

The Story of American Freedom

ERIC FONER

1998



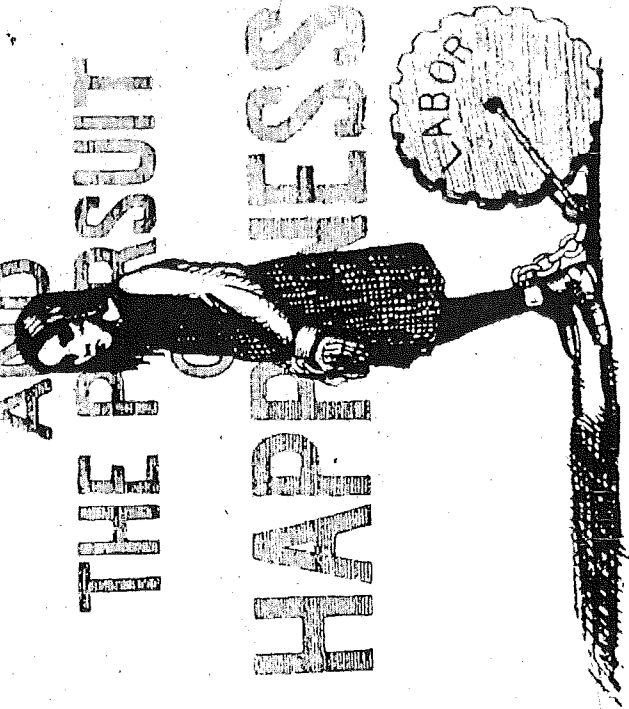
W. W. Norton & Company

New York London

99
LIFE LIBERTY

AND PURSUIT
THE PROGRESS

HAPPINESS



"Where the Mother's Vote is Needed," a cartoon from a women's suffrage magazine, invokes an image of child labor to suggest that exploited workers do not enjoy freedom. (*Maryland Suffrage News*, 15 May 1915)

7

Progressive Freedom

IN 1902, the monthly magazine *The Independent* organized a forum on economic inequality in the United States. On one side stood staunch defenders of laissez-faire Social Darwinism, convinced that vast disparities of wealth were the natural consequence of individual freedom. Riches, declared the Wall Street financier Russell Sage, whose personal fortune reputedly exceeded \$70 million, were the reward for superior intelligence, honesty, and thrift—"to rail against the accumulation of wealth is to rail against the decrees of justice." William Graham Sumner, nearing the end of his long career at Yale, insisted that economic inequality was not only inevitable but violated no "law of nature, religion, ethics, or the State." To this, the labor economist John R. Commons responded that monopolistic control of industry stifled competition, the lifeblood of economic progress, and Ernest H. Crosby, a longtime advocate of Henry George's single tax, declared that an economic aristocracy had arisen, powerful enough to endanger republican government. Henry Demarest Lloyd, the author of *Wealth Against Commonweal*th, boldly called for a "new democracy of industry" requiring the creation of unions and cooperatives, perhaps even socialism.¹

Clearly, deep disagreements over the political and social consequences of economic change had survived from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. If Sage and Sumner represented the mainstream of respectable opinion at the beginning of the new century, Commons, Crosby, and Lloyd heralded a fundamental shift in social thinking

over the course of the next two decades, a period that has come to be called the Progressive era.

In the Gilded Age, concern that concentrated economic power endangered freedom had been articulated most forcefully by organized workers and embattled farmers. In the Progressive years that followed, as severe inequality remained the most visible feature of the urban landscape, this fear animated a far broader array of individuals and social movements. When the British writer H. G. Wells visited the United States soon after the turn of the century, he found that "the steady trend towards concentration" had become "the cardinal topic of thought and discussion in the American mind." Everywhere, the signs of economic and political consolidation were apparent—in the power of a small directorate of Wall Street bankers and corporate executives, the manipulation of democracy by political machines, the rise of new systems of hierarchical control in workplaces, even the ability of national mass-circulation monthlies like *The Independent* to shape public discourse. In these circumstances, wrote Benjamin P. DeWitt in *The Progressive Movement* (1915), "the individual could not hope to compete. . . . Slowly, Americans realized that they were not free."²

"Freedom" was not the most prominent word in the vocabulary of Progressivism. So tainted had it become by association with Social Darwinism and liberty of contract jurisprudence that many reformers preferred to speak instead of democracy and its discontents. Progressive commentators were far more concerned with finding concrete ways to rejuvenate democratic citizenship than with abstract discussions of freedom. Yet much public discussion continued to revolve around the question of whether traditional definitions of liberty were still valid. "The rise of modern freedom," wrote the German sociologist Max Weber in 1906, "presupposed unique constellations which will never repeat themselves." Many Americans shared Weber's fear that the increasingly bureaucratic organization of life eroded the foundations of individualism and with them nineteenth-century ideas of freedom. Some Progressives proposed to restore individual opportunity by returning to a competitive marketplace populated by small producers; others accepted the permanence of large corporation and looked to the government to protect the interests of workers and consumers. Still others would relocate freedom from the economy and polity to a private world of consumption or a psychic realm of personal fulfillment. But nearly all Progressives agreed that freedom must be infused with new meaning. The task was to find a moral and social equivalent for the widespread property ownership once deemed the foundation of liberty. How, asked Herbert Croly, editor of the bible of Progressive intellectuals, *The New Republic*, could Americans be "free men" in a modern, industrial economy?³

