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Southern Progressivism in Historical Perspective: the 1890s and the 1990s.

1) From Populism to Progressivism

American historians began to analyze Southern Progressivism or, as Sheldon Hackney puts it, to discover that "there was such an animal as Southern Progressivism," in 1946 when Arthur S. Link published his path-breaking essay. Link focused on Southern politicians' contribution to Wilsonian liberalism, arguing that the awakening of a reform movement revealed how Southern legislators had become aware of the persistence, well into the 20th century, of poverty and of social backwardness in the post-bellum South. Link also opened the way to the interpretative trend in discussing the relationship between populism and progressivism, a relationship that came to be understood as being both sequential and complementary. Link observed how, in the South and in the West, the connection between populism and progressivism was fairly direct: the process of assimilation was slower in the South, but the former Populists were by 1912 an important segment of the new progressive coalition vying for control of Democratic state organizations. In 1955 Richard Hofstadter synthesized the issue by affirming that "after 1900 populism and progressivism merge." ¹

The question of persistence of populist political and economic programs of the Democratic Party's progressive policies and the question concerning the continuity/discontinuity between populism and progressivism have engaged American historians since the 1950s. Both subjects are too large to be addressed here. Suffice it to say that, in Dewey Grantham's words, "the political context in

which Southern progressivism developed was affected by populism" and that "populists challenged democratic commitments and served as a catalyst for selective change in Southern politics."² Certain central issues of the populist crusade of the 1880s and 1890s—railroad regulation, liberal agricultural credit, abolition of the convict-lease system, support of public education, prohibition, the referendum, the recall and the direct elections of senators—became part of the agenda of Democrats. A pervasive anti-monopoly spirit was, to quote Jack T. Kirby, "the great connecting link between the rural protests of the nineteenth century and those of the twentieth."³ Above all, Democrats accepted the populist concept of the positive state, that is to say of a more active government role in attempting to promote economic growth and protect society.

Inspired in part by A. Link's essay, a vast literature now exists concerning Southern progressivism around the turn of the twentieth century. I wish to focus here on some of the more influential interpretations of that era, including the masterly contribution of C. Vann Woodward and George Tindall as well as the more recent syntheses of Dewey Grantham and William Link.

2) Progressivism in the South as a "regional" movement.

At the end of the 1950s, the South became, in Dewey Grantham's words, "a new historical frontier,"⁴ thanks to C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South* (1951). As was also true in the case of populism, historical accounts of the progressive movement initially overlooked the South. It took the provocative work of Link and Woodward to raise the issue on which every further analysis would be grounded.

In his chapter entitled "Progressivism for whites only" Woodward showed that any attempt to understand Southern progressivism had to come to terms with the reality of the South as a "biracial" society. According to Woodward, Southern progressivism "was in no sense derivative", on the contrary, it was "a pretty strictly indigenous growth, touched lightly, here and there, by cross-fertilization from the West."⁵ Woodward maintained that

Southern progressivism "sprouted in the soil that nourished populism", thus affirming the continuity of the two movements, while also explaining that Southern progressivism "lacked the agrarian cast and the radical edge that had frightened the middle-class away from the earlier movement".

Moreover, if compared with the agrarian protest, progressivism was essentially urban and middle-class in nature; the typical leader was a city professional man or a businessman, rather than a farmer. During the transformation from agrarian protest to urban reforms, the trend was "from radicalism to Democratic conservatism", so that the threat of radicalism left room for a more reassuring political milieu.

In 1912 Senator La Follette had declared "I do not know of any progressive sentiment or any progressive legislation in the South."⁷ In fact, Woodward demonstrated, the South did not eschew progressivism, rather it developed its own unique brand of progressivism.

Thus, according to Woodward, conservatism and white supremacy were well reflected in the creation of primary elections, intended to be "white primaries", one of the first demands of Southern progressives, who wanted to eliminate boss and machine control.⁸

Progressivism in the South was also "regional" in its tendency to blame economic difficulties on national monopolies and their supposed strongholds of economic power.

