

## Origins of American Social Policies: the Progressive Era

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the evolution of social policy concerns, debates and reforms in the United States, especially starting with the Gilded Age and through the Progressive Era. It capitalizes on policy analysis literature in order to strengthen the argument of exploring context in order to understand social policy. It also delves into the social climate that gave birth to the Progressives and shaped their perceptions with regard to social change. Finally, it attempts to offer a new perspective on the distinctive social welfare track undertaken by the Americans, when compared to the European traditional model.

**Keywords:** social policy; welfare state; Progressivism; labor; social security

### 1. Introduction

Starting from the premise that the historical study of public policy, and therefore social policy, has the potential both to improve the policy itself and even teach us more about policy-making, this paper examines the origins of American social policies, with a focus on the Progressive Era. It would be difficult, if not impossible altogether, to understand and explain the evolution of a state or society without understanding social policy, in an age that, despite the many differences, still shares some similarities with the experiences of our forerunners. In turn, social policy is hardly comprehensible without a thorough exploration of the wider context in which it emerged. In fact, that would make policy analysis incomplete. Policy-making, just as decision-making and law-making, are influenced to a relative degree by a number of factors pertaining to the political climate, the state of the economy, the social dynamics, the cultural phenomenon, and the nature of government. Another objective attempted through this research is to debunk the myth of considering the United States a “laggard social welfare system”. Given its different experience and distinct circumstances, America simply took a different

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path in the social policy sphere and the major breakthrough, in terms of reforms aiming for social change, as part of a larger transformation process, occurred during the Progressive Era.

The first part of the paper attempts to explain the significance of context when discussing public policy, implicitly and especially social policy. It reviews selective works on the topic of governmental policy-making and offers insights into both the theories of policy-making, social change and the very structure of the process of crafting policy. At the same time, it considers politics and policy together, articulating an integrated view of two fields that are treated and taught distinctly in the academe.

The second part aims at clarifying who the Progressives were, why they appeared and what they proposed and eventually adopted, especially in the social policy field. For students of the American social welfare system, this historical account is useful in explaining the social reforms undertaken during the New Deal Era, when the United States was officially accepted into the community of states concerned with social welfare. The premium that Progressives put on the role of government, including its social dimension, was crucial for the events unfolding decades later and even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **2. On Social Policy as Public Policy, it's Setting and Making**

Building on a definition of public policy, of which it is also a part, social policy refers to “*a course of government action or inaction*” with regard to social issues and it is closely linked to “*formally approved goals and means, as well as the regulations and practices of agencies that implement programs*” (Kraft & Furlong, 2010, pp. 5-6). However, public policies, and social policies as well, do not emerge *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, they are born within a wider context shaped by social and economic conditions, the very nature of government, the cultural environment, and politics (Kraft & Furlong, 2010, pp. 10-15).

It is worth mentioning the relation between politics and policy: albeit separated in theory and generally studied apiece, “*in the actual practice of government they are tied as brothers*” (Mead, 2013, p. 392). Politics is about prioritizing those values (Kraft & Furlong, 2010, p. 6) that are about to be addressed through policies. Moreover, it is not just about the enablers, or the policymakers, but, to a certain extent, about the society as a whole. As Mead put it, the crafters of social policies

*“must somehow square what they want to do with what the political system will allow them to do. What they think is desirable on the merits must be reconciled with that they can get accepted by other politicians and then implemented by administrators”* (Mead, 2013, p. 390). We may definitely add here the general public, especially if it is the case of a democratic regime where citizens have a say in politics and policymaking and, additionally, get organized into lobby or interest groups and non-governmental organizations. In fact, the so-called political system, as defined by one of its conceptual founding fathers, is part of a larger environment which comprises the society (Easton, 1965, p. 32). Even though politics is about the “authoritative allocation of values for a society” (Easton, 1965, p. 21), the politicians have to answer for their choices, particularly in a democracy where they are accountable to the ones they represent, not to mention the fact that they themselves are products of the same society they are ruling. Furthermore, in the process of deciding “who gets what, when, and how”, to quote a famous book title (Laswell, 1936), politicians or policy-makers get involved in a process of persuasion: “decide, choose, and legislate as they will, [they] must carry people with them” (Goodin, Rein, & Moran, 2009, p. 887). Policy-making, not just in democracies, but to a lesser degree even in autocracies, is part of a “networked governance” (Goodin, Rein, & Moran, 2009, p. 894) whose actors are not just political and bureaucratic elites. Indeed, non-governmental players including activists of all sorts, ordinary citizens concerned about public issues, various NGOs, economic and financial private entities, lobbyists, journalists, and others who share a view or a perception on the public problem at stake. In this interconnected world, there is seldom someone exerting a higher authority. In fact, *“none is in [complete] command. Bringing others along, preserving the relationship [among the ones agreeing an idea or certain course of action], is all”* (Goodin, Rein, & Moran, 2009, p. 895).

