Acad. Quest. (2021) 34.1
DOI 10.51845/34s.1.23

Reviews

Progressivism: The Strange Career of a Radical Idea, Bradley C.S. Watson, University of Notre Dame Press, 2020, pp. 274, $45.00 hardcover.

We're All Progressives Now

Sidney M. Milkis

Progressivism traces the wayward path of an idea born in the early twentieth century that reverberates through our own time. *Caveat Emptor*. This book is not an analysis of how this idea plays out in practice; rather it is a searing critique of historians who have been complicit in imprinting ideas and practices on the American polity that its author, Bradley C.S. Watson, the Philip Mckenna Chair in American and Western Political Thought at Saint Vincent College, strongly believes are hostile to the "Founders Constitution." "The progressive idea, simply put," he writes at the start of this historiographical journey, "is that the principled American constitutionalism of fixed natural rights and limited and dispersed powers must be overturned and replaced by an organic and evolutionary model of the Constitution that facilitates the authority of experts dedicated to the expansion of the public sphere and political control, especially at the national level." (2)

Watson views this assault on the Constitution as the child of two philosophical movements: Social Darwinism and Pragmatism. Curated by early interpreters of progressivism, most notably, John Dewey, Charles Beard, and Frederick Jackson Turner, many reform thinkers and actors came to share six core and overlapping understandings of the nature of politics and constitutional government. First, "there are no fixed principles or eternal principles that govern, or ought to govern, the politics of a decent regime." Second, "the state and its component parts are organic, each involved in a struggle for never-ending growth." Third, "democratic openness and experimentalism, in the economic but especially in the expressive realms, are necessary to ensure vigorous growth." Fourth, "the state and its components exist only in history, understood as an exorable

Sidney M. Milkis is White Burkett Miller Professor and director of the Honors Program in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia; smm8e@virginia.edu. Milkis is also a Faculty Fellow at UVA's Miller Center.

process rather than a mere record of events." Fifth, "some individuals stand outside the process and must, like captains of a great ship, periodically adjust the position of this ship in the river of History." Sixth, "moral-political truth or rightness of action is always relative to one's moment in History."

Watson's main purpose is not to indict the purveyors of radical reform. Rather his target is historians writing after the "dust settled'—those scholars who dominated the history profession in the 1940s and 1950s, such as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Borstein, Louis Hartz, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. who transmuted progressivism's radical critique of the founder's constitution into a foregone conclusion. More pernicious or delusional than their clear-eyed forbears, progressive historians of the post-World War II era "ignored the fundamental constitutional dimensions of progressivism and the relationship of citizens to the state it bequeathed." These scholars, Watson charges, all but viewed New Deal political order as the end of history. They "offered up interpretations and historiographies of the Progressive Era" that "cemented in the American mind the image of progressivism as a rather warm and fuzzy movement for change." New Deal Liberalism—the governing philosophy of the administrative state—was accepted, if not celebrated, as a conserving reform that had become the "conventional wisdom" of the nation." (4)

Not until the 1980s did the dominant members of this "academic and cultural establishment," come under attack. The "Revisionists" who took the field came mostly from the "Claremont School," with which Watson identifies, the vanguard of an academic movement that has challenged the orthodox liberal account of progressivism; but the revisionist camp also includes those more sympathetic to the progressive tradition such as Eldon Eisenach, Wilson Carey McWilliams, and Alonzo Hamby. My own work, I discovered, is also considered part of this counter movement. All revisionists shared the view that Progressivism was a coherent intellectual movement and that it posed fundamental challenges to the constitutional order of the late nineteenth century. There was far less agreement, however, on the premise that Progressivism's ideas and practices were hostile to the Founders' political thought and the Constitution.

In truth, the "Founders' Constitution" has been disputed throughout American history. Even the essential question of whether

America should have a Constitution of settled standing laws or a "living Constitution" that is remade episodically by changing assumptions and political practices divided the Founders. James Madison's hope was that the people would one day come to "venerate" the document that was so seriously contested at its creation, that the Constitution would become America's civic religion. Frequent appeals to the people to alter the Constitution, Madison feared, "would deprive the government of that veneration that time bestows on everything." Madison thus opposed his friend Thomas Jefferson's idea of a "living Constitution": each generation of Americans, Jefferson insisted, deserved the opportunity to define the meaning of their rights, and to reset the terms of constitutional government in light of this return to first principles. Only through periodic refoundings would the Constitution remain a living, breathing thing that each generation of Americans could truly venerate.

History has largely vindicated Jefferson's exalted, elusive idea that the Constitution "belongs to the living." The Progressive Movement took flight in the 1912 election, when Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose campaign—defending a full blown welfare state and political reforms such as the direct primary and popular referenda—challenged voters to rethink the deepest meaning of America's social contract. But, as Eisenach argues, Roosevelt and his zealous followers claimed to be inspired by Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionists who viewed the Civil War Republican Party as an "organized Redeemer Nation." Lincoln, who Watson credits with bringing the natural rights understanding of the Constitution into full realization, viewed the Declaration as a transcendent document that constantly beckoned the country to live up to the "self-evident truth" that "all men are created equal." Watson looks askance at transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker; their views, he insists, were a "precursor" to progressives' mischievous vision of a "transcendental democracy." Yet Lincoln's argument in the Gettysburg Address that the Founders formed a "government of the people, by the people, for the people" was adapted from Parker's frequent pronouncement that democracy was "government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people." The reference to "*all* the people" clearly was aspirational—a condemnation of slavery that betrayed the promise of the Declaration. Lincoln elaborated

on the transcendent character of the Declaration in his Dred Scott speech,

> [The Founders] did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. . . . They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated . . .

In condemning the Progressives, Watson and the Claremont School have downplayed just how far the America these reformers confronted at the dawn of the twentieth century had strayed from "the arc of the moral universe" (another Parker phrase). The Civil War Amendments were betrayed by the South's fierce and violent struggle to redeem the "Lost Cause," a revanchism that resulted in the notorious Compromise of 1877, which prepared the ground for Jim Crow. The rise of corporations threatened to render "the fair race of life" Lincoln championed as the objective of the Republican's economic program a chimera. And the emergence of machine politics, subordinating party principle to spoils, marked, as historian Morton Keller noted, a shift from a "politics of ideology" to a "politics of organization." Progressives viewed this decentralized, patronage-based party system as an impediment to fulfilling the Founders objective to forge a nation. State and local machines, they argued, had perverted the original design of the Constitution, which was dedicated to the emancipation of the American people from provincial and special interests, embodied by the Articles of Confederation.

Progressives did not take up all these problems; indeed, Watson could point out that their emphasis on state building rather than natural rights led to a willingness to ignore and in some cases, such as Woodrow Wilson's extension of segregation to the federal civil service, embrace white supremacy. But the danger that the corporation posed to liberty and the seeming inability of the patronage state to protect Americans from threats to their freedoms at home and abroad gave reformers' attack on extant constitutional principles

and institutions credibility. We should consider, therefore, that the triumph of progressivism and its enduring influence in American politics is not the conspiracy of complacent historians; rather, it follows from reform leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt offering an alternative understanding of the Constitution that, for better and worse, appeared to better address the problems America faced in the wake of the collapse of Reconstruction and the rise of industrial capitalism. Progressives promised a "living Constitution" that would empower the president, as the steward of the "whole people," to meet the imposing domestic and international challenges of modern America. They invoked Hamilton's hope that the American Constitution beheld an ambitious experiment in establishing self-rule on a grand scale—anchored by a strong and energetic executive who could carry out, as Hamilton envisioned in Federalist 71, "extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit."

Watson rightfully condemns the consensus historians for failing to identify the fault lines that lay beneath the progressive state. The expansion of national administrative power that followed the construction of the New Deal political order did not result in the form of national state progressive reformers had championed. To be sure, recent political developments suggest that Americans have come to expect the national government—the "modern state" —to assume responsibility for their economic and social welfare. Middle class entitlements, especially, programs such as Social Security and Medicare, have become formidable pillars of the welfare state, strongly supported by Democrats and Republicans alike. Similarly, the Civil Rights laws enacted during the high tide of liberalism in the 1960s, a long overdue reckoning with ramparts of Jim Crow, rest in a strong popular consensus. At the same time, reform initiatives pursued in the wake of Lyndon Johnson's Great society, often incubated in the courts and bureaucratic agencies, have aroused strong opposition to the progressive idea. Controversies aroused by policies designed to ameliorate the persistence of racial inequalities, most notably affirmative action, and fierce disagreements about America's responsibilities in the world have destroyed the consensus progressive historians welcomed.

Yet here is the rub for those who would restore the "Founders' Constitution": conservatives, no less

than liberals, now choose to draw on progressive solutions. The strand of conservatism that arose in opposition to the Progressive movement, represented by William Howard Taft—who stood like Horatio at the Bridge in a vain effort to hold off TR's 1912 insurgency—defended constitutional forms like the separation of powers and federalism, a settled standing body of law, and restraints on popular and populist solutions to political and social discontents. Many modern conservatives have applauded Theodore Roosevelt's call for greatness and his vigorous use of executive power, especially in foreign affairs—heeding the call as Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush enlisted them in Manichean struggles against Godless Communism and Radical Islamic Terrorism. Moreover, a large number of contemporary conservatives have concluded that the government—even the federal government—has the responsibility to protect "traditional" American values. Such a view permeates proposals to uphold law and order, restrict abortion and same-sex marriage, require work for welfare, impose performance standards on secondary and elementary schools, and place severe restrictions on immigration. Most Republicans, including many of scholars of the Claremont School, backed Donald Trump, a self-styled conservative populist, as he pushed these causes with aggressive administrative action that has sharply divided the nation and weakened the national resolve.

Although the legacy of progressive democracy transcends the ideological battles of the moment, its pervasiveness raises profound questions. Is a strong administrative state compatible with an active and competent citizenry? Can the modern presidency, even with the tools of instant mass communication and social media, function as a truly democratic institution with meaningful links to the public? Can individual rights be secured by social welfare policies and national regulations? These are the fundamental questions that revisionist political scientists, no matter what their partisan commitments, should explore and debate together.