Other important progressive institutions originating in the South were the Commission plan and the city-manager plan, major innovations in the attempt to correct what was then called "the shame of the cities".

Woodward does not ignore Southern resistance to reform, he recognizes that field workers in social justice, health, and education were faced with the reaction of people who resented the "salvation" offered by Northern philanthropy, a theme that is central to the recent work of William Link (1992).

As early as 1988 William Link had suggested an interesting grouping of interpreters of progressivism in the South, dividing them in "pessimists" and "optimists". In the first group Link

includes C.Vann Woodward who indeed pointed out very clearly the peculiar traits in Southern reforms which were limited to white population, a reality that stresses the regional perspective of Southern leaders and the persistent and unsolved dilemma of black and white relations. An even harder judgement, on this line, comes from J. Morgan Kousser, who maintains that progressivism in the South was directed not even to all whites but to "Middle-class whites only".⁹ This is surely a most restrictive view of the reforming crusade.

George B. Tindall's monumental *The Emergence of the New South* covers the whole range of Southern history between the two World Wars. Tindall speaks of "metamorphosis of progressivism", from an impulse to "good government" and "public services", to a drive for "moral righteousness" and "conformity". "Efficiency and development" thus became more important than reform, and social justice and public welfare became associated with intolerance and social control. This new outlook Tindall called "business progressivism", a sort of credo for efficiency that stressed better roads, better schools, and better public services. Although North Carolina was on the forefront of this trend, other states moved in the same direction. Southern proponents of business progressivism urged industrialization as a means to help the South to enter the American economic mainstream. Of course the "industrial utopia" envisioned by the New South Creed promoters was never realized, at least at the extent they were dreaming of. Instead, business progressivism "marked a transition from the missionary era to one of institutionalization and professionalism".

Tindall presents a synthesis of the views of Arthur Link and Vann Woodward, defining Southern progressivism as "an amalgam of agrarian radicalism, business regulation, good government and urban social justice reform", a movement that becomes at the end "a movement for positive government".¹⁰

Numan Bartley, an insightful interpreter of the processes of modernization in the South, in his book on *The Creation of Modern Georgia* (1983),¹¹ draws upon Tindall's view, stressing that the Progressive Democrats' intent to establish a social order would favor towns and cities, more than rural areas, thereby neglecting

the Southern masses. Interestingly, one exponent of the New Rural History school, Robert Swierenga, states that "the economic historians and the geographers have helped to understand the inter-relatedness between growing cities and their hinterland which are at the heart of the modernization process", thus reminding us that without a comprehensive reform agenda¹² the entire region would have suffered. That is what went wrong with the progressive movement, more concerned to answer the needs of the cities and letting the rural areas in the backward economic conditions, without solving the needs of tenants, sharecroppers and indebted farmers.

3) Dewey Grantham and the reconciliation of progress and tradition.

When Peter Filene wrote his "obituary" for the Progressive Movement in 1970, no comprehensive synthesis of that movement had been published.¹³ Grantham had already written the biography of Georgia Progressive Governor Hoke Smith (1958), as well as a study of the Democratic South (1963), but Grantham's magnum opus did not appear until 1983.

In his essay Filene stressed the elements of disunity among progressives and, consequently, among historians of progressivism. Given the lack of a homogeneous electorate and rank and file, as well as the difficulties involved in identifying a coherent ideology, Filene went so far as to argue that even the concept of "movement" needed re-thinking. In reply Richard Hofstadter, while admitting the broad range of Southern progressive types and progressive issues, insisted that certain central commitments and beliefs did in fact justify the notion of "movement". Tindall in turn overcame the dilemma by speaking of "the spirit of the age" rather than of an organized movement. Filene finally allowed that "a diffuse progressive era may have occurred", but not a progressive movement, and he explained his view by noting the lack of a coherent set of common goals and even of a clearly identifiable social and political background among progressives, whose ranks included intellectuals,

businessmen, farmers, labor unionists, white-collar professionals, and politicians. There were men and women of lower, middle and upper class, Southerners, Westerners, and Easterners, urban and rural dwellers.