The Varieties of Economic Freedom

Inspired by the sense that traditional understandings of democracy and liberty were obsolete in the new century, the Progressive era produced a remarkable outpouring of social commentary and a complex array of movements aimed at addressing economic inequality and finding common ground in a society racked by labor conflict and experiencing massive immigration from abroad. The quest took Progressives down many paths. The era witnessed the use of political power to expand economic freedom, and the restriction of other kinds of liberty, such as the consolidation of racial segregation in the South and the legislative triumph of prohibition. A fluid and complex set of beliefs, Progressivism occupied a broad political spectrum that ranged from socialists who advocated state control of the economy to forward-looking businessmen who realized that workers must be accorded a voice in economic decision-making. But at its core stood a coalition of middle-class reformers, male and female, often linked to trade unions, who sought to humanize capitalism by making it more egalitarian and to reinvigorate democracy by restoring political power to the citizenry and civic harmony to a fractured society. The "old democracy," wrote Walter E. Weyl, *The New Republic's* associate editor, provided no answer to the problems of a world in which the "chief restrictions upon liberty" were "economic," not political.⁴

In Progressive America, the terms "industrial freedom" and "industrial democracy," which had entered the political vocabulary during the Gilded Age, assumed a central place in political discourse. Their very indeterminacy allowed them to be employed by socialists and antisocialists, forward-looking businessmen and trust-busting reformers, labor organizers seeking the right to collective bargaining and industrial relations experts hoping to promote harmony between employer and employee. All could agree that lack of "industrial freedom" stood at the root of the widely discussed "labor problem." At stake were not simply the living conditions of workers but the foundations of American democracy. "Political freedom," wrote Basil Manly, director of research for the Commission on Industrial Relations, established by Congress in 1912, "can exist only where there is industrial freedom."⁵

To many Progressives, the key to industrial freedom lay in empowering workers to participate in economic decision-making via strong unions freed from managerial hostility and court injunctions. The era's massive strikes among immigrant workers, notably the "uprising of twenty thousand" in New York's garment industry in 1909, the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike of 1912,

and the Paterson, New Jersey, silk strike the following year, attracted nationwide attention and placed labor's demand for the right to bargain collectively at the forefront of the reform agenda. Unions, wrote Croly, allowed "the condition of freedom" to be introduced "into the wage system itself." Yet nothing was more stubbornly resisted by entrepreneurs, courts, and conservative middle-class opinion. Louis D. Brandeis, an active ally of the labor movement whom President Wilson appointed to the Supreme Court in 1916, maintained that unions embodied an essential principle of freedom—the right of people to govern themselves. The contradiction between "political liberty" and "industrial slavery," Brandeis insisted, was America's foremost social problem, and workers were entitled to a voice not only on wages and working conditions but such managerial prerogatives as the relocation of factories, layoffs, and the distribution of profits. Restoring economic freedom, Brandeis insisted, would equip working people to become full and active citizens—"self-respecting members of a democracy." Without such "freedom in things industrial," the United States would be "a nation of slaves."⁶

Like Brandeis, many Americans in the Progressive era still invoked the venerable dichotomy between freedom and slavery to describe working conditions and employers' hostility to collective bargaining. In their periodic and often violent struggles for union recognition, for example, miners appealed to the American heritage of freedom against the coal companies that dominated local and state government and employed private police forces to suppress efforts at union organization. The motto "Mountaineers are Free" was emblazoned on the West Virginia capitol; but, as the fiery organizer Mary ("Mother") Jones insisted, miners needed to be emancipated just as the slaves had been. Born in 1830, Mother Jones was a living link to the days and the language of the irrepressible conflict. "We forever wiped out chattel slavery," she told a group of striking miners. "Now, industrial slavery is the battle you are in." (Indeed, Jones urged white miners to solicit black support; more than most union leaders, she appreciated that because of slavery, "the black man . . . knows what liberty is.")

But it was not only miners living under the despotic rule of corporate power who believed themselves deprived of freedom. The great increase in the number of white-collar workers—the new army of bookkeepers, salespeople, salaried professionals, and corporate managers that sprang up with the new system of bureaucratic management—also undermined the sense of personal autonomy. For although they enjoyed far greater social status and higher incomes than manual workers, many, wrote one commentator, were the kind of individuals who "under former conditions, would have been . . . managing their own businesses." Likewise, skilled factory workers experienced the spread of sci-

tific management—the system pioneered by efficiency expert Frederick W. Taylor whereby the work process was subjected to minute control in the name of increased productivity—as a loss of freedom. To work under the constant supervision of a manager and a stopwatch, said one skilled worker, was "getting down to slavery." Scientific management, declared Samuel Gompers, was incompatible with democracy: "Men and women cannot live during working hours under autocratic conditions, and instantly become sons and daughters of freedom as they step outside the shop gates."⁸

Economic freedom was also a rallying cry of American socialism, which reached its greatest influence during the Progressive era. Freedom was central to the Marxian conception of history at the heart of socialist ideas. Socialism, in the oft-quoted words of Friedrich Engels, would propel mankind from "the kingdom of necessity," where human relations (including those in the ostensibly "free" market) were governed by coercion into "the kingdom of freedom." In the nineteenth century, most advocates of socialism in the United States were European immigrants. By the turn of the century, the Americanization of socialism was proceeding apace, spurred by the same sense of economic injustice that inspired Progressive reform.

In 1912, the Socialist Party had 150,000 dues-paying members, published hundreds of newspapers, enjoyed substantial support in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and had elected scores of local officials. Socialism flourished on the Lower East Side of New York City, where it fed on the economic exploitation of immigrant workers and Judaism's reform tradition, and in old Populist regions of the Midwest, where it spoke the traditional language of land ownership as the basis of freedom. No one was more important in spreading the socialist gospel or linking it to ideals of equality, self-government, and freedom than Eugene V. Debs, who crisscrossed the country preaching that capitalism reduced workers to "slavery" while control of the economy by the democratic state held out the hope of "political equality and economic freedom." It was the task of socialism, said the western labor leader John O'Neill, to "gather together the shards of liberty" scattered by a government controlled by capitalist millionaires.⁹

