Progressivism: Opposing Viewpoints Essay, Research Paper

Progressivism: Opposing Viewpoints

At the commencement of the twentieth century, a period referred to as progressivism swept through America. Precisely, this era in American history began soon after the Spanish-American War and lasted until the beginning of World War I. At this point in history, America was in turmoil due to internal problems and was in dire need of social reforms. The progressive era was like a golden age for intellectuals who strived to create a nation where each citizen could be given a chance at success and involvement in the government. In the latter portion of the 1800?s, America faced an economic depression and encountered problems with industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Some progressives demanded that the government should be run directly by its people and that the quality of city life should be ameliorated through sanitation improvements, the abolition of child labor, and regulated working hours. America?s utmost problem, however, proved to be the overwhelming power that trusts and big business held in the nation. This factor had a leading role in the development of the era of progressivism. In general, progressives basically agreed that trusts must be destroyed; however, there were different solutions among the progressives on the correct remedy to solve this problem. One ideology in the progressive era called the New Nationalism, advocated for an increase of government involvement in order to regulate big businesses. The other ideology called the New Freedom, firmly believed the ?big? in business was the threat to American society; therefore, the role of the government should be to break up trusts and monopolies. Whatever may have been the case, the progressives desired to attack any group of concentrated power in order to bring more accountability to the government of America. Although the progressives had good intentions to reform the nation, some historians, such as Richard M. Abrams, author of The Failure of Progressivism, believe the entire movement was a complete failure. On the other hand, other historians, such as Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick beg to differ with Abrams and defiantly defend their own belief in their article entitled Progressivism in History that the movement was indeed successful. After closely reading both of the articles mentioned above, I have come to the conclusion that Abrams?s argument proves to be stronger in that it is not as biased and seems to be more sensible than that of Link?s and McCormick?s.

In the article, The Failure of Progressivism, Professor Richard Abrams argues that the entire progressive movement was a failure. First, Abrams initially defines what he believes to have been progressivism by concluding that the progressives expressed a common feeling that government should attempt to moralize the lives of its citizens through a series of reforms. According to Abrams, its followers flowered from various groups including female emancipationists, prohibitionists, the social gospel, conservation advocates, businessmen, and intellectuals. The progressives generally advocated for an efficient government that would implement strict moral values upon its people. Although most people in America had the same views as progressives, Abrams claims that ?[the progressives] also conceived of themselves, with a grand sense of stewardship, as its heralds, and its agents.? He states that the progressives mainly wanted to instill old moral values upon Americans by attempting to assimilate immigrants by forcing them to accept the American way of life. Additionally, they wanted to impose antitrust legislation, job reforms, and direct legislation. However, according to Abrams these goals were tarnished for significant reasons. First of all, the movement failed due to racism that was rampant during this time period. In addition to racism among blacks in the south, anti-Catholicism started appearing throughout the country. According to Abrams, racism hindered the motives of progressivism because there was ?the inability of reform to deliver a meaningful share of the social surplus to the groups left out of the general national progress, and in part the inability of reform to achieve its objective of assimilation and consensus.? Suddenly, different ethnic groups such as the African Americans took a more aggressive approach towards the public to finally stand up for their rights, which further contributed to growing animosity. Moreover, Abrams believes that new scientific developments regarding race and culture affected the movement in a pertinent manner. The new view about race was that ethnic differences had nothing to due with the equality of two human beings. However, the progressives believed differently and felt that they must assimilate all cultures to fit in to the American way of life. Abrams stated that people even began coming to the conclusion that, ?cultural diversity might yet be the salvation of the liberal society.? In the article, Abrams declares that there was a much ?hysteria? in American society before the end of President Wilson?s term due to pre-war madness and the high cost of living. He additionally mentions that antiradicalism and anti-Catholicism spurred out of the reform movements made by progressives because ?the old anxieties of the 1890?s? returned when the reforms were not meeting everyone?s needs. All of these factors added up to prove that the era was not successful. Abrams also mentions that numerous reforms were passed in this era and that some had long-lasting effects, but overall the legislation passed was not ?impressive.? He argues that with the reform passage of direct nominations and elections, only a selected group of wealthy men or men capable of raising money had the chance to run in elections. Furthermore, he admits that the progressives made minor reforms against the railroad industry with the Mann-Elkins Act and Hepburn Act, but consequently, the real regulation of railroads came in the 1940?s. For every piece of reform legislation passed, Abrams counteracts with a logical reasoning for its failure. He also states that the progressive?s ?hostility to labor unions defeated their own objectives? which were sharing the nation?s wealth with workers and balancing the power of corporations. Interestingly, at the end of this era, the distribution of advantages in society had no significant change and there were fewer farmers and more farmers were tenants than prior to the movement. Abrams does indicate that the progressives should be acknowledged for placing restraints on monopolies in America, but he also notes that ?two hundred corporations held almost one quarter of business assets.? Abrams ends his article by saying that the final blow to progressivism was ?the futility of intervention measured by progressive expectations? in World War I. In short, his article discusses the failure of progressives to stop the augmentation of corporate capitalism and their efforts to change the moral values in which Americans lived by to Protestant moral values.

