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Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation Of Progress And Tradition, 2nd Edition

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Review

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Grantham, Dewey *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition, 2nd Edition.* University of Tennessee Press, $26.00 ISBN 9781621902157

Southern Progressivism Revisited

When the University of Tennessee Press published Dewey Grantham's *Southern Progressivism* in 1983, scholars warmly welcomed it as the first thorough historical analysis of the subject. In the three decades since, little has changed. In his introduction to this reissue of *Southern Progressivism*, historian of the southern progressive era, William A. Link, concedes Grantham's work remains "the most comprehensive narrative account of the subject." But in the years since *Southern Progressivism* hit the shelves, historians have added nuance and texture to themes Grantham explored in his near-encyclopedic work. In fact, historians have come to doubt the existence of any coherent progressive movement, instead framing the era as one of a multiplicity of reform efforts. Therefore, this piece will straddle the line between review and historiography by referencing works from the intervening decades that have supported, undermined, or expanded on themes examined and claims made by Grantham.[1]

Further, this review looks forward from *Southern Progressivism* in part because, in his introduction, Link looks backward as he traces Grantham's academic lineage to UNC's Fletcher Green, and offers a brief historiography of the subject. Link starts with his father, Arthur S. Link, and his seminal 1946 essay, "The Progressive Movement in the South, 1870 - 1914," which first challenged the predominant view that there was no southern progressive movement. In his well-crafted and useful introduction, Link explains that Grantham's "mid-level synthesis" was an attempt to "reconcile" Arthur Link's "optimistic" portrayal of southern pro-gressives, and C. Vann Woodward's and Jack Temple Kirby's more "sinister views of reformers." [2] Grantham succeeds in this task as he shows southern progressives were ani-mated by a humanitarian

impulse, but also economically motivated, and often paternalistic in their outlook. This even-handed treatment allows Grantham to highlight the ambiguity, ambiva-lence, and irony in southern progressive reform.

Southern Progressivism is a book in three parts, the first of which lays out a pattern of political, social, and economic changes that paved the way for southern progressivism. Politically, a pruned and overwhelmingly white electorate, residual agrarian and populist factions, and politically active professional and economic interest groups combined to create a "paradoxical strain of political democracy." At the same time, a growing "sense of social needs" spread through the region, and economically, the "idea of southern progress" took hold. In turn, southerners elected "programmatic governors," who reflected the Democratic Party's new "reform posture."[3] While they were often unable to solidify political coalitions to carry on their reform efforts, the die was cast.

The movement's somewhat paradoxical nature largely resulted from these changes, but more importantly from the reformers' determination to simultaneously preserve what they believed was the best of southern society while reforming its institutions. Grantham's progressives did not tilt at windmills; they did not set out to dismantle the South's entrenched social hierarchy or to subvert its calcified racial order. Rather, they were "cultural traditionalists" who endeavored to create a "new and more harmonious social balance" in the region, which they believed was necessary to bring about the economic advancement and material progress predicted by the New South's prophets. Southern progressives' cultural traditionalism, rural heritage, and shared "'economically self-interested, ethically shaped middle-class attitude toward life'" made their reforms rather moderate and mild. Still, Grantham stresses that, "After all, the progressives were reformers."[4] Their reforms, which Grantham discusses in the book's second and largest section, focused on three interrelated but distinct facets: social control and state regu-lation; social justice; and social efficiency.

Progressives' pursuit of social control and state regulation manifested itself in the prohibition crusade, antimonopoly campaigns, and race relations. It also led to a piecemeal prison reform movement that skittered across the south, as states established boards of charity and cor-rections, juvenile courts, and provided inmates with religious guidance and libraries. While states abandoned the much maligned, albeit profitable convict-lease system, their "economically

self interested" attitude resulted in their continued exploitation of prison labor. This, Grantham shows, "provided the ultimate support for the South's labor system," as states passed vagrancy laws, in turn helping shore up the labor supply in times of shortage. In 2008, Douglas A. Blackmon of the *Washington Post* carried Grantham's argument further in *Slavery by Another Name*, which exposed how African Americans, unduly incarcerated in tremendous numbers, were forced to join the "'perpetual road-mending club,'"[5] and construct the New South's infrastructure thereby helping propel the region's economic advancement. Their labor, Blackmon shows, sometimes provided up to ten percent of some states' revenue well into the twentieth century, until when in 1951 a federal statute criminalized forced labor.

