

The New Progressive Vision for Los Angeles and California

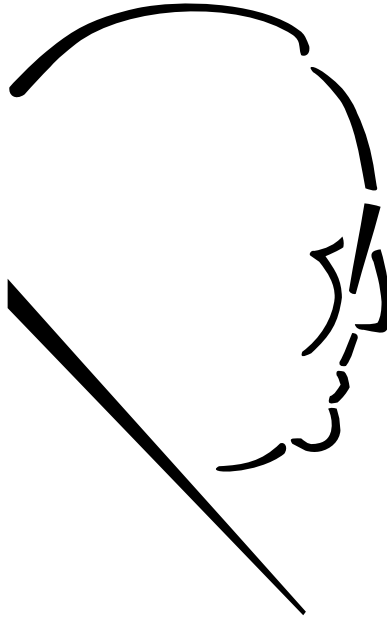
The California Agenda

Public Policy Lecture - May 17, 2005

Joel Kotkin

Irvine Senior Fellow

New America Foundation



This lecture is supported by a grant from The James Irvine Foundation

Our Appreciation to Union Bank of California
As the corporate host of the lecture series

EDMUND G. "PAT" BROWN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LOS ANGELES

RETHINKING PROGRESSIVISM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In California, and much of the nation, we still live, largely obliviously, in the afterglow of the progressive era that flourished in the first decades of the 20th century. Many of the things that have made this state, and the nation, the most powerful and successful large society in world history rest upon the basic approach of the early progressives – a belief in science, attention of infrastructure concerns, political pragmatism, and a sense of social balance and basic ethical principles.

These notions produced great consequences – the national and state parks, the beginnings of suburban transport, the great water and power systems, agricultural conservation, protections for workers, and homeowner mortgages. Progressive ideals helped drive expansion of the middle class. They also engendered many cherished notions of public life, including open government, fair elections, and the initiative and recall processes.

One extraordinary legacy of progressivism lies in its nonpartisan nature. Progressives operated through both major political parties as well as in independent associations. The great names of progressivism include Democrats such as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Pat Brown as well as Republicans such as Theodore Roosevelt, Robert LaFollette, Hiram Johnson, and Earl Warren.

In the current political climate, with its extraordinary level of partisan acrimony and small-mindedness, the progressive legacy counterposes an alternative perspective suffused with the notion of public virtue. At a time when science and technology are often hijacked to promote narrow, sectarian, and private interests, progressivism still seeks to apply impartial intelligence to improve the environment, the economy, and the general well-being of society.

This progressive tradition – with its focus on providing effective nonpartisan policy solution – provides an excellent framework for responding to today’s great problems. Progressivism’s pragmatic problem-solving approach could be particularly useful in addressing such challenges as improving the competitiveness of our work force and our overall economy.¹

Today’s educational weaknesses have also exacerbated concerns that the gap between classes has begun to widen, much as it did in the late 19th century.² In addition, our basic infrastructure – roads, bridges, transit, water, ports, and power systems – has not kept up with growth and, in many cases, is in far worse shape today than ten, twenty, or even thirty years ago. Recent catastrophic events on the Gulf Coast provide ample evidence of this.

¹ June Kronholz, “Economic Time Bomb: U.S. Teens Are Among Worst at Math,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 7, 2005; Martin Crutsinger, “U.S. Trade Deficit Hits All-Time High,” Associated Press, February 10, 2005.

² “Ever higher society, ever harder to ascend,” *The Economist*, December 29, 2004; David Wessel, “As Rich-Poor Gap Widens in the U.S., Class Mobility Stalls,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2005.

America's unique economic and political strengths have so far allowed the nation to withstand these problems. But it seems increasingly clear that, as a nation or a state, we are neither mobilizing to compete nor planning ahead.

A progressive response is not only programmatic, but to be effective it also has to have a political strategy. Fortunately, there seems to be at least some potential here. Most surveys of national and California opinion suggest that Americans are broadly in agreement on the major issues facing themselves and their children. They also increasingly distrust both major parties, much like the turn of the century electorate. In California, barely one in three residents trusts the government to do the "right" thing most of the time.³

At the same time, the forces most closely tied to the parties – the union movement on the left and the large corporate establishment on the right – increasingly represent shrinking portions of the electorate. Instead, we see the rise of an ever-increasing entrepreneurial, self-employed, and professional class.⁴ This group has powerful new tools to organize and inform, notably the Internet, which also greatly enhances its market power.

