

LEARNING FROM HISTORY?

Reviewed by Mark Schmitt

*The Poverty of Progressivism:
The Future of American Democracy in a
Time of Liberal Decline*

Jeffrey Isaac

Rowman & Littlefield/2003/\$19.95

176 pp.

“The World We Have Lost” is the title of the pivotal chapter of this gloomy and powerful short book that its author calls a work of “historically informed political theory.” Isaac is referring to the Progressive Era, the period from the turn of the last century through World War I, through mainly the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, when the United States began to embrace the idea that government should set limits on the depredations of the market, protect competition, and provide a minimal base of economic security.

In his main argument, Isaac sets out to challenge a theory that took hold among liberals and also a small but influential faction of moderate conservatives in the 1990s: our economic and political circumstances so resemble those of a century ago that the solutions, language, and style of the Progressive Era should naturally fit our age as well. *Laissez-faire* economics, great inequalities of wealth, unprecedented immigration, America’s sudden global reach, and the social dislocation of rapid industrialization were a fertile ground for a vision of the country in which we could find greatness in collective action and a modest attempt at social justice. Perhaps they would be again. Liberals of the 1990s reopened almost-forgotten books like Herbert Croly’s *The Promise of American Life*, which profoundly influenced Roosevelt with its rejection of Jeffersonian individualism and its argument that in an age of corporations and industry, continued American progress required a stronger federal government, a sense of community, and loyalty to a shared vision of nation.

While we, too, live in a time of corporate power and dislocating economic change, the hopeful parallel is too easy and misleading. History repeats itself, but rarely with the same results, and never without struggle. Refuting the neo-Progressive argument is child's play for Isaac, whose central philosophy — influenced particularly by European thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Albert Camus — is that there is no natural march forward to historical destiny, and that each moment is just that, a moment, shaped by its own circumstances and with as much tragic potential as reason for hope. The circumstances of the Progressive Era, most of which are not present in our own, included the emergence of liberal protestantism (sometimes known as “the social gospel”) as a largely unifying religious force, in contrast to the powerful minority that is today's religious right; the fact that organized labor was expanding rather than shrinking and still had a small but vibrant socialist element, and the arrival of practical social science with the conviction that experts could improve the conditions of urban life, manage the economy, and subtly resolve class conflicts. This last concept was thoroughly discredited after the meltdown of post-ideological liberalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

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That is more than enough to establish the point that the world of the Progressives is not our own, but there is another way to disprove the neo-Progressive mantra that Isaac doesn't explore as deeply. And that is to note that what we now call the Progressive Era is the creation of historians after World War II, and progressivism was not the only thing happening at the turn of the Twentieth Century. There is one version of history that begins when Theodore Roosevelt encountered Herbert Croly. But there is another version, overlapping the first, that begins with the election of William McKinley in 1896, leading to a 36-year period of political dominance by mostly non-progressive Republicans (Presidents McKinley, Taft, Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover), interrupted only by the Wilson administration from 1912 to 1920. This long wave of conservatism led, among other things, to the domination of the federal courts by judges who believed that government had the right to enforce racial segregation, but no right to regulate wages, hours or working conditions, or implement the economic recovery plans of the early New Deal.

If there is a historical parallel between our time and a hundred years ago, most likely the parallel is with this version of history and not the Progressive Era version. The President's political advisor, Karl Rove, self-consciously styles himself after McKinley's brilliant operative, the Ohio industrialist and later Senator, Mark Hanna. Rove boasts of

an ambition not just to elect Bush but also to bring about a similar four decades of Republican dominance. (The Right may not need that long to return the courts to a pre-New Deal hostility to federal action and individual rights, or to strip the federal government of the revenues needed to provide an economic safety net.) The current president styles himself after Theodore Roosevelt, but he takes from the first progressive president only what he wants: in foreign policy, only the second half of Roosevelt's admonition to "speak softly and carry a big stick," and at home, absolutely none of Roosevelt's worry that hugely concentrated economic power could be a threat to capitalism itself.

There is another "world we have lost," though, and that is the world in which the argument about the usefulness of Progressive-Era history really seemed to matter. The theory that Isaac so powerfully rebuts was just one thread in an intellectual ferment among liberals in the mid- to late-1990s. In the second and most useful of the book's four chapters – each of which could stand as an essay on its own — Isaac scans the full range of ideas in play among liberals and progressives in the years just preceding and during the Clinton administration, which together he confusingly calls neo-progressivism.

