# From Progressive to Preservationist

**A Preservation Institute Policy Study**

***The Natural Environment : The Social Environment***

The Preservation Institute
2140 Shattuck Ave, Suite 2122
Berkeley, CA 94704

**http://www.preservenet.com**

We take the distinction between progressive and conservative so much for granted that it is hard for us to think about politics in any other terms. Yet this way of looking at things was invented only two centuries ago, at a time when modernization and progress were sweeping away entrenched privilege and challenging the status quo. This distinction is outmoded now that modernization and progress *are* the status quo.

# The Rise of Progressivism

Progressive politics first appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The French revolution had abolished feudal privileges and established certain basic human rights. The Congress of Vienna tried to undo this change and restore the old regime. The political categories that we still use rose out of this struggle: Progressives fought for change, conservatives resisted change, and reactionaries tried to roll back changes that had already occurred.

Because politics centered on the battle over social change, the left was never able to focus on controlling technology. Progressives who believed in decentralization and small scale—such as Fourierists and utopian socialists—found themselves allied with communists and socialists who believed that a totally centralized, planned economy was the inevitable wave of the future. The alliances were sometimes uneasy, but they were necessary to fight conservatives and reactionaries, who defended the status quo against any change.

The realists on the left, who believed in centralization and modernization, became increasingly influential because the tide of history was on their side. By the early twentieth century, the left had absolute faith in modernization, epitomized by Lincoln Steffans' famous description of the Soviet Union: "I have seen the future, and it works."

Every economic activity would inevitably be modernized in large-scale industries, and only the state was large enough to plan the modern economy as a whole so it served human needs. Communists were putting their vision of a totally planned society into effect in the Soviet Union. European social democrats believed in a more moderate form of the same vision: major industries would be nationalized and human services would be provided by the welfare state.

In the United States, New Deal liberals believed in an even more moderate form of the same vision. Privately owned industries would generate the wealth. The Federal

Government would build dams, highways, electrification projects, and other infrastructure to promote modernization and help to generate wealth. And the Federal Government would use this wealth to help people by applying the same technological approach to social problems, funding housing projects, educational programs, welfare programs and job programs.

# The Sixties and the Seventies

There was a tremendous resurgence of progressive politics in the 1960s. The Great Society promoted a bigger and better version of New Deal liberalism suited to a more affluent society, and socialist ideology thrived even in America. But maybe the old progressive ideas were so popular at the time not because they were radical but because they carried the spirit of the consumer economy to an extreme. When they came of age, children who had grown up in the affluent society of post-war America, expected the economic system to provide everyone with an endless stream of goods and services.

Modern Americans all believe that they are dependent on the economic system to provide them with education, housing, health care, transportation, and jobs. The most progressive among them raise their dependency to the level of principle and claim that there is a right to education, a right to housing, a right to health care, and a right to a job—that the system should provide everyone with all these things as basic entitlements. They take their dependency so much for granted that they do not realize that, when they demand more education and day care, they are actually saying that the experts should decide how our children are raised, when they demand more housing and city planning, they are actually saying that the experts should decide what our neighborhoods look like, and when they demand more jobs, they are actually saying that the experts should make us do unnecessary work.

Yet there was another side to the radical politics of the 1960s, which was just the opposite of old-line progressivism, with its demands for more services from the system: The "appropriate technology" movement wanted people to consume less, do more for themselves, and live as much as possible outside of the economic system.

The radical back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 1970s believed in almost complete self-reliance. Ideally, you raised your own vegetables, you heated your home with a wood-burning stove and cut the fire wood yourself, you generated your own electricity using a wind-spinner that you had built out of recycled 55 gallon drums, and your children were home-birthed (with only a midwife assisting) and home-schooled. Though relatively few people actually moved to homesteads, this movement had wide influence: All over the country, people scrounged locally available building materials, or heated with wood-burning stoves, or bought hand-made crafts, or cooked their meals from scratch, using ingredients that had been processed as little as possible.

Though this movement was accused of being anti-technological, it actually was fascinated with technology: It constantly came up with new plans to build pedal-powered

tools from old bicycle parts, solar water heaters from old plumbing supplies, and the like. This movement was anti-technocratic, against technological organizations' controlling people's lives, but it was in favor of technology that was small-scale, ecologically sound and made people more independent.

Appropriate technology did have real political influence in the developing nations, where it is a serious alternative to conventional development policies. Transferring conventional technology to the developing nations leads to rapid urbanization and social breakdown, creating a dual economy with an affluent minority and an impoverished majority. By contrast, small-scale appropriate technology can preserve traditional rural communities and spread the benefits of development far more widely, and this approach has been used in many successful development projects.

