. But no, the Progressive Era was not like Tumblr. However, I will argue that it did indirectly make Tumblr and therefore J-Law GIF sets possible, so... that's something.

So, some of the solutions that progressives came up with to deal with issues of inequality and injustice don't seem terribly progressive today, and also it kinda overlapped with the Gilded Age, and progressive implies, like, progress — presumably progress toward freedom and justice — which is hard to argue about an era that involved one of the great restrictions of freedom in American history: Prohibition. So maybe we shouldn't call it the Progressive Era at all I argue — Stan, whatever, roll the intro.

(Intro)

=====Defining the Progressive Era=====

(01:06)So if the Gilded Age was the period when American industrial capitalism came into its own and people like Mark Twain began to criticize its associated problems, then the Progressive Era was the age in which people actually tried to solve those problems through individual and group action. As the economy changed, progressives also had to respond to a rapidly changing political system. The population of the U.S. was growing and its economic power was becoming ever more concentrated, and sometimes progressives responded to this by opening up political participation, and sometimes by trying to restrict the vote.

The thing is, broad participatory democracy doesn't always result in effective government... he said, sounding like the Chinese National Communist Party. And that tension between wanting to have government for, of, and by the people and wanting to have government that's, like, good at governing kinda defined the Progressive Era. And also our era. But progressives were most concerned with the social problems that revolved around industrial capitalist society, and most of these problems weren't new by 1900, but some of the responses were.

Companies, and later corporations, had a problem that had been around since at least the 1880s. They needed to keep costs down and profits high in a competitive market. And one of the best ways to do this is to keep wages low, hours long, and conditions appalling. Your basic house-elf situation. Just kidding, house-elves didn't get wages.

Also, by the end of the 19th century, people started to feel like these large monopolistic industrial combinations, the so-called trusts, were exerting too much power over people's lives. The 1890s saw federal attempts to deal with these trusts, such as the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, but overall the federal government wasn't where most progressive changes were made.

For instance, there was muckraking, a form of journalism in which reporters would find some muck and rake it. Mass circulation magazines realized they could make money by publishing exposes of industrial and political abuse, so they did.

=====Mystery Document=====

(02:48) Oh, it's time for the mystery document? I bet it involves muck.

The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the mystery document; I'm either correct or I get shocked.

“Let a man so much as scrape his finger pushing a truck in the pickle-rooms, and all the joints in his fingers might be eaten by the acid, one by one. Of the butchers and floor-men, the beef-boners and trimmers, and all those who used knives, you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb; time and time again the base of it had been slashed, till it was a mere lump of flesh against which the man pressed the knife to hold it. They would have no nails — they had worn them off pulling hides.”

Wow. Well now I am hyper-aware of and grateful for my thumbs. They are just in excellent shape. I am so glad, Stan, that I am not a beef-boner at one of the meat-packing factories written about in *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. No shock for me!

Ah, Stan, I can only imagine how long and hard you've worked to get the phrase “beef-boner” into this show and you finally did it, congratulations.

By the way, just a little bit of trivia, *The Jungle* was the first book I ever read that made me vomit. So that's a review. I don't know if it's positive, but there you go.

Anyway, at the time readers of *The Jungle* were more outraged by descriptions of rotten meat than by the treatment of meat-packing workers. *The Jungle led* to the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. That's pretty cool for Upton Sinclair, although my books have also lead to some federal legislation such as the HAOTP, which officially declared Hazel and Augustus the nation's OTP.

So to be fair, writers have been describing the harshness of industrial capitalism for decades, so muckraking wasn't really that new. But the use of photography for documentation was. Lewis Hine for instance photographed child laborers in factories and mines, bringing Americans face-to-face with the more than two million children under the age of 15 working for wages. And Hine's photos helped bring about laws that limited child labor.

But even more important than the writing and photographs and magazines when it came to improving conditions for workers was Twitter. What's that? There was no Twitter? Still? What is this, 1812?

=====Worker's Response=====
All right, so apparently still without Twitter, workers had to organize into unions to get corporations to reduce hours and raise their pay. Also, some employers started to realize on their own that one way to mitigate some of the problems of industrialization was to pay workers betters. Like in 1914, Henry Ford paid his workers an average of five dollars per day, unheard of at the time. Whereas today, I pay Stan and Danica three times that, and still they whine.