Social and economic dynamics also impact on policy-making. Demographics, immigration, healthcare, education, agreed or desirable living standards at the population level, affect how the general “public and policy-makers view and act on [public] problems” (Kraft & Furlong, 2010, pp. 10-11). Policies are implemented through programs that require funds originating from taxes which, in turn, depend on the general state of the economy (Kraft & Furlong, 2010, pp. 11-12), especially so in the case of social policies that, as a rule, are more of a budgetary consumer than a direct provider (indirectly, social policies enable certain categories of people to contribute to growth and thus become a source of budgetary input). The context

that breed public policies is completed by the “widely held values, beliefs, and attitudes [...] or the lack thereof” which are “acquired through a process of political socialization that takes place in families, schools, and society in general” (Kraft & Furlong, 2010, p. 14). All these factors represent some sort of constraints, whether to act or not, which may be material when resources are inadequate and ideational, for example when the centerpiece of policy-making is the “willingness of people to do what policy asks of them or the willingness of electors to endorse policies” (Goodin, Rein, & Moran, 2009, p. 904). The public’s policy agenda may be correlated with but not predetermined by the governmental one. The “perceived social problems” are fundamental here, since policies may change “because the people subject to those policies want them to change” (Goodin, Rein, & Moran, 2009, p. 906).

When it comes to the policy-making process *per se*, three general patterns have been observed in the policy analysis studies. The rational model is focused on the goals to be attained through the respective policy and its rationality derives from a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis that attempts to identify the most efficient means to meet the desired objectives (Hague & Harrop, 2013, pg. 368-369). The gradual model takes into consideration both ends and means at the same time and insists on the conceptualization and development of policy-making as a process of constant minor adjustments and incremental alterations, the so-called “science of muddling through” (Lindblom, 1959) in which the agreement on the acceptable policy matters more than the goals of the potentially best policy (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 369). The “garbage can” model (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972) emphasizes a trial and error method-solving process among groups of actors with no clearly defined preferences that get involved into “partial, fluid, chaotic and incomplete” policy-making (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 370). No model is perfect (Hague & Harrop, 2013, pp. 368-370):

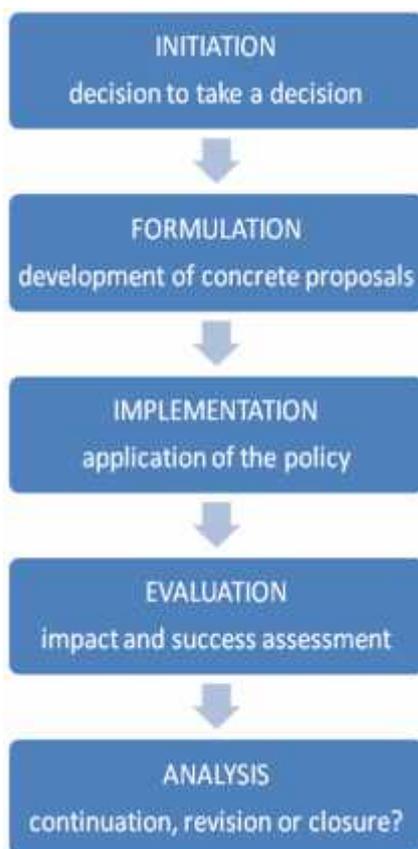
- rationalists tend to minimize issues pertaining to social justice or quality of life and generally ignore the distributions of costs and benefits (it is worth mentioning that most social policies are redistributive policies). Thus, this kind of rational analysis that overlooks social and political reality is rather ignored or knowingly avoided by politicians that have to deal with their voters;
- “small steps” incrementalism is hampered by its heavy focus on consensus (or compromise). Although, through its very nature, the gradual model

generally avoids grand failures, it is also less favorable for big changes: being cautious, its focus is on fixing, not innovating;

- the “garbage can” offers perhaps the most disquieting view since it attaches the least rationality to policy-making. The architecture of the process is a complex puzzle in which no actor has a strategic vision with respect to the ends of policy. From this perspective, public/social problems are addressed given their immediacy, when an urgent response is needed, and not based on the need to attain some grand goal.

