Introduction

Whoever looks at the major socio-economic advances of the twentieth century will find that the literature dealing with the period following the Great Depression of 1929 abounds with ideas of reform and progress of various kinds in Western countries. In that sense, the New Deal era in the United States, and most importantly the postwar boom tend to be regarded as the most significant phases in this process. Whether on the economic level (i.e. sustained growth), on the social level (i.e. the establishment of a welfare state), or on the political level (i.e. decolonization, the extension of the franchise to women), this historical period is usually associated with major breakthroughs around the globe.

Yet it was at an earlier point that the seeds of political, social and economic reform were sown. That period, known as the “Progressive Era,” is primarily associated with American history and society, and social scientists agree that it begins in the 1890s and ends in the 1920s. As its name suggests, the Progressive Era calls to mind a large raft of policy advances which dramatically transformed American society beyond recognition.

Although that vision truthfully reflects a tangible historical reality, it would be erroneous to view the Progressive Era as unfolding smoothly over time and as an exclusively American phenomenon, for two major reasons.

Firstly, within this thirty-year span lie several distinct sub-periods instead of a single macro-phase. The first stage, that is the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, marks the onset of what Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner would term “the Gilded Age.”¹ This period includes the start of the American Civil War (1861–65) in a context of rising urbanization and industrialization (the American version of Walt Rostow’s takeoff stage).² At the same time as the country enjoyed an economic boom, American moral values were also remodeled, revealing a society in the throes of a deep identity crisis.

Many historians have observed the gradual erosion of – or perhaps a shift away from – traditional moral values in the rural postbellum world, as they were gradually supplanted by individualism and personal success as seen in the constant pursuit of wealth. Seen in this light, life during the Gilded Age was even harsher than what major thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville had observed when he went on his seminal American tour in the 1830s.³

In all, the Gilded Age was a double-edged sword for Americans: a time of momentous economic prowess giving rise to greater individualist pursuits,

but also of widening inequalities in different areas, such as employment, race, gender and territory, among others.

Although class warfare did not bring about a proletarian revolution in the United States, rising inequality crystallized into a new intellectual consciousness keen on the notion of “progress,” which in turn enabled reforms to take place around the start of the twentieth century. From the 1900s to the Roaring Twenties, American society experienced momentous breakthroughs. Workers,⁴ among other social groups, benefited from improved working conditions. In the same spirit, on August 18, 1920, the United States ratified the 19th Amendment, thereby granting women the vote.

These advances, however, did not soften the blows of the Great Depression or of the First World War. Despite their belated involvement in the conflict in 1917, the USA was not insulated from the collateral damage of the war, which was historically significant. The Progressive Era challenged the idea of American exceptionalism, which had been a point of serious contention among American intellectuals as early as the 1870s. Is the USA an isolated case in Western history? A historical one-off requiring special treatment? Or, rather, should America be regarded as a major offshoot of European society?

For various reasons, America’s Progressive Era cannot be easily divorced from its global context. It is during this era that many nation states were formed – sometimes through abrupt convulsions such as the First World War – and that colonialism solidified its hold elsewhere. Besides the USA and Europe, similar trends of thought emerged in other parts of the world, which shared the goal of human progress. One key feature of the Progressive Era was the increased mobility of some social groups such as intellectuals. As a result, the intelligentsia could draw parallels between differing contexts and gradually began to believe in the possibility of spreading reform from one society to the next. By way of illustration, many American social scientists were educated on the European continent, particularly in Germany. Their initial motive was to learn how to remold America along the lines of European and, above all, German progressive ideas.