With these caveats in mind, and without accepting the suggestion to write an obituary for such a varied, complex and vital historical moment of Southern life, I will try to outline in few lines the fruits of Grantham's lifelong commitment to the study of Southern progressivism, sorting out some of his main themes and interpretative insights.

I begin with his 1981 essay "The Contours of Southern Progressivism", a seminal contribution in that it offered a clear account of other historians' interpretations, and a comprehensive list of the main issues, both progressive and Southern, requiring further analysis.

Grantham proposes as primary elements of Southern progressivism "the concept of economic development" and the idea of "reforming various institutions and practices". Secondly another "reform dynamic" was the "humanitarian spirit" in the South. Southern churches also became agents of change, and religion became very much part of the process of reform in the field of social justice. Social justice, in turn, implied an innovative presence of women in the public sphere. As David Goldfield has recently argued, it is through a gender perspective that new insights can be found in racial, religious, not to mention gender, reform. These insights set apart Southern reform from reform elsewhere in the nation.¹⁴

Two more elements of Southern progressivism pointed out by Grantham were the overwhelming dominance of the Democratic Party and the innovative white primary. These elements, along with social change, the emergent ideology of progress, a broadening humanitarianism, and the transformation of politics, converged around the turn of the century to provide a favorable setting for Southern progressivism.¹⁵ Southern Progressives, Grantham contends, though surely very different from one another, were unified by common goals and values. These shared goals and values were expressed in a defense of an ideal community that could offer

"unity, cohesion, and stability". Such community also allowed reformers to preserve rural values deeply rooted in Southern culture and traditions: morality, benevolence, and efficiency all were advocated as indispensable tools for the betterment of Southern society.

Prohibition thus became central among progressive crusades, and one in which women became protagonists in the name of motherhood and of defense of family, community, and society. According to Grantham this happened because prohibition "offered a means of moral reaffirmation of traditional values".¹⁶

In his major book on Southern progressivism, Grantham further developed the main issues already traced in his first essay in embryonic form.

Southern Progressivism (1983) is a detailed study of the progressive era in the South.¹⁷ A comprehensive analysis of every single aspect of Southern life, economy and society, the book suggests that Southern progressive leaders sought solutions to social ills, economic problems and racial tensions, by trying to reconcile progress and tradition.

Southern Progressivism is also clearly meant to analyze in depth the areas of Southern reform movements focussing on social welfare, thus the fields of social justice and of education as vehicles for Southern redemption are presented in a magisterial way. The failures, contradictions and limitations of the whole period do not obscure, in Grantham's view, this significant venture in social reform. In his pondering, progressives were the first Southerners to make a concerted attempt to cope with social problems growing out of modernization. Grantham has written another comprehensive and more recent book, *The South in Modern America* (1995): in this work Grantham in offering a general history of the South from "the shadow of Reconstruction" to the "Sun belt" of the present, discusses again the "southern question" during the years of the progressive awakening.

Here the author carefully analyzes sectional conflicts, yet, avoiding a simplistic analysis of conflict as the only defining relationship between North and South, Grantham succeeds in describing also the history of compromises and accommodation

between the sections of the country. New South leaders in the 1880s and 1890s preached and sought harmony with the North distancing themselves from the sectional conflicts fueled by the populist upheaval. The new emphasis on harmony resulted in a new political realignment—the so-called Solid South. Grantham maintains that the 1920s again witnessed cultural conflicts and sectional animosity (the main targets of Northern criticism being lynching, prison conditions, intolerance, and demagoguery).