If the idea of economic freedom recalled the great battles of the Gilded Age, its specific meaning was subtly altered in Progressive America in response to the inexorable maturation of an industrial economy. As late as 1919, an article in *The Carpenter* defended the use of the term "wage slavery" as an accurate description of laborers forced to toil "under conditions to which they do not consent." By this time, however, that venerable metaphor had been largely eclipsed by a vocabulary more in keeping with the reality that the vast majority of the em-

played population would spend its life working for wages. To the Progressive social commentator David Phillips, "the basis of freedom" now required expanding the notion of citizenship to ensure that "every American" could find, "as his right," a job at a decent wage. Here was a definition of economic freedom for the industrial age. New concepts—a "living wage" and an "American standard of living"—offered a language for criticizing the inequalities of wealth and power in Progressive America while recognizing that the wage system was here to stay. Father John A. Ryan's influential book, *A Living Wage* (1906), described the American standard of living as a "natural, and absolute" right of citizenship, underpinned by the Christian principle that economic relationships should be governed by moral standards. Ryan, who had grown up in Minnesota in a family sympathetic to Henry George, the Knights of Labor, and the Populists, sought to translate into American terms Pope Leo XIII's powerful encyclical of 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, which denounced the divorce of economic life from ethical considerations, endorsed the right of workers to organize unions, and repudiated liberal individualism in favor of an organic vision of the good society.¹⁰

The idea that social and moral considerations, not simply the law of supply and demand, should determine the level of wages, became a staple of Progressive thought. In the Clayton Act of 1914, Congress itself proclaimed that "the labor of a human being is not a commodity." A wonderfully malleable concept, the living wage was "constantly invading new realms," in the words of Jane Addams, perhaps the era's most renowned social reformer. By the 1920s, it would include the ability to purchase labor-saving devices for the home and mass-produced consumer goods, and to enjoy new forms of entertainment such as motion pictures. Yet even as it rejected the market definition of wages, the idea of the living wage suggested that a just social order could, in fact, be grounded in the wage system. The level of wages, not economic autonomy, became the index of economic freedom, and, increasingly, "slave wages" supplanted "wage slavery" as a description of economic servitude. (Simultaneously, "white slavery," a term widely applied to wage earners in the nineteenth century, was appropriated by campaigners for social purity to describe prostitution.)¹¹

In the nineteenth century, while male workers had stigmatized working for wages as a form of servitude, many feminists had seen labor outside the home as a source of autonomy. In the Progressive era, advocates of the living wage, by and large, viewed it as a male prerogative. The labor movement made some effort to organize women workers, but for the most part it clung to the nineteenth-century idea of the family wage. The living wage, said a spokesman for the AFL, was an emblem of manliness, "the right to be a man and to exer-

cise freely and fully the rights of a free man," including the ability to protect one's wife and children from the necessity of engaging in paid work. The man obliged to send his wife and children into the factories to make ends meet, said John Mitchell, president of the United Mine Workers of America, was "not really free." Father Ryan stood out for his insistence that women "forced" to support themselves were entitled to the same remuneration as men. Many advocates of a living wage assumed that wage differentials between men and women were not unjust, since women workers did not have to support families and were accustomed to a lower "standard of life."¹²

Yet no matter how pervasive the ideology of domesticity, the stark reality was that more and more women were working for wages at the dawn of the twentieth century, and that such work was no longer, as in the past, almost entirely confined to young, unmarried women (at least among the white population). For nativeborn white women, the kinds of jobs available expanded enormously, with the opening of clerical, retail, teaching, and social work positions. By 1920, only 20 percent of employed women worked in domestic service, the largest female job category of the nineteenth century. If the slave woman had served nineteenth-century feminists as an emblem of all women's oppression, the working woman—both working-class and professional—became, for a new generation, the symbol of female emancipation. The growing number of younger women desirous of a lifelong career, wrote Charlotte Perkins Gilman, offered evidence of a "spirit of personal independence" that portended a transformation of both economic and family life. Gilman's turn-of-the-century writings reinforced the claim that the road to woman's freedom lay through the workplace, and offered the most uncompromising critique of domesticity in the history of feminist thought. The home, she argued, was the site not of woman's fulfillment but of oppression, and the housewife not the guardian of the republic or protector of social virtue but an unproductive parasite. By condemning woman to a life of domestic drudgery, prevailing gender norms rendered her "a social idiot," incapable of contributing to society or enjoying freedom in any meaningful sense of the word.¹³

Influenced by nineteenth-century Owenite communities and by Edward Bellamy's utopia, Gilman devised plans for communal nurseries, cafeterias, and laundries. Only the complete abolition of women's individualized domestic sphere would allow women to attain "domestic liberty" and "stand free as economic agents." Gilman's critique had special resonance among the era's small but growing numbers of professional women. In 1907, Harriot Stanton Blatch, daughter of the great nineteenth-century feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and an activist strongly influenced, like Florence Kelley, by contact with socialism

during a residence in Europe, founded the Equality League of Self Supporting Women. Ideologically, the group aimed to unite the women's movement's nineteenth-century natural rights legacy with notions of economic freedom common in the Progressive era. In practical terms, the league hoped educated women and the new army of female wage earners could join in a struggle both for the vote and for the right of all women to combine marriage, motherhood, and paid labor. Another organization of middle-class and society women, the Feminist Alliance, tried to implement Gilman's ideas by constructing apartment houses with communal kitchens and day-care centers, and campaigning for maternity leaves for employed married women.¹⁴

Given the realities of the labor market, as Emma Goldman pointed out, working for wages offered most women "the merest subsistence," not genuine freedom. "How much independence is gained," she wondered, "if the narrowness and lack of freedom of the home is exchanged for the narrowness and lack of freedom of the factory, sweat-shop, department store, or office?" Among the army of young immigrant women who entered the urban labor market in these years, paid work was first and foremost a contribution to family survival, not a quest for independence. Yet even for those who handed their paychecks over to their families, wages still signified a form of autonomy. Almost in spite of themselves, union leader Abraham Bisno remarked, working daughters of immigrants developed a sense of independence: "they acquired the *right to a personality*," something alien to the highly patriarchal family structures of the old country. "We enjoy our independence and freedom" was the assertive statement of the Bachelor Girls Social Club, a group of female mail-order clerks in New York.¹⁵

