

Urban Disorder and Progressive Reform



Applying the Five Habits of Historical
Thinking to Better Understand
the Progressives

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From an America of villages and small
cities, a vast urban industrialized nation
arose in the late 1800s.



Chicago Stock Yards



Chicago, 1892

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At first, the problems of fire control,
sanitation, public health, crime, and safety
in America's rapidly growing cities
overwhelmed officials.



The city went up
in flames in the
Great Chicago
Fire of 1871.

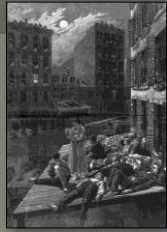
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Dismal tenement slums filled up with poor people arriving from rural areas, and with millions coming from other nations.



The whole family works picking nuts in a basement tenement



Sleeping outside on a hot summer night

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Labor conflicts often turned violent, adding to urban disorder in the decades of the late 1800s and early 1900s.



This is a view of a battle in Chicago, during a nationwide railroad workers' strike in 1877. Soldiers on horseback are shown with swords wading into a crowd of angry workers.

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The widespread use of young children in factories and sweatshops especially concerned reformers.



Child labor was not new in America. However, in the cities children worked long hours for little pay. They also worked in unregulated and unhealthy settings out of view of parents or neighbors.

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Adding to the diversity and confusion of city life were thousands of poor immigrants seeking unskilled work and often wound up in the most dangerous and low paying jobs.



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What most angered reformers were political "bosses" whose "machines" controlled big-city governments.



"Boss" Tweed of New York City's
Tammany Hall machine

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A machine sought to control city officials and contractors, often using corrupt means to win elections for its chosen candidates and increase its wealth and power.

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New York "boss" Richard Croker is seen here as an octopus whose tentacles control many sources of wealth and political power.



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However, machines did often win voter loyalty by helping the urban poor in ways that government itself did not or would not do.

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Progressive reformers arose to do battle with the powerful machines, corporations, and other “interests” they saw as working against “the people.”



Lincoln Steffens, author of *The Shame of the Cities*

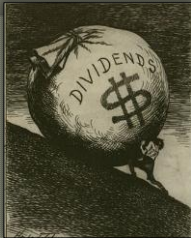


Ida Tarbell, famous for her book *The History of the Standard Oil Company*

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Some reformers, such as the National Child Labor Committee, focused on one issue—in this case, ending many forms of child labor.



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Many of these reformers were from the middle class, not the lower class. What motivated them, and what did they really hope to change?



These are not easy questions to answer, even though these Progressive reformers wrote and said a great deal.

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After all, the past itself is gone. All we have to go on is the historical record.

Primary source documents like these are one kind of record, yet they often leave out as much as they reveal.

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As the first of the **Five Habits of Historical Thinking** puts it: "History is not the past itself." It is an account of the past based on primary source evidence left behind.




Five Habits of Historical Thinking

- **History Is Not the Past Itself**
- The Detective Model: Problem, Evidence, Interpretation
- Time, Change, and Continuity
- Cause and Effect
- As They Saw It: Grasping Past Points of View

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Like a detective, a historian sets out to solve a key problem or answer a major question.



"What did the Progressives really think of the urban poor whose causes they championed?"

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But this question—"What did the Progressives really think of the urban poor whose causes they championed?"—only leads to many others.



Did their urban reforms make cities more democratic?

How did they feel about the millions of new immigrants?

What did they want more—order or equality and justice?

What impact did they really have?

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To answer such questions, historians must look for clues, or evidence. The problem is the sources are incomplete, and usually they do not all agree.



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Some sources suggest that Progressive urban reform was directed only at the rich and powerful.

"The commercial spirit is the spirit of profit, not patriotism; of credit, not honor; of individual gain, not national prosperity; of trade and dickering, not principle."

Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*

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Other sources suggest some Progressives themselves feared the urban poor and immigrant masses.

"The Italian comes in at the bottom, and in the generation that came over the sea he stays there. In the slums he is welcomed as a tenant who 'makes less trouble' than the contentious Irishman or the order-loving German, that is to say: is content to live in a pig-sty and submits to robbery at the hands of the rent-collector without murmur."

Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*

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Pause:

- How would you describe the differences between these two sources? Take a few notes and discuss your answers.

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Some historians stress the idealism of the Progressives; others, their own middle-class anxieties. They interpret sources differently to make their case.

Idealism

"The horrible conditions in the cities were too obvious to ignore."

"The greed and dishonesty of the rich made life intolerable for everyone."

Middle-class anxieties

"Progressives feared urban disorder and felt entitled to reform the cities to their own liking."

"The middle-class Progressives felt left out and wanted to be more in control."

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After all, it's hard enough to empathize with others around us. How much harder is it to see the world the way these people did?

"If it shall appear that the sufferings and the sins of the 'other half,' and the evil they breed, are but as a just punishment upon the community that gave it no other choice, it will be because that is the truth."

Jacob Riis

"This constant treaty-making of factionalism has been no less than a curse. The city manager plan proposes the commendable thing of abolishing wards."

Harry A. Toulmin

"The residents of the hilltops and the suburbs may not fully appreciate the faithfulness of certain downtown ward councilmen to the interests of their constituents."

Seattle Town Crier

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Keep this in mind as you do the rest of this lesson on the question of what Progressives really thought of the urban poor.

Tasks ahead:

- Interpret several primary sources
- Read and debate two secondary sources
- Draw your own conclusions about this past episode



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