



Progressivism, Old and New: The Spiritual Moorings of Progressive Reforms

Dmitri N. Shalin¹

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Abstract

With the tide of progressive reforms facing strong headwinds today, this essay offers a retrospective look at the progressive movement in the U.S.A. and reflects on the lessons to be learned from its triumphs and failures. The case is made that major advances in the progressive agenda came at historical junctions precipitated by dramatic events. The stretch between 1900 and 1920 saw the first wave of social reforms following the late nineteenth century recessions and upsurge in labor unrest. The New Deal took shape in the 1930s in the aftermath of the Great Depression. The Civil Rights movement burst onto the scene in the 1960s in the face of bitter attempts to shore up segregationist practices in southern states. And the 2020s spike in progressive activism gained momentum against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the January 6 Capitol riots. Special attention is paid to the interfaces between Social Gospel theology and efforts to ground progressive rhetoric in what John Dewey called “common faith,” Robert Bellah “civil religion,” and Richard Rorty “liberal pragmatism.”

Keywords Progressivism · Socialism · Social Gospel · Square Deal · New Deal · *Rerum Novarum* · *Quadragesimo Anno* · Common faith · Civil religion · Prophetic Judaism · Liberal pragmatism · Walter Rauschenbusch · John Dewey · Jane Adams · Abraham Joshua Heschel · Joseph Soloveitchik · Robert Bellah · Richard Rorty

The Rev. W. D. P. Bliss did not mince words in 1890 when he urged his followers “that Christian socialists should teach by fact and not by sentiment; by fact about city gas works, not by mere talk about city brotherhood” (Bliss 1970/1890: 352–353). By the time progressivism solidified into a nationwide movement, this view became commonplace in America where clergy from far-flung denominations advocated a need for hard-nose reforms. Christianity was destined to play a key role in reinventing American democracy. Now that a new tide of progressivism is rising in the U.S.A., it may be helpful to revisit this historical terrain, to reflect on the old progressivism and the lessons we can learn from its triumphs and failures.

What strikes me the most in the original progressive creed is how relaxed reformers were about their agenda’s alignment with socialism. Henry George, author of *Progress and Poverty*, put it bluntly, “The ideal of socialism is grand and noble; and it is, I am convinced, possible of realization” (George 1926: 319). Serialized in the U.S.A., translated into

European languages, and retailing over two million copies, this runaway bestseller presaged the transition from the Gilded Age of unbridled capitalism to the Age of Reform dedicated to economic and social uplift.

Herbert Croly, the founder and first editor of *The New Republic*, was equally frank in conceding the affinity between socialist and progressive creeds: “The majority of good Americans will doubtless consider that the reconstructive policy, already indicated, is flagrantly socialistic both in its method and its objects; and if any critic likes to fasten the stigma of socialism upon the foregoing conception of democracy, I am not concerned with dodging the odium of the term” (1909: 209).

Nor did Theodore Roosevelt exaggerate when he made this observation: “I am well aware that every upholder of privilege, every hired agent or beneficiary of the special interests, including many well-meaning parlor reformers, will denounce [my platform] as ‘Socialism’” (Roosevelt 1912/1962: 318). Roosevelt’s anxiety about the leftward drift of his progressive aspirations was well founded, given the inroads socialists were making in American politics. By 1912, the Socialist Party of America claimed the support of one congressman, 50 mayors, and 250 weeklies, and polled close to a million

✉ Dmitri N. Shalin
shalin@unlv.neveda.edu

¹ University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV, USA

votes, forcing the rest of the country to take note and define its stance toward socialism.

Supported by judges, politicians, and businessmen, the establishment fought to preserve capitalism in its pristine—laissez-faire—form premised on the notion that the market knows best and attempts to regulate it are a crime against nature. However, the rationale for the old customs began to wear thin in the late nineteenth century once it became clear that the economic engine of capitalism may stall without a major overhaul. The Haymarket riots and the national Pullman strike put elites on notice that the labor unrest in the country was reaching a boiling point and that drastic measures must be taken to stem popular discontent. This is when a remarkable coalition of academics, journalists, church leaders, business owners, and grassroots activists sprang to life and mounted a campaign to revamp the entire system of government.

Social Gospel activists and radical Evangelicals led the way. What made the new theology stand out was its commitment to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth rather than glory in the splendor of the world to come. It is startling to read the disclaimer of Walter Rauschenbusch, a principal architect of *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917: 31), that on “the more speculative doctrines the social gospel has no contribution to make. Its interests lie on earth, within the social relations of the life that now is.” Ralph Waldo Trine, another luminary in the progressive theology pantheon, put the same precept this way: “We need an everyday, a this-world religion. All time spent in connection with any other is worse than wasted. The eternal life that we are now living will be well lived if we take good care of each little period of time as it presents itself day after day. If we fail in doing this, we fail in everything” (Trine, 1897/1910: 210–211). This sentiment was echoed by secular thinkers like economist Richard T. Ely: “Christianity is primarily concerned with this world, and it is the mission of Christianity to bring to pass here a kingdom of righteousness and to rescue from the evil one and redeem all our social relations” (Ely 1889: 53).

It is in this spirit that the Episcopal church established a Joint Commission on Capital and Labor to help mediate disputes between workers and businessmen; the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. reached out to the American Federation of Labor, offering its services as an honest broker; and the National Council of Churches assembled a Committee on Labor with the mandate to promote labor rights. All these protestant organizations aimed to infuse American capitalism with ethical principles that Social Gospel proponents traced to Biblical sources.

