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Source: *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Mar., 1993), pp. 1546-1562

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2080216>

Accessed: 11-10-2017 10:04 UTC

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Narrating Progressivism: Unitarians v. Pluralists v. Students

Peter G. Filene

History textbooks resemble encyclopedias. They are thick, heavy, and crammed with information divided into subchapters and columns. When students cite the textbook during class discussions, they invariably remark, “the book says . . .,” as if the words had no author. In fact, of course, five or six names appear on the cover, but the plethora implies that all of them wrote every sentence—history by committee. Textbook titles add to this sense of depersonalized information.¹ I can never remember whether the one I am using this year is *American History* or *America’s History* or *The American People* or *A People and a Nation*. If they differ at all, it would seem to be in style. This one has zestier prose, that one is segmented into shorter subchapters, the next one has more photographs, but beneath the surface, they all apparently contain the same basic array of information arranged into roughly the same sequence of chapters. In the prefaces the authors have candidly explained their frames of reference and interpretations, but after their first pages the textbooks resemble truth books. As a result they reinforce our students’ assumption that history is “out there” waiting to be received, like Scripture.

Although I long ago discarded that assumption, I found it harder to differentiate the “truths” told by textbooks. Each year when the time came to order for the upcoming survey course, I would follow the most enthusiastic recommendation from one or another fellow teacher or, failing that, reorder the one I was using. This review has helped me define subtler and more reliable criteria. After sitting down with eight textbooks that my colleagues or I have used and comparing their accounts of Progressivism, I recognize that they differ not merely in literary and visual style but also in interpretation and, most significantly, in the overall shape they give to events.²

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I am grateful to Peter Walker, Linda Orr, John Kasson, Laurel Goldman, Dorrie Casey, Peggie Payne, Edward Neal, and Roy Rosenzweig for their invaluable comments and suggestions. They have been colleagues in the best sense of the word.

¹ I was alerted to this issue by Frances FitzGerald’s study of secondary school textbooks: Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston, 1979), 51–52.

² This note lists the textbooks considered in order of review. For fuller bibliographical information, see “Textbooks Reviewed” at the end of this article. Alan Brinkley et al., *American History: A Survey*, 8th ed. (2 vols., New York, 1991); Robert A. Divine et al., *America: Past and Present*, 3d ed. (2 vols., New York, 1991); James Henretta

Each of these eight books mentions the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, for example, and most use the same photograph of four corpses sprawled on the sidewalk at a policeman's feet. The episode has diverse meanings, however, depending first of all on how the authors interpret it. One finds the episode's meaning in the exploitation of women, another in the challenge for Tammany Hall, and yet another in the incentive to labor organizing. But meaning does not emerge only from what the authors explicitly ascribe. It also depends upon how each puts the event to use in his larger story. When summarized in three abstract sentences midway through a discussion of urban politics, the fire is a local incident. When opening a chapter as an extended dramatic scene that blends first-person quotations with vivid descriptions (bodies falling like bundles of dress goods), the fire ignites a nationwide reform movement. Style and interpretation alone do not define meaning. Overall shaping, or narrative, also plays a part.

Whether or not historians acknowledge it, we plot past events into a narrative that has a beginning, middle, and outcome. Our students may believe that history is facts, cut-and-dried and in chronological order. But we who have "done" history know better. A *chronicle*, or list, fails to make connections between—to make sense of—past events. Historians insert phrases such as "therefore," "more important," and "unfortunately." They arrange events into a cumulative story that carries the reader forward through time, creating meanings along the way. In their basic role as storytellers, historians and novelists perform the same task. Both of them enable readers to answer the question, "How did that come about?"³

Narrative shape is not only a literary matter but an ideological one. Should we devise a nonlinear form to represent the varieties and inconsistencies, the profusion and confusion, of Americans' experiences? Or should we resolve them into a linear synthesis? Such questions underlie the furious controversies about the new social history and multiculturalism.⁴ My own reading of the past, particularly of the Progressive Era, inclines me toward the nonlinear, multicultural side. Various in-

et al., *America's History*, 1st ed. (2 vols., Chicago, 1987); Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People & a Nation: A History of the United States*, 3d ed. (Boston, 1990); Gary B. Nash et al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 2d ed. (2 vols., New York, 1990); Paul S. Boyer et al., *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People*, 1st ed. (2 vols., Lexington, Mass., 1990); James West Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic*, 1st ed. (New York, 1990); Bernard Bailyn et al., *The Great Republic: A History of the American People*, 4th ed. (2 vols., Lexington, Mass., 1991).

³ For my definition of the slippery term *narrative*, I have extrapolated from Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln, 1987), 58–60. The analysis derives from Hayden White, "The Structure of Historical Narrative," *Clio*, 1 (June 1972), 5–20; Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (no. 1, 1980), 5–27, reprinted in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), 1–25; Louis Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in *The Writing of History*, ed. Robert Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison, 1978), 129–49; and Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, 1986), 71–75. For an exceptionally lucid discussion of narrative in historical context, see William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History*, 78 (March 1992), 1347–76.