Another manifestation of southern progressives' desire for social control and state regulation was the prohibition crusade, which Grantham concludes "may have been the most dy-namic and passionately supported 'reform' in the South" and was "remarkably versatile," as it appealed to broad swaths of southerners—urban and rural, white and black. Though southern Protestantism was primarily concerned with personal morality and salvation, the prohibition crusade served as a "bridge . . . between those who wanted to reform individuals, and those who wanted to reform society." The prohibition movement therefore became a gateway to reform for many southern Protestants, because they came to see other social ills as moral issues. This, Grantham believes, is evidence that "there was an active social gospel in the South,"[6] a point historians have long debated.

Although Grantham sees the middle class, evangelical Protestant church as the well-spring of the southern social gospel, Elizabeth Hays Turner discovered that, at least in Galveston, Texas, reformers were not exclusively or even primarily from evangelical churches. Rather, her 1997 book, *Women, Culture, and Community* shows that Presbyterian, Episcopal, Luther-an and Jewish women's shared elite social status united them behind reform efforts.

Still, in both Turner's and Grantham's analyses, women were the primary agents behind the South's progressive movement, especially in their compulsion toward social justice, the second facet of progressivism in Grantham's definition. Many southern women cut their reform teeth in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which one southern progressive believed fostered in southern women "'a sort of unself-conscious radicalism'" that propelled them deeper into the reform movement, including women's suffrage. Still, Grantham

shows that their "cultural conservatism" blunted their newfound radicalism, thereby leading white women to advocate for suffrage that was delimited by race, not by gender. In 1993, Marjorie Spruill Wheeler reinforced Grantham's assertion when she showed in her book, *New Women of the New South*, that white southern women's pursuit of voting rights was largely motivated by their desire to ensure white supremacy, which made them leery of the movement for a national constitutional amendment.

Spruill Wheeler's analysis also promotes Grantham's claim that white southern progressives often employed the specter of racial turmoil to pursue their reforms. Still, there were white southerners whose interest in social justice compelled them to earnestly seek a solution to the "race problem." But their belief in innate white supremacy meant their reforms were a timid, "updated version of paternalism," that ultimately demanded "black docility."[7] Therefore, southern black progressives, especially middle class women, took matters into their own hands and formed voluntary organizations like their white counterparts and worked to strengthen black schools and churches, which were instruments of African American uplift.

Glenda Gilmore's transformative 1996 *Gender and Jim Crow* expanded on Grantham's analysis and further emphasized the reforming role of middle class black women. Though they were deprived the right to vote, southern black women created a proto-civil rights movement through their efforts to register black voters. What's more, they embraced their new role as client to the growing state government, and used their womanhood to agitate for reform in ways black men could not, further solidifying black women's role as leaders of racial uplift in the progressive-era South. Other historians' works, including Steven Hahn's 2003 *A Nation Under Our Feet*, Paul Ortiz's 2005 *Emancipation Betrayed* and Leslie Brown's 2008 *Upbuilding Black Durham*, point to the progressive era as a time of African American women's leadership in a nascent, if inchoate, civil rights movement.

The educational awakening that spread across the South was another facet of south-ern progressives' drive for social justice and "touched more of the region's inhabitants" than any other reform. Southerners doubled state education expenditures, lengthened school terms, passed compulsory attendance laws, reduced the region's illiteracy, and increased funding for institu-tions of higher learning. And while southern whites were the primary benefactors of this awakening, northern philanthropists helped fund black schools, though they

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channeled their largess to institutions that promoted "practical training," which they claimed would ultimately make the African American "a home-maker, a farmer, a mechanic, and a good citizen."[8]

Making southerners good farmers was an essential part of southern progressives' search for social efficiency, Grantham's third facet of southern progressivism, as were their good government efforts and municipal reforms. Business progressives saw municipalities as "largely a business corporation," and as such, "they should apply business methods to public service." They did just that by creating the Galveston plan, in which five commissioners were each granted ad-ministrative and legislative powers over a specific aspect of the city's governance, and the city-manager plan, which added an administrative "professional 'expert'" to the Galveston plan.[9] These reforms streamlined municipal governments and reduced expenditures. But these savings overwhelmingly benefitted businesses, Grantham shows. In his 1990 work, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, Don Harrison Doyle similarly explained that progres-sive businessmen in New South cities pursued a common good and willingly sacrificed to achieve it, though they did so because they believed reforms would also be good for their bottom line.