This class, and the Internet, have helped spur the growth of a new kind of politics, epitomized in recent years by the insurgency of Republican John McCain and Democrat Bill Bradley.⁵ Of course, neither of these candidates ultimately won, but we should remember neither did the first generation of progressives over a century ago.

This increasing class of voters offers a potential base for creating a new and viable progressivism. Independent by nature, pragmatic, and public-minded, they resemble the very classes that fostered and nurtured the first progressive movement and could also be the key to its 21st-century revival.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PROGRESSIVE IDEAL?

A new progressive movement naturally can not simply adopt wholesale a program developed at the end of the 19th century. Yet we can derive from progressivism ways of approaching problems that have been time tested, and then try to best apply it to our contemporary reality.

Progressivism was a movement that attempted to address the problems of modernity. The great achievement of the progressives in America – in contrast to the fate of other industrializing nations such as Japan, Germany, Italy, and Russia – occurred within the context of a democratic political system.

³ "Special Survey on the Environment," *PPIC Statewide Survey*, July 21, 2005; John Harwood and Sarah Lueck, "Democrats Find Capital in Budget Deficit," *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2005; "As the Nation Goes So Goes California," *PPIC Statewide Survey*, January 27, 2005; Russell J. Dalton and Steven Weldon, "Is the Party Over? Spreading Antipathy Towards Political Parties," *Public Opinion Pros*, May 2005.

⁴ Clare Ansberry, "Small Companies Slowly Build Momentum in the Job Market," *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2003.

⁵ John B. Judis, *The American Prospect*, "Are We All Progressives Now?" May 8, 2000; Entreworld.org, Ewing Kaufmann Foundation; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004.

PROGRESSIVE ROOTS

In contrast to populism, whose roots lay in the countryside, American progressivism was always a “town” movement. Its earliest antecedents were in the social reform movements in mid-19th-century Great Britain, which experienced the industrial revolution first and with the greatest ferocity. In Britain, the reform movement originated not with the working class or displaced yeomanry but with the clergy, businesspeople, and a rising professional class.

These early movements brought the beginnings of efficient administration to the sprawling, chaotic cities. They established parks, baths, and washhouses for the poor. New sanitary measures and improvements in medicine initiated by reformers lowered urban rates of mortality dramatically. And, crime, once rampant, dropped dramatically in cities like Manchester, Liverpool, and Leeds.⁶

When America began to emerge as an industrial power, a similar reform movement took shape. As in England, it was led largely by business, professional, and religious leaders. It also spearheaded the movement to reform local governments, with success particularly in cities such as Milwaukee, Cleveland, Toledo, and Detroit.⁷ In many cities, services such as police, fire protection, and transportation were organized systematically for the first time.⁸

Progressives also promoted an expansion of public works, from water and sanitation systems to new roads, libraries, and schools.⁹ They also began to make concerted efforts to save some of the natural environment for their increasingly harried, city-bound citizens. Particularly ambitious efforts were made in St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York,¹⁰ where Frederick Law Olmsted, a primary designer of Central Park, defined his mission as an attempt “to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers...a specimen of God’s handiwork.”¹¹

Achieving political success took time. Starting out as a movement of the educated and affluent, the progressives only slowly learned to marry high-mindedness with political

⁶ Getrude Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, Alfred Knopf, (New York: 1995), p. 39; McNeil, *op. cit.*, p. 275; Thomas S. Ashton, “Workers’ Living Standards: A Modern Revision,” in Philip A. M. Taylor, *The Industrial Revolution in Britain: Triumph or Disaster?* D.C. Heath (Boston: 1958), p. 481; Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought: 1820-1840*, Columbia University Press (New York: 1985), pp. 40-41.

⁷ Lees, *op. cit.*, pp.166-169; Teaford, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-117; Samuel Hays, *The Response to Industrialism*, University of Chicago (Chicago: 1957), pp. 22-24, pp. 71-72.