⁴ Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History*, 73 (June 1986), 120–36. See also Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Some Reflections on the New History," *American Historical Review*, 91 (June 1989), 661–70; and Joan Wallach Scott, "History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story," *ibid.*, 680–92.

terest groups were contending for resources and legitimacy, but they cannot be neatly arranged in two camps, good guys and bad, nor did their struggle reach a decisive outcome. Nonetheless, I also feel pulled by what a friend called “a nostalgia for unity,” a yearning for the synthesized, morally unambiguous version with which I grew up in the 1950s.⁵ I feel the same ambivalence about how students should learn. On the one hand, believing that history is a process of questioning and constructing, I want them to engage in the open-ended process of analyzing historians’ interpretations and working with evidence to devise their own versions. On the other hand, I empathize with their desire for ready-made answers—history as an easily comprehended story that is moving onward and upward or at least is taking a clearcut direction.

This leads, finally, to the question of *learning*. After all, the audience for textbooks consists, not of other historians, but of students who may know virtually nothing of the story when they open the book. The authors may put in the latest scholarship, but what will readers take away?

Out of curiosity, I interviewed my twenty-three-year-old daughter, now a graphic designer, who took a freshman course on the United States since 1865—her only American history course in college. The single assigned reading was *America’s History* by James Henretta et al. A week before each exam, the professor would hand out a list of one hundred terms that my daughter researched (“slaved over”) in the textbook and, for each term, wrote a page or more to prepare herself for the test. I told her that I was working on this review and asked, “Who were the Progressives?”

A pause. “I’m not sure,” she said. “Weren’t they a political party?” she asked. “Sometime before the depression?”

“Almost,” I replied. And what was her impression of life in the early twentieth century?

“It was good and getting better. But,” she added after a moment, “not for all Americans. Not for people in slums and factories.” Later in the conversation, she recalled having written a fifteen-page research paper for the course, but she drew a blank on the topic. “Scary,” she murmured.

Silently, I agreed. This is what remains for a student who got an A in the course, indeed in all her courses, at a select New England college. Scary indeed. And according to cognitive learning research, my daughter’s experience is typical. However superb the textbook, students will retain only a fraction of the whole. How large a fraction, and which fraction? Empirical studies report that at the end of a lecture the listeners recall, on the average, only 40 percent of the information they have just heard. (Most of what they recall, by the way, comes from the first fifteen minutes, when energy and receptivity are highest.) A week later, they remember 20 percent. A textbook chapter will fare better than a lecture, because members of

⁵ My thanks to Linda Orr for this insight. For her version of this dilemma, see Linda Orr, “The Duplicity of the Southern Story: Reflections on Reynolds Price’s *The Surface of Earth* and Eudora Welty’s ‘The Wide Net,’” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 91 (Winter 1992), 111–37.

the “audience” can take it in at their own pace, backtrack when they need to, and decipher the original words instead of their scribbled notes.⁶

As college teachers are painfully aware, however, during the past fifteen or twenty years our students have demonstrated less and less pleasure in and aptitude for reading. But show them a Jacob Riis photograph, and they will read all sorts of nuanced meanings out of the grainy text. They are the visual generation. They comprehend most easily via images.⁷ In response, publishers have given unprecedented attention to graphics, creating charts and maps (and packets of transparencies) that are not merely attractive illustrations, but instructive “texts” in their own right. Equally impressive are the photographs and paintings: not the traditional head shot of President So-and-So or the decorative landscape, but pictures that tell a thousand words’ worth of past experience. At their best, then, textbooks transmit history on more than one channel.

But the basic determinant of memorability is not style, but structure. According to empirical studies, the more cohesive the overall exposition, linking events into a continuous causal narrative, the more will be remembered. “Dead-end” events (those not causally linked) will more likely be recalled if set in imaginable contexts—that is, re-created rather than merely listed. Measured against this criterion, most textbooks—segmented into analytic parts and overburdened with facts—will not fare well. In the short run (that is, through the day of the exam), our students understand and remember much of what they have read. In the longer run, years after they have sold their yellow-highlighted copies, what remains is a scattering of facts and what Frances FitzGerald calls “an atmosphere, an impression, a tone.”⁸

Fortunately, information is only one part of “cultural literacy.” More important in my view, though less measurable, is the ability to pose questions and construct evidence into interesting answers. Here I return to that ambivalence about narrative structure. A seamlessly constructed textbook will hold students’ attention, but, because of its supposed omniscience, it will also hinder them from considering alternative interpretations. A porous or discontinuous textbook will be more confusing,

⁶ John McLeish, “The Lecture Method,” in *The Psychology of Teaching Methods* (Chicago, 1976), 262–64, 269–71; Wilbert J. McKeachie, “Improving Lectures by Understanding Students’ Information Processing,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (no. 2, 1980), 26, 29; Wilbert J. McKeachie et al., *Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom: A Review of the Research Literature* (Ann Arbor, 1986), 73.

⁷ Joseph Lowman, *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching* (San Francisco, 1984), 102–3; Charles K. West, James A. Farmer, and Phillip M. Wolff, *Instructional Design: Implications from Cognitive Science* (Englewood Cliffs, 1991), 170–90.