In addition, it should be remembered that the Progressive Era coincided with progress and discoveries of different kinds. For instance, cinematography was invented in the 1890s thanks to the endeavors of Léon Bouly and Auguste and Louis Lumière, following the pioneering work of Thomas Edison who invented the Kinetograph in 1891. In France, such technological breakthroughs gave incentives to Charles Pathé to develop the industry of cinema during the *Belle Époque* period (1871–1914). Likewise, Gustave Eiffel’s radical innovations are evidence of this age of progress.⁵ Such a period was also characterized by the creation of new competitions in several fields, such as the *Tour de France* in 1903. Indeed, sport exemplifies the global atmosphere and environment of

the Progressive Era: progress, technology, competition, opportunities, but also inequalities.⁶

Likewise, the Progressive Era coincided with a string of historical phenomena of great significance, related to the growth of imperialism, the expansion of trade and industry, and the intensification of worldwide economic competition. In a sense, in the First World War, we find the culmination of tensions between different factions and the embodiment of changes within the capitalist order, which was symbolically reflected by the handover of global leadership from the British Empire to the United States.

In short, the Progressive Era was a time of profound upheaval, whose intellectual landscape bore the marks of pioneering thinkers from all corners of the globe – most notably in the fields of social sciences.

The present work purports to explore this period, which was both eventful for the United States as well as for a number of other countries. It seeks to do so from two overarching perspectives.

First of all, our chosen period, which starts in the 1890s and ends in the 1930s, encompasses more than the usual timespan. Besides vindicating some historical research, this allows for greater coherence: the 1930s were characterized by inequalities caused by the Great Depression as well as by the innovative public policies devised as a response to them. It therefore appears necessary to connect this period to the pioneering ideas beforehand which gave rise to the upheavals of the 1930s.

As far as I am concerned, I do not share the view that the New Deal owed its existence solely to the crisis of 1929. Rather, its rationale should be analyzed against the historical backdrop of both America and that of capitalism more largely. The remodeling of capitalism which occurred in the 1930s was the ultimate outcome of forty or so years of profound thinking, intense debating, and the burgeoning social movements of various persuasions.

It is my view that these reflections, debates and social movements are all united by the same theme, namely, that of inequalities. Whichever form it took, it then ceased to be branded as natural, unavoidable or normal. In this regard, the Progressive Era was a turning point, in the sense that it saw a shift in the perception of inequalities among all the key sections of society – in academia as well as in the media and in the political class.

A second feature of this work is the wealth of its contributions from international authors, each of whom sketches out a unique facet of the Progressive Era. Each contributor has dealt with a particular type of inequality, focusing on a specific geographical area, or on the responses of progressive thinkers – some of them being underestimated, in spite of their paramount intellectual contributions – to their particular contexts. Our decision to broaden the geographical scope to Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania reflects a willingness to illustrate the global impact of the Progressive Era, which was key to the

formation of a number of nation states. This is also helpful in identifying the particulars of each economic, social and political context presented in the chapters of this book. The raft of interventionist measures adopted in the aftermath of the Great Depression varied in scope and nature from country to country. In that sense, a provocative view would stress that there is nothing exceptional about American exceptionalism, just as there are exceptionalisms to be found elsewhere. Therefore, contingency of the context and exceptionalism should be distinguished.

Likewise, the Progressive Era also marked a scientific milestone, in terms of the proposals for radical reforms which emerged in this period. Although progressive authors' thoughts were plural, all share an important intellectual trait which transcends their own fields of interest and backgrounds. As they pushed for new policy measures, they asserted the importance of questioning the nature of the overarching socio-economic framework which governed individual interactions instead of blaming the victims. This methodological stance in turn enabled them to question the orthodoxy of conventional wisdom and, most crucially, to challenge the naturalization of social behavior. In concrete terms, this amounted to a huge step forward in the fight against the prejudices of their time, be they racism, sexism or eugenics.

In the United States in particular, intellectual leaders of the Progressive Era saw in science the best means to improve global welfare and to promote the public good. This explains why Edward A. Ross, a prominent sociologist of the Progressive Era, defined progressivism as "intelligent social engineering" (Ross 1907: 41).⁷ Indeed, intellectual leaders of the Progressive Era had faith in their expertise to guide the state – in their eyes, the unique institution capable to play this economic, social and moral role – in devising and implementing new types economic and social policies. As Leonard summarizes, "the progressives venerated science not only because it was their necessary instrument of social improvement. For the social gospel progressives at the forefront of American economic reform, science was a place of moral authority where the public-spirited could find religious meaning in scientific inquiry's values of dispassionate analysis, self-sacrifice, pursuit of truth, and service to a cause greater than oneself" (Leonard 2016: 16).⁸

