

A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF
THE PROGRESSIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Tung-hsun Sun

Abstract

In this paper, the author analyses the background of the rise of the Progressive historiography of the United States, its theory of historical study, and the characteristics of its interpretation of the history of the United States. He found that, though the factors which contributed to the rise of this historical school were very complex, the most important one was the prevailing climate of opinion produced by the Progressive movement. The progressive historians, who were either active reformers themselves or sympathetic to the reformers and motivated by a desire to help the Progressive reform, tried to make the study of history an instrument for social betterment. Sharing with the Progressives a pragmatism and an optimistic faith in the possibility of unending progress through man-made changes, the Progressive historians advocated historical relativism in theory and emphasized in interpreting the American past the growth of democracy through a series of revolutionary changes brought about by the conflicts between socio-economic or geo-economic groups or classes. Dominating the study of American history for almost the entire first half of the twentieth century, the Progressive historiography naturally had a profound influence on the development of the historical study of the United States.