Ford's reasoning was that better paid workers would be better able to afford the Model T's that they were making. And indeed, Ford's annual output rose from 34,000 cars to 730,000 cars between 1910 and 1916, and the price of a Model T dropped from $700 to $316.

Still, Henry Ford definitely forgot to be awesome sometimes: he was antisemitic, he used spies in his factory, and he named his child Edsel.

Also, like most employers at the turn of the century he was virulently anti-union. So while the AFL was organizing the most privileged industrial workers, another union grew up to advocate for rights for a larger swath of the workforce, especially the immigrants who dominated unskilled labor: the Industrial Workers of the World. They were also know as the Wobblies, and they were founded in 1905 to advocate for “every wage worker, no matter what his religion, fatherland, or trade.” And not, as the name Wobblies suggest, just those fans of wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey.

=====The Wobblies and Consumer Culture=====

The Wobblies were radical socialists. Ultimately they wanted to see capitalism in the state disappear in revolution. Now most progressives didn't go that far, but some, following the ideas of Henry George, worried that economic progress could produce a dangerous unequal distribution of wealth that could only be cured by taxes.

But more progressives were influenced by Simon W. Patten who prophesied that industrialization would bring about a new civilization where everyone would benefit from the abundance and all the leisure time that all these new labor-saving devices could bring.

This optimism was partly spurred by the birth of a mass consumption society. I mean, Americans by 1915 could purchase all kinds of newfangled devices like washing machines, or vacuum cleaners, automobiles, record players. It's worth underscoring that all this happened in a couple generations. I mean, in 1850 almost everyone listened to music and washed their clothes in nearly the same way that people did ten thousand years ago. And then, boom.

And for many progressives, this consumer culture, to quote our old friend Eric Foner “became the foundation for a new understanding of freedom as access to the cornucopia of goods made available by modern capitalism.” And this idea was encouraged by new advertising that connected goods with freedom, using liberty as a brand name, or affixing the Statue of Liberty to a product. By the way, Crash Course is made exclusively in the United States of America. The greatest nation on earth. Ever.

That's a lie, of course. But you're allowed to lie in advertising.

But in spite of this optimism, many progressives were concerned that industrial capitalism, with its exploitation of labor and concentration of wealth, was limiting rather than increasing freedom. But depending on how you define freedom, of course.

=====The Effects of Industrialization=====

Industrialization created what they referred to as the labor problem, as mechanization diminished opportunities for skilled workers and the supervised routine of the factory floor destroyed autonomy. The scientific workplace management advocated by efficiency expert Frederick W. Taylor required rigid rules and supervision in order to heighten worker productivity. So if you've ever had a job with a defined number of bathroom breaks, that's why. Also, Taylorism found its way into classrooms, and anyone who's ever had to sit in rows for forty-five minute periods punctuated by factory style bells knows that this atmosphere is not particularly conducive to a sense of freedom.

Now this is a little bit confusing, because while responding to worker exploitation was part of the progressive movement, so was Taylorism itself, because it was an application of research, observation, and expertise to the vexing problem of how to increase productivity. And this use of scientific experts is another hallmark of the Progressive Era. One that usually found its expression in politics.

American progressives, like their counter parts in the green sections of not-America sought government solutions to social problems. Germany, which is somewhere over here [points toward Europe on globe], pioneered social legislation with its minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and old age pension laws. But the idea that government action could address the problems and insecurities that characterized the modern industrial world also became prominent in the United States. And the notion that an activist government could enhance, rather than threaten, people's freedom was something new in America.

=====Legislation=====

Now progressives pushing for social legislation tended to have more success at the state and local level, especially in cities, which established public control over gas and water and raised taxes to pay for transportation and public schools. Whereas federally, the biggest success was like Prohibition, which, you know, not that successful. But anyway, if all that local collectivist investment sounds like socialism... it kind of is. I mean, by 1912 the socialist party had 150,000 members and had elected scores of local officials, like Milwaukee mayor Emil Seidel.