The policy-making process is ideally divided into a sequence of steps (Fig. 1), but in reality these stages overlap or are undertaken in an off-balance manner: reality is seldom logical.

The initiation and formulation phases generally consist of a bottom-up process when a bureaucrat, a citizen (or group of), or any actor other than the policy-makers themselves signals a public problem that needs to be addressed (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 371). A special emphasis goes to the “policy entrepreneurs”, especially in the United States or in American-like systems, which support proposals and “sell ideas” by shaping and amplifying the profile of their perceived public problem, orienting the debate on the topic and arguing on the implementation of the policy (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 371). They “wait in and around government with their solutions at hand, waiting for problems to float by which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage” (Cairney, 2012, p. 271). Be they politicians, activists, interest groups, lobbyists, NGOs, trade unions, private groups or research centers, these entrepreneurs are generally “people with the knowledge, power, tenacity and luck to be able to exploit windows of opportunity and heightened levels of attention to policy problems and promote their ‘pet solutions’ to policymakers” (Cairney, 2012, p. 272).



**Figure 1. (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 371)**

John Kingdon's approach of this initiation stage reveals three intersecting flows – the problem, policy, and the politics streams which, when converging, open a policy window of opportunity (Gulbrandsson & Fossum, 2009, p. 434):

- the problem stream is about the issue at stake and the public attention that it captures;
- the policy stream involves the proposed solutions to the problem, advanced by the policy entrepreneurs and chosen upon by policy-makers;
- the politics stream consists of the given political context at the time.

However, the policy entrepreneurs are crucial in all streams, since they can easily raise the awareness on the problem of interest and, in the same time, speculate the political climate or even forcing its change. Thus, they possess “vital resources” (Gulbrandsson & Fossum, 2009, p. 435):

- “claim to a hearing”, which means they benefit from their quality of representing others, detain an essential position in the authority architecture, or have outstanding expertise on the issue (or the three of them altogether);
- “political connections or negotiating skills”, which regards both their bargaining abilities and “political know-how”;
- “sheer persistence”, which refers their willingness to invest time, energy and resources in order to advance their policy proposals, and to do it consistently.

The implementation phase is the actual putting into practice of the policy decided upon. It is worth mentioning that, in a number of cases, politics breaks with policy-making at this stage: the political imperative is often more about having a policy and less about doing something about it. Applying the policy may be usually done through two types of approaches (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 372):

- the top-down approach is the traditional way of enforcing the action plan on bureaucracies and its main focus lies on command and control. Thus, it may be counterproductive, due to the innate resistance of the administrative and executive elites to change;
- the bottom-up approach is the reversed alternative, but highly contrasts with the first option because it involves the “enforcers” into the policy formulation stage and allows them a certain leeway in order to adapt the policy to specific circumstances during its execution.

The government holds a wide array of instruments to implement its public policies which usually does not limit itself to the commonly known legal framework established through laws and other regulations. With a ever-growing social reality in terms of complexity, the tools at the disposal of policy/law “enforcers” extend to “sticks” (sanctions pertaining to command and control: forbidding or asking something), “carrots” (rewards such as financial incentives), and “sermons” (public information and communication campaigns) (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 374).

**Table 1. (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 375)**

<b>Command and control</b>	<b>Finances</b>	<b>Propaganda</b>
<u>Examples</u>	<u>Examples</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Legislation	Taxation	Public relations campaign
Regulation	Subventions	Persuasion
Public services		Encouraging and shaping civil society groups to take a position
Private services		

The final two stages start with a complicated process of policy analysis which revolves around its impact. It is useful to distinguish between public policy outputs and outcomes: the former category refers to “the formal actions that governments take to pursue their category”, while the latter to “the effects such actions actually have on society” (Kraft & Furlong, 2010, p. 5). Outputs are easier to measure through quantitative indicators, while outcomes are easier to define than measure, since they are subject to social realities, take longer to produce effects and have a certain degree of unpredictability. This is why an integrated approach, both quantitative and qualitative, is recommendable: “the evaluation must be based on the wide and absolute cooperation of all interested parties”, meaning agents, beneficiaries and the ones that are excluded – “the victims” (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 373). As a result of the above assessment, most public policies tend to continue with more or less revisions and this is based on the idea that once the role of the government has been decided and agreed upon on an issue, it has to play its part constantly. In fact, public policies are generally conceived to take longer and this is not the only reason for their long life and implicitly their highly unlikely cessation: on the one hand, there are few actors willing to admit that the initial idea of involving the government was bad, on the other, the end of a policy may affect other programs and interests and thus lead to conflicts (Hague & Harrop, 2013, p. 374).