⁸ Beard and Beard, *op. cit.*, p. 748; Beckert, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

⁹ Jane Allen Shikoh, “The Higher Life in the American City of the 1900s: A Study of Leaders and Their Activities in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Boston, and Buffalo,” PhD dissertation in Department of History, Graduate School of Arts and Science, New York University, October, 1972, pp. 5-8, 81-85.

¹⁰ Lees, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, “Selected Writings on Central Park,” in Kenneth T. Jackson and David S. Dunbar, editors, *Empire City: New York City Through the Centuries*, Columbia University Press (New York: 2002), pp. 278-279.

savvy and energy. They needed to reach out to wider groups – small businessmen and farmers threatened by monopolies or unions seeking better working conditions – before they could win electoral majorities and, with the rise of Theodore Roosevelt, control of the White House itself.¹²

CALIFORNIA PROGRESSIVISM

Many of California’s progressives also were “well-fixed” people who in many cases had been conservative McKinley Republicans earlier in their lives.¹³ Most remained moderate politically, seeking simply to reform the abuses of capitalism, although some veered closer to socialism.

For much of the progressive era in California, starting in the early 1900s, these two tendencies frequently not only feuded but also often worked together on a common program.¹⁴ In California, their primary target was the Southern Pacific Railroad, whose predatory prices and corrupt practices threatened not only working people and consumers but various entrepreneurial interests as well.

Legislation passed to regulate the railroad in 1911, noted historian Spencer Olin, “was regulatory but certainly not anti-business.”¹⁵ The pivotal figure of the California progressive movement, Hiram Johnson, was an upper-middle-class Republican in the Theodore Roosevelt tradition. His running mate, Albert J. Wallace, a Methodist minister with extensive oil and farm holdings in the Central Valley, came from a similar class and political background.

Despite their decidedly bourgeois roots, Johnson and other progressives also sometimes made common cause with organized labor, then just beginning its rise to power, favoring labor legislation such as workmen’s compensation. They also worked for political reforms, such as the recall and referendum, then favored by union leaders.¹⁶

But at its root, California progressivism remained largely a movement of the middle class, the small property owners and professionals. It was also defined by a strong sense of conventional morality – much of which might seem a bit anachronistic by contemporary standards – and a powerful attachment to the notion of political decency.

Particularly striking was the progressives’ commitment to efficiency in government. Unlike traditional conservatives, progressives believed that government could be a positive force in the economic and social life of California. But they insisted this be done in a business-like manner, embracing the latest notions of scientific management. Their stated

¹² Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*, Knopf (New York: 1959), pp. 145-171.

¹³ Hofstadter, *op. cit.* p. 145. [this is correct spelling]

¹⁴ Tom Sitton, “John Randolph Haynes and the Left Wing,” in William Deverell and Tom Sitton, *California Progressivism Revisited*, University of California Press (Los Angeles: 1994), pp. 15-29.

¹⁵ Spencer Olin, *California’s Prodigal Sons*, University of California Press (Berkeley: 1968), pp. 20-33, 41.

¹⁶ Mary Ann Mason, “Neither Friends nor Foes: Organized Labor and the California Progressives,” in Deverell and Sitton, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-70.

goal, as one Johnson administration report put it, was “to systematize the business of the State of California.”¹⁷

Such principles were applied not only on the state level but at the municipal level as well. A progressive city was one managed with the best expertise derived from the private sector, preferably by businessmen. “The administrative affairs of the city are a business matter, rarely a political issue,” Berkeley’s reform minded Mayor suggested in 1909. “The object, therefore, [is] to provide a method that will result in the election of businessmen, not politicians, to office.”¹⁸

The reform agenda of the progressives did not always turn out as intended. Commissions of “experts” could, over time, be manipulated by special interests. But overall the progressives, suggested historian Jackson K. Putnam, created a government that, for the most part, “worked well” for Californians for much of the 20th century.

Most important, California created state government that, for all its limitations, helped prepare the state for the rapid growth that characterized the state throughout much of the 20th century. Progressivism’s pragmatic orientation, the melding of science and technology into government, the large-scale investment in infrastructure, and a strong nonpartisan tradition established California’s government something of a national role model.¹⁹

FROM PROGRESSIVISM TO INTEREST GROUP LIBERALISM

Progressivism’s ascendancy faded with the First World War. The exigencies of global conflict, followed by a period of revolutionary turmoil, increased political polarization. On one side, the nation witnessed both the rise of radical socialism as well as that of a renewed, isolationist right wing. On the other, conservative forces increasingly dominated the national Republican Party.