In the developed nations, the appropriate technology movement had less influence on practical policies, because it was utopian. It fantasized about escaping from the modern economy, rather than coming up with policies to change the economy. Its ideas were so remote from ordinary life that even people who were attracted to them did not always take them seriously: People dreamed about home-birthing and home-schooling their children, but when elections came, they supported candidates who promised to spend more on health-care and Head Start programs.

# Progressives Against Progress

Doubts about modernization did enter the mainstream during the 1960s and 1970s. The environmental movement reflected a widespread uneasiness about progress and growth. Architects rejected functionalism and the wholesale replacement of older neighborhoods with modern projects; instead they began working to preserve old buildings and design new ones that were human scale and that fit into their historical context. Popular political movements for environmental and historic preservation challenged the technological optimism of the 1950s: It became almost impossible to build new nuclear power plants and to build freeways in cities, for example.

At the same time, there was a surge of academic criticism of the "scientific" planning and therapy that progressives had always admired. Jane Jacobs wrote that the urban planners had destroyed our cities' neighborhoods. Christopher Lasch wrote that day-care centers and the helping professions had undermined the family. John Holt and Ivan Illich wrote that schools turn people into passive consumers of education, incapable of learning on their own. Michel Foucault and Thomas Szasz wrote that psychotherapists controlled their patients and undermined their autonomy. Paul Goodman was triumphant over the failure of the Great Society's social programs: "We have seen that all the resources of the State cannot educate a child, improve a neighborhood, give dignity to an oppressed man. Sometimes it can open opportunities for people to do for themselves; but mostly it should stop standing in the way and doing damage and wasting wealth."[i]

The people progressives had relied on early in the century to sweep away traditional authority had become the establishment fifty years later. During the 1920s, the *avant garde* dreamed that functionalist architecture of glass, steel, and concrete would revolutionize society, but by the 1970s, every city in the country was overshadowed by glass and steel high-rises. During the 1920s, progressive educators dreamed that the family would become obsolete as teachers and therapists applied the new science of psychology to child raising, but during the 1970s, the family was breaking down and the psychologists were not providing a good substitute. During the 1920s, progressive planners dreamed of clearing the slums and replacing them with housing projects built to hygienic and sociological standards, but by the 1970s, urban housing projects were a visible symbol of the powerlessness and anomie endemic to modern society.

During the 1960s and 1970s, most leftists still believed in the older progressive ideas, but the newest and most interesting social critics attacked modernization. People began to say that progressives were against progress.

# Two Directions for the Left

Yet all these new currents of thought did not cohere into a new politics that replaced progressivism. As the ferment of new ideas died down during the 1980s, the left retreated to older ideas about social issues, reacting against Reagan's cuts in social spending. Because this new thinking was not carried to its logical conclusion, progressives today take almost opposite approaches to environmental and social issues.

Now that environmentalists are an important part of the progressive coalition, the left resists modernization of the physical environment. When it comes to development issues, progressives are usually conservative in the literal sense of that word: They are against change and they want to preserve existing neighborhoods and natural areas—quite a difference from the 1930's, when progressives believed in functionalist architecture, urban slum clearance, and federal highway and power projects.

In fact, the most interesting ideas coming from "progressives" today are reactionary in the literal sense of the word. The Wildlands Project wants to restore large areas of land to a natural state. Transportation activists want to restore commuter service on old railroad tracks and to build light rail on streets where the trolley tracks were torn up fifty years ago. The New Urbanists want to build cities and suburbs the way they were built before World War I. All these proposals are meant to undo some of the damage done by the twentieth century. They are "trying to turn back the clock"—to use the phrase that progressives have always considered the most damning criticism of reaction.

But the left today only resists modernization of the physical environment. When it comes to social issues, the progressive coalition is still dominated by people who believe in the most radical ideas of the nineteenth century—people who want the government to provide child-care, to provide education, to provide social services and therapeutic programs, and to provide jobs. These people, who consider themselves progressive and

forward-thinking, are living in the past: Because they have refused to learn the lessons of the last few decades, they have made the left increasingly irrelevant.

# Further than the Conservatives

Because the left has no new ideas about social issues, conservatives have been able to play on the uneasiness that people feel about the social effects of modernization—probably the most important cause of the rise of the right during the past few decades. Yet conservatives cannot criticize modernization effectively, because they believe in market economics and in growth.

For example, most people can see very clearly that there is a "parenting deficit" in America today: Children are suffering because families are breaking up and, even in intact families, both parents must work full time to keep up financially. Yet the left does not address this new problem and still pushes the family policies of a century ago: more money for day care, more money for pre-school, and more money for schooling. These ideas were still convincing during the 1950s, when everyone took stable families for granted and affluent parents were sending their children to pre-school programs. Back then, people really believed in these progressive methods of raising children, but today even the left is disillusioned with them: They back these programs to help people cope with family breakdown and with the demands of the modern economy, and they have no vision at all of a better future.

