

Written Exercise #2

The Progressives were a group of individuals dedicated to reforming the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this era, an extremely limited group of individuals owned a majority of the wealth in America (Discussion Board 10/11). Unfortunately, the remainder of the population was subject to low wages, long working hours, dangerous industrial equipment, and unscrupulous employers (Discussion Board 9). As their primary goal, the Progressives fought to remedy the changes brought about by the growth of American industry. In the words of historian Howard Zinn, the Progressives worked to “stabilize the capitalist system by repairing its worst defects. 2and restore some measure of class peace in a time of increasingly bitter clashes between capital and labor” (Zinn 354). While the Progressives strove to restructure the United States, they were largely unable to make significant changes and ameliorate the struggles of the working class.

The Progressives “offered an impressive array of reform proposals” because the American social structure was in dire need of rearrangement. As mentioned above, the distribution of wealth was heavily concentrated amongst the richest captains of industry, while the remainder of the population struggled to get by. In addition, worker compensation was unreasonably insufficient. Laborers worked all day for “wages that barely kept their families alive” (Zinn 257). Meanwhile, employers received generous salaries and enjoyed comfortable lifestyles. In addition to salaries, the workday was expanded beyond reasonable hours. Zinn writes: 3“*The youngsters together with the men and women toiled from seventy and eighty hours a week! Saturdays and Sundays included!*” (Zinn 325). The average American works anywhere from 40 to 60 hours a week, but in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, laborers toiled for up to 80 hours per week. Furthermore, they were not given Saturdays and Sundays off. In short, the work never ceased.

During the Gilded Age, factory conditions were extremely treacherous. Laborers were subject to dangerous industrial equipment, toxic fumes, and swelteringly hot temperatures. In 1911, for instance, 146 women were killed in a raging fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory (Loewen 205). After further investigation, it was revealed that the Triangle Shirtwaist Company had violated several safety procedures, which ultimately led to the deaths of these women (Zinn 326). This example, unfortunately, is merely one instance of the many tragedies that occurred in factories during the Progressive Era. As Zinn explains, accidents, sicknesses, and disasters were abundant:

There were more fires. And accidents. And sickness. In the year 1904, 27,000 workers were killed on the job, in manufacturing, transport, and agriculture. In one year, 50,000 accidents took place in New York factories alone. Hat and cap makers were getting respiratory diseases, quarrymen were inhaling deadly chemicals, lithographic printers were getting arsenic poisoning (Zinn 327).

As indicated by the evidence above, working in manufacturing plants during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era was tremendously hazardous and unsafe.

Local, state, and national governments during the Gilded Age were heavily corrupt; in addition, government officials were easily bribed. During this period, Americans were not given the attention they deserved from their respective legislatures. With regards to the state of the United States government at this time, Zinn writes: 4“Corruption dominates the ballot box, the legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench” (Zinn 288). As evidenced by this quote, there was deception and dishonesty at all levels of legislature. From local governments all the way to Congress, representatives could not be trusted.

The Progressives made various proposals with the intention of reforming the United States and distributing the wealth amongst the population. 3In a general sense, Progressives sought “continuity and predictability in a world of endless change. They assigned far greater power to government. 2and encouraged the centralization of authority” (Zinn 350). In a time of extensive political corruption, the Progressives fought for transformation of the system, ultimately leading to some reformation and change. For instance, the Progressives were responsible for direct primaries, and the direct election of Senators, thereby expanding American democracy (Sage). They lobbied for an “aggressive, proactive government that foresaw problems and acted to prevent calamities” (Sage). Finally, the Progressives pressed for increased government involvement in public affairs (Sage). Overall, the Progressives made several beneficial proposals that led to expansion of American democracy and increased government regulation.

The Progressives pushed for several Constitutional amendments, all of which led to significant changes in the United States. The 18th Amendment, for instance, established the period of Prohibition. The 19th Amendment, which granted women’s suffrage, was also a product of the Progressive Era (Sage). The Progressives were also heavily involved in the struggle for the regulation of large businesses. One major accomplishment of this period was the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. This law was “an act to protect trade and commerce against unlawful restraints and made it illegal to form a combination or conspiracy to restrain trade in interstate or foreign commerce” (Zinn 260). Progressives recognized that large corporations had created an unfair business environment in the form of monopolies, so they fought to eliminate these trusts. By combating these large monopolies, the Progressives benefited America by facilitating the creation of a more competitive, diverse business market. In American society, the Progressives battled issues such as poverty, racism, and sexism. Through these efforts, the Progressives helped create a more egalitarian social atmosphere.

In many ways, the United States did become a “kinder, gentler nation.” As indicated by the evidence above, the Progressives were quite successful in creating reform. For example, they helped expand American democracy and institute women’s suffrage. However, there are many instances where the Progressives were not nearly as effective as they had hoped to be. For example, the working environment in manufacturing plants has continued to be extremely treacherous. As discussed in Fowl Trouble, the story of a present day American poultry slaughterhouse, many employees “must endure sweltering heat and remain ever mindful that the horrible fumes released by the decomposing blood can, in rare cases, become poisonous in a confined space” (Fowl Trouble). The Chain Never Stops further discusses the dangers of modern day factories:

5The rate of cumulative trauma injuries in meatpacking is the highest of any American industry. It is about 33 times higher than the national average. According to federal statistics, nearly 1 out of every 10 meatpacking workers suffers a cumulative trauma injury every year. In fact, it's very hard to find a meatpacking worker who's not suffering from some kind of recurring pain. For unskilled, unschooled manual laborers, cumulative trauma injuries such as disc problems, tendonitis, and "trigger finger" (a syndrome in which a finger becomes stuck in a curled position) can permanently limit the ability to earn a decent income. Much of this damage will never be healed (The Chain Never Stops).

Clearly, factory conditions have not improved as much as the Progressives would have hoped. Millions of laborers continue to be injured each year, yet manufacturers turn a blind eye to this issue. They are far more concerned with production and efficiency, so they often disregard work related injuries and accidents (Discussion 10/11). Due to the state of modern day work conditions, it is evident that the Progressives were not entirely successful in creating a "kinder, gentler nation." Overall, historians assess the Progressive Period as a time of "reluctant reform" (Zinn 349). Zinn, in particular, characterizes the Progressive Period as an era "aimed quieting the popular risings, not making fundamental changes" (Zinn 349). In this quote, Zinn is indicating to the reader that the Progressives were not focused on creating reform, but rather they were dedicated to quelling protest and ameliorating popular distress. Based on the modern working environments of many factories, as discussed above, I agree with Zinn's points. Today, laborers at many industrial plants work in equally as treacherous environments as those of the Gilded Age. Furthermore, these workers continue to receive little payment for their long-hour workdays. In conclusion, while the Progressives did press for changes in America, they were ultimately unable to create the ideal, democratic nation that they had hoped to establish.