The Catholic Church had gone through its own period of social awakening. *Rerum Novarum*, the Encyclical issued in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, spurred American Catholics into action with its frank acknowledgment that capitalist society failed the working classes because of its

mindless pursuit of profit and callous disregard for the wage earners’ welfare. Subtitled “On Capital and Labor,” the Encyclical exhorted governments to intercede on behalf of the oppressed by curtailing business power to impose onerous contracts and helping safeguard the right to unionize (*Rerum Novarum* 1891). The Encyclical goes to an impressive length to articulate the Holy See’s views of “the relative rights and mutual duties of the rich and of the poor, of capital and of labor,” the duty of the employer “to respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled by Christian character,” and the responsibility of the state “to realize public well-being and private prosperity” and further “justice which is called distributive.” While condemning “grasping employers [who] too often treat them with great inhumanity and hardly care for them outside the profit their labor brings,” Pope Leo XIII cautions against “crafty agitators [who] are intent on making use of these differences of opinion to pervert men’s judgments and to stir up the people to revolt,” reminding the faithful that “pains and hardships of life will have no end or cessation on earth,” that “the consequences of sin are bitter and hard to bear, and they must accompany man so long as life lasts” (*Rerum Novarum* 1891).

The reform proposals circulating at this time covered the wide range of economic, political, and social life (Hofstadter 1955; Scott 1959; Hays 1964; Shalin 1988; Gendzel 2011; Eisenach 2021).

On the economic front, progressive reformers sought to restrain monopolies and break powerful trusts; strengthen the workers’ right to organize and bargain with their employers; pass minimum wage legislation, workman’s compensation, and provision for old age; institute progressive income tax and levy a surcharge on large inheritances; limit child labor and improve work environment safety; and hold businessmen accountable for the quality of food and drugs they sell.

In the political arena, the reformers wanted to strengthen participatory democracy by granting women full suffrage; adopting federal laws mandating primaries and direct election of senators; empowering citizens to bypass machine politicians through the initiative, referendum, and recall; and promoting conservation by earmarking federally owned land for national parks and recreation areas.

The municipal reforms favored by the progressives meant to strip politics from administration, implement scientific procedures in municipal bodies, establish control over utilities and city railways, and promote settlement houses and philanthropic organizations.

A medley of proposals put forward by the progressives targeted social welfare through temperance, prohibition, anti-saloon initiatives, tenement improvement, comprehensive schooling for all classes, and progressive education combining the liberal arts curriculum with down-to-earth, technical training.

Not all these reforms were successfully implemented, but the extent to which the progressives managed to reshape American society seems startling in retrospect. Four constitutional amendments that the progressives pushed through the first two decades of the twentieth century advanced the cause of reform—the Sixteenth Amendment (1909) authorizing a federal income tax; Seventeenth Amendment (1912) approving the election of U.S. senators by popular vote; Eighteenth Amendment (1918) banning the sale and production of alcohol; and Nineteenth Amendment (1919) invalidating the abridgement of the right to vote based on sex. These constitutional accomplishments combined with marquee progressive legislation such as the Hepburn Railroad Regulation Act (1906) establishing the right to inspect the railroad companies' books; the American Antiquities Act (1906) protecting public lands and creating national parks; the Pure Food and Drug and Meat Inspection Act (1906) affirming the sellers' liability for defective products; the Clayton Antitrust Act (1914) outlawing predatory business practices like price fixing, anti-competitive mergers, and union busting; the Adamson Act (1916) reducing working hours and mandating overtime pay on interstate railroads; the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (1916) granting benefits to federal employees who fell ill or sustained injuries on the job; and the Workmen's Compensation Act (1916) allowing workers to collect compensation for work-related injuries. Combine these achievements, and you can see how far American society strayed from the tenets of laissez-faire capitalism.

The 1912 presidential campaign revealed a solid consensus among the major parties—Democratic, Republican, and Progressive—over the nation's priorities and suitable legislative measures. Instructive, also, were parallels and discrepancies in the platforms put forward by Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive party and Eugene Debs' Socialist Party of America. Roosevelt's debt to socialist musings is tangible in his party platform adopted in Indianapolis on November 5, 1912, where the progressives denounced “the unholy alliance between corrupt business and corrupt politics” and pledged to reverse “the existing concentration of vast wealth under a corporate system, unguarded and uncontrolled by the Nation, [which] has placed in the hands of a few men enormous, secret, irresponsible power over the daily life of the citizen” (Progressive Party Platform 1912). The similarities are tangible in substantive proposals like “minimum safety and health standards for the various occupations,” “compensation for death by industrial accident and injury and trade disease,” “prohibition of night work for women and the establishment of an eight-hour day,” and “one day's rest in seven for all wage workers” (Progressive Party Platform 1912). In one form or another, these measures appeared in the Socialist Party platform (except for a few provisions like the “strict limitation of all campaign contributions and expenditure, and detailed publicity of both” unmentioned by socialists).

And yet, there are crucial differences between the two platforms that show where the progressives parted company with their colleagues to the left. Theodore Roosevelt never meant to do away with capitalism; Eugene Debs pledged to do just that. As the preamble to the Socialist party platform explained, “the capitalist system has outgrown its historical function, and has become utterly incapable of meeting the problems now confronting society,” and this is why in “the present system in which industry is carried on for private greed [there] can be no remedy and no substantial relief except through Socialism under which industry will be carried on for the common good and every worker receive the full social value of the wealth he creates” (Socialist Party of America Platform 1912). Further along, the party platform expounded the standard socialist curriculum according to which “society is divided into warring groups and classes... one of which, the capitalist class, owns the means of production, and the other, the working class, must use these means of production, on terms dictated by the owners.” Specific remedies included “the collective ownership and democratic management of railroads, wire and wireless telegraphs and telephones,” “the extension of the public domain to include mines, quarries, oil wells, forests and water power,” “the collective ownership of land wherever practicable,” and so on according to the socialist playbook (Socialist Party of America Platform 1912).