Social policy is a public policy that has to do with social issues, whose complexity earned them the nickname of “wicked problems” (Vargas-Hernandez, Noruzi, & Irani, 2011, p. 287). As such, it addresses education, healthcare, housing, employment, labor conditions, and food issues and refers to “guidelines and interventions for the changing, maintenance or creation of living conditions that are conducive to human welfare” (Vargas-Hernandez, Noruzi, & Irani, 2011, p. 287). Their “wickedness” reside not just in their complexity, but in their appeal to the

general public, as well as the political elites, giving birth to passions and emotions which only add to their level of complexity. Poverty and inequality have always managed to stir up collective mentalities and perceptions in the society as a whole. Social policy also has a significant economic dimension since government attempts alleviate inequality “by providing certain floors on income and services and preventing income losses due to certain risks” and thus connects inequality to insecurity of income and households, approaching categories of people such as elders and disabled, injured or becoming ill at work, unhealthy, unemployed or underemployed, and their families (Amenta, 2011, p. 97). Given these peculiarities, social policy evolves, when compared to other public policies, in a much more sensitive context, be it social, political, economic, or cultural. This is why the study of social policies and laws cannot and must not be separated from a deeper and wider research into these conditions.

Another particularity of social policy is its conflicting nature. It improves the quality of life and in the same time “contains, controls, and suppresses people” (Blau, 2003, p. 4). Similarly, the construction of social problems follows the same confrontational logic, due to the above mentioned strong different feelings shared by groups with divergent views. Even the theory or, better said, classical theories of social change engender conflictual views on how transformations occur on the social dimension. Although the three main “conceptual schools” share a common premise – the inevitability of progress – and treat society as a whole instead as the sum of its individuals, they separate on the rest of their hypotheses (Blau, 2003, pp. 12-15):

- evolutionism considers that historical change has a powerful, universal, transformative impact on society: from primitivism to modern, “progress was the rule, and stability and stagnations were exceptions”.
- cyclical theories affirm the repeatability of history and focus on the advent and decline of various civilizations. Change does not favor just progress, from this perspective, and the evolution of humanity, or a particular community/society, resembles an ever-repeating “bell curve”.
- historical materialism shares the same belief in progress as evolutionists, but sets itself apart by emphasizing the role of human action: individuals (to be more specific, the working class) may, collectively and purposefully, change the society.

However, these grand theories are less and less accepted by social scientists, who presently tend to make their considerations with regard to social change based on historical specificity (Blau, 2003, p. 13). This is yet another reason to approach the particular context of each social policy at a given time and in a given society.

### **3. Progressivism in the United States and its Social Dimension**

Conventionally, America is considered to have joined the group of democratic states getting on the social policies track in the 1930s, with the Social Security Act adopted in the New Deal Era. Even American scholars shared the same view, until the late 1980s and early 1990s, and attempted to find explanations for the backwardness of the United States when compared to Western European democracies, relying on arguments that contrasted American experiences to the European ones, either in the sense of what the U.S. lacked, politically and culturally, or what factors were present in the American society, and not in Europe, and impeded the initiation and implementation of social policies (Skocpol, 1992). As such, all sociological schools prior to the 1980s and 1990s got entangled in the same debate (Skocpol, 1992):

- During the 1930s and until the 1960s, social policies were considered the effect of industrialization, which seems a valid argument, but does not explain the American apparent failure to introduce social welfare programs at the height of its industrialization process in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- In the same time, another school was attempting to explain the late development of the American welfare state due to its classic liberal political culture that put a premium on distrusting government and praising individualism. These theorists then fail to explain why the United States adopted social policies at all.
- During the 1970s, another conceptual strand moderated pure liberalism, advancing the idea that communalist values were present in the American cultural environment, owing to the Christian religious tradition. Also in the 8<sup>th</sup> decade of the last century, labor historians focused on the role of specific agents (e.g. labor activists and trade unions) that prompted social reforms and limited the alleged political hegemony of business interests. These two sets of critiques also failed to acknowledge the existence of an American social welfare state prior to 1945.

