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Educational materials for American Progressivism

In this essay, Ronald J. Pestritto describes the American Progressive criticism of the natural law tradition. American Progressives criticized the [Founders](#) for insisting that the natural rights listed in the constitution are universally applicable. Progressives held that history is progressive, with society constantly evolving; because they also believed rights to be a product of society, they held that rights were subject to change as well. Progressives also held that society had progressed sufficiently that the Founders' [constitution](#) was no longer appropriate: America was no longer seriously threatened by factions, and the government posed less of a threat to the people and had a greater ability to provide help. Because of this, Progressives wanted to expand government programs and regulations, developing a more democratic and administrative government. The Progressive beliefs described in this essay gave rise to the first Progressive Era (1880-1920) and ultimately to modern political liberalism.



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JOHN DEWEY

John Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont in 1859. As an undergraduate at the University of Vermont, he was first exposed to the evolutionary theory that later shaped his own philosophy. His time as a Ph.D. student at Johns Hopkins University introduced him to Hegelian idealism and its organic model of nature (that nature grows continually to surpass checks on its progress). Dewey's later work exposed this philosophical model to scientific methodology, the usefulness of which he first discovered through American experimental psychologist G. Stanley Hall.

After completing his doctorate, Dewey taught at the University of Michigan for ten years. He published two works that arose out of his background in idealism: *Psychology* (1887) and *Leibniz's New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding* (1888).

In 1894, Dewey moved to Tufts University for the second post of his academic career. There he developed a theory of knowledge that accorded with pragmatism, a new American philosophical movement. His work was published by his students and colleagues as *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903). At this time Dewey also founded a laboratory school, where he put his expanding theory of education into practice. His research allowed him to publish *The School and Society* in 1899.

Taking up his final academic position in 1904 at Columbia University, Dewey began to write on the relationship between his theory of knowledge and metaphysics. His continued publications in the fields of philosophy and education theory paralleled one another. 1910 saw the release of [The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought](#) and *How We Think*, and in 1916 he published *Essays in Experimental Logic and Democracy and Education*. In his later years at Columbia, Dewey became a leading public commentator on a number of issues, including women's suffrage and teacher unionization. His frequent lectures were published in several book collections throughout the 1920s.

After he retired in 1930, Dewey spent the final years of his life producing a large body of work, including the final form of his logical theory, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938). Some of his other works from this period include *Art as Experience* (1934), *A Common Faith* (1934), *Freedom and Culture* (1939), and his *Theory of Valuation* (1939). Dewey died in June 1952.

To read more about Dewey's life and works, please click [here](#).

WOODROW WILSON

Woodrow Wilson was born in Staunton, Virginia on December 28, 1856. His father was a slave-owning Presbyterian minister who sympathized with the confederacy. Wilson did not learn to read until age 10, or later. He graduated from Princeton University in 1873, received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in Political Science in 1885 and began an academic career, teaching at Bryn Mawr College and Wesleyan University, where he coached the football team.

Wilson joined the faculty of Princeton University in 1890, eventually moving through the ranks to become President of the University in 1902. He ran for Governor of New Jersey in 1910 on a progressive platform, and was nominated as the democratic candidate for President in 1912. He won, and after a first term, he ran for re-election on a non-interventionist platform, promising to stay out of World War I. Within the first year of his second term, however, Wilson asked Congress to declare war, and the United States joined the British and French on the western front. After the war, Wilson advocated an international treaty organization, the League of Nations, as outlined in his famous "Fourteen Points". The League was a failure, Wilson died in 1924, and the second World War began in 1939.

To read more about Woodrow Wilson, click [here](#).



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American Progressivism:

an argument to progress beyond the natural law principles of the [American Founding](#) and enlarge the scope of national government. This school of thought gave rise to the Progressive era and contemporary political liberalism.

ballot initiative:

a petition which, if it receives a legally determined number of signatures, forces a public vote

Croly, Herbert:

(1869-1930) co-founder of *The New Republic* and intellectual leader of the Progressive Movement who argued for a strong federal government and military.

Dewey, John:

(1859-1952) a psychologist, pragmatist, and philosopher who advocated a Progressive theory of education and played a major role in the American Progressive movement.

electoral system:

voting system by which voters make a choice between options or candidates

epistemology:

the field of philosophy concerned with knowledge and belief

Goodnow, Frank Johnson:

(1859-1939) a legal scholar and third president of Johns Hopkins University.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich:

(1770-1831) a German philosopher who employed a teleological approach to history, arguing that

history progresses in a particular direction. His philosophy proved influential for the American Progressives.

historical contingency:

dependence on historical circumstances; here, the belief that the ends and scope of government are defined differently in each period of history

historical progress:

the steady and predictable improvement of society with time. Progressivism relies on a belief in the inevitability of historical progress.