Sometime after the campaign platform (unveiled in Indianapolis on May 12, 1912) announced to the world that “the Socialist Party is the party of the present day revolution which makes the transition from economic individualism to socialism, from wage slavery to free co-operation, from capitalist oligarchy to industrial democracy,” Eugene Debs felt the need to clarify his position: “I am opposed to any tactics which involve stealth, secrecy, intrigue, and necessitate acts of industrial violence for their execution.” This disclaimer did not win the socialist standard bearer much sympathy among the mainstream progressives (Debs 1912: 403). Woodrow Wilson (1962/1912: 375) acknowledged the appeal of socialism—“I need not tell you how many men were flocking over to the standard of the Socialists, saying neither party any longer bears aloft an ancient torch of liberty”—yet he sharply demarcated his party stance from the radical socialist program. And so did the bulk of progressive reformers, regardless of whether they were affiliated with the Roosevelt or Wilson brands of progressivism.

For Social Gospel theologians, invoking socialism was a way to draw attention to the crisis facing America and remind everyone of Christianity's ethical moorings. The New Evangelicalism stopped well short of endorsing the socialist program. John Commons's *Social Reform and the Church* (1894), Henry King's *Theology and the Social Consciousness* (1912), and Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) advocated the national welfare

policies while spurning massive nationalization, state control over the distribution of goods, and similar prescriptions. *Bishop's Program of Social Reconstruction* that John Ryan wrote in 1919 on behalf of the Administrative Committee of the National Catholic War Council (later reconstituted as the National Catholic Welfare Council) is emblematic in this context:

It seems clear that the present industrial system is destined to last for a long time in its main outlines. This is to say, private ownership of capital is not likely to be supplanted by a collectivist organization of industry at a date sufficiently near to justify any present action based on the hypothesis of its arrival. This forecast we recognize as not only extremely probable, but as highly desirable for, other objections apart, Socialism would mean bureaucracy, political tyranny, the helplessness of the individual as a factor in the ordering of his own life, and in general, social inefficiency and decadence. Nevertheless, the present system stands in grievous need of considerable modifications and improvement. Its main defects are three: enormous inefficiency and waste in the production and distribution of commodities; insufficient incomes for the majority of wage-earners, and unnecessarily large incomes for a small minority of privileged capitalists (Ryan 1919).

Some secular progressive thinkers were less definitive in their repudiation of socialism, but they also declined to follow the socialist doctrine to its logical conclusion. Jane Addams's rhetoric is replete with philippics against the evils of unregulated capitalism as she bristled at "the overaccumulation at one end of society and the destitution at the other" and puzzled over the paradox of a "large and highly developed factory [that] presents a sharp contrast between its socialized form and its individualistic aim," yet her "passion for the equalization of human joys and opportunities" (Addams 1910: 126; 1902: 139) did not encompass the desire to create a command economy.

Nor did John Dewey, who, like Jane Addams, was profoundly influenced by Christian ethics, endorse socialism. In his younger years, Dewey speculated about the "tendency of democracy toward socialism, if not communism" and opined that "there is no need to beat about the bush in saying that democracy is not in reality what it is in name until it is industrial, as well as civil and political" (Dewey 1969/1888: 246). But he bristled at the charges levied against progressivism by the old-school liberals who "have always attacked it as pink socialism, as disguised radicalism; while at the present time the favorite charge is that it is instigated, of all places in the world, from Moscow" (Dewey 1935/1946: 130).

Whatever sympathy progressives felt toward socialism curdled after the Russian Marxists seized power and proceeded to build a one-party state. The Bolshevik Revolution and the Red Scare that swept through America in its aftermath reminded reformers that doing away with the constitutional safeguards that capitalist society affords to its citizens is a risky proposition. Progressive reformers wanted to socialize opportunity, not property. They sought to make the economy more responsive to the needs of the working classes, to transform democracy into a truly representative form of government yet linked distributive justice to personal merit. The solution to the problems facing the nation was not a revolution but reform, a program of reconstruction feeding on the strengths of the American democratic tradition yet willing to revamp old institutions standing in the way of progress. That is to say, progressives tried to salvage capitalism from itself, or as Richard Hofstadter (1955: 236) put it, progressivism represented "a dual agenda of economic remedies designed to minimize the dangers from the extreme left and right." Most importantly, progressive reformers sought to humanize American capitalism by infusing it with Judeo-Christian values.

The mobilization during World War I and subsequent disenchantment with an overbearing state drastically diminished the enthusiasm for reform. Progressivism suffered serious setbacks in the 1920s as the public turned against liberal politics, goaded by powerful opinion leaders. *Notes on Democracy* (Mencken 1926) and *The Stammering Century* (Seldes 1927) captured the mood of the moment, with the authors lamenting the abridgement of liberty in America: "Progress in America went in one direction, reform in another... In the middle of the nineteenth century, the word [reformer] meant one who wanted to give liberty to others; to-day it means, briefly, one who wants to take liberty away" (Seldes 1927: 10, 6).

H. L. Mencken was especially virulent in denouncing progressive reforms. He did not stop with philippics about such "bucolic imbecilities as Prohibition" which soured a lot of people on overzealous reformers or women's suffrage which showed "the women voters simply succumb[ing] to the sentimentalities that happen to be engaging their lords and masters" (Mencken 1926: 100, 93); he denounced democratic institutions in general. Progressive measures like "the recall, the initiative and referendum, or something else of the sort... convert the representative into a mere clerk or messenger," and thus give free reign to the "democratic mob" (Mencken 1926: 81).