Against this backdrop, the present work provides an account of the duality of the Progressive Era, as a transition was underway: that of the end of nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* capitalism toward the regulated capitalism of the Glorious Thirty, of the formation of nation states – including its imperialist and colonialist corollaries, as mentioned above – toward nascent postmodernity and the democratic renewal which followed the Second World War; of the emergence of social sciences to their institutionalization and professionalization. Hence, focusing on inequalities, as well the political and academic responses they inspired, is essential to understand the extent to which the

Progressive Era fully deserved its name. “Progress” did not materialize immediately at the time, but the thoughts bequeathed by the great figures of that time, often visionaries, all carried faith in betterment.

These intellectuals believed in the possibility of reconciling liberty with equality, as they sought to achieve both individual and collective emancipation. What they aspired to was the ability of individuals to recognize who they truly are, both for their own sake as well as for the sake of global well-being (of the societies of which they were a part). Indeed, both individual and collective progresses were related in their eyes. In the United States, for instance, progressives rejected individualism in the context of American industrialization of the Progressive Era, emphasizing the primacy of moral challenges, namely the need to improve the public good. In other words, each individual should have the equal ability to realize oneself but without jeopardizing the “cohesive wholeness” of society. American progressives clearly gave society primacy over individuals, with the belief that “what is good for the organism is good for its constituent parts” (Leonard 2016: 106).

Likewise, it should be noted that American progressives focused mainly on the issue of the equality of opportunity. On the one hand, they were dealing with individuals capable of self-government: in the name of the primacy of society over individuals, such a stance led paradoxically some American progressives to exclude individuals or social groups from this capability of self-government, such as blacks and women for instance.⁹ On the other hand, American progressives coped with the equality of opportunity because they believed in a sort of “elitism of experts,” whose unique scientific expertise was supposed to demonstrate the social need for superior intellectual leadership.

More generally, at stake was the emergence, preservation and expansion of democracy itself. Indeed, many such thinkers strove to reconcile economic efficiency with democracy against the backdrop of a rival model, that of the USSR, which had risen from the ashes of the First World War. They were dedicated to achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth and to the self-determination of all peoples, hence their common rejection of *laissez-faire* capitalism. The latter was seen as economically inefficient, unfair and then harmful for society.

Another factor contributing to this ideological stance was the precedence they gave to reality and life over abstract theoretical – economic in particular – models. They unanimously criticized the figure of the ivory tower thinker, while insisting that reflection should go hand in hand with action. This gave a noble dimension to intellectual pursuits – in effect politicizing their research. Through scientific study and intellectual work, they aimed to reduce the gap between the existing status quo and the potential for radical social change – which resulted in a “cultural lag” (William Ogburn) or a “social lag” (Charles Merriam).

More than merely conducting research on inequalities, and devising alternative systems for slicing up the cake of wealth, the ultimate goal of progressive thinkers was to “offer a different kind of cake.” This implied the need for a buoyant and meritocratic social ecosystem, where each individual would occupy a position reflecting their ability to realize their potential. Likewise, this was consistent with the view of evolving societies. The latter were viewed as living organisms, whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Consequently, the intellectual courage of those thinkers cannot be overemphasized, as their views and stances made them vulnerable to attack: their “fighting spirit” was sometimes the target of vehement criticism from radicals and they risked being ostracized or even prosecuted. They did not hold back from challenging conventional wisdom and confronting the proponents of the status quo – the latter did so either out of fear or because they had vested interests.

Symmetrically, focusing in this book on some progressives is not intended to embellish their portrait, and to hide some of their weaknesses and their contradictions. As we mentioned, some progressives of that time were “ambiguous,” and maybe conservative, with respect to some topics. Therefore, it is important not to underestimate the existence, and spread of, a significant current consisting of tendencies (in every way) antithetical to progressivism at the time (i.e. eugenics, nationalism, racism and sexism, among others).