La Follette, Robert:

(1855-1925) a Republican politician who served in the House, the Senate, and as Governor of Wisconsin. He was the Progressive Party's unsuccessful nominee for President in 1924.

Liberalism and Social Action:

published by John Dewey in 1935, it argues for a modern liberalism in support of government intervention in economic affairs.

liberalism - classical:

a political philosophy which emphasizes natural rights and individual freedoms, including economic freedoms. This places it in opposition to extensive government intervention.

liberalism - modern:

a political philosophy which emphasizes natural rights, including the right to certain economic resources. Because of this, modern liberalism supports government intervention in the economy, even when it limits economic freedom.

living constitution:

a constitutional philosophy which views the [Constitution](#) as subject to reinterpretation in new times, because of new circumstances

recall:

the removal of an elected official by a popular vote, initiated by sufficient signatures on a petition

referendum:

a public vote on whether to accept a piece of legislation, policy, etc.

Roosevelt, Theodore:

(1858-1919) President of the United States from 1901-1919, leader of the Republican Party and the Progressive Party of 1912.

social compact theory:

advocated by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, social compact theory holds that the government is a type

of contract made between its members, whose legitimacy rests on their consent

short ballot:

a ballot where people vote directly for their presidential candidate, rather than for the candidate's elector

Turner, Frederick Jackson:

(1861-1932) a historian whose "Frontier Thesis" held that westward expansion played a pivotal role in shaping American values and democratic traditions

Wilson, Thomas Woodrow:

(1856-1924) President of the United States 1913-1921. He passed a number of Progressive reforms, including the income tax and the Clayton Antitrust Act, and oversaw U.S. involvement in World War I and the subsequent Treaty of Versailles.



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I. Basics of American Progressivism

A. political orientation leading to first Progressive Era (~1880-1920)

B. principles inform contemporary American political liberalism

C. a challenge to the natural law tradition of [America's founding](#)

D. an argument to enlarge the national government to respond to economic and social conditions allegedly not envisioned by the founders

1. belief that the ends and scope of government should be redefined in each historical period
2. belief that the government was less of a tyrannical threat and capable of accomplishing more, arising from faith in historical progress
3. prevalent in ideas of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Croly, John Dewey, and Robert La Follette

II. Criticism of political and constitutional theory of American founding

A. emphasis on age of [Constitution](#) and its status as a response to old social and economic issues

B. the Constitution was designed to achieve the natural law principles of the [Declaration of Independence](#)

C. Progressives understood this and attacked underlying social compact theory and the belief that the government's role is to secure underlying rights

III. Motives for the Progressive agenda

A. regulatory and redistributive expansion, at odds with natural law principles of founding

1. Woodrow Wilson: "if you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence, do not repeat the

preface”

2. Frank Goodnow: the founders’ system of government “was permeated by the theories of social compact and natural right,” theories “worse than useless” because they “retard development”; he believed social expediency, not natural right, should determine individual freedom of action

IV. Criticism of the Founders, a historical view

A. Progressives didn’t oppose the founders’ use of natural law, but rather their treatment of it as transcendent and universal

B. John Dewey: the founding generation had a “disregard of history”; “They put forward their ideas as immutable truths good at all times and places; they had no idea of historic relativity.”

1. Dewey’s history of liberalism in *Liberalism and Social Action* was Progressive, with modern liberalism presented as better than classical liberalism
2. this idea is a product of German and Hegelian beliefs, promulgated through American contact with German universities, which criticized natural law, individual rights, and social compact theory; viewed nation state as “living”
3. Wilson wrote of the superiority of a “living” constitution over the founder’s model, because he believed improvements in the human condition had eliminated the risk of a factious population

V. Result of American Progressivism

A. advocacy of constitutional reform, increased legislation, and regulation

B. opposition to separation of powers; proposed separation of administrative and political functions (democratize and unify national political institutions like the presidency and congress; the real work of government is to administration, because the real political questions have been solved)

C. party and electoral system: referendum, recall, short ballot, professionalization of local governments



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Part I. Basic Interpretation

For further information about American Progressivism after reading this article, please refer to the [Primary Source Documents](#). The following questions are meant to focus your thinking as you read further.

- 1) What is Progressivism?
- 2) What, according to Goodnow, distinguished the dominant strand of American political philosophy from the European-style of politics?
- 3) What was the Progressives’ criticism of the [Founders](#)?
- 4) What did the American Progressives advocate? Why? How did their philosophical beliefs effect their practical proposals?
- 5) What historical motivations did the Progressives have for attempting to re-conceptualize government?

Part II. Connections to Other Thinkers

As you look deeper into American Progressivism, think about these questions in order to see how it fits into the broader historical context of the natural law tradition.

