A European Progressive Era?

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Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 634 pp., $36.95, ISBN 0-674-05131-9.

Axel R. Schäfer, *American Progressives and German Social Reform, 1875–1920* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000), 252 pp., €37.00, ISBN 3-515-07461-9.

Nancy Stieber, *Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam. Reconfiguring Urban Order and Identity, 1900–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 386 pp., $45.00, ISBN 0-226-77417-1.

Christian Topalov, ed., *Laboratoires du nouveau siècle. La nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France, 1880–1914*, (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1999), 574 pp., €38.00. ISBN 2-7132-1323-1.

Looking through the bibliographies of these books, or referring to the footnotes, I was interested to note that some of them were already engaged in dialogue. This review essay aims to pursue that dialogue from the outside. The subjects of these works are, at first sight, rather widely divorced from one another. Nancy Stieber looks at housing reform, with particular reference to architecture, in Amsterdam from 1900 to 1920. Daniel Rodgers examines the European connections of American social reformers in the first half of the twentieth century, while Axel Schäfer approaches the same subject from a different angle – links between the United States and Germany – and covering a different time span, from 1875 to 1920. The volume edited by Christian Topalov is devoted to social reform networks in France at the turn of the twentieth century (1880–1914). Thus all four works focus on the early years of the twentieth century. Despite the diversity of their subjects, they all claim to deal with 'reforming' enterprises, mostly urban in scope and seeking changes to the urban environment or the municipal administration. Looking from one to another, the reader begins to wonder how best to define the word 'reform'. Among American historians the term 'Progressive Era' is generally recognised as legitimate and meaningful; might we cautiously suggest that there was a similar 'era' in certain European countries? If we answer 'yes', we must consider a synchronicity (the social changes in a number of countries around the turn of the century), a formal similarity (reformers working through non-governmental institutions), and a fairly consistent vocabulary giving considerable space to scientific

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terminology and scientific paradigms. At first sight this may seem to involve a series of forced and approximate comparisons and contrasts between two different cultural systems. But the approach is justified by the actual contacts that were established between American and European reformers. In any case, if we are to answer the question, we must first ask the works reviewed here to provide us with a clear working definition of 'social reform', particularly 'urban reform', at the turn of the twentieth century. After that we will examine the approach in terms of transnational transfers and interconnections, which some of our authors have used to detect links between Europe and the United States in the earliest years of the twentieth century.

What is reform?

The works reviewed here all raise the question of their own chronological limits. This is not a purely formal question: the selected timeframes give interesting insights into the authors' preferred attitudes and viewpoints. Is 'reform' an actual historical period ? Christian Topalov stresses the fact that the chronology dear to traditionalist political historiography, which considered the Dreyfus affair as the dawn of the new century, prevented scholarship from including any consideration of the French 'nébuleuse réformatrice' before that alleged turning point. Focusing on political and parliamentary life, relying principally on governmental sources and sticking strictly to traditional chronological and political frameworks, this kind of history tended to ignore anything that was marginal to (or at the fringes of) power and any location where the frontiers of political and social life were shifting. The works reviewed here focus on a particular historical moment, and most endeavour to bring out its peculiarities. Rodgers's subtitle refers to a 'progressive age', which he takes as the long-accepted period in American history called the 'Progressive Era', from the last decade of the nineteenth century to 1920 – a period which saw the emergence of a new kind of social regulation. It is taken as crucial to an understanding of the genesis of modern America, whether social, political or economic.[1] Rodgers extends his study up to the Second World War, but with heavy emphasis on the redefinition of trans-Atlantic relationships among reformers in the aftermath of the Great War. As far as the Americans were concerned, these relationships ended after the 1940s, when the United States emerged as the leading superpower. Axel Schäfer examines the same period, but only up to the First World War, which in his opinion seriously weakened the links between European and American reformers. Nancy Stieber concentrates on the first two decades of the twentieth century, a period of intensive urban reform in response to the needs supposedly created by years of rapid urbanisation. She focuses on disputes over the definition of 'architecture' – science, art, profession or social service? – illustrating her arguments with references to the

[1] Kevin Matson's *Creating a Democratic Public. The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy during the Progressive Era* (University Park : The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998) stresses the importance of the 'Progressive Era' to an understanding of the broad social and economic characteristics of 'modern America' (see p. 5).

