

# Interpretation

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Bradley Watson's *Progressivism* is a study in the historiography of American progressivism since the 1940s. Following an initial sketch of the intellectual origins of the Progressive movement, Watson focuses on how Progressivism (otherwise known as progressive liberalism, as distinguished from the original, natural-rights-based liberalism of Locke, Montesquieu, the American Founders, and Lincoln) has been portrayed by academic historians—nearly all of them, starting in the postwar era, professed or implicit partisans of the movement.

The crucial division, Watson stresses, between the original liberals and their Progressive successors concerns the issue of whether there are limits to the scope and purpose of government, rooted in its existing to secure such individual, “negative” rights as are summarized in the Declaration of Independence, or whether government’s purview must constantly be expanded, in the light of advancing social-scientific knowledge of human needs and how to satisfy them. Underlying that division is the question whether there is a fixed human nature, from which the principles of just government are derived, or whether the concept of human nature, and hence of an objective criterion of justice, is an artifact of the past, which the latest social science requires us to jettison so as to improve the human condition. (Watson illustrates the difference by his epigraph, pairing Calvin Coolidge’s 1926 address on the Declaration’s sesquicentennial, observing its “finality” such that those who would deny its principles are reactionaries rather than progressives, with Progressive historian Richard Hofstadter’s 1955 account of how, having been “reared” on

the tradition of “Progressive reform,” like most American “intellectuals,” he found it temporarily expedient to “employ the rhetoric of conservatism” only to preserve “the social achievements of the past twenty years.”)

Reflecting Hofstadter’s strategy, the most striking aspect of Progressive historiography as Watson portrays it is how rarely its practitioners, in eulogizing Progressivism, acknowledged any conflict between that movement and constitutional limitations on government (an indifference reflected in Nancy Pelosi’s response to a question about the constitutionality of Obamacare: “Are you serious?”). Instead, Progressive historians, beginning with Hofstadter, blurred the difference between Progressivism and constitutional liberalism, as if the former were a natural outgrowth of the latter. Rather than address the Constitutional issue head-on, historians of the Progressive movement debated secondary or trivial questions, such as how far there had been a “consensus” among the Progressives rather than serious fissures among them, or even whether there had been an identifiable, coherent Progressive movement at all.

Hence, whereas the original progressive historians such as Charles and Mary Beard were open advocates, celebrating progressivism as a democratic “victory over big business” (3), later ones, no less committed to progressive goals, effectively denied the novelty of the progressive movement, representing it as a continuation of what Hofstadter labeled “the American political tradition.” In the process, they portrayed progressivism as “a populist rather than philosophic movement,” focusing on its “rejection of formalism in the service of social utility” or pragmatism, without addressing its transformative “moral-political and regime-level dimensions” (5). A central consequence, in Watson’s recounting, was the disappearance of “the idea of a fixed Constitution” as an object of study, and with it “the realm of the private,” which natural-rights liberalism had aimed to protect (6).

Watson attributes the origin of Progressivism in the late nineteenth century to the merger of Social Darwinism—the belief that political institutions must evolve just as biological species do—with pragmatism, or what one progressive historian termed the “revolt against formalism” (including the forms of the Constitution). As the American people proved too attached to “outmoded understandings of politics,” Watson observes, Progressives turned increasingly to the judiciary to advance their reforms (15). The progressive approach was summarized in John Dewey’s 1909 essay “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy.” But it was soon “woven into the fabric of American self-understanding” by early progressive historians like Frederick Jackson

Turner (author of the “frontier thesis”), Charles Beard, and V. I. Parrington, whose *Main Currents in American Thought* was recognized in the second half of the twentieth century as the “magnum opus of progressive history.” Crucial to Parrington’s endeavor to “demythologize” the past was his debunking of the Constitution as an undemocratic document reflecting economic forces aimed at restraining the advance of the “common man” (27–28).