The focus of progressive politics now shifted decisively to the Democrats. The key figure in this transformation would prove to be New York’s Governor, Franklin Roosevelt. A distant cousin of Theodore, Roosevelt saw himself in the traditional progressive mold. He envisioned the Democratic Party as a broad middle-class political entity financed by small donors – in contrast with the massive corporations that now financed the Republicans.

In classic progressive fashion, Roosevelt never opposed capitalism at all but favored a free market system that, as he saw it, went beyond serving the interests of “a small cross-section of business.”²⁰ As New York’s Governor, Roosevelt initiated classic progressive programs, such as promoting the conservation of natural resources, regulation of utilities, and enforcement of decent labor standards.²¹

¹⁷ Olin, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173.

¹⁸ Beverly Hodghead, “The General Features of the Berkeley Charter,” address delivered before the Convention of California Municipalities, September 21, 1909.

¹⁹ Jackson K. Putnam, “The Progressive Legacy in California,” in Deverell and Sitton, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-257

²⁰ Daniel R. Fusfield, *The Economic Thought of Franklin Roosevelt and the Origins of the New Deal*, Columbia University Press (New York: 1954), pp. 88-89.

²¹ Fusfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121, 150-151.

The Great Depression brought Roosevelt into the White House. The catastrophic conditions of the times tested the validity of the old progressive ideals and, to some extent, transformed them. The need to rely on organized labor, then concentrated in large industrial concerns, as a political ally and the pressing need to stimulate production made him look increasingly to favor economic institutions.

Some Roosevelt confidants, such as Rexford Tugwell, Adolf A. Berle, and Gardiner Means, now saw the old entrepreneurial class as an anachronism in a world dominated by large corporate, labor, and governmental bureaucracies. This notion, later to be refined by liberal thinkers including John Kenneth Galbraith, would become indifferent, or even hostile, to independent business.

In the process, Roosevelt helped transform progressivism into modern interest group liberalism. This new ideology essentially replaced the progressive notion of “fairness” and hostility to concentrated power with a more *dirigiste* approach favoring a strong central government dedicated to both redistributing wealth to favored groups and building national power.²² If the old progressives prided themselves on providing favors to no one, noted historian Richard Hofstaeder, the liberal state “offered favors to everyone.”²³

These tendencies were exacerbated by both the Second World War and the ensuing conflict with the Soviet Union, both of which greatly increased the power of the central government. Later, the rise of the civil rights and environmental movements also focused more attention on federal intervention, particularly at the judicial level.²⁴

THE LIMITS OF INTEREST GROUP LIBERALISM

The liberalism that blossomed in the postwar era diverged dramatically from the standards of traditional progressivism. In contrast to the idea of a broad public interest, liberalism became ever more identified with specific interest groups – minorities, feminists, union members, and gays – whose agendas often did not resonate well with the majority of middle- and working-class voters.

The failure of this approach was most evident in the decline of the large cities, which had been the birthplace both for progressivism and, later, interest group liberals. The greatest of all American cities, New York epitomized this process. Under Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia, a Republican of the Theodore Roosevelt stripe, the city built new parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, roads, and sanitation systems with an almost messianic fervor.

La Guardia’s expanded city government, noted Fred Siegel, still operated under an efficiency-oriented progressive administration. La Guardia and his parks commissioner, Robert Moses fired political appointees and dismissed incumbents, leading some public employees to identify him with the Italian dictator Mussolini. Rejecting narrow ideology, he famously claimed: “There is no Republican or Democratic way to clean streets.”²⁵

²² Fusfield, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²³ Hofstaeder, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

²⁴ “Rescuing Environmentalism,” *The Economist*, April 21, 2005.

²⁵ Ken Auletta, *The Streets Were Paved With Gold: The Decline of New York, An American Tragedy*, Random House (New York: 1975), p. 261.

