Unity through Education:
How America Can Heal its Wounds by Learning from its Past

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A violent attack on the U.S. government, driven by a growing extremist movement and inflamed by a sensationalist and partisan media. A former president – the favorite of white supremacists – seeks a second presidential term. Race relations are at a fever pitch, and media outlets proliferate unlike any time in U.S. history, a result of new communications technology and the low cost of distribution. Populism is a potent political newcomer.

To most, this might seem like a perfect description of 2021. But the era in question is actually the 1890s and early 1900s, the transition years between the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. It was a time of robber barons and yellow journalism, mob lynching and race riots, fear of anarchist terrorism, presidential assassination (William McKinley), sharp inequality, crushing economic depression, and feminism. Representing disgruntled farmers, middle-class activists, and nonconformists, the emergent Populist Party (also known as the People's Party), denoted by a "P" (instead of "D" or "R"), became one of the most successful third parties in U.S. history.

It is only intuitive to reflect on that era for the profit of today. Several of the sources of domestic discontent at the turn of the century would feel familiar to anyone living in 2021: unequal access to the benefits of modernity, unresolved racial issues, an instigative and sensationalist media, and a feeling that the political system neglects those in need.

How did the country deal with similar internal turmoil of the past? Where did it go right, and where did it go wrong? And how might those insights inform choices in a world with social media and the internet, a more diverse population, and differing social norms?

It is a tall task to unify the country today. The last four years have not only witnessed the largest protests in U.S. history, but the steady polarization of U.S. politics has been a widening trend for decades. Fixing the country requires satisfying legitimate grievances, being clear-eyed about our historical blind spots, and fostering a sense of empathy and community in a society with distrust sewn deeply into its fabric.

The turn of the century offers us one big idea to help us get there: public education. A deep culture of mistrust, internal animosity, and suffering cannot be solved in an instant. They are consequences of long-term trends, and as such, they need to be solved by instituting long-term correctives. A robust educational system undergirds progress, stability, and unity. Learning from the successes and failures of one of the most ambitious Progressive Era programs presents us with one path forward.

Background: Populists and Progressive Era Reform

In the 1880s and 1890s, rural farmers felt they lacked access to education, access to credit, and access to modern technology. With some urban allies, those farmers self-organized and formed a core constituency of the new Populist Party, established in 1892. In a matter of a few years, they

mounted impressive challenges to the two-party system, capturing half a dozen senate seats, a dozen governorships, and dozens of congressional seats. But it was not to last. Signaling the beginning of the end, in 1896, the Populists nominated William Jennings Bryan for President. Bryan was already the Democratic nominee, and the Populists hoped that an alliance might nudge his victory and give them a vote at the table. Bryan lost handily to Republican candidate William McKinley. The Populists sputtered on for a few more years, though after 1900, the party would never return as a major, independent force.

Despite its short lifespan, the Populist legacy extended far beyond the few fleeting years the party was in existence. Much of the Progressive agenda of the 1910s, for instance, drew on the Populist blueprint from the 1890s; direct election of senators, the secret ballot, and an expansion of public education being just a few of the significant policy suggestions. Furthermore, the political appeal of Populism is paradoxically what led to its demise. In addition to underhanded methods like voter intimidation, Democrats and Republicans adopted elements of the Populist platform. Doing so ensured its irrelevance as a separate political force. Ironically, in a way, the demise of Populism indicated a policy victory, not a defeat. As historian Charles Postel wrote in his award-winning history of the Populist movement, Populism "proved far more successful dead than alive."

Indeed, following the turmoil of the 1890s, the ensuing twenty years witnessed a flowering of domestic reform in labor protections, anti-trust regulation, fiscal and monetary policy, public education, and the environment – many of which had been championed by the Populists. In part these were overseen by President Theodore Roosevelt, McKinley's successor, a Republican. But they were also adopted a decade later as a part of the Progressive Party agenda (also under Roosevelt's leadership, when he split from the Republican Party in 1912) as well as the Democratic Party agenda, under Woodrow Wilson. Progressive reforms were bipartisan.