In his second chapter Watson addresses another element in progressivism’s rise: “a reconstituted worldly Christianity” that sought “expansion of the state in the name of moral and theological progress.” Unlike “prior American religious awakenings,” he observes, Christian progressivism focused “almost exclusively on matters of social and economic justice” rather than individual moral reformation. Progressive historians like Hofstadter understated the “essentially social and political” rather than theological roots of Christian progressivism, which (as explained by the economist and exponent of the “social gospel” Richard Ely) embodied the supposed truth “confirmed by social science” that developing “individuality” required harmonizing human beings “with the laws of social solidarity.” Ely portrayed socialism as Christian “brotherhood” for modern times, and given the recalcitrance of the American people towards the voluntary adoption of socialism, urged judges to use their coercive authority to eliminate “the messiness and corruption of American republican institutions,” for instance by “manipulat[ing]” “property distribution for the good of all” and guiding “our individuality towards others,” in contradistinction to James Madison’s observation of the inevitability of factional division in a modern republic (33–43).

The social gospel doctrine was popularized in the early 1900s by Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister, “armchair political theorist,” and adviser to Theodore Roosevelt. Rauschenbusch taught that the true “kingdom of God” is an earthly one, a moral subject on which the church must preach before it becomes a political, hence partisan, one, since it “should be a source of incontrovertible union.” Thus it can “speed the pace of evolution” toward human “perfectibility.” In Rauschenbusch’s account, “no Christian can be a conservative.” As Watson observes, Rauschenbusch’s critique of the conservatism of mainstream Protestantism echoed Roosevelt’s criticism of the modern polity as threatened by “effeminacy.” In a later book Rauschenbusch, whose doctrine was soon taken up by the precursor to the National Council of Churches, attributed “all the evils of civilization...to private property.” Rauschenbusch’s new theology was elaborated by his Catholic friend Fr. John Ryan, a vehement supporter of the New Deal who demanded (in a book

introduced by Ely) a guaranteed “living wage.” Attributing that policy to the theological doctrine of natural law, Ryan even encouraged clergy to impose religious sanctions against employers who rejected it. He attributed opposition to his doctrine to the influence of “anti-social natural rights theory,” of the sort embodied in the Declaration, despite claiming that the various economic and social rights he espoused were “implici[t]” in that document. Hence Ryan paid “little to no regard...to questions of legal or constitutional constraint” on government, even denying that “the people are...the source of political authority,” and rejecting the inherent right of freedom of conscience (46–68). And yet, Watson observes, these various deviations of Progressivism from America’s founding principles were disregarded in most histories of the movement “until well into the twenty-first century.”

Watson’s third chapter, “Gray on Gray” (Hegel’s phrase denoting philosophy’s description of the spirit of an age once the age has achieved maturity), is devoted to analyzing “the strange history of progressive history in the 1940s and 1950s.” Here we reach the core of Watson’s argument. As he observes, in contrast to the original Progressive Era historians, who had painted America’s history as one of corruption and hence in need of radical transformation, their mid-twentieth-century successors tried “to defang Progressive ideas” to make them “appear more compatible with the American experience and constitutional order” than they really were. American historians still maintained such assumptions as “the utility of statism, the chimerical status of natural rights” in light of “Darwinian and pragmatic criticisms,” and the American Constitution’s “anachronistic nature” in light of such developments. But starting in the 1940s progressive historians simply downplayed the “constitutional perspective,” regarding it as “quaintly irrelevant,” while also “clos[ing] ranks in the era of World War II and the Cold War around amorphous commitments to ‘constitutionalism,’” feeling the need (as noted by critic Herman Belz) for some sort of normative (not merely pragmatic) alternative to European totalitarianism, as well as guidance amid the turmoil of the civil rights era. The ostensible “vital center” at which they arrived (the title of a book by prominent liberal historian-activist Arthur Schlesinger Jr.) “turned out to be...not much of a center, as neoconstitutionalists...often embraced a very living constitution,” adaptable to “state expansionism and innovative civil rights theory.” Aiming to “circle the wagons,” however, progressive historians now claimed the mantle of the American Founders themselves for the supposedly “postpartisan” observation that democracy was now “imperiled by the growth of giant industry” and so required the suppression of individualism and competition in order to “restore Jeffersonian conditions of equal opportunity” (as Herbert

Croly had maintained in his earlier Progressive manifesto *The Promise of American Life*, the thesis of which had been reiterated in Franklin Roosevelt's 1932 Commonwealth Club campaign address) (73–78).