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development of social housing in Amsterdam in the wake of the 1902 Housing Act, which licensed town councils to initiate and control housing schemes on publicly owned land. The essays in Topalov's book span the period from the 1880s, which saw the stabilisation of republican government in France and a reconfiguration of the social elite, to the First World War – which acted as 'one of the best possible testing grounds' for reform, but also, and more important, interrupted the process of reform 'in its personnel, its organisational structures and its working methods' (p. 46).

Thus all our authors see reform in terms of movements, that is galaxies of enterprises all intent on palliating the evils of 'modernisation' – particularly industrialisation. They were not simply dispensing charity, but trying to introduce measures that would guarantee social peace. Thus the housing reform movement in Amsterdam, which claimed scientific backing for its approach, paid attention to such wider-ranging problems as the modernisation of water supplies, urban transport and hygiene. Through such endeavours reform became 'an opportunity to fashion and maintain urban order by controlling the physical environment', particularly that of the working classes (Stieber, p. 4). Stieber shows how architects, not content to serve the needs of other decision-makers, themselves contributed to the construction of a new urban order. Architects, like other reformers, rose to prominence in a new field of activity, open to various urban experts and structured around their differing approaches to the 'social question'. Although reformers' discourse was predicated on opposition to 'laissez-faire', they were not necessarily in favour of increased state control. They pressed for social welfare programmes backed by both the private and the public sector. Schäfer strongly disagrees that it was the reformers who made the welfare state possible. His study of the American reform movement and its trans-Atlantic links reveals an emerging *liberal* welfare state that became firmly established after the First World War (pp. 21–2). Topalov, on the other hand, tells us that the reform movement served to define areas of potential social and political transformation, arguing that its impact depended mainly on its capacity to define new fields of public action for both individuals and institutions: reform meant, above all, action. The exact boundaries of 'reform' can be hard to define – in France, for example, where Topalov brings out the overlap between reform and politics, or reform and administration, having previously emphasised the same lack of distinction between 'the social sciences and the developing technical expertise' (p. 462).

There was a relationship, albeit a wavering one, between reform and science. The scientific language used by the reformers needs to be taken seriously, as Topalov points out, saying that it not only conferred legitimacy but also offered model approaches to observation and interpretation (pp. 39–40). The reformers used science as a tool for defining problems and finding solutions. Hence studies of reform movements are an opportunity to take a fresh look at the history of science and of academic disciplines. Stieber shows how the housing reformers sought to improve living conditions by inventing new kinds of housing, rejecting the standardised plans of 'speculative' builders already on the market. The new plans