La Guardia's sense of social issues remained tied to traditional middle- and working-class values. A strong supporter of civil rights, he never attempted to identify his liberalism with the cultural avant garde. La Guardia himself liked the combination of "progressive government and conservative art."²⁶

La Guardia's successors, in New York and elsewhere, did not stick to this moral and administrative rigor. The share government workers in New York's workforce expanded from 10 percent in 1950 to over 17 percent in 1970s but with increasingly little accountability. Meanwhile, public employee unions evolved into a dominant political force not only in New York but also in many major cities.²⁷

At the same time, liberalism increasingly identified itself with a radicalized social agenda. Embracing the politics of black power, gay advocacy, feminism, and chicanismo, liberal politicians further alienated themselves from the vast American middle class, which now increasingly opted to live elsewhere.

Indeed, despite a widespread concept of an "urban renaissance," businesses and people, particularly middle-class families, continue to flee the urban core. In some areas – Detroit, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Boston, Cleveland, and New Orleans – the number of people in the cities is actually shrinking while in most others, the liberal city is losing its share of the metropolitan population to its more conservative leaning suburbs and exurbs.²⁸

The disastrous record of the Democratic Party since 1968 stands as persuasive evidence of liberal political failure. With the exception of two centrist southerners – Carter and Clinton – the Democrats have been significantly rebuffed, reduced largely to fighting rear-guard action against a more vibrant right-wing Republican agenda. As historian Fred Siegel noted: "Modern liberalism was born there in the big cities and died there, a suicide of sorts."²⁹

THE CALIFORNIA CASE

In California, progressive politics lingered well after the war. Governor Republican Earl Warren, who served between 1943 and 1953, epitomized progressive virtues– pragmatic in policy, nonpartisan in approach, and activist in his manner.

Under Warren, California prospered enough to find room for some tax cuts. But Warren also spent much of the surplus tax revenues on roads, mental health facilities, and schools. Even Warren's defeats, on issues like health insurance and civil rights, revealed how much he was ahead of the curve on cutting-edge political issues.³⁰

²⁶ Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, Vintage (New York: 1975), pp. 445-457; Fred Siegel, *The Future Once Happened Here: New York, D.C., L.A., and the Fate of America's Big Cities*, Free Press (New York: 1997), pp. 17-32.

²⁷ Ken Auletta, *op cit.* p. 32.

²⁸ Ronald Brownstein and Richard Rainey, "GOP Plants Flag on New Voting Frontier," *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 2004.

²⁹ Siegel, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

³⁰ Putnam, *op.cit.*, pp. 257-259.

Yet, within Warren's own Republican Party, new forces were emerging that would soon overwhelm the progressive faction. The growth in the ranks of more conservative voters in suburban Southern California was turning the Republican Party toward an increasingly right-wing orientation.

Progressivism now found its home largely within the Democratic Party. Under Edmund G. Pat Brown, elected in 1958, the state continued with an aggressive program of public works, a rapid expansion of higher education, and the massive California Water Project. Like his Republican progressive predecessors, Brown advocated civil rights for minorities but also remained tied to many prominent business interests, notably in real estate development, Hollywood, aerospace, and agribusiness.

Brown also embraced the traditional good government principles of the progressives. Shortly after taking office, Brown initiated a thoroughgoing reorganization of state government, attempting to make it more businesslike. California, Brown himself noted, needed "to apply the latest concepts of management, organization and cost control just as modern corporations have done, and are continuing to do..."³¹

Yet by the mid-1960s, Brown's traditional progressivism was being undermined by the rise of interest group liberalism. State employees, left-liberal lobby groups, and minorities were demanding more and more from the governor. Fed up with ever-increasing taxes and social spending, business interests became increasingly alienated from Brown. Once seen as a boon to the private sector, state government was increasingly perceived by corporate interests as overly meddling and hostile.

Perhaps even more damaging was the cultural rift that now developed. Many Anglo middle- and working-class voters felt threatened by the rise of new militant minority and student groups. Riots at Berkeley, in 1964, and Watts, the following year, deepened resentments against the university and African Americans, two linchpins of the Brown's support.

In the 1966 gubernatorial election, Ronald Reagan smashed Brown and what was left of the old progressive coalition. The former actor captured both business support and grassroots votes in previously Democratic-leaning areas in suburban Los Angeles and the Central Valley.