Progressive Errors and Oversights: Race and the Media

Given the wave of Progressive Era legislation, some have called for a "second Progressive Era," rightly championing a collection of needed reforms. But the Progressive Era was not one big happy, unifying moment for the country. As political scientists Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett have pointed out, policymakers widened some fissures by reversing progress on racial equality. Progressive Era reforms were matched by a sharp regression on race relations, the institutional enabling of white supremacism through Jim Crow, xenophobia, and system-wide disfranchisement of Black Americans. Segregation was an explicit part of the Populist agenda, and white supremacism was a dominating political dynamic throughout the Progressive Era. Even those Populists who disagreed with lynching recognized that they had to turn a blind eye to such atrocities if they were to attract Southern white Democrats to their mission. Theodore Roosevelt is often remembered (and lauded) for inviting Black leader Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House early in his presidency. What is forgotten is that after the immense backlash he received for doing so, he regretted the invitation and never repeated it in his nearly eight years in office. Even a man as fiercely independent as Roosevelt cowered in the face of white supremacism, while presidents like Woodrow Wilson actively instituted racial segregation in government. Both parties, in different ways, were to blame.

Additionally, the Progressive Era left some issues, like an inflammatory media, completely unresolved. Amidst the domestic strife, on September 6, 1901, President William McKinley was shot by an anarchist, Leon Czolgosz. Inside Czolgosz's pocket, it was later reported, he carried a copy of William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, an anti-McKinley newspaper that typified the sensationalist yellow press.

The new Roosevelt administration responded quickly with restrictions on anarchist immigration. But the yellow press remained untouched. Historian Frank Luther Mott speculates that McKinley's death dampened the appeal of the yellow press, as its most sensationalist brands were linked to a national tragedy and attacked for "inciting men to murder." But the yellow press never really went away. Writing in 1962, Mott himself acknowledges that many yellow techniques became mainstream; they merely did not contribute to an attack on the state in such a clear way. That is, until January 6, 2021. The January 6th insurrection attempt revealed that the worst of yellow techniques – inflammatory rhetoric, exaggeration, and outright lies – just needed new platforms like social media, new boosters, and a new spark to contribute to the undermining of American democracy and unity.

The (Dis)Unifying Power of Public Education

The Farmers' Alliance, an organization of southern, western, and midwestern farmers that motivated the Populist Party, began as an educational movement. They believed in the importance of education as a method of uplift and learning new technology to advance their craft. Learning, they argued, would reduce their economic inequality and reduce the social stigma of rural dwellers.

Their solution was a mixture of self-directed *ad hoc* lectures, some conducted in-person and some offered through Farmers' Alliance newspapers, as well as more widespread public education. At the time, the South, where illiteracy was three times as high as in the West and North, had a poor education system that was acutely deficient in rural areas. At their peak, these *ad hoc* lectures and papers reached hundreds of thousands of rural Americans. Over the following decades, the public education movement organically ballooned state by state, district by district, as the Populist movement transformed into the Progressive one. As education historians Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz have argued, as a result of this popular demand, the United States soon became a global leader in secondary education, with high school graduation rates skyrocketing from 6.4% in 1900 to 50.8% in 1940, and around 88% today.

Despite these gains, benefits of the public high school movement were unevenly shared. *Plessy v Ferguson*, the Supreme Court case that codified the "separate but equal" segregationist doctrine, was decided in 1896, right at the beginning of the Progressive Era. Over the following decades, policies following from that doctrine, as well as redlining, white flight, and income inequality, led to sharp disparities between Black and White schoolchildren and rich and poor schoolchildren. Their legacy continues to affect the United States today. Currently, public schools are not only more racially separate than they were in 1970, U.S. students perform roughly average internationally academically, when they once led the globe.

High quality education is an engine of growth, equality, and stability, and it works best when everyone has access to it. When access is uneven, people get left behind. Over time, especially if that access is systematically uneven, that leads to legitimate public grievances, deep political fissures, and an erosion of societal bonds. Why trust the system if it categorically disadvantages your community? It is not just in the interest of the disadvantaged to be educated. It is in everyone's interest.