On the contrary, late comers on the scene of social policy analysis searched through the period starting with the 1870s to the 1920s, roughly equivalent to the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, and discovered that some unique features, in terms of social provisions, existed prior to the New Deal Era and thus put the origins of social policies in the United States in a new perspective (Skocpol, 1992).

### **3.1. Conditions that Led to the Emergence of Progressivism: Social Policies during the Gilded Age**

Prior to the Reconstruction Era, after the Civil War, the “congressional agenda [in the United States] was dominated by private claims and private legislation” (Jensen, 2003, p. 9), but some notable exceptions existed. The Pension Act of 1818, which entitled Revolution’s veterans to receive federal pensions for life, under certain conditions, marked the first time that the U.S. government accepted to play an “active and direct role in the alleviation of poverty” (Jensen, 2003, p. 3). Albeit selective, due to eligibility criteria, the social role of the government was obvious: a limited “national system of public care” that granted “public benefits to groups of ‘like’ individuals programmatically, on the basis of the statutory eligibility criteria of deliberately enacted legislation” was established (Jensen, 2003, p. 8). Although it did not weigh, from a juridical perspective, as much as a constitutional provision, the federal law replaced the previous “one time, ad hoc grants of aid or preferential treatment” (Jensen, 2003, p. 9). It was a bold move, inasmuch as the U.S. government needed another bloody war to commit to similar policies.

Another pensions system was designed during the Civil War, in 1862, when the federal government accepted to distribute payments to Union soldiers injured and disabled during combat. Later on, through an amendment, the survivors of the soldiers, families and other dependents to which the deceased were the only wage earners. were entitled to financial benefits. Conditions were also stipulated, in that military ranks and degrees of disability differentiated retributions. Moreover, through the Dependent Pension act of 1890, the system became some sort of a retirement program, since the cause of disability was eliminated from the legal framework, and old age was introduced as criterion that permitted the pension. By 1910, almost a third of all men age 65 and older received Civil War pensions, and more than 300,000 survivors were also on the federal payroll. This was indeed a social welfare state, although a distinct one from the pathway followed by the

Europeans: generous pays were given to a special group, rather than paying less to a wider needy group (Skocpol, 1992). And it was the only form of social policy that existed in the United States prior to the Progressive Era.

However, following the reconstruction after the Civil War, new social, economic, cultural, and political conditions altered the context and prepared the way for social change. The rapid economic growth and industrial progress, as well as the massive urbanization process, “produced unwelcome, un-American imbalances in the society”, such as the emergence of “monopolistic and out-of-control corporations”, the deepening of the ethnic and sectional gap caused by massive immigration, and the decaying of social conditions due to “poverty, prostitution, disease, drunkenness, and despair” (Nugent, 2010, p. 2). Even the Civil War Pensions program became a political rewards system used for electoral machineries by the political bosses (Skocpol, 1992).

Undoubtedly, there was progress, and electrified streets and public places, prosperous markets, growth of industries, the technological “miracles” and the building of skyscrapers, not to mention the enriching tycoons on the Wall Street were testifying for this development (Nugent, 2010, p. 6). Nonetheless, this flourishing economy was hiding deep social problems: hence the name – the Gilded Age. The disparities became increasingly visible, as “the rich were getting richer – far richer – than most people” (Nugent, 2010, p. 6); moreover, their impetus was unchecked by anyone, not even by the government. By the 1880s, discontents with these public problems, concerned with the high degree of “profound unfairness in the American society” came to be more vocal, even violent, with the great strikes of the late 1870s and the 1880s. Meanwhile, the government was dominated by a laissez-faire attitude with regard to both monopolistic practices and financial speculations in the economic sector and the graft and patronage in the political one, while on the social dimension it was ignorant. Fury became the prevalent feeling for ever-growing segments of the public and the demand for reform gained powerful force during the 1890s until it reached a widespread sense of crisis by the 1900s (Nugent, 2010, p. 15).