Democracy, as a political scheme, may be defined as a device for releasing this hatred born of envy, and for giving it the force and dignity of law... To a democrat any attitude based upon a concept of honour, dignity and integrity seems contemptible and offensive... [and] he

will take whatever he can safely get, law or no law... He is still a slave to priests, and trembles before their preposterous magic. He is lazy, improvident and unclean. All the durable values of the world, though his labour has entered into them, have been created against his opposition (Mencken 1926: 164–165, 128, 197, 73).

Notice Mencken's reference to "priests," indicative of his Nietzsche-inspired contempt for religion and men of the cloth. Sensing the alignment between religion, democracy, and progressive reforms, Mencken disparaged "Christianity, a mob religion [which] paves heaven with gold and precious stones, i.e., with money... What it lacks is aristocratic disinterestedness, born of aristocratic security" (Ibid 1926: 216–217). Christianity, according to Mencken (Ibid. 74–75), "is the invention of Paul and his attendant rabble-rousers – a body of men exactly comparable to the corps of evangelical pastors of to-day, which is to say, a body devoid of sense and lamentably indifferent to common honesty... Paul knew his mob: he had been a travelling labour leader."

For all the vitriol and over-the-top criticism that progressivism faced in the aftermath of the Progressive era, we should not overlook its serious deficiencies. Not a few progressives harbored animosity toward immigrants hailing from undesired destinations and felt drawn to the pseudoscience of eugenics promoting ethno-racial purification. The total ban on the production and sale of alcohol exposed the moralistic streak in progressive activism, the propensity to use the state in the service of denominational agendas and downplay cultural diversity. Still more egregious was the failure of the progressive lawmakers to square off with exclusionary politics and racist practices. Theodore Roosevelt refused to seat Southern Black delegates at the Progressive party convention, while confiding to his friends that he had found the Fifteenth Amendment "bad policy" and considered Blacks "altogether inferior to the whites" (Klein 2020, citing a letter from 1906). Woodrow Wilson's executive order segregating federal civil servants on racial grounds stands as a reminder that do-gooders can harbor bigoted views. To his credit, Eugene Debs was the only presidential candidate at the time to condemn white supremacy (Jones 2008).

It was not until the Great Depression wrecked the economy that the country regained its appetite for nationwide projects aimed at general welfare. Once again, religionists led the way. On the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Pius XI issued an Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* where he restated Vatican's commitment to labor reform and affirmed the need to regulate the marketplace (*Quadragesimo Anno* 1931). The Pontiff went further than his predecessor in identifying the culprits responsible for economic turmoil, singling in particular "the so-called Manchesterian Liberals" who bear much responsibility for the fact that "capital' has undoubtedly long been able to

appropriate too much to itself... hardly leaving to the worker enough to restore and renew his strength." Praising Leo's Encyclical as "the Magna Charta upon which all Christian activity in the social field ought to be based," Pius XI claimed that "the wealth of nations originates from no other source than from the labor of workers," urged that "the opportunity to work be provided to those who are able and willing to work," and offered a "vigorous defense of the natural right to form associations." He also gestured toward "Socialism [which] inclines toward and in a certain measure approaches the truths which Christian tradition has always held sacred; for it cannot be denied that its demands at times come very near those that Christian reformers of society justly insist upon." For all that, Pope Pius XI was adamant that socialists are bound to fail in their secular undertaking because they preach class warfare and spurn religion as the foundation of progress. He expressed confidence that "the unchanged and unchangeable teaching of the Church should meet new demands and needs more effectively" (*Quadragesimo Anno* 1931).

It fell to Franklin Delano Roosevelt to convince the country that a fresh round of reforms was necessary in the face of national emergency. His New Deal plan built on the achievements of the Progressive Era, with some former heroes getting another chance at shaping the national policy (in 1939, FDR gave a tribute to John Ryan as a man of virtue who "pleaded the cause of social justice and the right of the individual to happiness through economic security, a living wage, and an opportunity to share in the things that enrich and ennoble human life" Roosevelt 1939). New Deal legislation strengthened state regulatory powers through a series of executive orders and legislative initiatives. Among the most consequential accomplishments of this era were the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (1933) underwriting work-relief projects and income support; the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (1933) boosting agricultural prices and easing mortgage refinancing requirements; the Glass-Steagall Emergency Banking Act (1933) setting up deposit insurance and instituting regular bank inspection; the Federal Securities Act (1933) mandating stock sales disclosure and security transaction registration; the Social Security Act (1935) creating the national system of unemployment insurance and old age pension; and the Wagner National Labor Relations Act (1935) guaranteeing the right of private sector employees to form trade unions and bargain collectively.

Throughout the FDR decade, conservatives continued to bemoan the progressive revival and nurture suspicion that someone, somewhere receives public assistance. Once again, H. L. Mencken (1956: 110) led the way: "New Dealers, blaming its adherents, ostensibly trying to put an end to unjust and unnatural forays by the haves, only opened the ways for unjust and irrational forays for the have-nots."

Such attacks notwithstanding, the enthusiasm for reform was strong enough to carry past World War II well into the 1960s when it produced two landmark pieces of legislation under President Lyndon Johnson—the Civil Rights Act (1964) that banned discrimination in employment and public accommodations based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, and the Voting Rights Act (1965) that prohibited racial discrimination in voting. Other notable progressive enactments of this period included the Economic Opportunity Act (1964) that set out to eliminate poverty; the Higher Education Act (1965) increasing federal support for colleges and universities and offering assistance to low-income students; the Social Security Amendments (1965) which created Medicare and Medicaid programs offering insurance for the aged and extended funds to the states expanding health coverage for the needy; the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act (1966) requiring clear labeling of consumer products; and the Endangered Species Act (1973) protecting native animal species facing extinction.