In principle, this was recognized by political leaders in the 1890s. President William McKinley often referred to education as a bulwark for law and order. It was rooted in a recognition that education contributed not only to progress and well-being, but to unity and national security too. The problem is that most political leaders also believed in varying doctrines of white supremacy, that because whites (specifically white Americans or white Anglo-Saxons) had innately higher capacities for learning, society was more stable when whites were in charge. "Now, as to the Negroes," Roosevelt wrote in a letter in 1906, as President. "I entirely agree with you that as a race and in the mass they are altogether inferior to whites." Ironically, the rest of the letter assails White Southern suppression of the Black vote – but this is precisely the point. People like Roosevelt actually did support Black advancement, but not Black equality. Because of that, they were unwilling to expend political capital fighting for Black rights, ensuring separate but unequal facilities while Jim Crow flourished. That attitude won out over the stabilizing principle of equal education.

We still feel the effects of those decisions. The current and poor state of U.S. educational access and quality is a long-term problem rooted in the past, but also a long-term problem we can fix. The Progressive Era public education movement worked until it was constrained and undermined by racial and income inequality. Re-investment in education, with a sharp focus on resolving those gaps in quality and coverage, is absolutely critical to resolving disaffection. So is making sure those left behind by modern developments – changes in technology and trade – are not neglected. In the early 1900s, if somewhat paternalistically, Roosevelt created the Commission on Country Life to study rural America and then recommend a series of reforms. Today, nonpartisan commissions on racial inequality, income inequality, and modernity should be established toward similar ends to resolve disparities in educational access.

But additional to a *reinforced* public education system, the United States needs an *expanded* public education system, something recently proposed by the Biden administration. The K-12 public system from the Progressive Era is a hundred years old. Its coverage was designed at a moment when fewer women entered the workforce and high school degrees carried greater weight. Times have changed, and the system should adapt. In 1910, 20.6% of women age 16+ were in the labor force, compared to 57.4% in 2019. Moreover, these days, 95% of fathers and 66.4% of mothers with children under 6 years of age participate in the labor force. The trends of working parents increase the challenges in raising and educating young children, especially for parents who cannot afford extra care and are not covered by Head Start, a federally-funded program for low-income children. In 1910, those challenges were already felt by Black and immigrant populations, which had higher rates of women participating in the labor force. The moral argument for providing greater educational access should be compelling enough itself, but if it isn't, the economics make sense too. Federal help with raising children allows parents a greater ability to participate in the labor force, contributing to the economy through their work,

while simultaneously increasing the chances for economic success of their children. Furthermore, two years of public education beyond high school would deliver similar economic advantages to Americans today that universal public high school did for children in the Progressive Era.

Reforming education can also contribute to a greater sense of community. This might happen itself by evening the playing ground for the disadvantaged, or through initiatives like bussing programs. But education can play an even deeper role in teaching community values to children. At a certain level, American disunity can be summed up by a single phrase: a lack of empathy. Empathy allows individuals to understand people of different circumstances, facing different challenges, and coming to different opinions. It is a value that encourages policies of equality and unity.

Empathy is an emotional skill that can be taught, and over the last several years, schools across the country have been adopting what's called a social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum toward that end. Among a variety of other benefits, it helps instill a sense of empathy to students. Many state legislatures across the country have recently developed SEL teaching standards, but 40% of U.S. states still lack them. SEL-educated communities are linked to lower incidences of bully and other problem behaviors. A greater and formal emphasis on SEL would go a long way to building a community that understands itself better.

Lastly is the issue of media exaggeration and falsehoods. So-called "yellow journalism" developed throughout the 1890s as newspapers experimented with new "yellow" techniques to attract greater readership, such as bold banner headlines, a focus on sex and scandal, and Sunday cartoons. Combined with innovations in printing press technology and the declining price of paper, these techniques proved to be remarkably successful at building readership. The newspaper business boomed in the 1890s.

But there was a dark underbelly to the yellow press. While some yellow techniques, like banner headlines, were innocuous, others, like sensationalism, led to exaggeration and outright fabrication. Of course, not all papers were yellow, and not all yellow papers lied. Still, many papers with the largest distributions, such as Hearst's *New York Journal* or Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, were infamous for their shady business practices, superficial evidence gathering, and their focus on dramatic storytelling, not factual accuracy.