However, in spite of this, we qualify the authors of this book as progressives because they have contributed significantly to the global improvement of society through their original and innovative thoughts, and their commitment to struggle. Ensuring that progressive ideas would take root in academia and in society at large was an uphill battle (whose final outcome was far from predetermined). Therefore, our decision to focus on other progressive thinkers than mere American ones reflects a willingness to address the issue of inequalities in its different forms and meanings, and thus to rethink what inequalities mean and refer to.

It is within this contextual framework that the theme of inequalities during the Progressive Era should be placed, which is precisely what the present work seeks to do. But this volume lays no claim to comprehensiveness. Other influential authors and geographical spheres of interest will be conspicuous by their absence. The choices made regarding the corpus of the volume reflect our goal to convey a sense of the most salient aspects of progressive ideas. Besides, all the contributions neatly share an overall thematic unity. In particular, this meant the need for contextual background – met in several chapters when necessary – was an essential part of our work. The multidisciplinary approach adopted in this volume is most appropriate in view of the pedagogical tasks at hand.

The present work is divided into three distinct sections, for a total of twenty-two chapters. The first section, “Foundations of inequalities,” includes

contributions addressing the question of the nature and origin of various forms of inequality. The second section, “Fighting income, capital and land inequalities,” provides an overview of inequalities caused by “physical capital” (dependent on machines, industry and land), and subsequently examines the distribution of these inequalities within that period on a global level. Such an appraisal in turn leads to establishing proposals for progressive reforms, with a view to reducing inequalities. The third section, “Fighting social inequalities,” follows a similar pattern to the second section. It is centered on other (alternative) forms of social inequalities in a broad sense (related to gender, architecture, community and ethnicity), and examines the reformist agenda laid out by certain progressive thinkers.

It is our hope that this collective work will attract the interest of not only academics, but also students, politicians and that of all readers with a mind of civic engagement. The progressive figures and economic, social and political contexts discussed throughout these twenty-two chapters all strive to reconcile conducting theoretical research with concrete policy proposals for reform. However risky the tendency to draw historical parallels might be, the present work does help make sense of the dynamics of inequalities inherent in capitalism. It opens up new perspectives in the contemporary desire to usher in a new phase of capitalism, at a time when inequalities are aggravated.¹⁰

In the same vein, each contributor has aimed for optimal clarity in addressing the subject of inequality, so as to make this knowledge accessible to all – the primary condition for intellectual emancipation which progressive thinkers held so dear. In the words of Albion W. Small: “Science would be like music in a population of deaf if there were no provision for its publicity” (Small and Vincent 1894: 156).¹¹

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NOTES

1. See Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner (1973), *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. Chicago, IL: American Publishing Company.
2. See Walt W. Rostow (1961), *The Stages of Economic Growth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. See Alexis de Tocqueville (2012 [1835 and 1840]), *Democracy in America* (2 vols). London: Penguin Classics.
4. But mainly male and white workers.
5. These innovations refer to the composition of the structure of the Eiffel Tower, the latter being erected for the *Exposition Universelle* held in Paris in 1889.

These innovations were also critical to build the supporting frame of the Statue of Liberty.

6. In relation to the creation of the Tour de France in 1903, mention should be made of the invention of the modern bicycle (the “Rover Safety Bicycle”) by John Kemp Starley in 1884.
7. Edward A. Ross (1907), *Sin and Society: An Analysis of Latter-Day Iniquity*. New York: Macmillan.
8. Thomas C. Leonard (2016), *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
9. It should be mentioned that some American intellectuals of the Progressive Era were sometimes ambiguous on the subjects of racism, sexism and eugenism (see Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers*). With respect to footnote 7, Ross was a eugenicist for instance. Likewise, Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation in the Southern United States enacted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should not be forgotten.
10. See, for instance, Thomas Piketty (2014 [2013]), *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Thomas Piketty (2019), *Capital et Ideologie*. Paris: Seuil.
11. Albion W. Small and George E. Vincent (1894), *An Introduction to the Study of Society*. New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: American Book Company.