For all its undeniable achievements, the postwar progressivism showed strains and contradictions that had remained submerged during the Progressive era and that began to cause a rift in the progressive coalition. From the start, progressivism positioned itself as a national movement championing the rights of ordinary citizens. Every creature made in the image of God, the Social Gospel theology proclaimed, must be accorded the dignity becoming a human being, which first and foremost meant freedom from insecurity due to the loss of job, injury, illness, and old age. At least implicitly, the New Nationalism championed by Theodore Roosevelt promised equal rights for all Americans, and so did the New Freedom put forward by Woodrow Wilson. This promise has never been fulfilled, however. Full citizenship was denied to substantial segments of the U.S. population, most notably to Blacks, who faced barriers in securing equal rights and protection under law. Poll taxes, literacy tests, racial segregation, employment and housing discrimination were rampant in Jim Crow America—which progressives helped to build, if not sanctify. Wilson's racial animus and enthusiasm for the Confederate Klansmen were by no means an aberration. A few progressives like Jane Addams, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead eschewed the racial prejudices of the time (Addams fought the Progressive party decision to disenfranchise Black delegates from the South), but many more were oblivious to the damage it did to the fabric of American society or, worse, reveled in white supremacy.

This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. fought during much of his career as a member and then president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He owed a good deal of his inspiration to early Social Gospellers: “In the early ‘50s I read Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, a book which left an indelible imprint on my thinking” (King 1960: 440; see also Luker

1991). In 1961, MLK addressed these words to the AFL-CIO Convention in Miami:

I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness as Negroes, Jews, Italians or any other distinctions. This will be the day when we bring into full realization the American dream – a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality (King 1961).

King's call for economic equality did not play well in America at large. To be sure, there were ministers, priests, and rabbis who stood fast by Dr. King and joined the fight against racism, some with their own memories of exclusion still fresh in their minds. Among the prominent religious leaders who marched alongside Dr. King was rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who ingeniously linked the Hebrew prophets with the contemporary fight for human dignity and civil rights (Heschel 1963; Zelizer 2021). In 1963, he met Martin Luther King at a convention in Chicago where he was given a rousing reception and unanimous praise for his talk, “Religion and Race,” that condemned the indifference toward injustice permeating American society:

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted... Equality as a religious commandment means personal involvement, fellowship, mutual reverence and concern. It means my being hurt when a Negro is offended. It means that I am bereaved whenever a Negro is disfranchised (Heschel 1963).

Heschel's commitment to civil rights is a powerful testimony to the historical nexus between spiritual striving and progressive reform, between prophetic Judaism and the struggle against bigotry and racial violence. For Heschel, “Racism is satanism, unmitigated evil” and “man's gravest threat to

man,” and it is the prophet who is called to fight injustice by reminding humans that they are all made in the image of God and called upon by the Creator to confront prejudice. “The prophet is a person who suffers the harms done to others,” “who is not tolerant of wrongs done to others, who resents other people’s injuries,” which is why Heschel exhorted his fellow citizens: “Let there be a grain of prophet in every man!” Belief in God and the fight for justice are inseparable, for “the fear we must feel lest we hurt or humiliate a human being must be as unconditional as fear of God. An act of violence is an act of desecration. To be arrogant toward man is to be blasphemous toward God” (Ibid. 1963).

Yet, many religious and secular leaders saw the stance taken by King and Heschel as an encroachment on the economic and political interests of the White population. And as gays, lesbians, immigrants, transgender people, and other marginalized groups pressed their claims to full citizenship, the progressive movement fractured along various fault lines. It is this legacy that the New Progressivism now grapples with as it tries to rebuild the progressive coalition.

There is no shortage of organizations dedicated to the progressive agenda today (for a representative list, see <http://www.startguide.org/orgs/orgs00.html>). For the purpose at hand, I will limit myself to the Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force proposal. Issued in July of 2020 after Joseph Biden secured the Democratic party nomination, this 110-page document articulates the progressive agenda for our time, with general policy statements and specific recommendations that the Biden administration pledged to implement. The added bonus is that we can see how Bernie Sanders’ democratic socialism and Joseph Biden’s mainstream reformism are merged in a practical program undergirding progressive politics of our time. From the get-go, we can see how the new progressivism diverges from the original progressive creed:

Democrats commit to forging a new economic and social contract with the American people – a contract that works for the people, not just for big corporations and the wealthiest few. A new economic contract that recognizes all Americans have a right to quality, affordable health care. One that recognizes housing is a right and not a privilege... A new economic and social contract that at last grapples honestly with America’s long history of racism and disenfranchisement, of segregation and discrimination, and invests in building equity and opportunity for the communities of color who have been left out and left behind for generations (Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force 2020).