⁸ West, Farmer, and Wolff, *Instructional Design*, 41–42; Perry Thorndyke, “Cognitive Structures in Comprehension and Memory of Narrative Discourse,” *Cognitive Psychology*, 9 (Jan. 1977), 77–110; Lynne M. Reder and John R. Anderson, “Effects of Spacing and Embellishment on Memory for the Main Points of a Text,” *Memory and Cognition*, 10 (no. 2, 1982), 97–102; Gary M. Olson, Susan A. Duffy, and Robert L. Mark, “Applying Knowledge of Writing Conventions in Prose Comprehension and Composition,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (no. 2, 1980), 67–84. Experiments with fifth-graders confirm those with college students: Tom Trabasso, Tom Secco, and Paul Van Den Broek, “Causal Cohesion and Story Coherence,” in *Learning and Comprehension of Text*, ed. Heinz Mandel, Nancy L. Stein, and Tom Trabasso (Hillsdale, 1984), 83–111; Bonnie Armbruster, Thomas H. Anderson, and Joyce Ostertag, “Does Text Structure/Summarization Instruction Facilitate Learning from Expository Text?” *Reading Research Quarterly*, 22 (Summer 1987), 331–46; FitzGerald, *America Revised*, 18.

but it will require readers to put the pieces together. As a manual for “doing history,” neither type is sufficient. Ultimately, both depend upon the intervention of teachers.⁹

In this review I will focus on three narrative aspects: *Interpretation*: How do the authors explain and assess Progressivism? *Style*: Do the words as well as the graphics dramatize the past or do they render it in neutral, abstract tones? That is, to what extent does the text, verbal and visual, enable students to “see” the past? *Continuity*: Does the structure flow like a story or is it segmented into units?

Reduced to elementary terms, these eight textbooks tell much the same story. Progressivism tried to reform the ill effects of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration by arousing public concern and passing regulatory laws. To be sure, there was no unified Progressive “movement,” but at best a set of heterogeneous, loosely affiliated groups that had different, even contradictory goals. Nevertheless, underlying the diversity there was a common “spirit” or “mind.”

Once they move beyond definitions, however, the authors split into two camps of interpretation, the unitary and the pluralist. The unitarians portray Progressivism as a homogeneous, purposeful phenomenon and conclude with an optimistic assessment. The pluralists, on the other hand, focus on Progressivism’s varieties, fractures, and ambiguities. Theirs is a skeptical, often gloomy account. This division reflects the historiographical controversy of the past thirty years, as historians in the 1960s and 1970s replaced George Mowry and Richard Hofstadter’s cohesive formulation with a focus on myriad, often contradictory, largely unsuccessful pressure groups. Recently, by contrast, the inclination seems to be turning toward a more unitary and optimistic version.¹⁰

The Unitary Interpretation

In three of these eight textbooks, Progressivism emerges as a largely middle-class movement on behalf of oppressed groups. The heroes are settlement house workers, journalists, and reform-minded politicians who fight against slumlords, sweatshop owners, corrupt legislators, and corporate tycoons. The plot moves in a straight line from city to state to Washington, D.C. And even though in the end much misery and injustice remain, the Progressives have made progress.

By choosing this traditional approach, these three textbooks lay claim to a coherent and reassuring story. But only one takes full advantage of these assets. The

⁹ For an ingenious experiment and discussion of how students use history textbooks, see Samuel S. Wineburg, “Probing the Depths of Students’ Historical Knowledge,” *Perspectives: The AHA Newsletter* (March 1992), 19–24.

¹⁰ For instructive historiographical surveys, see Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History*, 10 (Dec. 1982), 113–32; and Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Arlington Heights, 1983), 1–10, 119–40. The recent trend is exemplified in Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1986), 263–88, 311–56.

second lapses into an analytic muddle, and the third builds upon a marshy premise. However much I long for a readily comprehensible version of the past, these texts indicate that the unitary interpretation is not the way to get there.

American History, by Alan Brinkley et al., is the best of the three.¹¹ In a two-page insert, students are given a deft synopsis of “Where Historians Disagree”: Richard Hofstadter versus Gabriel Kolko versus Robert Wiebe versus David Thelen versus unnamed feminists. But this multiplicity turns out to be a false lead—like the cacophony of an orchestra tuning up, which stops when it begins to play the symphony in perfect harmony. Apart from this insert, Brinkley and his collaborators focus primarily on middle-class reformers working within the political structure. This is systemic history. Few individuals emerge by name and even fewer as personalities (except in the photographs). Few episodes, anecdotes, or quotations enliven the analysis. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire (“the worst industrial tragedy in the city’s history”) is summarized in three efficient sentences as part of a discussion of how city bosses “sometimes allowed their machines to become vehicles of social change.” Woman suffrage earns three pages of detailed, respectful analysis, including the racial and ideological tensions within the movement. But the next section immediately asserts that suffrage, like Prohibition and immigration restriction, attracted “large but limited constituencies.” Economic issues were more important. Thus the authors reaffirm the hierarchy of their interpretation.¹²

One finds the same viewpoint in the illustrations. With rare exceptions, these are “official” photographs: middle-class white men (and sometimes women) orating, parading, or posing. Similarly, the prose remains dispassionate and magisterial, filtered through starchy verbs and nouns (“elevate the distressed”; “women found themselves excluded”).¹³

What *American History* forfeits in scope and drama, it gains in coherence. The authors develop their narrative steadily and instructively, providing the reader a clear route of argument. Progressivism began as ideas but would be implemented through politics. On the local level, bosses were deposed by interest groups operating largely outside the party system. On the national level, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson extended government power not only in the domestic realm, but also to Latin America, Asia, and then, via Wilson’s moralistic crusade, Europe. As readers finish the chapters on Progressivism and prepare to enter World War I, they will carry away a unified interpretation. And given the narrator’s neutral voice, they will likely believe it is “what really happened.” That two-page insert may have mentioned disagreements among historians, but as far as all but the most skeptical students can infer, *American History* has told the true version.