In the 1930s compromise again prevailed with a sort of national reconciliation taking place, and Grantham defines the trend as "regional convergence", which did not "cause the South to disappear as an organic entity—not at least in the minds of most Southerners".¹⁸

With regard to the Progressive period in particular, Grantham stresses the trends to sectional compromise and reconciliation offered by the New South Leaders, and especially by Henry Grady, as a counterpart to Northern investments and economic cooperation in the South (a concept already developed in his book on Southern Progressivism). The economic upturn of the late 1890s and of the early years of 1900 was seen as a sign of Southern transformation and "Americanization", with an increasing industrialization, economic growth in the cities, and rising of agricultural prices. The temporary prosperity of the South in the years after 1900 gave way to the progressive optimism that characterized the activity and the planning of reformers. Grantham speaks of the "easing of sectional tensions" and describes the achievements in social betterment, in the field of education and public health, supported especially by Northern philanthropy and capital.

Both blacks and whites had tried to support public education with private funds, and for both the campaigns against illiteracy were part of a larger commitment to social reform. Black women were active in the field, knowing that the only way out from poverty and exclusion was education for their children.

Northern philanthropy played an important role in public school crusade and gave impetus to the public health movement as well. The most spectacular campaign was the one against the hookworm plague, waged between 1909 and 1914. The Rockefeller

Sanitary Commission contributed a million dollars to support the campaign aimed at wiping out the infection that afflicted so many Southerners, depriving children of both their health and their ability to attend school.

Northern support was also directed toward the field of agriculture, which was very much in need of restructuring and modernizing. One example of such support was the Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission, which helped to improve Southern agricultural techniques, increase production, and raise farm income.

Grantham also maintains that another manifestation of the reform spirit of the 1920s was a series of campaigns to protect moral standards and cultural traditional values. Prohibition was at the core of the evangelical reform movement, where women were instrumental in defining the moral side of the prohibition question. This was, in Grantham's view, "a drive for cultural conformity", which led to a fundamentalist mentality and brought, as a consequence, an anti-evolution spirit and an opposition to Roman Catholicism.

The issue of public health caused a reaction that another leading historian of progressivism in the South, William Link, as already mentioned, deals with in his analysis of the paradoxes of Southern reform movement.

Link's major book, published in 1992, argues (in his own words) that "Southern progressivism should be understood as a clash between radically divergent views of social contract".¹⁹ Link continues his narrative until 1930, emphasizing the paradoxes of the reform movement that pointed to internal divisions and cultural traditions of localism. In no other study of progressivism is this localism so clearly described.

Link analyzes the relationship of individual citizens with public institutions and maintains that in the South "aside from postmasters and an occasional tax collector, the federal government rarely touched the lives of individuals, in the isolated rural communities and villages, that the great majority of them inhabited".²⁰ Instead, education and public health functioned under a "community-controlled administrative system ... and only as a

temporary response to the emergence of epidemics did states begin to establish public health systems".²¹

As another example Link offers the issue of prohibition, which was administered under what he defines a "pre-bureaucratic governance". Because of strong traditions of alcohol consumption in the South, nineteenth-century State and local governments made few efforts at regulations.

In short, "few features of social policy were compulsory or coercive except for grave emergencies, the sanctity of the individual and of personal liberty remained sacrosanct".²²

On these premises Link dissects in detail the reaction of Southerners to the action of the Rockefeller Commission to eradicate hookworm. "Resistance to reform", becomes a central issue of his innovative interpretation of the Southern progressive movement.

As noted above, the hookworm campaign was intertwined with the educational crusade because improved attendance would result from sanitary reform, and healthier children and families would become capable of regular school attendance. We must remember that despite the passage of compulsory education legislation during World War I, regular attendance, especially in rural areas, depended on parental consent.

While ordinary Southerners fully comprehended the cost for reform, "reform in the reality of individual homes and class-rooms was strongly resisted across the region".