Wealthy interests largely financed Reagan's campaign and dominated his eight years in Sacramento. Interviews with his closest confidants at the time make clear that their agenda was not social conservatism but a desire to reduce the progressive era regulatory regime and, at the same time, restore order on the state's campuses and ghetto streets.³²

One scholar has claimed that Reagan "destroyed" progressivism, but some of the blame should also be laid at the feet of the Democrats. People who paid taxes for California's world-leading system of education, for example, had a right to be displeased when these were roiled by civil unrest.

³¹ Ron Seyb, "It's Ideas That Matter," in Martin Schiesl, editor, *Responsible Liberalism: Edmund G. Brown and Reform Government in California, 1958-1967*, Pat Brown Institute (Los Angeles: 2003), pp.125-139.

³² Interviews conducted by the author in 1980.

Of course, there was also a significant racist sentiment behind the massive shift to the Republicans. Even legitimate civil rights demands engendered resentment from some whites, particularly those whose roots were in the South or rural Midwest. Yet whatever his source of support, Reagan now tapped a new political majority largely through the desertion of disgruntled Anglo Democrats.³³

Over the next decades, the Democrats would fare better in California than in the rest of the nation, but traditional progressivism never returned to the state. Even Reagan's successor, Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown, Jr., veered away from the traditional focus on non-partisan governance and infrastructure spending – what long-time advisor Tom Quinn called "this build, build, build thing"³⁴ – and instead focused on an environmentally friendly "small is beautiful" approach.

But the real problems did not lay with the brash, creative, and sometime unpredictable young governor. It was entrenched in Democratic interest groups, particularly public employees who refused, among other things, to vote for property tax relief for California's middle-class homeowners. Ultimately, this failure brought about the passage of Proposition 13, a draconian measure that would sharply limit infrastructure spending for the next quarter century.

Now, arguably, the best-organized political force in the state, public employees, along with groups such as trial lawyers and narrow interest activist groups, gained a dominant hand over Democrats in the legislature. Their ability to raise money, and impose their political will, often outweighed that of even the most powerful business interests.

This failure was evidenced in the recall-shortened gubernatorial reign of Gray Davis, Brown's former chief of staff. Although cognizant of the old progressive tradition, and instinctively pro-business, Davis failed to restrain the escalating demands of the new style "progressives" – essentially allies of the liberal interest groups -- who now dominated his party.

These post-1980s progressives shared little of the traditional progressive concern for small business, competition, infrastructure spending, or efficient management. Their goal, as reflected by their dutiful supporters in the legislature, was to increase spending on salaries and pensions for public workers, regulate business for the benefit of environmental or labor causes, and advance the general civil rights agenda.

As a result, even with a massive state surplus, Davis did little to expand the state's infrastructure at a time when the state's population was again growing rapidly. And when the state's revenues shrank after the high-tech bust in 2000, Davis found himself unable to resist the demands of these so-called progressives. Perhaps the most telling example of the misplaced priorities of the Democratic mindset took place amid the state budget crisis when legislators, facing an imminent fiscal disaster, took time to debate legislation about providing more protections for transgender Californians.

³³ Putnam, *op. cit.*, pp. 262-263; Matthew Dallek, "Up From Liberalism: Pat Brown, Ronald Reagan, and the 1966 Gubernatorial Election," in Martin Schiesl, editor, *op. cit.* pp. 202-207; Denise Spooner, "The Revitalization of the Right: The GOP During the Reagan Years," in Schiesl, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-229.

³⁴ Interview with author in 1975.

RESTORING PROGRESSIVISM IN CALIFORNIA AND AMERICA

The problems now afflicting President Bush and Governor Schwarzenegger, lead some Democratic “progressives” to predict an inevitable return to power. Yet even if political fortunes change, the agenda embraced by many of these “progressives” – ever-expanding social spending, tough regulations against business, generous support for public employee pensions – do not constitute a workable governing strategy.

THE PROBLEM WITH BLUE STATE PROGRESSIVISM

In this context, what actually constitutes progressivism constitutes increasingly critical concern for those who want to see meaningful change.

