



## Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution

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In May of 1919, women from around the world gathered in Zurich, Switzerland, and proclaimed, "We dedicate ourselves to peace!" Just months after the end of World War I, the Womens International League for Peace and Freedom--a group led by American progressive Jane Addams and comprising veteran campaigners for social reform--knew that a peaceful world was essential to their ongoing quest for social and economic justice.

Alan Dawley tells the story of American progressives during the decade spanning World War I and its aftermath. He shows how they laid the foundation for progressive internationalism in their efforts to improve the world both at home and abroad. Unlike other accounts of the progressive movement--and of American politics in general--this book fuses social and international history. Dawley shows how interventions in Latin America and Europe affected domestic plans for social reform and civic engagement, and he depicts internal battles among progressives between unabashed imperialists like Theodore Roosevelt and their implacable opponents like Robert La Follette. He draws a contrast between Woodrow Wilson's use of force in exporting American ideals and Addams's more cosmopolitan pursuit of economic justice and world peace. In discussing the debate over the League of Nations within the context of turbulent domestic affairs, Dawley brings keen insight into that complicated moment in American history.

In striking and original ways, Dawley brings together domestic and world affairs to argue that American progressivism cannot be understood apart from its international context. Focusing on world-historical events of empire, revolution, war, and peace, he shows how American reformers invented a new politics built around progressive internationalism. *Changing the World* retrieves the progressive tradition in American politics and makes it available to contemporary debates. The book speaks to anyone seeking to be both a good citizen within the nation and a good citizen of today's troubled world.

## Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution Details

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## Michael says

Alan Dawley's book, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution*, is a broad study of American progressivism, dealing with nearly every aspect of the movement from its early domestic reform efforts, to its national platform in the early 20th Century, and ultimately to its demise and rebirth in the 1920s. Often progressivism is misunderstood and seen principally as a domestic movement aimed at urban renewal and trust-busting; however, Dawley defines progressivism, at its core, as a quest to improve the world both at home and abroad. The movement had three overlapping goals: "winning social and economic justice, revitalizing public life, and improving the wider world."(3) While the title of the book hints that it specifically explores war and revolution abroad, *Changing the World* focuses upon the dual effort of reform by progressives in both the domestic and the international arenas, which are inseparable from one another.

Dawley was a professor of history at the College of New Jersey, wrote a total of four books, and won the Bancroft Prize in 1977 for his book *Class and Community*. His books mostly deal with the United States in the late 19th Century and during the Progressive Era. His extensive experience with the topic is evident. He discusses nearly every possible element of progressivism, especially focusing upon the activities of those at the grass-roots of the movement, such as Crystal Eastman, Jane Addams, and Walter Lippmann. The book especially stands out in explaining the diversity of thought in the movement (made up of both "mild socialists" and "enlightened conservatives,"(335) and its ultimate contradictions, which might be overlooked in a more basic study of progressivism.

Dawley begins his work by discussing the new possibility of international cooperation that developed in the early 20th Century prior to the First World War. For the first time, much of the world was interconnected at a fundamental level, where capital, investment, labor, and travelers traversed borders globally thanks to modern technology, such as the steamship and telegraph. The modern world created a sense of interconnection and progressives embraced this as a chance to not only improve their own society, but also global society. Dawley uses this vision of internationalism as a starting point for his study, and argues that it was the ultimate goal of progressive foreign policy.

Dawley follows progressivism through the 1910s and focuses upon the messianic spirit embraced by progressives. He explains how that emphasis factored into both domestic reform and a global mission. This was a belief that America, by virtue of its moral superiority, had a God-given right to redeem the world of its evils. This powerful idea was a major justification used by progressives for entry into the First World War, as well as involvement in conflicts such as the Mexican and Bolshevik revolutions. War and revolution provided chances to save, redeem, and remake the world. America was to become the savior of the world. The mass death and violence of the First World War would ultimately cause progressives to rethink their position; however, the messianic myth carried progressives, and indeed their ultimate spokesman President Wilson, all the way to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. However, by mid-1919, many Americans, especially national politicians, began to retreat from reform. Dawley explains that the death of progressivism was a reaction to the war. The war had been won, but the peace was lost, with revolutions sparking across Europe, and social, racial, and political violence breaking out in America in 1919. Finally, after the death of progressivism, Dawley discusses its rebirth as a more compact and indeed leftist movement, focused upon world peace and economic justice.

On a stylistic level, this book is sound. Dawley relies on excellent sources for his work, in particular the writings, publications, and speeches of progressives themselves. He draws on nearly every influential actor in the movement from the national leaders of the movement, like Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, to those working from the grass-roots. These primary sources are also drawn from multiple points of view and present the vast ideological diversity encompassed by the progressive movement. Dawley does adopt a more relaxed and informal tone at times, which can distract from the flow of the text. However, he presents such extremely strong evidence that any stylistic problem can be overlooked. As noted before, Dawley's work approaches the dual nature of progressivism. While he achieves this in the book, it seems that his primary goal was to address the attempts of progressives to reform the wider world. A great deal of space is devoted to explaining some of the basic domestic attitudes and approaches to progressivism. Due to this, the book almost becomes a general survey of the progressive era itself instead of a study of progressivism's international ambitions. It may have been preferable for Dawley to have approached this topic more concisely. Nevertheless, his study is an excellent source of historical information on progressivism.

Changing the World is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it enlightens history by expanding the understanding of progressivism beyond merely domestic American politics and places it into a global context. On another level, this work illustrates the contradictions and complexities of progressivism. After all, the movement encapsulated nationalism and internationalism, white supremacy and racial harmony, capitalists and unions. Finally, as a student of history, this book has managed to bring broad elements of my historical education together, not only involving material I learned in American history classes, but also classes in Mexico, Russia, Germany, and China. It is a pleasure to find so many diverse elements of history wound-up and applied together in such a sweeping study.

Because Dawley explores the entire breadth of the progressive movement and exposes the less understood aspects of progressivism's international reform efforts, Changing the World should be considered a standard source for anyone seeking information about the progressive era. This is especially true for those studying progressivism's internationalist aims. It not only contributes greatly to the wider scholarship of the Progressive Era, but also to 20th Century world history.

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### **Sean Chick says**

The writing is simplistic, but Dawley's thesis is sound: the progressives were tied to internationalism, which is one cause of their fall from power in 1920.

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