The wrenching intrafamily battles between immigrants and their self-consciously "free" children, especially daughters, over employment, leisure activities, and sexual mores have been chronicled in remarkably similar accounts of virtually every immigrant group, from Jews to Mexicans. Contemporaries, native and immigrant, noted, often in a tone of disapproval, the penchant of young working women for "the novelties and frivolities of fashion," and the growing number who spent part of their meager wages at dance halls and other places of entertainment. In their sociological study of Muncie, Indiana, that produced the classics *Middletown* and *Middletown in Transition* in the 1920s and 1930s, Robert and Helen Lynd attributed the rise of work among women to the hope of catching "the rear platform of the speeding American standard of living."¹⁶

The Lynds' pregnant quotation marks testified to the widespread popularity that the idea of an American standard of living achieved during the Progressive era—a development that reflected a subtle shift in understandings of

economic freedom. In these years a consumer definition of freedom—access to the cornucopia of goods made available by modern capitalism—began to supplant an older version centered on economic and political sovereignty. There was, of course, nothing new in the idea that the promise of American life lay, in part, in the democratization of consumption, the enjoyment by the masses of citizens of goods available, in Europe, only to the well-to-do. Nineteenth-century American economists like Henry C. Carey and labor advocates of the eight-hour day had argued that the material well-being of the mass of citizens was the surest measure of national greatness and that rising wages and a reduction in working hours would produce more leisure, more consumption, and more prosperity.

Scholars have dated the origins of consumer society in America to the early nineteenth century, or even earlier, when goods like china, glassware, and fashionable clothing became objects of common use. Not until the Progressive era, however, did the consolidation of the national market and the advent of huge department stores in central cities, chain stores in urban neighborhoods, and retail mail-order houses for farmers and small town residents make available to consumers throughout the country the vast array of goods now pouring from the nation's factories. By 1910, Americans could purchase electric sewing machines, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and phonographs; by 1920, there were 8 million automobiles on American roads. Low wages and the highly unequal distribution of income limited the consumer economy; not until after World War II would it fully come into its own. But it was in Progressive America that the promise of mass consumption became the foundation for a new definition of freedom to supplant the now obsolete ideal of economic autonomy.¹⁷

As economic production shifted from capital goods (steel, railroad equipment, etc.) to consumer products, the new advertising industry perfected ways of increasing exponentially the "wants" of mankind. It also hammered home the message that freedom would now be enjoyed in the marketplace, not the workplace. Numerous products took "liberty" as a brand name or used an image of the Statue of Liberty as a sales device. Consumption was a central element of freedom, an entitlement of citizenship—"every free-born American," said advertising executive Kenneth Goode, has a "right to name his own necessities." Consumerism was also, according to the department store magnate Edward Filene, a "school of freedom," since it required individual choice on basic questions of living. By this definition, as opposed to older ones centering on economic autonomy and political sovereignty, freedom was available to women as fully as men. The "woman of today," announced an ad for Piggly

Wiggly supermarkets in 1928, was "free to choose" among the multitude of products offered for sale in its emporiums.¹⁸

Eventually, a new "culture of abundance" would come to define the "American way of life" and the values of thrift and self-denial, central to earlier notions of "character," would be supplanted by an ethos of personal fulfillment through the acquisition of material goods. Later social critics would see mass consumption as a diminished, depoliticized utopia, which abandoned older foundations of freedom such as active participation in public affairs in favor of passive citizenship and privatized aspirations. Yet the promise of abundance could galvanize political activism as well as promote self-absorption. Exclusion from the world of mass consumption (and unequal access to department stores, restaurants, and other sites where consumption occurred) would come to seem almost as great a denial of the entitlements of citizenship as exclusion from voting once had been. Workers' increasing "wants" inspired struggles for a "living wage," while the desire for consumer goods led many workers to join unions. "We find ourselves simply swamped by our desires," wrote the wife of one worker, in a classic statement of the dilemma of a market society. "Without the union earning power, we would not have had the money to buy the radio or countless other things." The argument that monopolistic corporations artificially raised prices at the expense of consumers would become a weapon against the trusts. "Consumers' consciousness," wrote Walter Lippmann, who emerged in these years as one of the nation's most influential social commentators, was growing more rapidly than class consciousness, with the "high cost of living" emerging as its rallying cry.¹⁹

A new collective actor, "the consumer," now stepped onto the stage of social reform. In the Gilded Age, Helen Campbell had brilliantly exposed the tradition of a market economy in which fashionable women wore clothing produced by poor women in wretched sweatshops. "Emancipation on the one side," she pointedly observed, "has meant no corresponding emancipation for the other." A generation later, under the leadership of Florence Kelley, the National Consumers' League became the nation's most important advocate of laws governing the working conditions of women and children. Their very freedom of choice in the marketplace, Kelley insisted, enabled socially conscious consumers to "unite with wage-earners" by taking cognizance of the exploitative conditions under which goods were produced.²⁰

OPPOSITE. One of numerous advertisements of the early twentieth century that invoked the Statue of Liberty to market consumer goods, in this case a brand of crackers. (Library of Congress)