¹¹ Whenever the preface to a textbook indicates which author wrote the section on Progressivism, I have specified him (there is no her) by name. Brinkley et al., *American History*, does not indicate authorship, but Brinkley wrote all the revisions for this edition. Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, also does not specify authorship, so I have credited Boyer.

¹² Brinkley et al., *American History*, II, 630, 636.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 620, 623.

America: Past and Present, by Robert Divine et al., offers a unitary view of Progressivism (written by R. Hal Williams) that is both more vivid and more confused. Progressivism “brought people together rather than drove them apart.” Professionals, feminists, intellectuals, socialists, all played their part, but reform occurred only after they entered the political system. By 1917 the Progressives had not solved all problems; some injustices, like racism, they did not even tackle. On balance, though, it was an era of “important and measured reforms.” By the time Wilson had finished blending the New Freedom with the New Nationalism, he had “foreshadowed the pragmatic outlook of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.”¹⁴

But this is only half of the narrative in *America*. A preceding chapter, “The Progressive Era,” sets the stage for the reform movement with a lively survey of turn-of-the-century America. Here are the color and drama and personalities absent in Brinkley’s account. Farmers, women, blacks, and immigrants—“society’s masses”—are given detailed, sympathetic portraits in words as well as photographs. Alongside photos of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire victims and Rose Schneiderman, the text describes the “stampede” of seamstresses down narrow stairways and the funeral procession of eighty thousand people marching up Fifth Avenue in the rain. Not only working conditions but also recreation and the arts are described. Quotations and poetry punctuate the text, creating a medley of voices. Illustrations decorate almost every page. “Life in the States is one perpetual whirl,” exclaimed an English visitor. The air throbbed with excitement and hope, out of which emerged “the progressive generation.”¹⁵

All this makes for an exciting style. Unfortunately, as analysis it *is* a whirl. The chapter begins with the thesis that “prosperity became one of the keys to understanding the era and the nature of progressive reform.” During the next dozen pages, however, one reads about the hardships that industrialism inflicted upon the “masses.” An upbeat note appears in the discussion of organized labor, but here the narrative logic wavers yet more wildly. After crediting the Women’s Trade Union League with winning “the model for the kind of agreements that govern industrial relations today,” Williams mentions not only the Wobblies’ popularity among poorer workers but also the generous company programs at the Ford Motor Company and Amoskeag Mills. What is the conclusion? Did workers need bargaining, revolution, or paternalism?¹⁶

Instead of giving an answer, Williams vaults the reader into a unit announcing that “for many Americans, the quality of life improved between 1900 and 1920.”¹⁷ Health and skyscrapers, sports and ragtime, Isadora Duncan and postimpressionism—a miscellany of life-style items unravel an already frayed argument. Continuity vanishes. When Progressive reform appears in the next chapter, readers will have difficulty figuring out where it came from. Moreover, labor unions, im-

¹⁴ Divine et al., *America*, II, 678.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 647, 652, 671.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 647, 661–65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 665.

migrants, blacks, and suffragists will make only fleeting encores, which will lead students to think that these groups played no part in Progressivism.

James Henretta et al., in *America's History*, construct a unitary model that holds together better than Williams's but has a disturbing structural rattle and a dubious blueprint. According to this version, written by David Brody, almost every interest group eventually joined the Progressive cause, from businessmen to factory workers to social workers. If there was feuding among them, it derived from ideology, not class. After the Triangle fire, urban politicians joined social workers and professionals in support of labor regulations. In the women's movement, "socialites and sweatshop girls marched side by side" for suffrage.¹⁸ On the other hand, immigrant masses clashed head-on with old-stock Americans about drinking and immigration restriction. Do all these groups belong within the same category? Yes, Brody insists. Some were "urban liberals," but all were Progressives. (Urban as contrasted with what? Not rural.)

This is what once was called whig history. Brody enlists virtually everyone in the reform effort because he characterizes reform as hardheaded, pragmatic, and willing to compromise—Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s vital center forty years early. Progressives were activists but not militants. They were moral, but the best of them were not moralists. Socialist ideas "served as a beacon for more moderate reforms." Roosevelt left an "imprint of vigorous action—laced with prudence" upon domestic as well as foreign affairs, whereas Wilson had to learn through experience that the New Freedom idealism needed to be modified. "It stood to reason that Wilson, like other progressives who achieved power, would drift to the center." Tragically, however, he did not apply this lesson to his foreign policy. With this ominous warning, we turn to the next chapter, "Progressivism Goes to War."¹⁹

Although the narrative of *America's History* is guided forward and upward by this centrist ideology, its initial propulsion derives from a metaphysical theory of change. "It was as if social awareness had reached a critical mass around 1900 that set reform activity going," Brody explains. Later, introducing President William Howard Taft, he writes: "The agencies of historical change sometimes take strange forms. A person out of tune with the times can, by the sheer friction he or she generates, serve as the catalyst for great events."²⁰ There is an imposing ancestry for this philosophy, stretching back to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and beyond. Served up in this capsule form, however, it does not help students explain events. In fact, I fear it will reinforce their uncritical notion that "things turned out for the best" (at least in the United States)—a seamless past that resists interrogation.