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acted like a sort of black box, containing the answers to all sorts of social problems. The new rules, seen as rational and unprejudiced, represented the values of civilised urban order and modernity cherished by the experts, bureaucrats and politicians who approved of the new plans (Stieber, p. 153). Social workers, hygienists, social engineers and architects saw those plans as a way of fostering civilised behaviour: the separation of domestic functions in the new housing was seen as a spatial organisation of civilisation. Stieber shows how after the Great War this new housing plan – a cognitive and social tool – became institutionalised as the new standard. This reforming experiment sheds new light on the history of academic disciplines – particularly the social sciences – and their institutionalisation. The interaction of reform and science harks back to earlier work on the relationship between social science and social reform in late nineteenth-century England. It is no longer *de rigueur* to criticise the practical and political aims of the leading experimental reformers merely because they never succeeded in establishing them as academic disciplines in the universities.[2] The reformers had no such aim: it was not until several decades later that universities were seen as inviting ivory towers, and academic study as a refuge for reformers whose political ambitions had been frustrated.[3] The works reviewed here contribute to this discussion of the (sometimes disputed) creation of disciplines. Daniel Rodgers begins with a chapter on the 1900 Universal Exhibition, the symbol of the brave new iron world of industry. Like Topalov, he looks in detail at 'social economics', the science of social peace, the scientific approach to the social problem. Social economics embraced all attempts to temper, socialise and average out the pains of capitalist transformation. 'Social economics' was a favourite term of turn-of-the-century reformist discourse – as Antoine Savoye and Marc Pénin remind us when studying the same phenomenon in France.[4] Topalov introduces this 'forgotten science' and shows how it was institutionalised, first in the 'complex world of social reform' – thanks to (*inter alia*) the 1889 and 1900 exhibitions – and then in the universities (pp. 29–38). Thus the

[2] Stephen Cole has investigated the apparent failure of nineteenth-century English social science and its near-absence from twentieth-century social science discourse. He explains this discontinuity partly in terms of the tenuous relationship between social scientists and reformers. Since, in the long run, reform took priority over science, institutionalisation proved impossible. Stephen Cole, 'Continuity and Institutionalization: A Case Study in Failure', in Anthony Oberschall (ed.), *The Establishment of Empirical Sociology: Studies in Continuity, Discontinuity and Institutionalization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

[3] Lawrence Goldman's study of the Social Science Association seeks to explain why sociology was 'absent' from nineteenth-century England, and shows that when it did become institutionalised as a 'discipline', at the end of the century, this was at least partly due to the frustration of the political aims of the English 'liberal bourgeoisie'. Lawrence Goldman, 'A Peculiarity of the English? The Social Science Association and the Absence of Sociology in Nineteenth Century Britain', *Past and Present*, 114, February 1987.

[4] Savoye's article on the Société d'Economie Sociale is an attempt to assess the extent of the 'audience', or influence, of the Le Playsien movement: Antoine Savoye, 'Les paroles et les actes: les dirigeants de la Société d'économie sociale, 1883–1914', in Topalov, *Laboratoires*, 61–87. Pénin follows the career of Charles Gide, bringing out the interaction between social Christianity, social economics and reform: Marc Pénin, 'Un solidarisme interventionniste: la *Revue d'économie politique* et la nébuleuse réformatrice, 1887–1914', ibid., 95–119.

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reformists' spheres of activity emerge as sites for the construction of a history of science which is not only focused on institutionalisation but also, taking due account of diverse claims to a 'scientific' approach, shows how knowledge and expertise could emerge outside the legitimate territory of academic disciplines – learned journals, universities, and so on.

It seems right to see the reformers' world as a 'common ground where politicians mingled with civil servants and old-fashioned philanthropists'.[5] It is hard to grasp such a polymorphic, and yet unique, phenomenon while sticking to one standpoint, be it intellectual, institutional or social history. We must borrow, as necessary, from each of these fields if we are to investigate reforming activity which existed in the interstices between all of them. Indeed, the very choice of reforming networks as a subject of study implies the formulation of a strong set of theoretical and methodological choices.