Scholarship on the Progressive Era “c[a]me into its own,” Watson notes, in the 1940s, at a time when objectivity was not American historians’ “strong suit,” a situation that encouraged them to downplay the innovative character of progressivism. Epitomizing this trend, starting with his 1944 book *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, Hofstadter represented Darwinism as a “profoundly conservative” force that had been used to justify “the laissez-faire status quo”—that is, until pragmatists led by Lester Frank Ward turned the doctrine of evolution to “constructive uses.” But Hofstadter never acknowledged how Darwinians of both Right and Left undermined the principles of the Constitution, along with the separation of religion from expanding state concerns. In his subsequent, widely read collection of essays *The American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter “emphasized a consensus view” of American history, “albeit a consensus too far to the right for the author’s tastes.” Whereas the self-described progressive presidents Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt were really “conservative” liberals, who had failed to question “conventional laissez-faire arguments,” it was Franklin Roosevelt who embraced “novelty on a scale with the founders, albeit one that did not cling as much to the sanctity of private property.” But after FDR’s death, according to Hofstadter, liberalism became “rudderless and demoralized,” making it necessary to “salvage” the New Deal by the late 1940s for the sake of the future. Since “no one abreast of modern science” in Hofstadter’s view could “believe in an unchanging human nature as the founding fathers did,” the new task was “to transcend notions of conflict [among differing interests] and property rights that the Constitution took to be eternal” (80–82).

As Watson points out, Hofstadter’s writing exhibited a “reluctance to deal with constitutional matters on their own terms,” as distinguished from the Constitution’s supposed economic “context” as portrayed by Charles Beard. Hofstadter lamented that Beard himself, amid the dangers of foreign despotism that manifested themselves in the 1940s, redirected his scholarship, now viewing the Constitution not “as an undemocratic imposition of aristocrats” but “as a prophylactic against despotism.” (The new introduction that pragmatic historian Carl Becker added to the reissue of his book *The Declaration of Independence* amid the specter of Nazism during the Second World War, attributing objective validity to the Declaration’s principles, in contrast to the book’s argument, I note, exhibited a similar change of heart.) But in his

1955 “comprehensive account and gentle critique of populism and progressivism,” *The Age of Reform*, Hofstadter depicted the progressive thought of the 1890s to 1940 as merely a “highbrow reaction to political conservatism,” a “safe house” that protected scholars from any “serious assault on their commodious living.” As Watson observes, while Hofstadter approvingly cites the critic Lionel Trilling’s dismissal of conservatism as consisting merely in “irritable mental gestures” rather than ideas, he never addresses “the possibility of a genuine constitutional conservatism” that stretched from the Founders through Presidents Lincoln, Taft, and Coolidge (82–84).

Watson follows his account of Hofstadter’s portrayal of progressivism with Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s celebration of the achievements of the New Deal and Henry Steele Commager’s midcentury treatment of progressivism as animated by “moderation, common sense, and even inevitability,” which overcame the “embarrass[ing]” distrust of government that Americans had “inherited from the Revolutionary era” (90–91). In the remainder of the chapter, Watson shows how numerous other midcentury historians worked, with little opposition, to represent progressivism as having been “well within the mainstream of American thought and practice,” culminating in a liberal “consensus” (109, 115). It all did seem rather gray.

The effort of Hofstadter, Commager, and other “liberal” historians of the postwar period to downplay the transformative or anticonstitutional character of Progressivism succeeded too well, Watson implies in his chapter “Progressive Historiography in a Countercultural Age,” in persuading their New Left successors of the 1960s, led by William Appleman Williams and Gabriel Kolko, to demand a more radical, Marxist-tinged reconstruction of the American polity. One such historian dismissed progressive liberalism itself as an “ideology of American business groups” to maintain “social control” (147). But by the 1970s and ’80s, rather than address the (forgotten) constitutional questions that an adequate assessment of the progressive movement required, some mainstream historians were doubting that progressivism had ever existed (so thoroughly had they imbibed its premises).