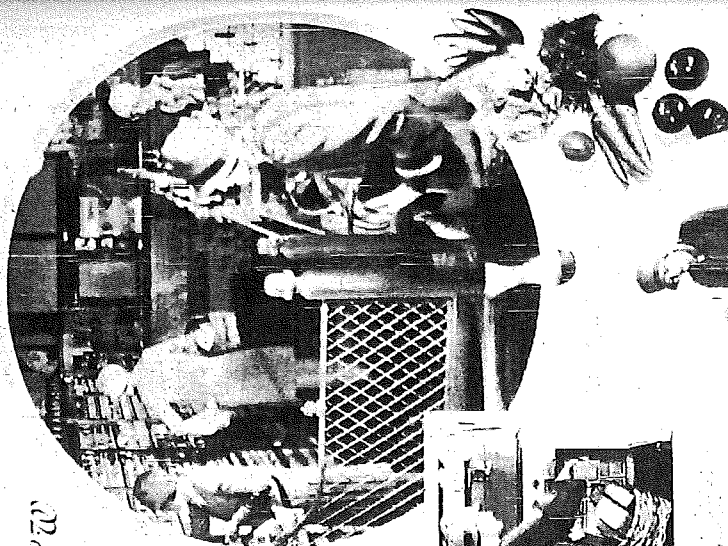


THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Armed with New KNOWLEDGE

—sure of her new skill

The Woman of Today has made
This Plan of Household Buying a
Nation-Wide Thing



THE woman of today is a woman of new skill. Only yesterday her knowledge of food was almost wholly on the advice of her mother. Needed to be persuaded to buy a new variety of food, she was a woman of today with her own mind. She has made this plan of household buying a Nation-Wide Thing.

There are no checks to purchase for in the Piggly Wiggly Store.

The choice foods of five continents are on the open shelves, with all prices plainly marked. You find the choice foods of the world at Piggly Wiggly.

Out of the countless brands and grades on the market today, the experienced men in charge of Piggly Wiggly have selected the finest varieties of every food for you to choose in your home.

You take what you need in your hands, examine the quality, compare the prices. No checks to wait for no delays, no hurry, at the Piggly Wiggly Store. What useful ideas you get for dishes and menus!

And with every article you see a big picture price tag, the lowest price you can get for the Piggly Wiggly Store.

Finer foods—less expense
How easily you save money at Piggly Wiggly



From a single store a few years ago, the Piggly Wiggly Store has spread to over 100 cities and towns. Now you can see the plan of household buying at Piggly Wiggly.

PIGGLY WIGGLY STORES

The finest kinds of each food selected for you to choose from

OFFERED IN OVER 100 CITIES AND TOWNS

For the first time in American history, mass consumption came to occupy a central place in descriptions of American society and its future. In the Gilded Age, social theorists had wondered why economic progress simultaneously produced increased wealth and abject misery. The Progressive generation was strongly influenced by the more optimistic writings of Simon W. Patten, a "prophet of prosperity and progress," as the economist Rexford Tugwell would later call him. Patten taught that mass consumption offered an antidote to class warfare as well as the prospect of improving the lives of the poor, whose degradation resulted from a low standard of living rather than moral failings. In language that recalled both Adam Smith and Karl Marx, Patten proclaimed the end of the "reign of want" and the advent of a society of abundance and leisure, spurred by the rising material aspirations of the mass of citizens. Without abandoning capitalism, Americans in the dawning "new civilization" would enjoy both market liberty and the benefits promised by the socialists—personal fulfillment, economic equality, a world in which "every one is independent and free."²¹

In 1928, André Siegfried, a Frenchman who had visited the United States four times since the beginning of the century, commented that a "new society" had come into being, in which Americans considered their "standard of living" a "sacred acquisition, which they will defend at any price." In the *Atlantic Monthly*, the journalist Samuel Straus called this new society "consumptionism" and identified advertising and motion pictures as its distinctive forms of communication. In Muncie, the Lynds found that new leisure activities and a new emphasis on consumption had supplanted politics as the focus of public concern. Elections were no longer "lively centers" of public attention as in the nineteenth century and voter turnout had fallen dramatically. National statistics bore out their point; the turnout of eligible voters, over 80 percent in 1896, had dropped to less than half of those registered by 1924. There were many reasons for this decline, including the consolidation of one-party politics in the South, the enfranchisement of women (who for many years voted in lower numbers than men), and the long period of Republican dominance in national elections. But the consumerist shift from public to private concerns undoubtedly played a part. "The American citizen's first importance to his country," declared a Muncie newspaper, "is no longer that of a citizen but that of a consumer."²²

OPPOSITE. In a Piggly Wiggly supermarket, proclaims this 1928 advertisement from the *Saturday Evening Post*, the "woman of today" is "entirely free to choose for herself" from the cornucopia of goods in the consumer marketplace. (Reprinted by permission of Piggly Wiggly Company, 1998)

Freedom and the Progressive State

Citizenship, nonetheless, remained central to the Progressive idea of freedom. Drawing on the heritage of the Civil War era and the reform programs of the Gilded Age, a broad coalition—reform-minded intellectuals, a resurgent women's movement, unionists, and socialists—emerged to reinvigorate the idea of an activist national state, and bring to its support a large urban middle-class and labor constituency. The old idea that "a minimum of State regulation" meant a "maximum of . . . freedom," wrote Father John A. Ryan, no longer could claim "any considerable number of adherents." Whether the aim was to regulate or destroy the power of the trusts, protect consumers, civilize the marketplace by eliminating cutthroat competition, or guarantee "industrial freedom" at the workplace, Progressives assumed that the modern era required a fundamental rethinking of the functions of government. The national state, noted one Progressive commentator, was "a moral agent," which should set the rules under which society conducted its affairs.²³

Most of the era's reform legislation, including changes in voting requirements, regulation of corporations, and the overseeing of safety and health conditions in factories, was enacted at the municipal and state levels. But the most striking development of the early twentieth century was the rise of the national state, complete with administrative agencies, independent commissions, and laws establishing the parameters for labor relations, business behavior, and financial policy, and acting as a broker among the disputatious groups whose conflicts threatened to destroy social harmony. These were the years when the Federal Reserve Board, the Federal Trade Commission, and other agencies came into existence, and when the federal government, through measures like the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906), sought to set basic rules for market behavior and protect citizens from market abuses.

