NOTES ON PROGRESSIVISM:

In 1914 the journalist and political commentator Walter Lippman wrote that it was the task of his generation “to substitute purpose for tradition; and that is, I believe, the profoundest change that has ever taken place in human history.” Speaking for those born during and after the Civil War, for those who had grown up in an industrializing, urbanizing and polyglot America, Lippman gave voice to his generation’s optimism that they could control the pace and direction of social change.

We can no longer treat life as something that has trickled down to us. We have to deal with it deliberately, devise its social organization, alter its tools, formulate its method, educate and control it. In endless ways we put intention where custom has reigned. We break up routines, make decisions, choose our ends, select means.

Americans, Lippman said, needed to substitute “mastery” for “drift.” And, most shared his conviction that a new America had come into existence in the decades following the Civil War, his certainty that old ways of doing things no longer worked and his confidence that his generation would indeed invent new and better ways. Progressivism in short, was a new public philosophy emphasizing an anti-conservative approach to society and more to the point, suggesting the possibility that Americans could and should engage in “social engineering” in order to perfect their society.

Progressives came in all sizes and shapes but for all their differences, they did share some common traits. One was a belief that they were living at the dawn of a new age. Another was that they possessed the scientific and management skills necessary for them to bend the future to their moral will. They believed that the conscience of the people and the skills of experts could fuse into public policies which would meet society’s major needs: to alleviate the suffering poor; safeguard the health and lives of workers; regulate commerce, protect consumers and preserve opportunity. And of course, some believed that progressive values had a role to play in other nations as well. Finally, Progressives sought to look beyond the ills of modern society commit themselves to the larger spirit of modernity: its insistence on expert knowledge, its will to bring exact and productive order to the world. And, in pursuit of this spirit they invented many of the characteristic features of the modern polity: the social welfare state, the imperial presidency, government mediation of labor-management disputes, consumer protection, regulation of working conditions and business practices.

MUCKRAKERS: In the early twentieth century, a group of journalists emerged who were committed to exposing the social, economic and political ills of industrial life. In 1906, they were nicknamed “muckrakers” by President Roosevelt, who borrowed the word from John Bunyan’s Puritan story Pilgrim’s Progress, which spoke of a man with a “muck-rake in his hand” who raked filth rather than look up to nobler things. Roosevelt recognized the muckrakers’ key role in publicizing the need for progressive
reform, but only as long as they knew when to “stop raking the much,” and avoid stirring up radical unrest.

Muckraking grew out of two related developments of the era—a changing journalism and the reform impulse. The muckrakers represented a new cadre of educated reporters, distinct from earlier journalists who wrote polemical, sensationalized news. They saw themselves as scientists objectively reporting the conditions and ills of modern industrial society. Most of their articles focused on business and political corruption, such as Ida Tarbell’s series on Standard Oil, Lincoln Steffen’s investigation of scandals in city and state politics and Upton Sinclair’s expose of the meat-packing industry. Other subjects included insurance and stock manipulation, the exploitation of child labor, slum conditions, and racial discrimination. From 1902 to 1912, over a thousand such articles were published in magazines specializing in the genre, including McClure’s, Everybody’s and Collier’s.

These muckraking pieces heightened moral indignation among middle-class Americans over the corruption of big business and politicians. They rallied support for several federal regulatory measures including the Pure Food and Drug Act and Hepburn Act of 1906. Although muckraking subsided with the demise of progressivism, some smaller political journals such as the Nation and the New Republic sustained the tradition.

The Politics of Progressivism: Progressives considered themselves the architects of the newly urban, industrialized and ethnically diverse nation they saw forming in these years. Their confidence, perhaps more than any other single quality, gives the era its characteristic tone. Many progressives began as urban reformers; others got their start in the consumers’ movements of the period. Most realized the need to enlist the authority of the state and the national government behind their reforms. Some of their pet measures aimed to extend the power of ordinary citizens. The woman’s movement campaign for the vote is the leading example. The initiative, referendum and recall are others. Some progressive schemes, on the other hand, looked to transfer public questions from politics altogether through the creation of regulatory agencies to be staffed by experts.

There were many kinds of progressives. In part this was because the term progressive, like “efficient” and “businesslike” became one of the watchwords of the day. Some progressives were products of the dissolving status system of the early 1900s transformed by modernization. Ministers and small businessmen for example were losing status while social workers and journalists were gaining it. Both types were galvanized into reform activity. The “new” middle class of professionals, managers and bureaucrats championed the values of rationality, efficiency and predictability. The new consumer-oriented population became involved in the crusade for consumers’ rights. In general, historians define progressives as reformers badly flawed by certain moralistic and symbolic concerns. The general view is that Americans, from the 1890s to the 1940s, wrestled with problems associated with modernization. They did not really come up with long-term solutions, however, until the welfare state measures of the New Deal. Progressives, in such measures as workers’ compensation laws, anticipated some of
the New Deal but their moralism produced reforms that were for the most part only symbolic.

Once Theodore Roosevelt became President, the progressive impulse had a national champion and, by 1912, the reformers dominated presidential politics. Even, Taft, the object of so much criticism from the progressive wing of his own party (Republican), had impeccable reform credentials. Despite the efforts of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois among others, however, African-Americans were more often the victims than the beneficiaries of progressive reform.

Fresh ideas and new perspectives characterized the era. The most important of the new schools of thought was pragmatism. William James, John Dewey and their disciples created a distinctively American sort of empiricism embracing democratic values as the best way to manage change in a thriving US. At the same time new groups sought recognition as having a right to help determine the future. Women and blacks both launched campaigns for equality. Progressive intellectuals revolted against the “formalism” that had characterized intellectual life after the Civil War. Oliver Wendell Holmes for example, rejected deductive legal systems with his famous remark that the life of the law was experience not logic. Thorstein Veblen ridiculed the equally deductive theorems of classical economics and insisted that economics must concern itself with how people actually behaved instead of “postulating economic men” ruled by some abstract natural law. At the heart of the revolt was the new philosophy of pragmatism, which asserted, in William James’ phrase, that truth “happened” to ideas. Pragmatists concerned themselves with the practical value of ideas. They looked not to tradition but to experience and trial and error as the source of ideas for the future. They were distinctively anti-conservative.

**Vocabulary:**

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire  
Social Gospel Movement  
Frederick Taylor  
Muller v. Oregon (1908)  
Initiative, referendum  
16th Amendment  

New Immigrants  
Social Justice  
Lochner v. New York (1905)  
social control/social engineering  
conservation/rational management  
New Nationalism/New Freedom