The Pluralist Interpretation

Unitarians are a minority among the authors of these eight textbooks. The more typical approach divides the past according to the trinity of gender, class, and race.

¹⁸ Henretta et al., *America's History*, II, 656.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 648, 673. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston, 1949).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 645, 668.

Beneath the banner of "Progressivism," different groups struggled against one another as much as against the urban and industrial evils. Using this analysis, five textbooks conclude with a mixed or downright negative assessment.

The pluralist approach confronts a dilemma. How does one make a comprehensible story about reformers who were at odds with the oppressed? "Pluralist coherence" seems a contradiction in terms, or at least a tricky literary balancing act. E. L. Doctorow succeeded in his novel *Ragtime* by creating a cast of stereotypical characters: smug, righteous, bourgeois Mother and Father; hardworking Russian Jewish father and innocent daughter; bigoted Irish firemen and police; megalomaniacal millionaire and his exploited show girl mistress; aspiring, affectionate, principled Negro piano player. Doctorow leads these figures along several interwoven plot lines, dramatizing the clash of interests. He gives race, gender, and class "lifelike" animation. We might easily become lost amid this myriad, but he invites us—compels us—to take sides with Coalhouse Walker, Tateh, and Evelyn Nesbit, the underdog heroes, against the various villains of the elite. And always there is a narrator's voice leading us through this semifactual labyrinth, a voice that Doctorow has labeled "mock historical-pedantic."²¹

Historians do not enjoy the options of novelists. They cannot invent characters and episodes, sending Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung on a ride together through the Coney Island Tunnel of Love, or assigning Emma Goldman to be Evelyn Nesbit's mentor. They want to be true to the facts. Like novelists, though, they want to tell a compelling account of the past. It is too much to expect a textbook to be a "page turner," the kind of book that a student does not want to put down at midnight. That sort of magnetism belongs to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Historians write *expository* narratives devoted, not to characterization and feelings, but to problem and analysis. Nevertheless, they too need to keep their readers engaged by showing what was at stake (class tensions among Progressives, for example) and enticing readers to learn how it turned out (that is, to offer not simply an ending, but an outcome). Otherwise they confuse or lose their audiences.²²

Measured against the dual standard of coherence and dramatic quality, these pluralist texts achieve varying success. Two end up, despite valiant efforts, more unitary than pluralist. Two others depict class and gender conflict consistently—indeed, vehemently—but only one with imaginative appeal. The fifth, however, proves that it can be done: not only a coherent pluralist narrative of Progressivism, but one that will stimulate students to keep reading to discover the outcome.

²¹ E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York, 1975); Victor Navasky, "E. L. Doctorow: 'I Saw a Sign,'" *New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 28, 1980, pp. 44–45. See also Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson, *E. L. Doctorow* (Boston, 1990), 49–71; Barbara Foley, "From U.S.A. to *Ragtime*: Notes on the Form of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction," in *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner (Princeton, 1983), 158–78. Doctorow has argued that "history is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory, by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes": E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents," *ibid.*, 25.

²² Jean M. Mandler and Nancy S. Johnson, "Remembrance of Things Passed: Story Structure and Recall," *Cognitive Psychology*, 9 (Jan. 1977), 111–51. See also note 8 above.

It is symptomatic that *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People* by Paul S. Boyer et al. demotes “the people” to the subtitle. Although ostensibly, sometimes ostentatiously, attentive to underprivileged groups, on balance this text tells a history that is middle-class, not very embattled, and sanguine. Here is a clear case in which narrative structure shapes meaning. Instead of setting classes, races, or genders in conflict, Boyer and his coauthors separate the contestants into sub-chapters of their own. First we read of the plight of the urban masses (highlighted by a dramatic account of the Triangle fire) and workers’ efforts to organize. Then, after a page break, a headline announces: “The Progressive Movement Takes Shape.” It turns out, however, to be a movement for, rather than by, the masses. Middle-class reformers such as Lincoln Steffens and Robert La Follette played leading roles. Political bosses and their immigrant constituents lent occasional applause.

This unanimity broke down over moral issues. In caustic tones the authors recount the Progressives’ efforts at social control of the masses. The crusades against movies and drink, the white slave “hysteria,” immigration restriction bills, eugenicist Madison Grant’s “rancid brew of pseudoscientific data,” Woodrow Wilson’s racism—these were “disturbing ingredients” of Progressive social thought.²³

But this moral/social tension is not set in the framework of basic social conflict. It remains a deplorable but bounded episode, followed by the reassuring news that blacks and then women (well, actually, middle-class women) organized on their own behalf. Whereas blacks developed “a robust voice,” women not only won the vote but “broke out of” their prescribed sphere. By the time Roosevelt and Wilson have brought Progressivism to a climax, *The Enduring Vision* has become a rather rosy pluralist account. Students will have little trouble understanding the plot line, and they will come away reassured.