To most Progressives, the tradition of localism and states' rights seemed an excuse for parochialism, an impediment to a renewed sense of national purpose. Poverty, economic insecurity, and lack of industrial democracy were national problems that demanded national solutions. As for *laissez-faire*, this, observed the Progressive social scientist Horace Kallen, had become "anathema among lovers of liberty." Many Progressives believed that economic evolution, rather than the misconduct of capitalists, had produced the large corporation acting nationally and even internationally. The same kind of process, they concluded, had made the national state the natural unit of political action. Only energetic government could create the social conditions for freedom. The democratic

state, wrote Herbert Croly, embodied an alternative to control of Americans' lives by narrow interests that manipulated politics or by the all-powerful corporations. To achieve the "Jeffersonian ends" of democratic self-determination and individual freedom, he insisted, it was now necessary to employ the "Hamiltonian means" of a government-directed economy.²⁴

Progressives could reject the traditional assumption that a powerful government posed a threat to freedom because their understanding of freedom was itself in flux. In a lecture in 1880 that would exert a powerful influence on Progressive social thought, the British philosopher T. H. Green had argued that freedom was a positive concept, a matter, ultimately, of "power." Green's call for a new definition of freedom was taken up throughout Progressive America. "Effective freedom," wrote John Dewey, who pondered the question from the 1890s until his death in 1952, was far different from the "highly formal and limited concept of liberty" as a preexisting possession of autonomous individuals that needed to be protected from outside restraint. It meant "effective power to do specific things," and as such was a function of "the *distribution* of powers that exists at a given time." Thus, freedom was "always a social question" and inevitably also a political issue. Freedom—and the individual endowments, powers, and desires it embodied—was constructed by and enjoyed through social institutions and democratic citizenship. "Freedom," wrote Dewey's brilliant young admirer Randolph Bourne, "means a democratic cooperation in determining the ideals and purposes and industrial and social institutions of a country."²⁵

What the nineteenth century had called autonomy appeared to Progressives like Dewey and Croly mere isolation; real freedom, they believed, involved the constant growth entailed by a lifetime of interaction with others. In seeing freedom as an ongoing process of self-realization, to be sure, they harked back to the Emersonian notion of personal fulfillment and even to Jefferson's natural right to "the pursuit of happiness." But to traditional notions of individualism and autonomy, Progressives wedded the idea that such freedom required the conscious creation of the social conditions for full human development. To Croly, this suggested that the state must become responsible for "a morally and socially desirable distribution of wealth." For Dewey, it meant equipping Americans with the intellectual resources required to understand the modern world, and empowering the state to combat economic deprivation and disempowerment. Progressivism, said the social scientist William F. Willoughby, "looks to state action as the . . . only practicable means now in sight, of giving to the individual, all individuals, not merely a small economically strong class, real freedom."²⁶

Yet while Progressive intellectuals developed a new conception of the national state, their "new democracy" (the title of Walter Weyl's influential book) had a highly ambiguous relationship to the inherited definition of political freedom as democratic participation in governance. Enhancing the power of the state made it all the more important to identify the boundaries of political participation. During the Progressive era, a host of changes were implemented in the electoral process and political arena, many seemingly contradictory in purpose. The electorate was simultaneously expanded and contracted, empowered and removed from direct influence on many functions of government. The era witnessed the massive disenfranchisement of blacks in the South (a process begun in Mississippi in 1890 and completed in Georgia in 1908), and a constitutional amendment enfranchising women—the largest expansion of democracy in U.S. history. It saw the adoption of measures like the initiative, referendum, and recall, designed to allow the electorate to propose and vote directly on legislation and remove officials from office, and the widespread replacement of elected mayors by appointed city managers. It saw literacy tests (increasingly common in the North as well as the South) expanded, and new residency and registration requirements implemented in the hope of limiting the franchise among the poor.²⁷

Taken as a whole, the electoral changes of the Progressive era represented a significant and ironic reversal of the nineteenth-century trend toward manhood suffrage and a rejection of the venerable idea that voting was an inalienable right of American citizenship. To most Progressives, the "fitness" of voters, not their absolute numbers, defined a functioning democracy. In the name of improving democracy, millions of men—mostly blacks, immigrants, and other workers—were eliminated from the voting rolls, even as millions of white women were added. The more egalitarian Progressives, like Dewey, believed that given the necessary opportunities and resources, all citizens were capable of mastering the spirit of disinterested inquiry and of applying themselves to finding pragmatic, "scientific" solutions to social problems. Thus, government could safely be removed from the control of trusts and machines and placed in the hands of "the people." Yet most Progressive thinkers were highly uncomfortable with the real world of politics, which seemed to revolve around the pursuit of narrow class, ethnic, and regional interests. Indeed, one reason for many Progressives' support for women's suffrage was the belief—encouraged by feminists—that as an independent, non-partisan force, women voters could help rescue politics from politicians and partisanship and reorient it toward the pursuit of the common good.²⁸

"He didn't believe in democracy; he believed simply in government." H. L.