Not all the authors reviewed here use the same method. It is Stieber who adopts the most definite position and gives the clearest indication of her borrowings (pp. 2–9). She refers in particular to Michel Foucault and the relationship between knowledge and power – knowledge engendering power and vice versa. Hygiene, urban aesthetics and architecture are seen as tools for improving social control, particularly over the working class. But Stieber also echoes Pierre Bourdieu's stress on the social dynamics of cultural production, and the notion of 'fields': the tensions that constituted the field of cultural production sprang from a structured interplay of forces between the institutions and agents active in that field. She is interested in architectural style, but (as already mentioned) attempts rather to trace the historical sociology of an enterprise aimed at defining architecture as 'a science, an art, a profession and a social service' (p. 2). Avoiding the consideration of housing as a mere matter of aesthetics, she insists that it should be seen as a product of modern social practice and of the tensions at the heart of modernity. Topalov also talks in terms of fields in his 'free interpretation' of Bourdieu: the 'field' is 'an autonomous system of positions, actors and institutions organised on the basis of specific internal priorities and relationships'. Topalov, however, finds that there are limits to this 'model'. The reforming field is first and foremost a descriptive tool to be used on a selected, and perforce limited, historical period. The essays focus on certain important institutions: conferences (Didier Renard on assistance, Rainer Gregarek on social insurance, Susanna Magri on low-cost housing), associations (Viviane Claude insists that the association is an important form of 'reforming action') and learned journals.

Rodgers and Schäfer are more reticent about their methodology and their approach to examining the nature of reformers as a group. Only by noting the sources they use, and the way they write about them, can we discern certain methodological assumptions. Rodgers uses mainly printed sources, including travellers' tales recounting meetings between reformers from both sides of the

[5] Pierre Rosanvallon, 'Préface: figures et méthodes du changement social', in Colette Chambelland, ed., *Le Musée social en son temps* (Paris: Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 1998), 7–8.

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North Atlantic. This, as has been pointed out elsewhere,[6] leads him to neglect correspondence and archive sources, and to ignore other kinds of Atlantic crossings (including projects that never saw the light of day, and exchanges of letters). Rodgers, like Schäfer, concentrates mostly on links between individuals. They are much less interested in the structures which supported, or even organised, the 'crossings' and so made it possible to import reforming ideas and practices. This focus on travel is in tune with the main aim of both works: to trace the genesis of an era, a period of common social policy on both sides of the Atlantic; to show what differences sprang from this network of transnational connections, and how it contributed to political decision-making. It is an exceptionally stimulating approach.

Comparison or transfer?

Topalov devotes a considerable part of his introduction to terminology: 'reformer', a familiar word to contemporaries, has been neglected in French history and by French historians, whereas others have found it quite a relevant category for analysis. Topalov proposes 'using this imported notion [i.e. imported from the United States and Britain] to challenge assumptions that are deeply rooted in French political, intellectual and historiographical tradition' (p. 12). He calls for a 'controlled transfer', especially as such a transfer is intrinsic to the very subject of the book: French reformers forged and maintained links with their opposite numbers across the Atlantic (or the Channel). These links are treated rather anecdotally in the book, but nonetheless seem to license a transfer of notions which have become well rooted in American historiography. American studies of early twentieth-century reform in the United States are legion. During the Progressive Era, the move to the industrial towns tended to break up the communities that had been so powerful in the nineteenth century. Progress, relentless change and the new divisions of social work assigned extensive powers to various levels of government and did a good deal to centralise authority.[7] The rules of the political game and of public intervention changed, at both local, state and federal level. From 1910 onwards, such reformers described themselves as 'progressive', and the word has since been taken up by most historians and political scientists to describe a rather heterogeneous collection of 'movements'.[8] Political reform was essentially urban: municipal government was the first target of the progressives.[9] And this is the imported notion that Topalov hopes to apply to the galaxy of French reformers at the turn of the twentieth century. Other contributors concentrate on imports, transfers and the travels of reformers. But these interconnections must be carefully examined, to avoid falling back on

[6] See Pierre-Yves Saunier's contribution to the *H Net* symposium on Rodgers's book: *H Urban*, 10/06/1999, http://www.unimelb.edu.au/infoserv/urban/hma/hurban/current/0043.html

[7] Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967), 5.

[8] Daniel T. Rodgers, 'In search of Progressivism', *Reviews in American History*, 10 (December 1982), 113–33.

[9] Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1983), 29.

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unhelpful explanations in terms of 'influence' which merely echo the discourse of reformers anxious to justify their actions through an idealised and stereotyped concept of what was happening abroad.

