



Students from North Carolina A&T College stage a sit-down strike after being refused service at a luncheon counter in February 1960.

Social Movements and Progressivism

Part Three of the Progressive Tradition Series

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Introduction

A rich history of social movements shaped progressive thought throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Historian Sidney Milkis characterizes the accomplishments of the original Progressive Era as “momentous reconstructions of politics,” a description that equally applies to the numerous social movements that aimed to better align America’s political and social order with its ideals of liberty, equality, and opportunity for all.¹

Progressivism as a reform tradition has always focused its moral energy against societal injustice, corruption, and inequality. Progressivism was built on a vibrant grassroots foundation, from the Social Gospel and labor movements to women’s suffrage and civil rights to environmentalism, antiwar activism, and gay rights. The activists and leaders of these movements believed deeply in the empowerment and equality of the less privileged in society, the primacy of democracy in American life, and the notion that government should safeguard the common good from unchecked individual and commercial greed. They challenged government to eliminate its own legal injustices and also harnessed the force of government as a vital tool for advancing human freedom and establishing the “more perfect union” envisioned by the Founding Fathers.

Central to all progressive social movements is the belief that the people do not have to wait for change from the top down—that people themselves can be catalysts for change from the bottom up. Many social movement activists came from middle- or working-class backgrounds and possessed the courage and skill to organize others, risking great personal sacrifice and danger. Nonviolent themselves, many of these activists faced ridicule, violence, and other hardships in their efforts to push their fellow citizens toward more enlightened positions in line with the country’s stated values.

Mainstream political parties often ignored social movement activists who engaged in public education and took to the streets to demand justice and political equality. Through direct action campaigns and political organizing they asked other Americans to join their cause as a matter of conscience and duty to their fellow human beings. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously stated in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”:

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.²

The relationship between political progressivism—as expressed in the platforms and actions of political parties and leaders—and social movements has not always been harmonious or cooperative. Social movements, by definition, arise from a committed minority of citizens working together to shape larger public consciousness about particular injustices in addition to working for concrete political change. Social movements have invariably advanced moral and political causes surrounding gender, racial, and class equality with much greater force and consistency than those in mainstream politics. The ideas of social movements, such as expanded suffrage and civil rights protections, often become uncontested parts of mainstream politics after prolonged struggles. In other cases, social movements band together to create new political institutions to challenge the partisan status quo from the outside as seen with the early farmers’ alliances who formed the People’s Party and social reformers and dissident Republicans of the early 1900s who formed the Progressive Party.

Progressive leaders themselves learned from the principled activism of social movements. Many mainstream progressive political leaders in the past were reactionary on issues of race and gender. At the same time, the seeds of the great civil rights triumphs of the 20th century came from within progressivism itself. An interracial coalition of progressives joined together to create the NAACP and many leading progressives emerged from the fight for abolition and women’s suffrage. The collective efforts of these movements eventually helped to turn progressivism itself into a stronger vehicle for human equality, social tolerance, and political rights for all people.

Progressive social movements are divided into two main categories for the purposes of this essay: movements for equality and individual rights, and movements for economic justice. This division presents two questions: What, if anything, ties these movements together, and how do they fit within the larger intellectual and political tradition of progressivism?

- First, each of the movements developed in response to a grave injustice in American life that directly or indirectly affected a significant segment of society—for example, the formal inequality of women, African Americans, immigrants, and gays and lesbians led to various movements for civil rights; the poor working conditions and poverty-level subsistence of wage earners led to the rise of the labor movement.
- Second, each of these social movements worked as independent checks on mainstream progressive politics and functioned as internal factions within the progressive tradition itself.
- Third, in terms of shared values, many of these movements were grounded in the moral and philosophical inspiration of the early American tradition—particularly the Declaration of Independence, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, and other civic republican and democratic ideals—as well as longstanding religious principles expressed in Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths.

- Fourth, each of these movements in one way or another advanced the values of progressivism described in the opening essay: freedom in its fullest sense; a commitment to the common good; pragmatic reform; human equality; social justice; democracy; and cooperation and interdependence. Although sometimes radical for their times, the movements described here lie clearly within the reform tradition of American politics and many, if not all, of their original goals have been integrated into mainstream American society and government over time.

The relationship between social movements and progressivism is ultimately one of shared learning and activism in pursuit of common values. These brief summaries are not meant to be exhaustive accounts of all the major players or all the landmark events of the various movements, but rather to provide an illustrative sampling of a rich tradition that continues to shape progressivism today. Other important social movements including environmentalism, consumer protection and antiwar activism will be explored in future essays.

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