Mencken's quip about Theodore Roosevelt came uncomfortably close to the mark for many Progressive advocates of an empowered national state. The government could best exercise intelligent control over society through a "democracy" run by impartial experts and in many respects unaccountable to the citizenry. This technocratic impulse toward order, efficiency, and centralized management—all, ostensibly, in the service of social justice—was an important theme of Progressive reform. The title of Walter Lippmann's influential work of social commentary, *Drift and Mastery* (1914), posed the stark alternatives facing the nation. "Drift" meant continuing to operate according to the outmoded shibboleth of individual autonomy; "mastery," recognition that society could be remade by the application of rational inquiry to social problems and conflicts. "The scientific spirit," Lippmann wrote, was "the outlook of a free man." But, Lippmann feared, ordinary citizens, attached to antiquated ideas and parochial concerns, were ill-prepared to embrace it (an augury of his full-fledged repudiation of the idea of popular democracy during the 1920s). The new generation of corporate managers and educated professionals could be trusted to address creatively and efficiently America's deep social problems. For Lippmann, political freedom was less a matter of direct participation in governance than of proper policy outcomes.²⁹

But alongside this elitist administrative politics arose a more democratic Progressive vision of the activist state. As much as any other group, organized women reformers were its midwives. In the first two decades of the century, as women's suffrage for the first time became a mass movement, it moved beyond the elitism of the 1890s to engage a broad coalition, ranging from middle-class club women to unionists, socialists, and settlement house workers, and its rhetoric became more democratic and less nativist. Among the reasons for the movement's expanding base was that it became linked to the broad demand for state intervention on behalf of economic freedom. The immediate catalyst was a growing awareness of the plight of the immigrant poor among women involved in the settlement house movement, and the emergence of the condition of women and child laborers as a major focus of public concern.

Still barred from political participation in most states, women nonetheless were central to the era's political history. The effort of middle-class women to uplift the poor, through clubs, settlement houses, and other agencies, and of laboring women to uplift themselves, helped shift the center of gravity of political discourse toward activist government. Well-educated middle-class women not only found a calling in providing social services and education to poor families, but discovered the severe limitations of laissez-faire orthodoxy as an explanation for urban poverty and the failure of even well-organized social work



A women's suffrage parade. (*Suffragist*, 10 Aug. 1918)

to alleviate the problems of inadequate housing, income, and health. Out of the settlement houses came not only Jane Addams and Florence Kelley but also Julia Lathrop, the first woman to head a federal agency (the Children's Bureau, established in 1912 to investigate the conditions of mothers and children and advocate their interests), and Frances Perkins, secretary of labor during the 1930s. In turning for assistance to the state, Progressive women helped to launch a mass movement for governmental regulation of working conditions and direct state assistance to improve the living standards of the poor.³⁰

"We need the ballot," said labor leader Leonora O'Reilly, "to do justice to our work as home-keepers. Children need pure milk and good food, good schools and playgrounds, sanitary homes and safe streets." What historians have called "maternalist" reform—based on the assumption that the state had

an obligation to encourage women's unique capacity for childbearing and child-rearing—inspired many of the era's experiments in governmental policy. Ironically, those who sought to exalt women's role within the home helped to inspire the state-building process during the Progressive era.³¹

By the time the United States entered World War I in 1917, Progressives had succeeded in bringing governmental power to bear in seeking to enhance the conditions of women's freedom, at work and at home. Laws providing for mothers' pensions (state aid to mothers of young children who lacked male support) spread rapidly after 1910. Although the pensions tended to be meager and local eligibility requirements opened the door to discrimination in application (white widows were always the primary beneficiaries, single mothers were widely discriminated against, and only 3 percent of the recipients nationally were black), the laws recognized the government's responsibility to enable women to devote themselves to their children and be economically independent at the same time. Both "egalitarian" and "difference" feminists favored mothers' pensions—the former in the hope that they would subvert women's traditional economic dependence on men, the latter as a way of strengthening traditional families and the mother-child bond. "The only way we can keep mothers free," said the feminist Crystal Eastman, was to compensate the raising of children as "a service to society." Laws prohibiting child labor, a major issue at a time when an estimated 2 million children under the age of fifteen were gainfully employed, represented another "maternalist" reform (although these laws were often opposed by poor families for whom income earned by children was essential for family survival).³²

Other Progressive legislation recognized that large numbers of women did in fact work outside the home, but defined them as a dependent group (analogous to children) in need of state protection in ways male workers were not. In 1908, in the landmark case of *Muller v. Oregon*, the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the constitutionality of a maximum hours law for women. In his famous brief supporting the Oregon measure, Louis Brandeis invoked a battery of scientific and sociological studies to demonstrate that because they had less strength and endurance than men, long hours of labor were especially dangerous for women, while their unique ability to bear children gave the state a legitimate interest in their working conditions. Thus, three years after the notorious *Lochner* decision invalidating a state law limiting the working hours of bakers, the Court created the first large breach in liberty of contract orthodoxy. But the cost was high: at the very time that women in unprecedented numbers were entering the labor market and earning college degrees, Brandeis's brief and the Court's opinion solidified the idea that women workers were weak, depen-

dent, and incapable of enjoying the same economic freedom as men. By 1914, twenty-seven states had enacted laws limiting the hours of labor of female workers.³³

While the maternalist agenda built gender inequality into the early foundations of the welfare state, the very use of government to regulate working conditions called into question basic assumptions concerning *laissez-faire* and the sanctity of the labor contract. State regulation of the labor market began with the family, but programs based on the needs of women and children coexisted with those based on the rights of all workers. Although not all reformers were willing to take the step, it was easy to extend the idea of protecting women to demand that government better the living and working conditions of men by insuring them against the vagaries of unemployment, old age, ill health, and disability. Brandeis himself insisted that a broad definition of social welfare formed part of the "liberty" protected by the Fourteenth Amendment and that government should concern itself with the health, income, and future prospects of all its citizens. John A. Ryan's prescription for state action to secure economic freedom began with the protection of women and child laborers, and moved on to legal support for union activities, an eight-hour day, municipal housing, public ownership of utilities, and a progressive income tax. All these measures, he insisted, were necessary "to safeguard individual liberty" in an industrial society.³⁴

Brandeis and Ryan envisioned a different welfare state from that of the maternalist reformers, one rooted less in the social work tradition and visions of healthy motherhood than in the idea of universal economic entitlements, including the right to a decent income and protection against unemployment and injury on the job. This vision, too, enjoyed considerable support in the Progressive era. By 1920, nearly all the states had enacted workmen's compensation laws, the entering wedge for broader programs of social insurance. But state minimum wage laws and most laws regulating working hours applied only to women. The provision of a basic living standard and a set of working conditions beneath which no individual should fall would await the coming of the New Deal.³⁵