Yellow techniques, to varying degrees, have survived to the present day. Not all media outlets trade in harmful sensationalism and inflammatory language, but some do. And one thing January 6th proved was that the media matters greatly in amplifying and normalizing falsehoods about the world. Falsehoods powerful enough to tear our society apart.

The Progressive Era never resolved the issue it created with sensationalist journalism, which has only gotten more complex and complicated with the introduction of radio, T.V., internet, and social media. Falsehoods appear not only in "hard news" (reporting and news analysis), they also appear in "soft news" (talk shows like Fox and Friends or The View), the latter which can often appear to viewers as legitimate news sources, but are really for entertainment.

The issue of media falsehoods cannot (and should not) be solved by direct government intervention. Free speech is a hallmark of American democracy, and the open exchange of ideas – if sometimes uncomfortable – should be welcomed. However, the government also has a duty to protect and educate its citizens. Falsehoods, as we witnessed on January 6th, have the ability to undermine American democracy by leading individuals to attack the state. This division was sewn by a handful of idea entrepreneurs, platforms that promoted them, and a segment of the public that believed their lies.

Public education has the potential to protect against the insidious nature of media-amplified falsehoods. In some parts of the United States, schoolchildren are already taught how to be internet and social media savvy. In Massachusetts, for instance, the state Curriculum Framework establishes a set of standards for teachers to educate students about digital literacy and computer science practices. Third through fifth graders are taught about internet safety, spotting scams and ads, recognizing news sources, and navigating social media. That kind of education needs to be replicated across the country, deepened, and extended to all age groups, including and especially adults. Most adults grew up at a time when internet safety standards were inchoate and never received this kind of education. A significant percentage of every age group uses Facebook and YouTube; everybody, thus, is at risk.

Over the last couple of years, social media companies have come under fire for the impact they have on amplifying falsehoods. Earlier this year, for instance, Facebook announced it will encourage community members to read articles before sharing them. This is a positive step in the right direction, but it does not exactly solve the problem. If someone is willing to believe a falsehood and does not know any better, might they still believe it after reading an extra couple of paragraphs?

The public, in other words, needs to be better educated in digital literacy. We would do well to take a page from the Farmer's Alliance *ad hoc* lecture series called Farmers' Institutes. Instead of roving lectures, one could imagine a digital set of workshops or videos – developed privately or publicly – to educate the public about internet safety and media savviness. What separates the reporting process from the *Economist* from *BitChute.com*? How can one quickly and easily identify misleading sentences, falsehoods, scams, or advertisements? Developing these instructional videos are the easy part, since they already exist to some extent. Getting people to watch them and learn is the real hurdle.

The Department of Education could coordinate with social media companies to incorporate versions of these videos on their platforms (either mandatorily or through targeted initiatives) encourage state legislatures and leaders to continue developing their own standards for public schools, and then extend that access to families of students, adult educational programs, public universities, public libraries, community centers, nursing homes, and other community organizations at the district level. This kind of training exists in pockets throughout the United States. But it is missing in a systematic, coordinated way that ensures that the *entire* population has access to this critical kind of education.

Conclusion

The Progressive Era produced a slew of legislative reforms that whets the appetite. Expanding public education stood at the very top of those domestic reforms because education is itself a force multiplier for progress. Educational reform enables follow-on opportunities of social reform, advancement, equality, unity, and community.

But one must be just as attuned to the movement's failures as its successes as well as recognize the many differences between today's society and that of the turn of the century. The Progressive Era movement failed on racial equality and neglected the effect of a sensationalist media. Disparities in income levels between residential districts also contributed to unequal educational access. Those issues have led to further problems down the line, limiting the success of the movement and exacerbating social tensions. Furthermore, though many parallels exist between the domestic turmoil of the present and domestic turmoil of the 1890s, we live in a society of differing technology, social norms, and demography.

No two historical experiences can ever be the same. Still, there is much we can learn from the public education movement of the Progressive Era, and much we can adapt to the present day. The time is ripe to consider a new public education movement, one that expands on the Progressive Era's successes, but also resolves the long-standing errors and blind spots of the past.

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