Although the reformers themselves were very fond of alluding to what was happening abroad and claiming 'influences', it seems preferable for historians to avoid merely reproducing that discourse and instead to investigate exactly how achievements and ideas were imported, or why certain countries became examples to the rest. Stieber avoids all such questions, though she does allude to Amsterdam's international reputation as the Mecca of social housing, and – without further explanation – to an international movement that saw infrastructures as a means of combating the evils of capitalism (p. 2). But the outlines of this 'movement' are left very vague, and there is no further examination of Amsterdam's 'reputation'. Rodgers is suspicious of the comparative method, holding that it tends to stress the differences among distinct legal and national systems; comparison inevitably leads to contrast and so entrenches oppositions. The comparative approach, he argues, takes the differences or resemblances out of context and so obscures the actual mechanisms of acculturation and differentiation. He prefers to examine instances when the transnational game was played according to its own rules, with players of different nationalities. Instead of emphasising the differences, he traces the formation of a 'world in between' – the North Atlantic – through a study of conferences, exhibitions, academic books and periodicals, and organised visits.

Schäfer also focuses on transatlantic connections, in particular transatlantic contributions to the construction of the American reform movement, a subject which he considers to have been neglected by previous historians. He traces this construction through the careers of reformers educated at German universities, or strongly 'influenced' by German reform. He sees the reformers as transatlantic mediators, intellectual middlemen, cultural translators – apostles of the German approach to social problems (p. 220). He stresses the intellectual and social diversity of these 'middlemen'. What they had in common was their experience of foreign travel and their eagerness to import the new ideas they had picked up in Germany. Naturally, reform campaigns (Schäfer is particularly interested in municipal and urban reform) featured references to Germany, as an example and – somewhat idealised – as a source of legitimacy. In their search for foreign models, the reformers were attracted more by cultural 'stereotypes' than by established fact. Schäfer introduces us to some American importers of municipal reform ideas: Richard Ely (1854–1943), who studied in Germany in the late 1870s and was devoted to the idea of municipal autonomy; some of Ely's students, such as Albert Shaw (1857–1947), who took the German model as a basis for applying industrial methods and principles to municipal government; Leo S. Rowe (1871–1946), who spent three years in Europe, and on his return launched a course in municipal government at the Wharton School (1895), where he preached his own creed, the development of a new urban spirit dominated by citizen control of public administration; and, finally, the importer Frank J. Goodnow (1859–1939), who drew a sharp distinction between politics and local government. Through these biographical studies Schäfer

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discerns a nascent science of public administration which aggregated in the first decade of the twentieth century around a series of municipal urban 'problems'.

Both Rodgers and Schäfer urge that 'study visits' should be taken seriously, and that attempts to transfer and imitate foreign achievements should be carefully examined. If we resist the temptation to explain everything in terms of 'influences', we can analyse the construction of public policy by import or imitation. The genesis of public policy has often been seen as a steady movement from the centre towards the periphery; but by looking at each level of local and national government for the horizontal networks that promoted the circulation of ideas, people and achievements, we may come to understand how foreign achievements were imported and copied by a process of 'pulling in'.[10] Then we can begin to discern the emergence of a 'reforming international' around the turn of the century. Academic visits and academic books helped to construct a system of shared references. The English experience – particularly that of the Fabians led by Beatrice and Sidney Webb – nourished the ideas of American reformers[11] as well as of French socialists who were members of the 'Albert Thomas network' at that period.[12] Reformist pilgrims bent their steps towards two favourite locations: the English garden cities, and the Chicago and New York settlements. That North Atlantic 'world in between' depended not only on trips from America to Europe, but also on trips in the reverse direction. The first president of the Musée Social, Jules Siegfried, visited Chicago, where he met Jane Adams, founder of Hull House. He also visited settlement houses in New York and Boston.[13]