Some urban progressives even pushed to get rid of traditional democratic forms altogether. A number of cities were run by commissions of experts or city managers who would be chosen on the basis of some demonstrated expertise or credential, rather than their ability to hand out turkeys at Christmas or find jobs for your nephew's sister's cousin. Progressive editor Walter Lippmann argued for applying modern scientific expertise to solve social problems in his 1914 book *Drift and Mastery*, writing that scientifically trained experts “could be trusted more fully than ordinary citizens to solve America's deep social problems.”

This tension between government by experts and increased popular democratic participation is one of the major contradictions of the Progressive Era. The Seventeenth Amendment allowed for senators to be elected directly by the people rather than by state legislatures, and many states adopted primaries to nominate candidates. Again, taking power away from political parties and putting it in the hands of voters. And some states, particularly western ones like California, adopted aspects of even more direct democracy: the initiative, which allowed voters to put issues on the ballot and the referendum, which allows them to vote on laws directly. And lest you think that more democracy is always good, I present you with California.

But many progressives wanted actual policy made by experts who knew what was best for the people, not the people themselves. And despite primaries and direct elections of senators, it's hard to argue that the Progressive Era was a good moment for democratic participation since many progressives were only in favor of voting insofar as it was done by white, middle-class, Protestant voters.

All right, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble=====

Progressives limited immigrants' participation in the political process through literacy tests and laws requiring people to register to vote. Voter registration was supposedly intended to limit fraud, and the power of political machines — stop me if any of this sounds familiar — but it actually just suppressed voting generally. Voting gradually declined from 80% of male Americans voting in the 1890s to the point where today only about 50% of eligible Americans vote in presidential elections.

But an even bigger blow to democracy during the Progressive Era came with the Jim Crow laws passed by legislatures in southern states which legally segregated the South. First there was the deliberate disenfranchisement of African Americans. The Fifteenth Amendment made it illegal to deny the right to vote based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude, but said nothing about the ability to read, so many southern states instituted literacy requirements. Other states added poll taxes, requiring people to pay to vote which effectively disenfranchised a large number of African American people who were disproportionately poor.

The Supreme Court didn't help. In 1896 it made one of its most famous bad decisions, Plessy v. Ferguson, ruling that segregation in public accommodations (in Homer Plessy's case, a railroad car) did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause. As long as black railroad cars were equal to white ones, it was a-okay to have duplicate sets of everything. Now, creating two sets of equal quality of everything would get really expensive, so southern states didn't actually do it. Black schools, public restrooms, public transportation opportunities, the list goes on and on, would definitely be separate, and definitely not equal.

=====African-Americans=====
Thanks, Thought Bubble. Now of course as we've seen, progressive ideas inspired a variety of responses: both for Taylorism and against it, both for government by experts and for direct democracy. Similarly, in the Progressive Era, just as the Jim Crow laws were being passed, there were many attempts to improve the lives of African Americans.

The towering figure in this movement to uplift black southerners was Booker T. Washington, a former slave who became the head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, a center for vocational education, and Washington urged southern black people to emphasize skills that could make them successful in the contemporary economy. The idea was that they would earn the respect of white people by demonstrating their usefulness and everyone would come to respect each other through the recognition of mutual dependence while continuing to live in separate social spheres.

But Washington's accommodationist stance was not shared by all African Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois advocated for full civil and political rights for black people and helped to found the NAACP, which urged African Americans to fight for their rights through “persistent, manly agitation.”

=====Conclusion=====

So I wanted to talk about the Progressive Era today not only because it shows up on a lot of tests, but because progressives tried to tackle many of the issues that we face today, particularly concerning immigration and economic justice, and they used some of the same methods that we use today: organization, journalistic exposure, and political activism.

Now we may use Tumblr or Tea Party forums but the same concerns motivate us to work together, and just as today many of their efforts were not successful because of the inherent difficulty in trying to mobilize very different interests in a pluralistic nation. In some ways their platforms would have been better suited to an America that was less diverse and complex, but it was that very diversity and complexity that gave rise — and still gives rise — to the urge toward progress in the first place.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

=====Credits=====

Crash course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Rojas, and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Cafe.

Every week there's a new caption for the Libertage. You can suggest captions in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, if you like it, and if you're watching the credits, you probably do, make sure you're subscribed. And as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.

[off-screen thud] That was more dramatic than it sounded.