Sadly, the predominant definition in California and today’s notion of the term progressive diverges dramatically from its historic roots. Instead of favoring robust private-sector economic growth, the emphasis tends toward remedial measures, such as redistributing wealth to selected “victim” groups. In the same way, the idea of efficiency in government has been replaced with a kind of shadow government by public employees who increasingly dominate “progressives” on city councils and in the state legislature.

At the same time, the old progressive ideals of being nonpartisan and supporting the overall public good have been lost. Much of the blame here belongs to a Republican Party that seems either ashamed or ignorant of its own progressive tradition. In the end, we are left with two widely divergent political tendencies, one far to the left and the other, far to the right, neither of which seems capable of serving the true interests of either America or the state of California.

The new progressivism reflects largely the narcissism of its political base in the urban core and a few elite suburbs. Liberal “progressive” activists in affluent, largely childless places like San Francisco, Manhattan, Seattle, Portland, and Boston see the world as needing simply to become more like themselves. As *The Stranger*, a Seattle weekly, put it, they perceive themselves as “islands of sanity, liberalism and compassion” compared with the suburbs, exurbs, and rural areas where “people are fatter and slower and dumber.”

The new progressives’ prescriptions for America reflect their prejudices. They favor, among other things, greater density and huge subsidies for urban mass transit systems over better roads. They seem often more concerned with environmental protection than the creation of jobs. Not surprisingly, as labor- advocate Harold Meyerson pointed out, most white blue-collar workers trusted Republican Bush over Democratic Kerry on economic issues in the 2004 election.³⁵

In economic terms, blue state progressives also seem to be living in a solipsistic dream world. Rather than focus on sparking growth, they tend to look more favorably at re-

³⁵ Matt Smith, “Housing Democrats: Why Democratic Mayors Must Build America’s Cities by Establishing an Urban Real Estate Cartel,” *San Francisco Weekly*, December 15, 2004; “The Urban Archipelago,” by the editors of *The Stranger*, November 17, 2004; Harold Meyerson, “ISO Working-Class Democrats,” *Washington Post*, February 23, 2005.

distributive measures, such as higher minimum wages (the so-called living wage) and enforced union rules on state projects. At best, these measures help only a few workers at the low end of the spectrum; however, as a recent Public Policy Institute of California report suggested, such measures often tend to reduce employment opportunities for the least skilled.³⁶

Finally, the contemporary blue state progressives lack the strong moral convictions that underlined the policies of leaders such as Hiram Johnson.

The progressive lexicon, as Hofstadter noted, was full of old-fashioned values about patriotism, the role of the citizen, the importance of law and character, conscience, morals, service, duty, and shame.³⁷ In contrast, contemporary blue state progressivism tends toward at best an indifference to notions of discipline, self-reliance, and other traditional moral or religious ideals.

This moral failing may be the most difficult of all to overcome. Without a sense of right and wrong, or of balance and discipline, no serious reform program can succeed. Even in a postindustrial era, suggested the late Daniel Bell, the fate of societies still revolve around “a conception of public virtue” and the “classical questions of the polis,” that is, how best to solve the overall public good.³⁸

WHAT WOULD BE THE BASIS OF A REVIVED PROGRESSIVE AGENDA IN CALIFORNIA AND THE NATION?

To succeed in the new century, progressivism must move away from its current configuration and back to its core, fundamental principles. Modern progressives need to focus, as the turn of the century reformers did, on issues that impact the vast middle and working class. They must place serving the needs of the public above those who work for the state. And they must express stronger appreciation for religion and traditional morality.

There are clearly powerful issues upon which reformers – in either party – could restore the progressive legacy. On the national level, these clearly lie with domestic issues surrounding middle-class concerns in an era of social and economic instability, energy dependence, our crumbling physical infrastructure, the rising challenge posed by China and India, and cloudy prospects facing the next generation.

The recent disaster around New Orleans reflected all these concerns in sharp relief. Republican conservative attitudes on planning, conservation, and investment in basic infrastructure have clearly contributed to the tragedy along the Gulf. But so did the fail-

³⁶ Scott Adams and David Neumark, “A Decade of Living Wages: What Have We Learned?” *California Economic Policy*, Public Policy Institute of California, July 2005.