Rodgers does not neglect these European visits to America. While noting that the American travellers were vastly more numerous than the Europeans, he shows that this asymmetry decreased in the 1920s, when the 'American invasion of Europe' became more visible through commercial policy and the role of American industry in post-war reconstruction. Schäfer sees a distinct change after Germany's defeat in the Second World War: American reformers jettisoned their German models and ceased to idealise European-style social reform. Is this correct, or do Schäfer's conclusions depend on his choice of material? The archives of some institutions, such as philanthropic foundations, reveal the power of the European model in the interwar period. It is particularly visible in American public adminis-

[10] Wade Jacoby, *Imitation and Politics. Redesigning Modern Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 22.

[11] For example, Charles Zueblin (1866–1924), professor of sociology at the University of Chicago and urban reformer, referred to the Fabian achievement. See Jean-Michel Chapoulie, *La tradition sociologique de Chicago, 1892–1961* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 45.

[12] On the Fabians see Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Ronan van Rossen, 'The Verein für Sozialpolitik and the Fabian Society. A Study in the Sociology of Policy-Relevant Knowledge', in Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, eds., *States, Social Knowledge, and the Origins of Modern Social Policies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 117–62. On the Webbs, see Royden J. Harrison, *The Life and Times of Sydney and Beatrice Webb: 1858–1905: The Formative Years*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[13] Janet Horne, 'Le libéralisme à l'épreuve de l'industrialisation: la réponse du Musée social', in Chambelland, *Le Musée social*, 20. Janet Horne also has a chapter in Topalov's *Laboratoires*: 'L'antichambre de la chambre: le Musée social et ses réseaux réformateurs, 1894–1914' (121–40).

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tration networks, some financed by the Spelman Fund of New York (part of the Rockefeller Foundation), which organised and paid for a large number of transatlantic voyages.[14] These pioneers of public administration, some with links to the turn-of-the-century reformers, still considered such visits to be indispensable.

So was there a 'European progressive era'? There is no easy answer. A straight 'yes' would mean ignoring context and failing to respect the unique chronology of each country. But there were numerous points of contact between the American reformers who helped to engineer the Progressive Era and their European counterparts. Rodgers – echoed by Schäfer – speaks of a 'shared historical frame': a framework of shared references, idealised achievements and would-be exemplary social and political measures which was constructed in the first years of the twentieth century on a basis of encounters and interconnections which became steadily more structured and more routine. It is by studying these interconnections, points of contact and transfers that we can make effective comparisons – between cultural and political systems, municipalities, regions or whole countries.

These interconnections, not only at the turn of the century but also between the wars, give the impression that there is good reason to bring the notion of 'reform' back to the notice of historians who have hitherto refused to acknowledge its legitimacy. Or rather, the question whether there was a European progressive era cannot be answered but does help us to change our stance and examine some things which might otherwise escape us. If we ask whether there was such a thing as reform of local government, in a centralised country whose historians have been content to reproduce and collude in that centralisation, we may be induced to examine a whole series of institutions – periodicals, specialist conferences, administrative conferences, and so on, which, while fragile in themselves, shed some light on the constitution of political and administrative space and the genesis of governmental expertise, both applied and theoretical. Questions from beyond the Atlantic throw up historical facts which would otherwise remain obscure. While it is not easy or even necessary to answer the question 'Was there a European progressive era?', it does prompt us to widen the scope of 'reform'. 'Reform' is not simply a home-bred category relevant only to a single country or historical moment: it can be used as an analytical approach to a whole series of undertakings, from prescribing goals – transforming the political, economic and social order – to forging new cognitive tools.

[14] The first links were set up in the 1930s: American public administrators attended international meetings on administrative science and international conferences on towns (the first series was inaugurated in Brussels in 1910, the second in Ghent in 1913), and received visits from European reformers. The Americans took colour from European ideas and debates even as they sought to influence their direction.

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