- 1) Both American Progressivism and [Aristotle](#) believe the law should serve the good of humanity, and that good laws can be discerned from the actual state of society. How does Aristotle's view of the human good differ from that of the American Progressives? How do their views on how we can best determine these laws differ?
- 2) Pestritto writes of American Progressives: "The natural-law understanding of government may have been appropriate, they conceded, as a response to the prevailing tyranny of that day, but, they argued, all government has to be understood as a product of its particular historical context. The great sin committed by the founding generation was not, then, its adherence to the doctrine of natural law, but rather its notion that that doctrine was meant to transcend the particular circumstances of that day." How might the Founders have responded to this criticism? Can natural law, if viewed as a social construct, reasonably be called upon as a source of authority to enact social change?
- 3) How do [Edmund Burke](#)'s criticisms of natural rights compare with the criticisms offered by the American Progressives?
- 4) Compare American Progressivism to [Legal Positivism](#). In what way do the two philosophies conform to traditional or classical natural law (e.g. that of Aristotle and Aquinas)? In what ways do they reject it?
- 5) In what way might the more explicitly theistic conception of natural law explicated by [Thomas Aquinas](#) serve as a response to the critiques of the American Progressives? Might Thomas's emphasis on God help answer some of the objections brought against the historically contingent nature of natural law?
- 6) How do the practical views of the American Progressives on governmental organization differ from those put forward by [Montesquieu](#)?
- 7) Even though one might expect American Progressivism and [Social Darwinism](#) to have very different doctrines, the two movements are remarkably similar. What are some of the relevant similarities? What are the main differences, if any, between these two philosophies?

Part III. Critical Analysis

Now that you are more familiar with American Progressivism let us subject it to further scrutiny. Use the following questions to test its conclusions and better understand its underlying basis and further consequences.

- 1) Virtue does not play a significant role in American Progressivism. Is this a good thing? Does virtue have any value? And if so, is it of any political value?
- 2) If there is no natural law, what does it mean for society to improve? It seems that if this improvement is real, then some things must be truly better than others, which does suggest some sort of absolute morality. Is there a way for American Progressives to get around that? By what measure can they discern progress?
- 3) How might American Progressives account for differences in cultures during the same time period? What about differences between people within the same society? Are some societies and some people more "advanced" than others? How might this be determined?

4) Goodnow [writes](#): “the rights which [an individual] possesses are, it is believed, conferred upon him, not by his Creator, but rather by the society to which he belongs.” What does it mean to have rights “conferred” by society? If this is the case, can any society criticize any other society for what rights they choose? If these rights are merely conferred, on what grounds might we foster respect for them? Furthermore, if the society confers the rights, then the society may take any right away at any time, including the right to life. Is this a dangerous doctrine? Or can the right to life be appealed to only insofar as it is recognized?

5) One of the two main prongs of Progressivism’s critique of natural law is Progressivism’s assertion that all government and political ideals are historically contingent. Does this argument, however, count against the Progressives themselves? They, just as much as the Founders, are a product of the beliefs and intellectual milieu of their times. Might not their philosophy, then, also be contingent? If there are no universal truths about the rights of man, is not the universal truth “there are no universal truths about the rights of man” also discredited? Is Progressivism also historically relative?

6) The other main prong of the Progressive critique of natural law is concerned with the nature of historical progress. The Progressives argued that mankind was constantly improving itself, its capacities, its understanding of liberty, and its moral sense, and therefore the governments of more modern eras can do more and fix more problems than past ones. Is this view plausible? Has mankind improved substantially? If so, how do we account for the manifest horrors of the 20th century?

Part IV. Contemporary Connections

1) In what ways is modern liberalism similar to American Progressivism? Is the latter the root of the former? What salient differences are there, if any, between the two philosophies?

2) Both modern conservatives and modern liberals tend to advocate for expanding the government and the [Constitution](#) in response to modern problems. The former does this for defense and security, the latter for social and fiscal policy. Does this shared aspect indicate that American Progressivism achieved at least part of its aim?

3) Today, there is a large foreign policy debate over whether the United States has a duty to intervene for humanitarian reasons in foreign wars and genocides. There is also widespread disagreement over whether we ought to impose democracy and civil liberties on countries currently lacking them, and whether those countries could even support such liberty. How might an American Progressive answer this differently from an American proponent of natural law?

4) Progressives, writes Pestritto, believed that, “the real work of government was not in politics, but in administration, that is, in figuring out the specific means of achieving what the people agreed they all wanted” and that, “the will of the people was no longer in danger of becoming factious.” However, contemporary philosophical discourse is dominated by contentious social and fiscal issues about which people seem to deeply disagree. Were the American Progressives wrong about the primacy of administration, or is there deep agreement among Americans lying beneath the apparent conflicts?

5) Moreover, many of most contentious debates—about abortion, euthanasia, marriage, etc.—are characterized by enormous amounts of rights-talk. Does the American tradition of casting political issues in terms of natural rights hinder our ability to compromise?

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