Grantham looks beyond the cities to where rural middle-class reformers tried "rehabil-itating the southern farmer" by forming "organized pressure groups"[10] that called for modern farming practices and adopted Populist visions of railroad regulation, cooperatives, and communal warehousing. At the same time, students and professors from both white and black southern colleges ventured into the far reaches of the South and preached the profitability of modern scientific farming practices. This effort, Grantham shows, was the most ironic and ambivalent of all, because in the end, progressives' agricultural reforms would diminish the yeo-man farmer and with him, his traditional values, which progressives sought to preserve.

Like Grantham, in his 2003 book, *Lessons in Progress*, Michael Dennis high-lighted the outward thrust of southern institutions of higher education by following the careers of four college and university presidents. These progressive educators kept their advances attuned to southern societal norms, especially in regards to race and gender. Still, they believed they were progressive in their support for parallel institutions for African Americans and women.

Reforms in the three areas of social control and state regulation, social justice, and social efficiency followed a chronological and organizational pattern. In the first decade of the Twentieth Century, progressives embraced "'the politics of pluralistic interest groups'" and pressured state governments to expand their regulatory capacity and extend social services. By 1910, many progressives promoted their reforms through "Southwide" campaigns. And when Woodrow Wilson won the presidency, southern reformers nationalized southern progressivism by joining extant nationwide organizations or adopting their methods and approaches in their region-wide campaigns. Further, with Wilson in the White House, and a resurgent southern Democratic coalition in congress, southern progressives appealed to the national government for help in their reform efforts. This means, in sum, southern progressivism was a campaign for "positive govern-ment."[11]

Grantham explores the nationalization of southern reform in the book's third and final section, which highlights southern progressivism's ironic nature. While progressives rejoiced at Wilson's election, the Democratic party's conservative leaders dashed their hopes when they forced the president to dole out patronage positions to "old-line Democrats."[12] And when subsequent reform efforts stalled at the state level, progressives turned to Washington believing a resurgent southern Democratic congressional coalition would advance their agendas. Indeed, southern Democrats in congress supported regulatory efforts, like tariff and banking reform but blocked social justice reforms, like child labor legislation. These southern congressional Democrats wielded their newfound power and nationalized the region's racial order by, for in-stance, segregating the government's workers, and denying federal appointments to African Americans.

David W. Blight's 2001 *Race and Reunion* shows that similarly, a denial of African Americans' service in the nation's collective memory of the Civil War helped to reunite the North and South. Proponents of three structured memories of the Civil War and Reconstruc-tion struggled for dominance in turn of the century America—that of the reconciliationists, white supremacists, and emancipationists. Ultimately, as northerners embraced southerners' white supremacist and reconciliationists' memories of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, the re-gions reunited, but, Blight explains, "the races divided."[13]

This racial division was true during World War I, which enjoyed widespread support among a newly patriotic and nationalistic southern population, despite the protestations of a "dissenting minority" comprised of Bryanites who foresaw

war profiteering and southern congress-men wary of a reorganized national military. Their support came at the expense of southern progressive reform. Once the war began, southern reformers turned their attention toward mobilizing for war and serving the soldier and his family. While black men and women believed their com-mitment to the war effort would provide an avenue toward equality, whites did not. In turn, in the interwar era, African Americans exhibited a new "assertiveness" as they protested their mal-treatment at the hands of whites and joined the NAACP at record rates.[14]

Although some of the works mentioned above have challenged Grantham's claims, the literature on the subject does more to substantiate his portrayal of southern progressivism than to undermine it. Grantham's work has withstood the test of time and has yet to be challenged in its breadth and scope. On that note, the length and detai of this review reflect *Southern Progressivism*'s length and detail, which can be overpowering in certain sections, as Grantham gets into the weeds of southern reform. Reorganization would help to streamline the volume, as it is at times redundant; the same names, organizations, motives, means, and achievements arise in different sections. Still, as it stands, *Southern Progressivism* offers its readers an unparalleled and exhaustive investigation of southern reforms, which makes this volume an absolutely indispensable resource for southern historians, and justifies its reissue.

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[1] Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xv; I am greatly indebted to Illinois State University Professor Amy Louise Wood's historiographical essay on southern progressivism: "The South" in *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, eds. Christopher McKnight and Nancy C. Unger (Sussex: Wiley Black-well, 2017).

[2] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, xiii.

[3] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, xiii, 10, xxiii-xxiv, 36, 12.

[4] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 417 – 418, xxvi, 418.

[5] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 137, 134.

[6] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 160, 161, 173, 23.

[7] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 231.

[8] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 246, 260.

[9] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 283, 284.

[10] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 320, 330.

[11] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, xxiv, 249, xxvii.

[12] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 360.

[13] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cam-bridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

[14] Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 387, 406.

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