It remained for a systematic challenge to the progressive reading of American history be set forth by a group of scholars originally trained in political philosophy, many of them connected to the “Claremont school” of political science, beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, as Watson explains in his fifth chapter, “Intellectual Consolidation and Counterattack.” The Claremont school, consisting of scholars associated with Claremont McKenna College, Claremont Graduate School, and the Claremont Institute,

was deeply influenced by the work of the political philosopher Leo Strauss, who “placed the problem of historicism at the front and center” of his inquiries (171). Thus Strauss provided the ground for a new look at the principles of the American Founding, freed from the Progressive assumption that they must be out of date.

But while discussing the work of a number of scholars influenced by Strauss, originally including Martin Diamond, Paul Eidelberg, and Harry Jaffa, Watson also discusses the contribution to the reconsideration of progressivism’s foundations made by the progressive historian Eldon Eisenach (who emphasizes the revolutionary character of the movement that had been overlooked by the liberal-consensus historians). Other challenges to the liberal-consensus view were made by such scholars unconnected to Strauss or Claremont as historian Alonzo Hamby and political scientists Wilson Carey McWilliams, Jerome Mileur, and Martha Derthick. One forgotten aspect of the original progressive movement brought out by Eisenach was its motivation by “secular religiosity” (as discussed in Watson’s second chapter). As political scientist Will Morrisey observes, Rauschenbach’s original progressive theology now “comes to sight in American politics as ‘living constitutionalism’ aided by strong executive leadership,” at the expense of constitutional limitations and the rule of law (183). Similarly, law professor David Bernstein defends “the Supreme Court’s pre–New Deal jurisprudence” against Hofstadter’s claim that its support of individual economic freedom was “premised on social Darwinism”—especially considering the fact that Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose dissent in the *Lochner* case disparaged such freedom, “was the only social Darwinist on the Court at the time” he attributed that doctrine to the Court majority (187–88). The victory of progressivism (to which both Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt subscribed, *pace* Schlesinger) in the 1912 presidential election, which entailed according to Roosevelt that “the people themselves must be the makers of their own Constitution,” ultimately grounded the adoption by today’s populist conservatives of a program combining “a strong executive and mass democracy,” rather than a return to the constitutional conservatism (combined with moderate legislative progressivism) championed by William Howard Taft in that same election (195). Clearly, the issue of constitutionalism versus progressivism transcends the liberal-conservative debate.

Watson’s concluding chapter, “The Shades of History,” addresses the question of “how best to account for the weaponization of American history since the 1940s.” Somewhat surprisingly (in view of his own criticism

of postwar historians' lack of objectivity), he initially cites historian Peter Novick's blaming this weaponization as the product of their pursuit of the "noble dream" of an unattainable objectivity. In consequence of that dream, historians (in Novick's words) "developed and maintained positions that both expressed a progressive consensus and became impervious to change or challenge from the outside," effectively substituting "consensus" for truth. (Surely in pursuing truth the scholar should strive to be objective in the sense of impartial—though impartiality by no means entails neutrality.)

In response to Novick, however, Watson observes that his rejection of "the idealism of purported scientific history" itself "embraces the historicism that underlies it," peremptorily rejecting without argument the Declaration's "self-evident truths." More generally, Watson connects the insular "professionalization" of American historians and their disregard of regime questions to wider developments in twentieth-century social science, which sought (in imitation of the natural sciences) to avoid controversial ethical issues, even as they retained (and sought to advance) their personal commitments to Progressive goals. It has been left to political scientists, especially those schooled in the history of political philosophy (as distinguished from those trained in the dogmas of historicism and scientism) to rescue the understanding of American history from progressive historians. Watson's provocative and learned study constitutes a worthy contribution towards that goal.

## GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

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Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

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