The same holds true for style. The authors have worked hard to make the text user-friendly. To heat up the prose, they have inserted adjectives and adverbs at every opportunity: “passionately called for a strike,” “grotesquely mutilated body,” and so forth. Occasionally the habit gets out of hand, parodying itself. “Ambitious, bombastic, self-righteous, jingoistic, and opportunistic—but also brilliant, politically masterful, and endlessly interesting—Roosevelt.” (Then again, if anyone invited excess, it was TR). Once in a while, the authors even inject humor, a rare commodity in these textbooks. (When TR went off to hunt in Africa, the conservative Sen. Nelson Aldrich prayed: “Let every lion do its duty.”) More important, they bring abstractions (such as La Follette’s Wisconsin Idea) down to earth in particularities (he set up a reference library so that lawmakers need not rely on lobbyists). They personify aggregates in terms of individuals and often give these individuals a hint of three-dimensionality by mentioning biographical background, temperament, and appearance. We meet “eccentric, prickly, and brilliant Thorstein Veblen” and W. E. B. Du Bois, “the cultivated scholar of refined manners and . . . a carefully trimmed goatee,” and, no surprise, “grossly overweight” Taft.²⁴

²³ Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, II, 768–70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 779, 761, 771, 775.

In sum, the prose style obeys the adage *show, don't tell*. The plentiful photographs, meanwhile, perform that task with a distinct slant. Almost every one shows women, children, or men of color marching, striking, or posing proudly. Likewise, the vivid two-color charts, graphs, and maps sum up national elections but also immigration rates and the progress of woman suffrage. Graphics and words thus work in tandem to create an affirmative-action version of the Progressive Era — affirmative both in the sense of proportional representation for minorities and in the sense of optimism and activism. In the final analysis, the era “still shines forth.”²⁵

Pluralism is easier said than done. Despite the promise made by James West Davidson et al. in their title, *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History* does not fully enact it in the chapter on progressivism. And despite their prefatory claims to have written “narrative” that re-creates the multicausal and often illogical course of events, here too practice falls regrettably short.²⁶

The basic interpretation of Progressivism in *Nation of Nations* (written by Michael Stoff and edited by Davidson) so closely parallels Boyer's that, with two notable exceptions, I can simply say “ditto.” Once again Progressivism is defined as a mostly middle-class effort culminating in “a sense of mastery, so characteristic of twentieth-century reform,” replacing “the awful feeling of drift.” This less than pluralist perspective becomes even less so when one notices the virtual omission of race and labor. TR's summary discharge of black troops in Brownsville, Texas, after they had rioted against discrimination, and his silence on the Atlanta race riot (1906) are not only counterbalanced by his black-and-tan strategy, but seemingly excused in the name of “the limits of political feasibility.” Wilson's segregationist policies emerge in a single casual sentence amid a biographical sketch of the southern president. In the same fashion, although child laborers and factory women enjoy several pages of attention (including a long, poignant vignette of the Triangle fire), male workers earn merely a paragraph. In sum, this predominantly middle-class version is complicated more by ethnicity and gender than by race and class.²⁷

Nation of Nations is truer to its subtitle. The chapter has a narrative flow that carries the reader along a swift current of analysis. Lucid transitional sentences cast a look backward before launching a new phase of the story. Without resorting to melodramatic adverbs and adjectives, the prose has cadence and color. But the success is cognitive as much as stylistic. Stoff continually spells out abstractions in terms of human vignettes. Why did Progressives turn from preaching to politics? As garbage piled up outside Hull House, Jane Addams protested to city hall — seven hundred times in a single summer. Having failed by that route, she asked to be appointed garbage inspector, but even then she could not coerce the city machine appointees to pick up the trash. So she twice ran candidates against the local ward boss and twice failed to oust Johnny Powers (who tossed cigars to the men and nickels to the children). Nevertheless, Addams continued the fight for reform,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 786.

²⁶ Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations*, II, xx.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 856, 845–46, 854.

reaching to the state and then federal level. "Politics," Stoff concludes, "turned out to be the only way to clean things up."²⁸ Such vignettes neatly combine the what and the why, enabling readers to understand the meaning of reform. The graphic materials, meanwhile, are fewer and more understated than in most of these textbooks, but they do not have to carry the weight of bringing the past to life. The prose does that well enough on its own.