In the case of health reform Link explains that non-enforcement was a symptom rather than a cause. In fact, local officials skirted the law because of community opposition. Any kind of inspection was considered coercive, and opposition was even stronger when inspectors entered homes and schools. Dispensaries were founded in response. Hookworm infection thus became, in Link's words, "an ideal disease around which to organize a mass mobilization" and an educational campaign on disease, cures, and prevention. The accomplishments of the crusade, though, were less the eradication of the disease than a conversion of public opinion to its dangers. The resistance to the innovative methods of the Rockefeller Commission was mainly due

to the fact that government control over public health meant allowing public officials the power to coerce. It was against this bureaucratic and interventionist social policy that Southerners reacted negatively. The reformers asked for physical transformation of schools (proper ventilation, lightening, heating, and sanitary disposals of human waste), and compulsory medical inspection, yet the continuing influence of localities in the rural South over decision-making meant that many of these attempts to reshape school hygiene were foiled entirely or significantly compromised. Modernizers defused opposition by limiting the extent of centralized control, and by 1920 they had substantially scaled down their ambition to transform schools into centers for public health.²³

The importance of school reforms in the South is very much central in the ongoing debate on Progressivism in the South. William Link had already discussed the issue in his 1986 book on schooling and society in Virginia; Thomas Terrill stressed the issue in his comprehensive study *The South. A History* (1991); and James L. Leloudis, in his most recent analysis (1996) on schooling in the New South, shows the centrality of that reform in modernizing the South.²⁴

Indeed the Commission, apart from the beneficial effects of its crusade against disease, was viewed also as a means of social control of black students by industrialists or as a corporate dominance in American life, intended to reinforce the existing class and caste structure.

The continuing and ongoing debate in American historiography on the methods and results of reform activities reveals the complexity of Southern social Progressivism.

4) Concluding remarks.

Dewey Grantham, after discussing the progressive South around the themes of conflict, compromise, and convergence, ends his analysis by dealing with a fourth element that can define the South: cultural distinction. "The South demonstrated", writes Grantham, "a capacity to absorb economic and demographic change

with relatively little social and cultural disruption". Richard Gray also remarked that their "non-material culture, although altered, still enables Southerners to think and talk of themselves in terms of their regional identity."²⁵

The progressive wave of change and transformation did not, indeed, alter the basic structures that make Southern culture "Southern": evangelicalism, fundamentalism, religion intended as a sort of civic code of life (Grantham speaks of "cultural religion" still alive today), community values, to name just a few. Indeed what progressives shared was the desire for a "more orderly and cohesive community" based on kinship, mutual interest, and sense of place. Community maintained its role as the core of society, a microcosm in which to try new strategies of change, from old established traditions to new realities and needs. Social controls that localism challenged were, in Grantham's interpretation, needed "for preservation of moral values, for the purification of social institutions and for the protection of men and women from their own weaknesses."

Protection implied paternalism and noblesse oblige, which created a context for social activism, especially in the case of women's philanthropy and social work. What might be called "coercive reformism" was indeed the basis on which the main crusades took place, from prohibition to public health improvement, from education to city and village beautification.

Morality was perceived as the final goal of an harmonious society, so that women were accepted eventually as agents of change in the name of womanhood and motherhood, and as defenders of the moral and physical health of their society. In this context, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Women's Clubs Movement gave voice to women and offered them a "proper" forum in which to fight for their own emancipation, supporting their crusade for woman's suffrage.

Blacks built their own institutions behind the walls of segregation, because indeed, as Kousser maintains, progressivism was directed to "middle-class whites only".