On the other hand, Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, authors of Progressivism in History, contradict Abrams point of view by concluding that progressivism succeeded. They begin by saying that progressivism was not a unified movement and that the words progressives and progressivism are looked upon to have a beneficial, uplifting meaning. However, they believe these words to have a neutral connotation. They basically believe that the progressives were the first group who tried to ameliorate the ills of societies; therefore, their achievements as well as failures should be considered relevant to present day society. Link and McCormick also define the followers of progressivism to have come from some farmers, the old middle class, and businessman, but also believe the main followers came from ethnic groups. They believe that scandalous events made known to the public by muckrakers as well as ?antibusiness emotion? allowed the era to flourish. Link and McCormick explain that one must distinguish each reform in the progressive movement and then proceed to examine its purpose, rationale, and results. According to these authors, progressive thinkers wanted to rid the society in the belief of social Darwinism and condemned laissez faire. Progressives believed in intervention to control social and economic affairs and for the most part sought the government?s help to enforce reforms. McCormick and Link reveal that ?evangelical Protestantism and the natural and social sciences? inspired progressives. Many progressives believed that it was their duty to instill Protestant Christian values upon the corrupt industrialists. Link and McCormick believe the Social Gospel motivated the progressives in this aspect and state that ?few of the era?s reforms were untouched by the spirit and techniques of Protestant revivalism.? Additionally, science impacted the reforms in that the progressives considered methods of reforms by first consulting with new knowledge concerning social science; so, progressives mixed science and religion in order to create a new view of human actions and ways of life as well as to develop reforms. Link and McCormick defend the many failures of the progressive movement by claiming that ?the effort to change so many things all at once, and the grandiose claims made for the moral and material betterment which would result, meant that disappointments were bound to occur.? They believe that it wasn?t necessarily the reformer?s fault for the failures because they had tried new methods. They also point out that the progressives published their failures in order for historians to see and comment on. Also, since individual reformers were divided on their views concerning industrialism and big business and since they never recognized the actual conflicts in American society, the progressives seemed to have failed to achieve all their goals. However, a positive note to the progressive movement was that they acknowledged that each cultural and occupational group in America had differing interests, which hindered the cooperation of the society as a whole. McCormick and Link continue to defend the progressives by informing their audience that the progressives believed that science and administration had unlimited possibilities and that they were not radicals, but simply reformers. They admit that the progressives failed to eliminate social conflict and their reforms did not complete the intentions made by them. However, although the progressives had various shortcomings, they ?brought major innovations to almost every facet of public life in the United States.? First of all, the era introduced a new political procedure concerning elections and nominations. Also, the progressives strived to ameliorate the disorder of society and eliminate unjust actions taken by big businesses. McCormick and Link finish the article by mentioning that the progressives did an excellent job of addressing political, social, and economic problems, even though their efforts seemed to have failed in solving all the problems of the time period.

In my opinion, the article composed by Professor Richard Abrams makes the stronger case in defending whether progressivism failed or succeeded. First and foremost, Abrams seems to be less biased than Link and McCormick. He shows both viewpoints on the issue of progressivism and refutes the opposing arguments in order to express his point of view. His rebuttals are sensible and seem more accurate than the attempts that Link and McCormick make throughout their own article. In the second article, Link and McCormick point out all of the negative aspects of progressivism and fail to fully prove how the failures of the progressives truly led to a successful movement. They are redundant in saying that the blame should not fall on the reformer?s shoulders and that the reformers were using untried reform methods, so they should be excused. Their efforts in defending the progressives are mediocre when compared to the arguments that Abrams implements in his article. Also, one can tell that Link and McCormick are more biased in that they are writing in the point of view of the reformers. They did not analyze the entire progressive movement as accurately as Abrams. Moreover, Abrams does an excellent job of defining progressivism in his own terms and it makes the reader better understand his viewpoint. McCormick and Link simply state that the progressivism in their article will have a neutral meaning, in that it will not have a negative or positive connotation. They never fully elaborate on its meaning. Also, in the second article, it almost seems as though the authors are losing their own argument because they lack sufficient support to draw the reader in believing their view on the effects of progressivism.

All in all, the progressive movement was an early attempt at social reform in America. The progressives tried to better the lives of American society by instilling Protestant moral values upon public life and by attempting to assimilate all cultures and ethnic backgrounds to fit into the American way of life. To this day historians and professors, such as Richard Abrams, Arthur Link, and Richard McCormick argue whether the movement was a success or a complete catastrophe. When considering the two articles written by these renowned professors, I have come to the conclusion that Richard Abrams?s view that the movement was a failure is more sensible and agreeable than the opposing viewpoints of Link and McCormick. However, I do believe that the movement had an impact on American society and still affects the nation to this day. Although, historians will argue about this issue for years to come, they must admit that all the hype surrounding progressivism exemplifies that the movement must be of great importance to American history.