

Why Progressives Are Going to Win

Understanding Progressivism and the Progressive Era is one of the most important tasks for intellectual defenders of ordered liberty. In just under two generations, Progressivism captured the minds of the American intellectual class, which then transformed traditional governance institutions into the modern bureaucratic-administrative state. As Thomas C. Leonard shows in his new book, [*Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economists in the Progressive Era*](#), economists played a crucial role in this transition. Educated abroad under the influence of the German Historical School, American economists returned home asserting the non-existence of universal economic law. Instead, they believed society's institutions of governance, and in particular the State, could be used to engineer desired social outcomes. The rise of the research university—again, German influence was critical—facilitated the professionalization of the economics discipline, changing it from a conversation aimed at understanding society to an intellectual toolkit of social control. The various economic upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—repeated financial panics, mass unemployment, and the transformation and concentration of industry—seemed to justify the imperative to rationalize the “anarchic” system of market competition to make it both more efficient and more just. With the rise of various public commissions and bureaus to solve these problems, and the U.S. experience with industrial collectivism during the Great War, the foundations for a new *de facto* constitutional order had been laid. The age of federalism and checks and balances had passed; centralization and bureaucratic administration was the new reality.

Given the importance of constitutional republicanism in the

civic religion of the time, that this change happened so quickly is extraordinary. Why did this happen? Progressives would say it was required by the discovery of a new body of knowledge, consisting in part of the recognition that social planning could be conducted on scientific lines. The Progressive capture of the state is thus, according to this theory, justified by truth and necessity. However, the trajectory of Progressivism's "march through the institutions" suggests another answer. Progressivism manifested itself in the United States first as a desire for the alleviation of social ills, then in the educational establishment for discovering solutions to eliminate these ills, and finally culminated in the offices of the government for implementing these solutions. The importance of the two institutional categories, Academy and State, cannot be overstated when considering how Progressivism won the battle of world views.

Progressivism is, first and foremost, an ideology, a collection of ideas concerning the nature of man and his social institutions, and what role they ought to play. While Progressives often differed with each other, what they had in common is that the state can and should be used to reform society. Now, it was now certain that Progressivism would win the battle of world views. There will always be a certain degree of autonomy in the realm of ideas. But ideas do not influence human events in the abstract. Individuals and the groups they comprise are carriers of ideas, so ideas interact in the same institutional network as the carriers. Just as we can view institutions, in part, as filters that select for particular outcomes over others—for example, "profit maximization" in a market economy is not the result of conscious decision by firms, but the gradual displacement via competition of firms that fail to profit maximize by those that succeed—we can analyze those features of ideas that give them an advantage when contested. Ideas do compete based on their ability to track truth, *but this is not the only margin on which they compete.*

It is plausible, whatever the truth of Progressives' various claims, that Progressivism also outcompetes other claims these other margins. Almost by definition, Progressivism promises power, wealth, and prestige to its adherents. This gives it a competitive edge when compared with traditionalist conservatism or classical liberalism which disperse these goods in much smaller quantities. For example, applied Progressivism can result in high-status appointments to important offices within Academy, State, or both. Furthermore, creating and staffing these positions, ostensibly in the service of larger social goals, is directly implied by Progressive ideas for implementing reform. Traditionalist conservatism and classical liberalism, almost always hostile to the bureaucratic-administrative state and skeptical of academic theories of social control, cannot promise similar rewards to their proponents.

This abstract rewards process is made concrete when operationalized within real-world universities and governments. Academic theoreticians think up new plans of social control and call for their implementation. Agents of the state draw upon the prestige of the university in affirming and implementing these plans, while also funding future academic efforts. The theoreticians then draw upon the prestige of the state, using its funds and influence to continue the cycle. The political theorist Bertrand de Jouvenel showed how individuals could use positions within respected social institutions to further their own goals, drawing down the "reputational capital" of such institutions to subvert their original purpose, eventually reconstituting them. This process is so important to social dynamics that scholars as diverse as Carroll Quigley and Mancur Olson made the process a central part of their analysis of the rise and fall of civilizations.

This cycle is only stable if it can secure the resources necessary to propagate it. The key is the state's ability to

raise funds through non-voluntary means. Thus the state is not subject to the familiar competitive pressures that govern voluntary associations. The Academy-State cycle, symbiotic for Progressives and parasitic for others, can continue despite hostility from the populace and without regard for the truth value of its doctrines.

Progressivism is thus a *spontaneous order*. It is the “result of human action, but not of human design.” The various policy studies and bureaucratic plans are the result of such intentions, but the overall social structure supporting them is not. Like all spontaneous orders, it is an emergent outcome of particular rules that come from the institutions governing the process. Progressivism simply wouldn’t be Progressivism without mutual Academy-State reinforcement. That this is not just a historical concern is evident from observing Academy and State today. University Departments of political science, public policy, and economics create more schemes for social control than ever, and government bureaus continue to expand in size and scope.

There are several conclusions of this narrative. None are reassuring for those who dislike Progressivism. The first, and most obvious, is that this process is extremely unlikely to be reversed from inside universities or bureaucracies. The mutual reinforcement is too well entrenched. Second, bypassing the Academy arm and targeting the State arm directly through grassroots democratic action is also probably ineffective. The bureaucratic-administrative state is more or less autonomous at this point. Even the Reagan Revolution, the closest America has come to a referendum on the New Deal order, produced minimal lasting changes to the government. Public enchantment with constitutionalism and federalism is today nowhere near where it was in the 1980s, which means the prospects for the People to short the circuit are negligible.

In closing, as I said previously, none of the above depends on whether the ideas inherent to, or that result from,

Progressivism are true or false. Everything Progressives say could be true, and the dynamics would be unchanged. But given that the Academy-State cycle that we call Progressivism has a strong competitive advantage irrespective of truth, we should be especially skeptical of its claims.

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