³⁷ Hofstadter, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

³⁸ Lenn Chow, Des Verma, Martin Callacott, and Steve Kaufmann, “Ethno-Politics Threaten Canadian Democracy”, *National Post*, March 31, 2004; Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago: 1990), p. 26.

ures of the corrupt, inefficient Democratic liberal administrations that have controlled cities such as New Orleans for generations. The need for a rigorous, forward-looking approach to urban development was never clearer.³⁹

In California, these issues are put in sharp relief by the state's continuing rapid growth. As the progressives understood in their day, growth requires a massive investment in infrastructure – ports, roads, and water and power system – to be sustainable and successful. In the era from Hiram Johnson to Pat Brown, California led the nation in all these areas.

Today the picture could not be more different. California's power system routinely experiences brownouts and blackouts and water prices often rise rapidly while the ports, notably the great Los Angeles-Long Beach port complex, remain highly congested and under constant threat of increased competition from the East Coast, the Pacific Northwest and, in the future, Mexico's Baja California.⁴⁰

The biggest beneficiaries of such investments would be California's business community as well as its middle and working class. Lower electrical and water rates, for example, would help preserve the state's industrial facilities – from semiconductor aerospace plants to textile mills. Reinvestment in the port complexes is critical to employment growth. The LA-Long Beach trade complex, the world's third largest port system, accounts for as much as 15 to 20 percent of the region's total employment, much of it in highly paid, blue-collar sectors.⁴¹

Another area critical to the middle class lies in the development of the state's human capital. California's educational system has been in decline for decades. Its worker training system lags behind states such as Wisconsin and Georgia. Although still a center for the elite, creative talent in the world, California employers frequently complain of the low level of skill and work commitment of the overall workforce. The state's rebounding aerospace industry, for example, is experiencing problems finding new workers to replace aging skilled technicians and machinists.⁴²

The priorities of infrastructure, education, and economy have the virtue of appealing to voters both in the urban core and in the so-called red parts of California. These include

³⁹ "Report: Nation's Infrastructure Crumbling," *USA Today*, March 11, 2005; Ray Fournier, "Plenty of Katrina Blame," *Associate Press*, September 1, 2005; Sharon Begley, "Man-Made Mistakes Increase Devastation of 'Natural' Disasters," *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2005; Timothy Aepell, "U.S. Waterway System Shows Its Age," *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2005.

⁴⁰ Daniel Machalara, "How Savannah Brought New Life to Its Aging Port," *Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2005; David Greenberg, "Port Logjams Force Ships to Detour North," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, November 15, 2004; Ellen Hanak, "Water for Growth," *Public Policy Institute of California*, 2005, pp. 1-5; Ronald D. White, "L.A. Ports Unclogged but Not in the Clear," *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 2004; David Greenberg, "Mexican Ports Could Take Traffic From L.A.," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, August 16, 2004.

⁴¹ Gregory Treverton, "Making the Most of Southern California's Global Engagement," Pacific Council on International Relations, June 2001; U.S. Department of Transportation, Waterborne Databank; Steve Erie, "Enhancing Southern California's Global Gateways." Pacific Council on International Relations, June 2003.

⁴² Matt Meyerhoff, "Aerospace Struggles to Replace Generation of Engineers," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, May 30, 2005.

areas, such as the Inland Empire and the Central Valley, that increasingly represent the future demographic vitality of the state.

Voters in these areas would be the primary target for a renewed progressive movement. Just as Hiram Johnson barnstormed the turn-of-the-century farm country or Pat Brown wooed the booming suburbs of postwar California, a contemporary progressive movement must find its base beyond the elite bastions in the core cities. Focusing primarily on winning votes among minorities or well-heeled “enlightened” San Francisco and Santa Monica voters is not a long-term winning strategy.

If the old progressive leaders were around today, they likely would already have laid out the challenges before us. They would not spend their time placating the extremes of their parties, much less let special interests or public employees divert them from the basic business before the nation and California.

Whether the next generation of such like-minded progressives occurs within one party or the other, or in a new party, is of little long-term importance. What matters is to find political leadership that is interested in getting the public’s work done.

*Joel Kotkin is an Irvine Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation. He is the author of *The City: A Global History, Modern Library* (New York: 2005).*