Indeed, it may do it too well. In this coherent interpretation I miss the illogic of events, "jostling one another, being deflected and redirected by unpredictable successions of personal decisions, sudden deaths, natural catastrophes, and chance." This is the exciting promise in the preface: a history that would have not only pluralist content but nonlinear form—a contingent, open-ended narrative of the past. One expects something like a nonfictional *Ragtime* but finds nothing close. I would be less disappointed, I should point out, if I had not been happily prejudiced by Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle's ingenious study, *After the Fact*. In this set of essays on methodology and theory, they deftly and wittily sketched the various ways in which American historians have constructed, rather than reported, the past. As a result, I opened their textbook expecting them to call attention to their own narrative processes—to pull aside the curtain and instruct the reader in their wizardry. Evidently, I was asking too much. Even for Davidson, the textbook form exerts the compulsion to seem to be telling the truth.²⁹

If pluralism evaporates in these two textbooks, it emerges front and center in *A People & a Nation* by Mary Beth Norton et al. Howard Chudacoff's chapter on Progressivism highlights economic class in a series of four paragraphs under boldface headlines: Political Reformers, Upper-Class Reformers, Working-Class Reformers, and Socialists. Race and gender soon join the story with equal emphasis. In six pages (more than any other text), Chudacoff explains how women and nonwhites, "the two largest groups of underprivileged Americans in the early 1900s, lived in a society dominated by white native-born males." This blunt assertion introduces a discussion that pulls no punches but avoids easy answers. Although Booker T. Washington's accommodationist strategy was "unrealistic," Du Bois's militant strategy was equally "fanciful." Neither program overcame oppression, and neither resolved the dilemma of what Du Bois called "twoness"—wishing to be black and also American. "That simple wish," Chudacoff says, "would haunt the nation for decades to come." He then draws a parallel to Native Americans and, in different terms, to women. After a cogent analysis of "the woman movement," he admonishes suffragists for having slighted their working-class sisters.³⁰

In sum, *A People & a Nation* manages to delineate the fault lines of race, gender, and class while also putting the pieces together into a coherent story. Structurally, it is an effective narrative. The abstract prose style, however, muffles much of the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 841.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xx; James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (2 vols., New York, 1992).

³⁰ Norton et al., *A People & a Nation*, II, 619, 621.

impact. Capsule concepts substitute for specifics. Early in the chapter, for instance, we are told: "Progressive spirit also stirred some elite business leaders. Successful executives like Alexander Cassatt of the Pennsylvania Railroad supported some government regulations and political reforms to protect their interests from more radical political elements." Which regulations and reforms? Which interests? Who were those radical elements? None of these terms is spelled out, leaving behind at best a blur. The section on socialism is even more opaque. In a time when my students are oblivious to any political "ism" except perhaps conservatism, they will have trouble deciphering "opposition to war and boring materialism" and "radical attacks on free enterprise." Yet these three phrases—each a negative—are all that Chudacoff gives them about socialist principles.³¹

On the whole, this textbook subordinates sensory description to abstract issues. What students cannot comprehend from the exposition, however, they may find in the illustrations. Above a one-sentence reference to the "notorious" Triangle fire, a painting depicts a hook-and-ladder truck dousing the flames while police and women watch and twenty-five shrouded bodies lie in a neat row on the sidewalk. The photo of a white-uniformed nurse visiting a shabby immigrant family demonstrates "social control." Even these vivid illustrations, however, cannot fill the gaps left by the words.³²

In *The American People* by Gary B. Nash et al., structure and style mesh to form a potent, single-minded interpretation. Pluralism becomes class conflict. As Allen Davis's chapter title proclaims, "The Progressives Confront Industrial Capitalism." (In the previous edition, they had confronted "Industrial America.") We quickly learn, however, that the heroes were not Progressives like Florence Kelley or TR, but rather the industrial workers, plus women and blacks cast in supporting roles. (Unlike *A People & a Nation*, *The American People* places the suffragists' effort in an earlier chapter and mentions the Washington–Du Bois debate only briefly.) By the time the social justice movement comes to an end, students may be convinced that the middle-class reformers promoted as much injustice as justice.

Davis constructs this interpretation by means of a "yes, but" technique. Reformers fought against the evils of child labor but largely failed to overcome the opposition of businessmen, politicians, and parents. They organized juvenile courts to save delinquent youth from being jailed alongside hardened criminals, but the courts deprived juveniles of due process rights. Reformers sympathized with industrial workers "but often had little understanding of what it was like to sell one's strength by the hour." Within a single paragraph, sometimes within a single sentence, Davis snatches back the credit he has just granted.³³

If this were all, the interpretation would be a more insistent but otherwise typical version of the mixed assessment offered by most textbooks. It acquires special force, however, because he fills in the workers' half (the "but" half) of the argument so

³¹ *Ibid.*, 609–10.

³² *Ibid.*, 514, 618.

³³ Nash et al., *American People*, II, 722.

dramatically. Again and again, Davis translates generalities into specifics. When New York shirtwaist workers went out on strike, we read a young worker's diary entry. "It is a good thing, that strike is. It makes you feel like a grown-up person." During the fire a year later, we are told that some women jumped in groups of three and four, holding hands.³⁴ Individual voices speak, turning past tense into present. Dramatic details convey the large picture. But Davis does more than put together an effective narrative. In a two-page "Researching the Past" insert (typical of those in other chapters, each on a different type of historical evidence), he invites students to decide how juxtaposed photos of a textile mill and an immigrant's apartment served the reformers' middle-class viewpoint. These techniques of bringing the past to life are not merely ornamental. They are instructive, enabling students to comprehend what lies behind labels like "class conflict" and "paternalism." And, of course, they help bring home the authors' case against the Progressives.