All the cross-currents of Progressive-era thinking about what *McClure's Magazine* called "the problem of the relation of the State and the corporation" came together in the presidential campaign of 1912. A "year with supreme possibilities," as Eugene V. Debs put it, 1912 witnessed a four-way contest between Republican president William Howard Taft, former president Theodore Roosevelt, now running as candidate of the Progressive Party, Democrat Woodrow Wilson, and Debs himself, representing a Socialist Party at the height of its influ-

ence. The campaign became an extended national debate on the relationship between political and economic freedom in the age of the large corporation. At one end of the political spectrum stood the president, a *bona fide* Progressive, although in 1912 he stressed that economic individualism could remain the foundation of the social order so long as government and private entrepreneurs cooperated in addressing social ills. At the other end was Debs, the only candidate to demand a complete change in the economic structure to propel the nation "from wage slavery to free cooperation, from capitalist oligarchy to industrial democracy." Relatively few Americans adhered to the party's goal of abolishing the "capitalistic system" altogether, but its immediate demands—including public ownership of the railroads and banking system, government aid to the unemployed, legislation establishing shorter hours and a minimum wage, and a graduated income tax—summarized the most forward-looking Progressive thought.³⁶

But it was the battle between Wilson and Roosevelt over the meaning of freedom and the role of the state in securing it that galvanized public attention in 1912. The two differed on many issues, notably the dangers of governmental power and the inevitability of economic concentration, but both believed increased state action was necessary to preserve individual freedom. Though representing a party thoroughly steeped in states' rights and *laissez-faire* ideology, Wilson was deeply imbued with Progressive ideas. "Of course, we want liberty," he had declared in 1911, "but what is liberty?" "Old words . . . consecrated throughout many generations," he insisted, needed to be "translated into experience," and as governor of New Jersey, he had presided over the implementation of workmen's compensation and state regulation of utilities and railroads. Nonetheless, Wilson's 1912 "program of liberty," or the "New Freedom," as he came to call it, was heavily indebted to traditional Democratic ideology. Government, he insisted, was the antagonist of freedom: "the history of liberty is a history of the limitation of governmental power, not the increase of it." Yet freedom, Wilson maintained, meant more than in Jefferson's time, and government had a responsibility to promote it: "freedom today is something more than being let alone. The program of a government of freedom must in these days be positive, not negative merely." Strongly influenced by Brandeis, with whom he consulted frequently during the campaign, Wilson insisted that freedom was "an economic idea" as well as a political one, and that the way to revitalize democracy was to restore market competition by freeing government from subservience to big business. Freedom could only thrive in a decentralized economy that bred independent citizens and restored self-government to local communities—goals the federal government could pursue by strengthening

antitrust laws, protecting the right of workers to unionize, and actively encouraging small entrepreneurs.³⁷

In retrospect, it seems clear that Wilson had little understanding of the myriad sources of corporate hegemony in a modern economy. But his warning that consolidated economic power might join with concentrated political power to the detriment of ordinary citizens was remarkably prescient, especially given the confidence of so many Progressives that the state could be counted upon to act as a disinterested arbiter of the nation's social and economic purposes. To Roosevelt's supporters, however, Wilson seemed a relic of a bygone era, whose program served the needs of small businessmen but ignored the interests of professionals, consumers, and labor. The New Freedom, wrote Lippmann, meant "freedom for the little profiteer, but no freedom for the nation from the narrowness, the . . . limited vision of small competitors." Wilson and Brandeis spoke of the "curse of bigness"; what the nation actually needed, Lippmann countered, was frank acceptance of the inevitability and benefits of bigness, coupled with the active intervention of government to counteract its abuses while guiding society toward common goals. Lippmann was articulating the core of the New Nationalism, Theodore Roosevelt's alternative vision of 1912. Wilson's statement that limits on governmental power formed the essence of freedom, Roosevelt pointedly remarked, "has not one particle of foundation in the facts of the present day." It was a recipe for "the enslavement of the people by the great corporations who can only be held in check by the extension of governmental power"; only the "regulatory, the controlling, and directing power of the government" could represent "the liberty of the oppressed."³⁸

Where Wilson opposed extensive social welfare programs for making citizens dependents of the state, the Progressive Party platform offered a myriad of proposals to promote social justice. Inspired by a group of settlement house feminists, labor reformers, and Progressive social scientists, the platform laid out a blueprint for a modern, democratic welfare state, complete with women's suffrage, federal supervision of corporate enterprise, national labor and health legislation for women and children, an eight-hour day and a "living wage" for all workers, the right of workers to form unions, and a national system of social insurance covering unemployment, medical care, and old age. Roosevelt called it the "most important document" since the end of the Civil War, and the platform brought together many of the streams of thought and political experience that flowed into Progressivism. Roosevelt, of course, lost the election (although once in office, Wilson often seemed to act as a New Nationalist). But his campaign helped give freedom a modern social and economic content and

established an agenda that would continue to define political liberalism for much of the rest of the century.³⁹

Indeed, by 1916, writers like Herbert Croly were consciously attempting to redefine the venerable term "liberalism," previously shorthand for limited government and laissez-faire economics, to describe belief in an activist, socially conscious state.⁴⁰ This would become the word's meaning for most of the twentieth century. Modern liberalism, however, has other features conspicuously absent from the Progressive agenda: an overriding preoccupation with civil liberties, including the right to personal privacy and the free expression of ideas, and a pluralist concern for the rights of racial and ethnic minorities. With its impulse toward social cohesiveness and homogeneity, and its exaltation of the national state as the embodiment of democracy, mainstream Progressivism was not attuned to these understandings of freedom. Their origins lay elsewhere—among the radicals and cultural bohemians of Progressive America.