There were the communitarians, critiquing liberalism for an overemphasis on individual rights and seeking to recast it in terms of mutual responsibility. There was the incoherent "politics of meaning" group that converged around Michael Lerner, founder of the liberal Jewish magazine *Tikkun* and briefly an influence on Hillary Rodham Clinton's language. There was the economic populism associated with the late Senator Paul Wellstone, and its opposite number, the moderate Democratic Leadership Council, which tended to stress the importance of values such as work, responsibility, and military strength, and argued that liberals needed to mollify the resentments of white middle class men. There were grand political projects that envisioned a third party and a complete realignment of expectations to help poor and working people join forces and claim power. And there was a vast area of thought that went under the nearly meaningless rubric of "civil society." This ranged from the statistical reasoning of Robert Putnam, whose 1995 article "Bowling Alone" introduced the idea that we needed to regain the "social capital" of institutions such as bowling leagues and civic associations, to an argument that the non-profits and neighborhood efforts of local civil society were the best way to move forward in a world where government action was discredited and the only alternative was the private values of the market.

Finally, another version of the civil society argument, and the one to which Isaac seems most favorably disposed, looked to local efforts, such as community development corporations that were creating housing and schools in poor urban and rural areas, as examples of successful public participation and innovation that would point the way to larger-scale progress through "bottom-up" policies such as the creation of federal empowerment zones.

Then, suddenly, this full-throated search for a useable public philosophy disappeared. The book-length version of "Bowling Alone," the article that had stirred up such interest in 1995, finally appeared to little notice. Most of the other ideas receded with the arrival of the Bush administration, which aggressively set an agenda that put liberals

continuously on the defensive. The political debate fell back into tired ruts, with Democrats mainly pandering to their most reliable voters – senior citizens — with issues like prescription drug coverage and charging Republicans (correctly) with plotting to ruin Social Security. The 2002 election cycle passed without Democrats offering even an alternative economic vision, much less a broad new perspective on the relationship between government and civil society. One would hardly know that just a few years earlier so many rich and complete alternative visions of the way forward had been in the air.

Isaac is one of the few people with the patience to have read all the literature of this very recent period, so much of which consisted of books that stacked up because one “ought” to read them. His critical survey of all this thinking makes *The Poverty of Progressivism* a broad response to the political thought of the 1990s, but it can also make the reader nostalgic. Of course he is right about the simple-minded parallel to the Progressive Era. Of course his criticisms of communitarians and the less modest of the civil society theorists are well taken. But where are we now, without those dozens of flawed ideas? What do we have to take their place?

Leaders in these local and state-level efforts have started to acknowledge that their policies are not about “power.” Until they grapple with the underlying forces that prevent resources from being allocated to individuals and communities that need help, they will always be struggling to undo damage, rather than moving forward to change society.

Isaac does not say much about President Clinton and he explicitly rejects any interest in studying “Clintonism.” Nonetheless it is hard not to think that so much of the flourishing of American political thought in the 1990s had something to do with the fact that there was a president who took an interest, or seemed to, in all of these currents of thought. Clinton’s courting of political intellectuals, recounted in Benjamin Barber’s 2001 book, *The Truth of Power*, was one of his great seductions, and one has to wonder whether some of the books and essays that appeared in those years might have been written for an audience of one, much as Lorenzo de Medici was the audience for Machiavelli. But now, when American politics most desperately needs an alternative vision, the conversation seems to have dried up, cut short just as its many false starts might have been starting to come together into something real.

Isaac’s own solutions stem from his skepticism of grand visions such as neo-Progressivism. He puts his hope in local initiatives, but recognizes that community development and community organizing efforts, for all the good they do in engaging people around local problems, will fall short if they do not have a real political agenda or lead to a larger vision. Leaders in these local and state-level efforts have started to acknowledge that their policies are not about “power.” Until they grapple with the

underlying forces that prevent resources from being allocated to individuals and communities that need help, they will always be struggling to undo damage, rather than moving forward to change society.

Isaac's vision of liberal renewal recalls something that Vice President Al Gore used to say during the 2000 presidential primaries, when I was on the campaign staff of his Democratic rival, former Senator Bill Bradley: politics "is not an academic exercise or a seminar in theory," he said. "It's a day-to-day fight for real people who face real problems." Gore's comment was not the anti-intellectual put-down that it seemed at the time. It was an accurate statement of the limits of hopeful political theorizing detached from the moment-to-moment struggle for political justice. Coming from within the academy, and immersed in the theoretical and historical approaches to liberal renewal, *The Poverty of Progressivism* is the more nuanced and persuasive version of this realization, one that might help restart the political thinking of the 1990s but with a greater appreciation of its real value and limits.

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