

PROGRESSIVE ERA

Definitions of manliness during the Progressive Era (1890–1915) were often ambiguous and contradictory. While a more assertive and aggressive masculinity (with origins in the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century) spilled over into the twentieth century and continued in the Progressive Era, new articulations of manliness were emerging that emphasized a greater foundation in social networks and political associations and a scientific approach to examining and understanding society and politics. These new definitions, which sought to balance notions of liberal individualism and social justice with notions of social bonds, social order, the common good, and social efficiency, began to reign in and temper the more aggressive concepts of masculinity common in the Gilded Age.

Since the Civil War, U.S. society had seen the emergence of new administrative capacities that expanded the reach and powers of the nation, while corporate capitalism had transformed the economic model of U.S. society by concentrating production (and political power) in the hands of large industrial conglomerates. These developments challenged prevailing ideals of manhood, bringing about what contemporaries referred to as a “crisis of masculinity” and prompting, particularly among middle-class men, the ideal of a “strenuous life” and hedonistic articulations of a “passionate manhood.” By the early twentieth century a reform-oriented state, geared toward correcting the worst abuses of the system, sought to assure men of their status, rights, and opportunities as autonomous individuals in a liberal, capitalist society and offered new outlets for masculine activity. This resulted in new loyalties between the federal government and the voting (male) citizenry.

During the Progressive Era, men continued to speak a language of masculine individualism, which was manifested in a strong opposition to corporate monopolies and an insistence on an open, liberal marketplace. Yet the stress on male individual autonomy was balanced by stresses on the commonwealth and social efficiency. Definitions of manhood stood in opposition to arbitrary and unregulated sources of power, and men accepted a critical break with nineteenth-century notions of the autonomous individual. Instead, they acknowledged the necessity to intervene in people’s lives and to regulate social and economic processes to improve social conditions and to restore economic opportunity. To realize this goal, Progressives not only accepted, but also demanded, an enlarged government role in their lives.

Theodore Roosevelt serves as one outstanding example of the simultaneous commitment to individual autonomy, social

obligation, and the acceptance of an enlarged role of the state. During the Spanish-American War (1898), Roosevelt led the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, known as the “Rough Riders,” in Cuba in a specially tailored uniform. As spokesmen for the “strenuous life,” he journeyed to the West to recapture a more pure and true masculinity. As president (1901–09), he announced a “square deal” for Americans and sought to use the power of the state to break up trusts and ameliorate social abuses, thus helping to create the twentieth-century notion of the interventionist state.

Concerns with men’s commitment to social justice and the common good did not remain limited to presidential politics. Authors such as Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford felt that the nineteenth-century ideal of the autonomous self-made man had proven to be a failure. The “Young Americans,” as they were called, set out to reconcile notions of community and society in a new, inclusive, and participatory democratic society by formulating a masculine ideal grounded in a notion of the common good.

Some men took such commitments a step further and embraced women’s suffrage. Randolph Bourne, Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, Hutchins Hapgood, William Sanger (husband of birth control advocate Margaret Sanger), and John Dewey organized the Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage in 1910. Such men embraced women’s social and legal equality as a statement about their own confidence in their masculinity and sense of security in their position as men.

Yet this new emphasis on a socially embedded manhood also subjected men to the judgment and scrutiny of informed, scientifically inclined, professional communities of experts, such as lawyers, doctors, politicians, advertisers, and efficiency experts, such as Frank and Lillian Gilbreth and Frederick Winslow Taylor. While the Gilbreths sought to apply principles of scientific management to such places as their own home and household, Taylor, through his time-motion studies, gave employers new tools to subvert male craft-workers’ control over the shop floor and extract greater productivity from them.

Progressives also defined socially embedded notions of manliness in terms of religion. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Social Gospel movement, with its commitment to social reform and social justice, emerged in U.S. Protestant churches. No longer certain of the meanings of manhood, but convinced that masculine spirituality involved a concern with social salvation as much as with individual salvation, Social Gospelers defined an ideal of manliness that promised to reconcile an urban-industrial society with spiritual needs and interests. This ideal of a Christian manhood

espoused service, self-sacrifice, and teamwork, and it rejected an ideal of an entrepreneurial, self-made manhood.

The emphasis on the socially rooted individual and the concern with social justice raised vexing issues and questions that exposed uncertainty and contention over the meaning of American manhood and its relation to citizenship. Working-class men sought to defend their leisure practices and its spaces—such as the saloon, which they saw as fundamental to their masculine identities—against attacks from middle-class Progressive reformers, who felt that such practices were anti-social and antithetical to true manhood. At the same time, however, working-class men, their unions, and middle-class politicians agreed that “American” masculinity did not include Asian immigrant men, whom they believed lacked the type of manliness necessary for citizenship. African-American reformers inspired by Progressive ideals, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, organized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They insisted that black men possessed the kind of manhood that could be expected of men as citizens, arguing that social justice demanded that black men be treated equally with white men and urging Progressive reformers to devote greater attention to issues of race. Meanwhile, the very connection between masculinity and citizenship increasingly came under assault as suffragists, organized in the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), argued that social justice and the common good ultimately required that women be given the right to vote and that manliness was no longer a valid criterion for access to the rights and privileges of citizenship.

Progressive Era articulations of masculinity consisted of overlapping, and at times contradictory, notions and images. Progressive Era articulations of manliness, by emphasizing social obligation, civic commitment, and social change, questioned static and exclusive notions of masculine identity and pointed the way toward the increasingly complex understandings of manhood characteristic of American society in the twenty-first century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Banta, Martha. *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Blake, Casey Nelson. *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- Buenker, John D. “Sovereign Individuals and Organic Networks: Political Cultures in Conflict during the Progressive Era.” *American Quarterly* 40 (June 1988): 187–204.

- Diner, Steven J. *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998.
- Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: Free Press, 1996.
- Rodgers, Daniel T. “In Search of Progressivism.” In *Reviews in American History*. Vol. 10, *The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects*, edited by Stanley I. Kutler and Stanley N. Katz. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

FURTHER READING

- Crunden, Robert M. *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889–1920*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984.
- Fink, Leon. *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Link, Arthur, and Richard McCormick. *Progressivism*. Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1983.
- Quandt, Jean. *From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Individuals*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970.
- Rotundo, E. Anthony. *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.

RELATED ENTRIES

African-American Manhood; Body; Bureaucratization; Business/Corporate America; Citizenship; Consumerism; Feminism; Gilded Age; Individualism; Industrialization; Leisure; Reform Movements; Roosevelt, Theodore; Social Gospel; Strenuous Life; Suffragism; Urbanization; Working-Class Manhood

—Thomas Winter

PROMISE KEEPERS

Founded in 1991 by Bill McCartney, a former football coach at the University of Colorado, Promise Keepers is an international evangelical Christian organization designed specifically to appeal to men and promote a masculinity centered upon “traditional” definitions of home, family, marriage, and Christianity.

Promise Keepers began as a late-twentieth century manifestation of “muscular Christianity,” a movement that emerged in Great Britain and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century to make Christianity more appealing to men by encouraging masculine expressions of religious devotion and using athletic metaphors to describe Christian commitment. Promise Keepers asks its members to maintain an ideal of Christian manhood that focuses on being faithful, devoted