From all we learn reading the recent historical literature on progressive reform movement, it seems that the South still poses

what Don Doyle and Larry Griffin call an "American problem".²⁶ From Paul Gaston's pioneering study we also learn that in order to understand the New South and the Progressive Era we must understand the fascinating process of "Southern Mythmaking", in its symbols and metaphors.²⁷

More than a half century since Arthur Link's essay, we still have a long way to go before we can claim to know the "1001 things" about the south, as John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed suggest in their recent, witty and comprehensive compendium of Southernness.²⁸

1 Arthur S. Link, "The Progressive Movement in the South, 1870-1914" *North Carolina Historical Review*, 23 (April 1946), pp. 172-195. Idem, *American Epoch. A History of the United States Since the 1890s* (2nd Ed., New York, 1969), quotation p. 69; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), quotation pp. 133-135; Anne Firor Scott, as early as 1957 wrote her Ph.D. Diss. on Southern Progressivism, "The Southern Progressives in National Politics, 1906-1916," (Ph.D. Diss., Radcliffe College, 1957); in 1963, Scott published an essay on the same subject, thus becoming one of the pioneering historians in the field of Southern Progressivism: "A Progressive Wind from the South," *Journal of Southern History*, 22 (1963), pp. 53-70.

2 Dewey W. Grantham, "The Contours of Southern Progressivism," *American Historical Review*, 86 (December 1981), pp. 1035-1059. Quotation 1040 and 1041.

3 Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia, 1972), p. 32.

4 Grantham, "Contours," p. 1035.

5 C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1951), p. 371.

6 Ibidem.

7 Quoted in A. Link, "The Progressive Movement in the South," p. 173.

8 The direct primary was not invented in Wisconsin in 1903, on the contrary by that time, a majority of Southern States were already practicing the system (South Carolina 1896; Arkansas 1897; Georgia 1898; Florida and Tennessee 1901; Alabama and Mississippi 1902; Kentucky and Texas 1905; Louisiana 1906; Oklahoma 1907; Virginia 1913; only North Carolina in 1915). See Woodward, *Origins*, p. 372.

9 J. Morgan Kousser, "Progressivism for Middle-Class Whites Only: North Carolina Education, 1880-1910" *Journal of Southern History*, 46 (May 1980), pp. 169-94.

10 George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 219 ff.

11 Numan Bartley, *The Creation of Modern Georgia* (Athens. The University of Georgia Press, 1983). On the process of modernization see also Douglas

Flamming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia 1884-1984* (Chapel Hill, The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992).

¹² Robert P. Swierenga, "Theoretical Perspectives on the New Rural History: From Environmental History to Modernization" *Agricultural History*, 56 (July 1982), pp. 495-502. Quotation p. 499.

¹³ Peter Filene, "An Obituary for the Progressive Movement," *American Quarterly*, 22 (1972), pp. 20-34.

¹⁴ David Goldfield has discussed these issues in a paper presented at the international conference organized by Don Doyle and Francesco Benigno, Naples (Italy), June 20-21 1997, on the two souths, and the "southern question" in Italy and in the United States.

¹⁵ Grantham, "Contours", p. 1041.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: the Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

¹⁸ Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America. A Region at Odds* (New York, Harper Collins, 1995), p. XIX.

¹⁹ William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 4

²¹ Ibidem, p. 6

²² Ibidem, p. 7

²³ For an in-depth analysis of hygiene, school conditions, and resistance to control, see also W. Link's essay "Privies, Progressivism and Public Schools: Health Reform and Education in the Rural South, 1909-1920" *Journal of Southern History* 54 (November 1988), pp. 623-643; and William J. Cooper; Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South. A History*, Vol. II (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1991).

²⁴ James L. Leloudis, *Schooling in the New South: Pedagogy, Self and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and William A. Link, *A Hard Country and a Lonely Place. Schooling, Society, and Reform in Rural Virginia, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

²⁵ Richard Gray, *Writing The South: Ideas of an American Region* (Cambridge, 1986), quotation pp. 230-231.

²⁶ Larry Griffin; Don Doyle, eds. *The South as an American Problem* (Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1995).

²⁷ Paul Gaston, *The New South Creed. A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York, Vintage Books, 1970).

²⁸ John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed, *1001 Things Everyone Should Know About the South* (New York, Doubleday, 1996). For a varied and multifaceted approach to sources useful to analyze everyday life in the New South, see also the more optimistic viewpoint of Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South. Life After Reconstruction* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992).