By default, family issues have fallen to conservatives who defend "the traditional family" (which really means the early modern family, with a husband who goes out to work in a factory or office and a wife who stays home). The conservatives strike a chord because they do not try to deny the damage done by the decline of the family during the past few decades, but they cannot get at the root of the problem because they believe in economic growth.

For example, Ronald Reagan once praised women who stay home with their children by saying: "Unlike Sweden, ... the mothers of America have managed to avoid becoming just so many more cogs in the wheels of commerce"[ii]—unconsciously implying that American men *are* just cogs in the wheels of commerce, probably the strongest criticism of the modern economy that any American president has made since Jefferson. Yet Reagan also boasted that his economic policies had created enough jobs to give America the highest "employment ratio" of any country in the world. Apparently, he did not know that a higher employment ratio means more working mothers.

Some "New Democrats" and Communitarians moved toward conservative positions on family issues, but they consider themselves middle of the road, and the more militant left criticizes them for not being progressive enough.

Yet a genuinely radical approach to family issues would say that we should go further than the conservatives. The fact that parents no longer have time for their children is the worst possible indictment of the modern economy—the thing that makes average Americans wish that they could spend less time working, even if it means living on less

money. Rather than demanding more day care and schooling to help fit families into the economy, the left should be demanding changes in the growth economy that make it work for families—policies that let people consume less and work less so they have more time for their children and their own interests.

During the 1980s, as the left retreated to older ideas about social issues, the right took over the issue of empowerment. The New Left of the 1960s wanted to break up bureaucracies and give people control over decisions that affect their lives, but now the left just demands more bureaucratic social services. Again, the right has tapped into the discontent with modern society by criticizing big government, but it cannot criticize modern society effectively because it believes in market economics and growth. The right spends some of its time criticizing big government for stifling ordinary people, and it spends most of its time saying that we should unleash the private sector—which helps big corporations to stifle ordinary people.

Whenever conservatives criticize modernization, they come up with the same distorted response. They are nostalgic about old-fashioned small towns and neighborhoods, but they will not stop the freeways and shopping malls that are destroying towns and neighborhoods all over the country. They want to preserve families and individual self-reliance, but they promote the growth of a consumer economy that leaves people with no time for their families and that takes over most responsibilities of individuals.

# Choice of Technology

Americans today see that modernization has not kept all its promises. The left could dominate the political debate if it stopped focusing on demanding services from big government, pushing policies left over from a century ago, and instead focused on humanizing the economy by limiting both big government and big business.

The left distrusts material technologies—hardware and chemicals—but it needs to move beyond this old concept of technology as hardware. Technology, as Daniel Bell says, is any use of applied science to create a system to do something in a reproducible way: "In this sense, the organization of a hospital . . . is a *social* technology, as the automobile or numerically controlled tool is a *machine* technology. An *intellectual* technology is the substitution of algorithms (problem solving rules) for intuitive judgments."[iii] The older concept of technology as material, is clearly obsolete now that we have immaterial technologies such as computer programs. Bell's broader definition lets us criticize the ways in which large technocratic organizations program our behavior: If they are not used selectively and wisely, machine technologies, social technologies and intellectual technologies can all make ordinary people powerless.

We need to limit material technologies that are destructive, such as pesticides and freeways, but we also need to limit social technologies that process people according to standard rules even when personal judgment is called for, such as child-care systems, health insurance systems, and the economic system as a whole.

In every case, we need to remember that the technological approach is useful to deal with problems that can be defined narrowly, but not with underlying human questions. It is useful for small children to go to occasional classes or groups; it would be a mistake to have national child-care system that processes all preschoolers through the same curriculum. It is useful to have standard medical treatments for specific diseases; it would be a mistake to have a national health insurance system that decides which doctors people can see and which treatments they can have. It is useful to have factories that produce standard products; it is a mistake to require their employees to have a standard work week rather than giving them the option of choosing shorter hours. Even more than hard technologies, these social technologies make ordinary people feel powerless by redefining human decisions as technical decisions made by the experts.

If we began choosing technologies on human grounds, the American economy would stop growing, as people found they could live quite well on one-half or two-thirds of their current incomes. We would live in real neighborhoods where you can walk, we would have enough time to raise our own children, we would have more time for ourselves—and as we consumed less, the problems of global warming and fossil fuel depletion would diminish. Limiting growth can have such dramatic benefits now, because we have reached a point where so much of the economy is useless: We have decades of wastefulness that we can get out of our way.

# A New Political Spectrum

The appropriate technology movement showed the direction that a radical criticism of the modern economy must take, but it had little practical influence because it was utopian. It rejected consumerism, dependency, and growth, but it rushed to the opposite extreme instead of thinking rigorously about when technology is useful and when it is inappropriate.