The Americans who had been left behind in the earlier rounds of reforms are foremost in the mind of today’s progressives. Every section dealing with a specific set of issues

highlighted in the Joint-Task-Force document—health care, criminal justice, climate change, the economy, education, and immigration—underscores the wrongs of the past and identifies measures to rectify the injustice:

People of color – and particularly Black people and Latinos – are more likely than average to live near heavy polluters, including ports, power plants, and industrial sites. Air pollution contributes to higher rates of asthma, heart disease, premature birth, and low birth weights, among other serious health issues. Democrats will put environmental justice at the center of our climate change and energy policies... We commit to managing federal actions and undertakings in a manner that honors the trust responsibility; respects the nation-to-nation relationship and sovereignty of Tribes; and protects treaty and other reserved rights, natural and cultural resources, and sacred sites of federally recognized Indian tribes... [We shall] enact H.R. 40 as the building block to begin to redress the harms committed against African Americans, including slavery, sharecropping, Jim Crow, redlining, and the deliberate exclusion of Black Americans from the benefits of the New Deal, G.I. Bill, and other wealth-building government programs. Tackle racial bias in communities of color, including appraisals and creating a national standard for housing appraisals...

The joint-task-force text omits some of the more audacious proposals championed by Sanders and his followers like Medicare for All or the Green New Deal, but the recommendations contained therein have something for all Americans. Certain proposals are rather aspirational, with timelines beyond what many present leaders will live to see, but there is plenty of specifics for the electorate to hold the Democratic Party accountable for its promises:

Within five years, we will install 500 million solar panels, including eight million solar roofs and community solar energy systems, and 60,000 made-in-America wind turbines... reduce harmful air pollution and protect our children’s health by transitioning the entire fleet of 500,000 school buses to American-made, zero emission alternatives within five years... eliminate carbon pollution from power plants by 2035 through technology-neutral standards for clean energy and energy efficiency... ensure all employers provide at least 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave for all workers and family units, to enable new parents to recover from childbirth... enact universal, high-quality prekindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, and expand the Child and

Dependent Care Tax Credit to help make child care more affordable... fight to make public colleges and universities tuition-free for students whose families earn less than \$125,000 [and] double the maximum Pell Grant award for low-income students... issue an executive order to prevent companies from receiving federal contracts that outsource jobs overseas, pay workers less than \$15 an hour without benefits, refuse to remain neutral in union organizing efforts, [and] hire workers to replace striking workers... recognize unions with majority sign-up – via so-called “card check” processes [and] direct the National Labor Relations Board to enforce the law by penalizing companies that bargain in bad faith.

So, how is Biden’s progressive agenda faring? Democrats have had their share of impressive victories. On March 11 of 2021, President Biden signed into law the American Rescue Plan Act (2021) that was designed to speed up the recovery from the economic and health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The \$1.9 trillion stimulus package targeted the pandemic and sought to prop up the economy by providing funds for COVID-19 vaccine production and contact tracing; extending unemployment benefits; offering emergency paid leave benefits; expanding the child and dependent care tax credit; and more.

Another major legislation—the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021)—was passed on November 5. It authorized \$1.2 trillion in spending for a wide range of transportation, broadband, clean energy, and climate change projects (e.g., federal-aid highway and transit programs, highway and motor carrier safety, and rail improvement programs).

Less certain are the prospects for the soft infrastructure package—the Build Back Better Act—that was introduced in the 117th Congress pursuant President Biden’s ambitious legislative agenda. A \$3.5 trillion reconciliation package of investment in human capital and projects addressing climate change was trimmed in the face of stiff opposition to some \$1.75 trillion appropriation that passed on 220–213 vote in the House of Representatives on November 19, 2021. This legislation fulfills the Biden-Sanders Unity Task Forces commitment to halve carbon emissions by 2030 through tax credits for companies and consumers implementing pollution reduction measures. Specifically, it invests in the energy efficiency of buildings and the transition to electric vehicles; incentivizes manufacturing of clean energy technologies; and creates the Civilian Climate Corps with the mandate to restore forests and wetlands. The Bill also funds free universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-old children; expands affordable care coverage by reducing health care premiums; creates a federal program that guarantees workers 4 weeks family and medical leave; and takes steps to clear the

backlog of applications for in-home health care through supplementary Medicaid funding. To the consternation of committed progressives, the House version of the Build Back Better Act omitted or pared down several Joint-Task-Force recommendations, including Medicare coverage for dental and vision benefits, the government authority to negotiate lower drug prices, free community college, and strong language shoring up immigrants’ rights.

The opposition to twenty-first century progressivism is fierce among conservatives, who gleefully tie present-day efforts to the original progressive agenda. The progressives of old just as their present-day heirs, according to Glenn Beck (2009), “detested the Declaration of Independence, which enshrines the protection of individual natural rights (like property) as the unchangeable purpose of government; and they detested the Constitution, which places permanent limits on the scope of government and is structured in a way that makes the extension of national power beyond its original purpose very difficult. ‘Progressivism’ was, for them, all about progressing, or moving beyond, the principles of our founders.” Of similar mind is George Will (2011) who believes that “progressivism exists to justify a few people bossing around most people,” “progressives’ politics is always about multiplying dependent constituencies” (Will 2011, 2021). Bret Stephens (2021) blames the progressive administration for urban decay and the spike in delinquency—“progressive misgovernance has now tattooed ‘soft on crime’ on Democratic necks”—and counsels the Democratic Party to ditch its progressive agenda to stay competitive in the national elections. Vilifying Democrats as radical lefties played a big part in recent elections: “Biden has made a corrupt bargain in exchange for his party’s nomination. He’s handed control to the socialist, the Marxist, and the left-wing extremists” (Trump 2020).