The Depression of 1893, the emerging living difficulties in the rural areas (the farmers were the backbone of the American society and economy until then and they were becoming indebted to railroad companies and banks), the decreasing labor conditions (long hours, low wages, poor factory environment) as well as the inability of urban areas to manage the flow of migrants, combined to shake an

already delicate social context, and the result were even more violent strikes in the late 1890s, when troops were called to quash the protests during the Homestead Strike (1892) and the Pullman Strike (1894), leaving dead people behind (McNeese, 2010, pp. 48-49). Social Darwinism, the conception that each individual was on his own to advance or to fall, was waning: government was asked to intervene as a regulator. Calls for reform by the government, perceived as the most adequate actor to alleviate social ills, were at a climax.

The discontents with the Gilded Age even came to organize themselves into political groups, not just activist groups, clubs, and trade unions, such as the People’s Party of Kansas which, through its first program – the Omaha Platform – clearly painted the gloomy image of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in America:

“We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. People are demoralized... The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled... The urban workmen are denied the right to organize for self-protection... The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of the mankind... The national power to create money is appropriated to enrich bond-holders... We seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of the ‘plain people’, with which class it originated... We believe that the power of government – in other words, of the people – should be expanded... as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify, to the end that oppression, injustice, and poverty shall eventually cease in the land” (Nugent, 2010, p. 22).

Although the Party itself never knew electoral success, due to the peculiarities of the political system in the U.S., its message was heard and felt throughout the country: Progressivism was taking shape.

### **3.2. The Progressives and their Social Approach**

In the midst of modernity that challenged the social order, the group(s) of reformers that came to be known as Progressives was as heterogeneous as one may get, with different views, tactics, and objectives (Pastorello, 2014, p. 56). However, almost all shared the belief that progress, meaning social justice and equity, was possible through social change and that the government should be the main agent

for reform. A brief and selective enumeration of the most common Progressive categories of people would point not just to their diversity, but to the fact that it was a grass-root movement, starting from the bottom up:

- Investigative journalists that raised public awareness with regard to the social ills – the so-called “muckrakers” – and took the job of exposing corruption, misery, and poor health conditions and thus “wielded an enormous amount of influence on policy-makers and legislators”. In fact, they even managed to push reformist legislation at the state and national level (Pastorello, 2014, pp. 57-63).

- Religious preachers that were merging “sacred and secular” in order to demand broad reforms for social change – the so-called Social Gospellers – and were even encouraging laity to consider labor and living conditions. They were relatively successful in the promotion of the Christian idea of community into a public culture marked by individualism (Pastorello, 2014, pp. 66-67).

- Scholars that added an intellectual flavor to the Progressive movement and that proposed new ways of educating and even governing. The so-called theory of pragmatism underlined the role of applied knowledge instead of abstract concepts, a stream that made social sciences to flourish in American universities. In another train of thoughts, Dewey, the educationalist that would leave a great inheritance to pedagogy and the philosophy of education, considered the schools themselves as actual agents for social change. Moreover, they were not just seeking government support for reform, but were aiming the transformation of government itself (Pastorello, 2014, p. 68).

- Social workers that established actual charity structures in almost every city and combined their practical actions towards saving and helping the underprivileged with concrete support to local authorities. For example, they instituted an integrated system of record keeping on the basis of which “certificates of relief were awarded to persons deemed ‘needy and worthy’ (Pastorello, 2014, pp. 69-70).

- Club women that pushed for gender equality but did not stop short of “asking prison reform, creation of public kindergartens, day care for the children of working mothers, and facilities to aid dependent and neglected children”. Furthermore, the women’s organizations widen its activism for social legislation such as mandatory health and safety measures in the workplace and even the universal right to vote (Pastorello, 2014, pp. 71-72).

- Practitioners, such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, and teachers that demanded and implemented the professionalization of their respective jobs. Systematic approved licensing and the requiring of standards led to the specialization of these fields and set apart impostors and incompetents (Pastorello, 2014, pp. 84-89).
- Even some businessmen, whose association with the rich class made them questionable as to be labeled Progressives, joined the rest of the reform movement to denounce corruption, fraud, and government ineffectiveness. However, they mainly focused on narrow reforms aiming at the business sector and lacked a grand social vision (Pastorello, 2014, pp. 95-96).
- Labor unions and workers’ associations that employed more radical means, such as boycotts and strikes in order to further their demands with regard to social legislation, especially in the field of factory conditions. Some of them, like the “Wobblies” and the anarchists even encouraged a restless fight for a new social order, and no compromise with the employers (Pastorello, 2014, pp. 97-98).
- Farmers that associated themselves into non-partisan grand alliances, although at times making the step onto the political scene, and supported anti-monopolistic government action. However, their declining number, due to the industrialization and urbanization processes, turned them less and less influential (Pastorello, 2014, pp. 103-105).