Given this "yes, but" treatment of local and state reforms, it is predictable that *The American People* portrays TR and Wilson as compromisers. Although Roosevelt was "the first president to listen to the pleas of the progressives" and was surprisingly sympathetic to labor and environmentalists, he invariably took a middle course. Worse, as the section "Progressivism for Whites Only" emphasizes, on racial justice he steered far to the right. Wilson preached a different philosophy but was little different in practice. The New Nationalism and the New Freedom were Tweedledum and Tweedledee. In this pluralist narrative, the memorable figure is Big Bill Haywood. ("He had lost an eye and mangled a hand, but he had a booming voice and a passionate commitment to workers.") The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was for a few workers "a dream of what might have been." Of course, the rest of the history proves otherwise. Nevertheless, students will end up thinking of might-have-beens, because the authors continually pit their interpretation against the Progressive actualities.³⁵

Turning to the final pluralist text, *The Great Republic* by Bernard Bailyn et al., one finds a similar plot told with less equivocation and more nuance. The chapters on Progressivism, written by John L. Thomas, weave diverse themes into a complex, fast-moving plot line. Even more impressive, they have a distinctive narrative voice, speaking with irony as well as passion. Like novelist Doctorow, historian Thomas has constructed a story of pluralism and contingency—a *tour de force*.

The history from 1877 to 1920 was a "search for order in a disordered world," a modern version of Alexander Hamilton's contest with Thomas Jefferson. Thomas traces "the progressive impulse" for control from corporations, Populists, and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to the settlement workers and reform mayors in cities and then upward to state legislatures and, climactically, to Theodore Roosevelt's White House. But the triumph of "neo-federalism" also signaled its limits. Using TR's conservation program as a case study, Thomas argues that Progress-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 703.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 733, 727–28.

sives created less a grass-roots movement than management from above. A large array of Americans did not feel well served by an orderly republic.³⁶

Hence the next chapter swings the spotlight to “the challenge of pluralism” led by Wilson, “the shining knight of progressivism,” who aspired in the Jeffersonian tradition to liberate Americans from big business and big government. Instead of order, Thomas portrays the swirl of ethnic minorities, blacks (divided between Washington and Du Bois), and women (divided among clubs, unions, settlement houses, and rival suffrage groups). In Washington, D.C., meanwhile, Wilson ended up—partly by political necessity, partly by inclination—presiding over reforms that meant more government, not less, and that largely spurned women, blacks, and labor unions.

Here emerges one of Thomas’s favorite themes: unintended consequences. The industrial revolution accentuated class strife; the war to save democracy abroad would stifle dissent at home. Thomas skillfully lays the path of evidence toward ironic conclusions. In the case of Progressivism, however, he supplements irony with an oblique but forceful wistfulness. Just before discussing Wilson’s presidency, he devotes six pages (far more than any other textbook) to socialism and the Wobblies. Between their internal factionalism and external repression, these radicals accomplished no more than revivifying the promise of a Jeffersonian “Paradise Lost.” Nonetheless, Thomas applauds them for exemplifying “a secular, imaginative, permissive society,” and thereby highlighting the flaws in “a compulsive progressive order.”³⁷ All this is might-have-been, of course. But by spelling it out at such length, Thomas puts an even more personalized stamp on these chapters. Something is at stake here. Because the author cares, readers will care.

Not all readers, I should say. Thomas does not provide analyses neatly sliced and sandwiched like American cheese for undergraduates to serve up in blue books. The continuity of his narrative produces exciting momentum but also makes it more difficult for students to read (and professors to assign) in small doses. And as the quotations above illustrate, the verve and allusiveness of his prose demand of his readers an extra attentiveness—one might say literary intelligence.

Correspondingly, the publishers have been sparing with graphics. In order to slice the price in half, the latest (recession-era) edition has deleted color photos, subtracted many black-and-white shots, reshaped the format from the traditional 8" × 10" to 6½" × 9". This looks (and weighs) like a book instead of an encyclopedia.

Textbooks straddle the canyon between experts and novices, looking to be true to the latest scholarship while also comprehensible to freshmen. This is neither a comfortable nor an enviable position. When dealing with Progressivism, it is even less so. For historians are in the middle of redefining this phenomenon in complicated,

³⁶ Bailyn et al., *Great Republic*, II, 188, 181, 214–15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 243–48.

ambiguous terms. Understandably, most of these eight textbooks—even some of these espousing pluralism—have resorted to a simplified plot: reform groups versus powers-that-be. For Brinkley the reformers are middle-class, and for Davis they are working-class, but in terms of narrative structure, both authors tell the same story. Simplification is not a vice. Better that than losing the reader in a labyrinth of intricacies and exceptions. And better that than incoherence.

But here comes a dilemma. The more integrated and compelling a text, the more likely a novice reader will accept it as “the truth.” John Thomas, for example, has braided pluralist ambiguities into an admirably complex, dramatic narrative. In telling so smooth a story, however, he conceals the process of constructing it (“making it up”). By integrating the facts so effectively, he disguises the fact that other historians interpret them differently. In other words, as a learning device rather than as a vehicle for scholarship, every textbook falls short. Whether seamless or flawed, a textbook depends upon the classroom teacher to become truly instructive. If we want our students to ask questions, ponder interpretations, and become engaged with the past, we must step between them and the textbook. With any luck, even though five years from now they will have forgotten Progressivism, they may still want to learn history.

TEXTBOOKS REVIEWED

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