Ask the conservative critics which historical achievements of the Progressive Era, the New Deal, or the Civil Rights Movement they would like to roll back, and you are likely to draw a blank. Few conservatives dare to call for abolition of specific programs put in place during the last 100 years, although behind-the-scenes efforts continue to undermine voting and labor rights and shrink the welfare state. The old progressivism-cum-socialism canard has never gone out of style. It works, especially among those with the get-the-government-off-my-back-and-keep-my-social-security-checks-coming mindset. The bromide about Democrats being radicals committed to the nanny state and bent on destroying free markets is here to stay. President Harry Truman’s response to this critique still rings true:

Socialism is a scare word they have hurled at every advance the people have made in the last 20 years. Socialism is what they called public power. Socialism

is what they called Social Security. Socialism is what they called farm price supports. Socialism is what they called bank deposit insurance. Socialism is what they called the growth of free and independent labor organizations. Socialism is their name for almost anything that helps all the people (Truman, 1952/2019).

Looking back at the history, we can see that major advances in the progressive agenda came in spurts. To be sure, sundry legislative enactments popped up throughout U.S. history—President George H.W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) prohibiting discrimination based on disability; President Barack Obama passed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010) expanding access to medical care and constraining healthcare costs; and President Donald J. Trump oversaw the Formerly Incarcerated Reenter Society Transformed Safely Transitioning Every Person Act (2018) that revamped federal prisons and sentencing laws. However, real breakthroughs came at specific historical junctions, precipitated by dramatic events. The stretch between 1900 and 1920 saw the first wave of social reforms following the late nineteenth century recessions and upsurge in labor unrest. The New Deal took shape in the 1930s in the aftermath of the Great Depression that had been presaged by the economic collapse of 1929. The Civil Rights Movement burst onto the public scene in the 1960s in the wake of powerful racial protests against segregationist practices in the southern states. And the early 2020s' spike in progressive activism gained momentum against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the January 6th Capitol riots.

Each upsurge in progressive activism, in turn, has been followed by a backlash. Exhausted by World War I and Wilson's heavy-handed exercise of executive power, the nation voted for Warren Harding whose hostility toward reform and nativist tendencies reverberated through the 1920s. Ronald Regan tilted the country to the right by refashioning the market-knows-best dogma and using neoliberal philosophy to attack the welfare state through the trifecta of policies encapsulated in the slogan—deregulate, cut taxes, starve the government. Today, progressives once again are sailing into political headwinds.

As they struggle to make room for marginalized groups neglected by the architects of the Square Deal and New Deal, progressives open themselves to the charge of currying favor with special interest groups. The opposition is concentrated in the U.S. Congress where progressive proposals meet a hostile reception from Republican lawmakers, but reform projects face a tough time in left-leaning states as well. In 2016, Senator Sanders held rallies in Colorado to promote a constitutional amendment authorizing a state-based single-payer system—79% of

state residents rejected the measure; 22% voted for it. At least, Colorado activists were able to place this amendment on the ballot (half of all states still have no provision for initiative, referendum, or recall).

While policies advocated by progressives are still popular, their image has taken a beating after critics cast them, fairly or not, as elitist, soft on crime, anti-family, and deaf to the voice of God. The debate is raging on how reformers can position themselves vis-a-vis these charges. Tinkering with the message may help (e.g., you do not reform Jim Crow—you abolish it; you do not abolish police—you reform it), yet messaging is hardly the main reason why progressivism has fallen on hard times. When an ignoramus, boastful buffoon, and coddler of dictators becomes a cult figure for millions of Americans, we must ask ourselves whether we are failing as a nation.

That is not to say that progressive reforms have always worked as advertised. As any human enterprise, progressivism is bound to generate unintended consequences. Prohibition did not improve morals, strengthen families, or slow urban decay, as reform-minded citizens hoped; rather, it triggered the rise of organized crime and corruption. The 19th Amendment had not brought women to the polling stations in the numbers progressives anticipated, and for the most part, women's vote hardly differed from that of their male counterparts. The power of referendum and initiative designed to bypass party politics and let the popular will triumph has not been consistently used for the common good.

Nor have progressives found a way to cope effectively with the conservative backlash. Women's reproductive rights are under assault in statehouses and federal courts, with progressives casting about feebly for countermeasures. Efforts to enfranchise minorities and limit the role of dark money in the electoral process have been undermined by the U.S. Supreme Court and extreme partisan gerrymandering, while progressives argue among themselves about the wisdom of reforming the Senate filibuster. High hopes for nonpartisanship that old-school progressives entertained in the early twentieth century seem like a pipe dream today. In the face of all these challenges, the lonely faith of the progressive can use a boost.

The Social Gospel and Inter-Church movement that some early progressives saw as a harbinger of a future civil religion clearly fell short. The "Onward Christian soldiers" hymn that the Progressive party adopted as its marching song will not do as a battle cry for today, nor will the Bible communism that animated much of the nineteenth century communitarians who spoke fondly of the times when "the believers were together and had everything in common," when Christians "sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (Acts 2:44–45; see Cullen 2003; Jennings 2016). Still, moral energy behind the social gospel push for reform reverberated throughout the twentieth century when, as Jennings

observed, “reformist causes went into politics, often becoming less radical in the process. Abolitionism, formerly the ultraist fringe of the antislavery movement, became federal policy. The moral crusade for temperance became the political cause of Prohibition. And utopian socialism, once indifferent to the councils of government, gave way to political Progressivism and various schools of party socialism” (Jennings 2016: 378).

The legacy of the social gospel is seen in valiant attempts to recover the religious pathos nourishing progressivism in diverse projects such as John Dewey’s “common faith,” Robert Bellah’s “American civil religion,” and Richard Rorty’s “liberal pragmatism.” Behind these diverse undertakings is the disillusionment with church dogma, with the belief in “some unseen higher power as having control of [human] destiny” (Dewey 1934/1986: 5). Even though advances in science weakened beliefs in the supernatural and divine providence, according to Dewey, their progressive spirit can be recaptured with the help of “the adjective ‘religious’ [which] denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs, [but] the sense of values which carry one through periods of darkness and despair to such an extent that they lose their usual depressive character” (Ibid. 11). Common faith does not demand allegiance to a dogma or prescribe a set of rituals, and it eschews mystic experience as irredeemably private. Rather, it calls for collective action and elevates human dignity as its North Star—just as the social gospel theology did.

Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant... In that way the churches would indeed become catholic. The demand that churches show a more active interest in social affairs, that they take a definite stand upon such questions as war, economic injustice, political corruption, that they stimulate action for a divine kingdom on earth, is one of the signs of the times (Ibid. 59, 56).

Robert Bellah took a different tack in articulating what he called “American civil religion” with its commitment “that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations” (Ibid. 54–5). According to Bellah, “the civil religion was not, in the minds of Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, or other leaders, with the exception of a few radicals like Tom Paine, ever felt to be a substitute for Christianity. There was an implicit but quite clear division of function between the civil religion and Christianity” (Bellah 1967/2005: 46). Each form of devotion is based on a specific set of rituals; both can lead astray (“The civil religion has not always been invoked in favor of worthy

causes” Ibid. 51), and they are at their best when advancing the cause of human dignity and justice.

The spirit of social gospel is alive and well in the grandchild of Walter Rauschenbusch, philosopher Richard Rorty, who embraced Christianity’s social agenda and sought to marry it to socialism’s egalitarian ethics:

Most of us can no longer take either Christian or Marxist postponements and reassurances seriously. But this does not, and should not, prevent us from finding inspiration and encouragement in the New Testament and the Communist Manifesto. For both documents are the expression of the same hope: that some day we shall be willing and able to treat the needs of all human beings with the respect and consideration with which we treat the needs of those closest to us, those whom we love... We should raise our children to find it intolerable that we who sit behind desks and punch keyboards are paid ten times as much as people who get their hands dirty cleaning our toilets, and a hundred times as much as those who fabricate our keyboards in the Third World (Rorty 1999: 202–203; see also Rorty 1998).

Rorty’s commitment to progressivism is steeped in pragmatism which provided much philosophical fodder for early twentieth century progressives. One of his intellectual heroes is John Dewey whose gospel of progress and the spirit of inquiry Rorty took as a model for his engagement with the world. In the same spirit, Rorty urges public intellectuals, professional politicians, religious authorities, and socially minded business leaders to come together and articulate a national reform agenda. He had amended his earlier skepticism regarding the role of religion in the public square and endorsed the thesis that ethical imperatives embedded in the best religious strivings cut across denominational differences and political creeds and help society find common moral ground. In the pragmatist phase of his intellectual career, Rorty rejected the Enlightenment’s rationalism with its trust in the power of pure reason to wrestle with problems facing humanity and embraced progressive mindfulness and emotional intelligence: “Another meaning of ‘rational’ is, in fact, available. In this sense, the word means something like ‘sane’ or ‘reasonable’ rather than ‘methodical.’ It names a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinion of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force” (Rorty 1987: 40). In this, Rorty once again is indebted to Dewey’s pragmatic take on human intelligence: “Rationality, once more is not a force to evoke against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires. ‘Reason’ as a noun signifies a happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions, such as sympathy, curiosity, cooperation, exploration, experimentation, frankness,

pursuit – to follow things through – circumspection, to look about at the context, etc., etc.” (Dewey 1922: 1995–196; cf. Shalin 1986, 1992).

I want to end this essay with a kindred insight articulated by the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his seminal text—“The Lonely Man of Faith.” Therein, Rabbi Soloveitchik offers advice on how to shun arrogance in victory and keep faith in defeat by listening not only to the “majestic intellect” with which God endowed Adam in Genesis I, but also to “the sensitive reasons of the heart” granted in Genesis II to the same biblical personage. The two often work at cross purpose, Soloveitchik tells us, looking wearily at each other’s preoccupations—this-worldly pursuit of mastery over the elements and the covenantal agenda of grappling with the tragedy of being. Both are prone to succumbing to despair, though for different reasons, yet both do their best while joining forces and bringing their strengths to bear on the problems confronting humanity. I hope the following observation by the Jewish sage, which echoes the common faith’s premise that religious “attitude includes a note of submission” (Dewey 1934/1986: 14), can lift the spirits of today’s progressives as they face setback and derision in our overwrought times:

On the one hand, the Bible commands man “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might,” a performance of which only covenantal man is capable since he alone possesses the talent for complete concentration upon and immersion in the focus without being distracted by peripheral interests, anxieties, and problems. On the other hand, the same Bible which just enjoined man to withdraw from the periphery to the center commands him to return to the majestic community which, preoccupied with peripheral interests, anxieties, and problems, builds, plants, harvests, regulates rivers, heals the sick, participates in state affairs, is imaginative in dreaming, bold in planning, daring in undertaking and is out to “conquer” the world... The Biblical dialectic stems from the fact that Adam the first, majestic man of dominion and success, and Adam the second, the lonely man of faith, obedience and defeat, are not two different people locked in an external confrontation as an “I” opposite a “thou,” but one person who is involved in self-confrontation. “I,” Adam the first, confront the “I,” Adam the second. In every one of us abide two personae – the creative majestic Adam the first, and the submissive, humble Adam the second (Soloveitchik 1965: 54).

Declarations

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Dmitri Shalin has a Ph.D. from the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Science (1973), and a Ph.D. from Columbia University (1991); Dr. Shalin is professor of sociology and director of the Center for Democratic Culture at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His research interests and publications span a wide array of topics including pragmatism, emotional intelligence, and Russian society.