Given the nature of these policy entrepreneurs, social policy took a different path in the United States; one that combined the public policy approach, which itself was distinct from the European tradition, with a private one. The two approaches aimed at selective populations but they joined their support for more comprehensive, publicly funded social programs (Pastorello, 2014, p. 73). This dual track of diverse groups, reform measures, including in the social field, were first passed at the state and local governments, but some of them, especially the successful ones, became models for the federal legislation to emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the “Wisconsin Idea”, conceived and promoted by Robert La Follette, several times governor of Wisconsin and both Congress representative and senator for the same state, included plans that “enacted and implemented laws and policies to improve the condition of workers and farmers, African Americans and immigrants; [...] and promoted woman suffrage” (Nugent, 2010, pp. 63-64). The “Oregon System”, designed by William S. U’Ren, consisted of a series of reforms that improved elections, through direct primary laws, initiative and referendum

laws, and later the vote for women. It also produced successes since it empowered people to initiate change with regard to agriculture, labor, and small business (Nugent, 2010, p. 70).

At the federal level, with the advent of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as presidents at the White House, as well as with the electoral victories that brought to the Progressives seats in Congress (there was even a Progressive Party that briefly lived on the political scene), the Progressives attempted to convert the Civil War Pension program into a generalized welfare system. The system was following the paternalist European model, aiming to “keep respectable working-class families headed by male breadwinners away from the indignities of poor relief” (Skocpol, 1992, p. 314). Instead, what Skocpol called a maternalist system took shape: while the legislation regarding the working hours and health and safety working conditions for males was never passed during the Progressive Era, most of the states stipulated limited working hours for women as well as health and safety conditions, and some even forbade working at night. Moreover, two-thirds of the states already had minimum wage laws for women before these stipulations were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1923. The Department of Labor was even supplemented, in 1920, with a special Women’s Bureau that dealt, on behalf of the federal government, with the protection of female workers’ interests. Mothers’ pensions were also introduced in most states by 1920, albeit limited due to the low wages and few beneficiaries, but they nevertheless prepared the late social reforms during the New Deal Era (Skocpol, 1992).

The reasons for this emergence of a maternalist social system are to be found in the minor position occupied by women in the American polity (political context) and the general appreciation of their role as mothers (cultural context). Paradoxically, the fact that women were quasi-completely excluded from political life (they were not even allowed to vote until 1920) gave to female-oriented social reforms, and to the club women fighting for them, the aura of civil rights, which was only augmented by the perception of the mother in the collective mentality of the Americans. Children, closely associated to women in public perceptions, were also a beneficiary of the system. The Children’s Bureau was responsible, starting with 1912, on the side of the federal government, with the promotion of the welfare of children. The Promotion of the Welfare and Hygiene of Maternity and Infancy Act (Sheppard-Towner Act) from 1920 was the first major federal healthcare program and played a major role in informing the public, through its public relations campaigns, on the need of better healthcare and social conditions for women and

children (Skocpol, 1992). Furthermore, in this respect, women did not just play the role of policy entrepreneurs, but also administrators, since they almost completely staffed the federal agencies responsible with social programs for women and children – hence, Skocpol’s label of “maternalist” system.

To conclude, Skocpol identifies three major debates on social policies, with different outcomes and outputs, during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era (1870-1920): the Civil War pensions system that turned to be a general welfare system; the efforts to institute European model-based pensions, insurances and benefits for male workers, generally unsuccessful; the “maternalist” system, mainly established at the state level, and with a certain degree to the federal one (Skocpol, 1992).

The bottom-line is that social policies did exist in the U.S. prior to 1935, but their strange peculiarity, when compared to the European dynamics in the field, led to labeling America as a “social welfare laggard”. However, when studying and understanding the context, a very significant element in the development of public policies, the myth of American backwardness is alleviated, if not properly busted. In fact, this different experience sheds a new light on the dynamics of social policy debates in the United States.

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