

Progressivism and Reform

As the country continued its progression from a rural society to an urban society in a period of immense population growth and industrialization, many were concerned with the social and economic effects of this change, especially in the cities. Morality was low and corruption high. Many blamed the conditions of immigrant life in these cities as the source of all urban ills. In the early twentieth century an era of reform called the **Progressive Movement** emerged as a series of attempts to address social and economic issues.

A chief concern of progressives was that immigrants would never assimilate or “Americanize.” A contemporary wrote that. “The influx of foreigners into our urban centers, many of whom have liquor habits, is a menace. . . The hope of perpetuating our liberties is to help the foreigner correct any demoralizing custom, and through self-restraint, to assimilate American ideals.” Many saw the ideals of the founding fathers being swept away and vowed to re-institute social justice and democratic ideals.

Progressives theorized that advances in science, technology, economic development and social organization could improve the human condition; essentially, reform through improvement. They believed that at the root of all urban problems, moral and behavioral, lay the tenement housing system. By improving the living conditions of immigrants, Progressives reasoned that many other social problems would be resolved. Tenement house investigators noted at the time that, “the physical conditions under which these people live lessen their power of resisting evil.” In 1900, the *New York Tribune* wrote of the Lower East Side that:

The squalor, the poverty, the hopeless drudgery, and the queer features of this foreign district are evident to the visitor, no matter how hurriedly he goes over the ground, but the crime with which that part of the city is infested has been concealed from the general public until it gained such proportions . . . other parts of the East Side tenement-house district . . . shelter crime in its worst form, and the inmates of these apartments contaminate their neighbors and create an atmosphere in which good morals cannot exist.

Journalist, photographer and social activist **Jacob Riis** was one of the most prolific reformers of the time. His groundbreaking, searing exposé, *How the Other Half Lives*, shed light on the plight of the immigrant poor living in New York City’s Lower East Side. His social criticism centered on the disparity between the rich and poor: “That half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate of those who were underneath.” His publication shocked the nation. Furthermore, it became a catalyst and call to action for some, including then-New York City

Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt. The two became allies in the fight for reform in 1894 when Riis worked as a journalist for the *Evening Sun*. As Vice-President, Theodore Roosevelt wrote of Riis in April of 1901:

The countless evils which lurk in the dark corners of our civic institutions, which stalk abroad in the slums, and have their permanent abode in the crowded tenement houses, have met in Mr. Riis the most formidable opponent ever encountered by them in New York. . . . Mr. Riis was given, in addition to earnestness and zeal, the great gift of expression, the great gift of making others see what he saw and feel what he felt. His book, "How the Other Half Lives," did really go a long way toward removing the ignorance on which one-half of the world of New York dwelt concerning the life of the other half.



[Jacob Riis Self-Portrait](#), c. 1901, Jacob Riis, gelatin silver print, National Portrait Gallery Smithsonian Institution

In an effort to combat the social and economic issues facing the urban destitute, a political party called the Progressive Party was founded by Roosevelt in 1912. The short-lived party's platform contained a number of social, economic and political reforms. The social reforms advocated by the party set the foundation for programs that still exist today: insurance to provide for the elderly, disabled and unemployed; an eight hour workday; and workers' compensation for on-the-job injuries.

Just as Jacob Riis's photographs shed light on the plight of immigrants, so too did the artworks of Everett Shinn. Yet despite the identical subject matter, Shinn's intent was not to exact social change like Riis, but merely to evoke a mood or a particular activity. In an interview Shinn recalled the ambitions of the Ashcan School: "Not one of us had a program . . . sure we were against the monocle-pictures at the Academy, but that was all. None of us had a message – and it's funny now when they try to make me a 'protest' painter. I wasn't." Nevertheless, his illustrations aided and inspired reformers and socially concerned citizens in accurately representing the squalor of downtown life. Shinn remembered a conversation with Mrs. Frances Morgan, wife of famed American financier J. Pierpont Morgan, in which she had asked him if his artworks "represented truth," to which Shinn replied, "Truth, yes, but understated, as odor couldn't be unless I dipped my drawing in refuse." He recalled that, "A week later, Mrs.

Morgan's secretary told me that Mrs. Morgan had opened a haven for those unfortunate souls on the Lower East Side. But I had no such intention in mind."

Supporters of restricted immigration also wanted saloons closed as it was assumed that immigrants were the chief patrons of drinking establishments. It was believed that alcohol demoralized the character of the immigrant, kept him in poverty, contributed to the decline of family life, and prevented him from becoming a responsible American citizen. A chief concern was the economic impact of alcohol consumption. Supporters of prohibition argued that consuming alcohol limited an individual's efficiency to function at work, in turn hampering industrial production, which on a larger scale interfered with the prosperity and progress of America. Just like the literacy tests, the **18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution** establishing the **Prohibition** era was another attempt at social control over the immigrant population. Prohibition eventually backfired as the illegal manufacturing and sale of alcohol increased the volume of organized crime. The amendment was repealed in 1933, just thirteen years after its institution.

Glossary

18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: established the ban on all manufacturing, transportation and sales of alcoholic beverages. It is the only amendment to the Constitution to be repealed.

Jacob Riis: (1849-1914) Danish-American social reformer and photographer, author of *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), a published work of photojournalism that exposed the squalid living conditions of the poor in the slums of New York.

Progressive Movement: also referred to as the Progressive Era, the movement was comprised of social and political reform in response to industrialization and its byproducts: immigration, urban growth, growing corporate power, and widening class divisions.

Prohibition: the period of time from 1920 to 1933 in the United States when it was illegal to manufacture, transport, or sell alcohol, except for medicinal and religious purposes.