During the 1960s, the anti-technocratic back-to-the-land movement and the socialist demands for more from the system, were all lumped together on the left end of the political spectrum, because they were all considered radical criticisms of the status quo. In reality, the socialists were still criticizing the status quo of the nineteenth century, while appropriate technology movement was criticizing a new modernist status quo. When we see that these two political views are opposites, it should change our idea of what the political spectrum is.

The conventional political spectrum lines up political ideologies from progressive to reactionary, depending on their attitudes toward traditional forms of authority, the central socio-economic issue of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The new political spectrum should line up ideologies from preservationist to modernist, depending on their attitudes toward economic growth and technocratic planning, the central socio-economic issue today.

At the far left, the preservationist, anti-technocratic extreme of the new spectrum, is the radical back-to-the-land movement, which believes in total self reliance—from home-birthing, to building your own house of local materials, to producing your own energy—and which refuses to work in the organized economy. At the far right, the modernist, progressive extreme of the new spectrum, is orthodox communism, which believes that a centralized, planned economy should provide all human "needs"—from housing, to education, to child-care to jobs—and which requires everyone to work in the centralized economy.

Socialists and New-Deal liberals are near the modernist end of this new political spectrum. They want the organized economy to provide everyone with services, though they consider communists too extreme and want to make slower, incremental moves in the same direction. Yet our "conservatives" are also on the modernist end of the spectrum, at least when it comes to economic issues: They are closer to the center than liberals, because they still have an old-fashioned belief in personal initiative, but they believe as strongly as anyone in technology, progress and economic growth.

On social issues that involve empowerment, on the other hand, "conservatives" are exactly in the center of the new political spectrum and are trying to go in both directions at once. For example, they want voucher systems of schooling to empower the family, but they also want voucher systems so the market can provide education more efficiently. They do not realize that the market could product Wal-Mart-like chains of schools that leave parents even more powerless than local public schools.

Conservatives fall into this sort of contradiction because they are really only half-way conservative—conservatives on social issues but market modernists on economic issues. They will not admit the obvious fact that the market economy is a progressive force. In the nineteenth century, liberals backed the market because it was breaking down traditional social ties. In the twentieth century, supporters of the market were branded conservative only because socialists wanted even more extreme forms of economic modernization.

The fact that our conservatives believe in classical liberal economics shows how far our politics were skewed toward the modernist end of the spectrum during the twentieth century, when everyone agreed on the value of progress and growth. The modernist end of the spectrum is crowded with the most important ideologies of that century, from communism to socialism to new deal liberalism to laissez-faire capitalism.

By contrast, the preservationist end of the spectrum is riddled with gaps. It has a scattering of ideas rather than a coherent ideology, but these ideas represent the new political directions of recent decades—environmentalism, the New Urbanists' use of traditional neighborhood design, the idea of empowerment that inspired first the new left and now the new right—all of which are reactions against modernization.

We need realistic social policies that fill the gaps in the preservationist end of the political spectrum. These policies must reflect the central ideas of the appropriate technology movement—that we should limit technology on environmental and social

grounds, that we should consume less and do more for ourselves, that we should modernize selectively to preserve the human scale of society—but they also must be practical and must fit into the lives of the average person.

The appropriate technology movement was utopian, but most people would find its underlying bias very attractive, if they saw how it could fit into their own lives. Most people will never home-school their children, but they do want to spend more time raising their own children rather than giving them up totally to day-care centers and schools. Most people will never grow all their own vegetables and cook on a wood-burning stove, but they do want to eat more home-cooking around the table with the family, rather than living on fast-food from a drive-through chain. Most people will never drop out of the modern economy and become totally self-reliant, but they do want to be less harried by the modern economy and to have more free time for themselves.

# A Political Turning Point

When communism fell in eastern Europe, the world's politics shifted dramatically away from the modernist extreme. Most people thought in terms of old political spectrum and saw the fall of communism as a victory of capitalism, but we can also think of communist eastern Europe as the last place where an extreme, brutal form of technocratic modernism survived.

In 1988, for example, Nicolae Ceaucescu reaffirmed Romania's plan to solve "the problem of modern living places for villagers" by demolishing his country's 13,000 villages and moving their inhabitants to 1,200 "agro-industrial centers" with identical pre-fabricated concrete housing—despite protests from Western European preservationists. Likewise, in Bucharest, once called the Paris of Eastern Europe, the government removed 45,000 people from their homes and demolished buildings dating back as far as 1588, as part of a plan to build modern, concrete high-rises throughout the city.[iv]

This sort of planning was common all over Eastern Europe until the fall of communism. The same style of planning had been common in the United States from the New Deal housing projects of the 1930s through the Great Society slum clearance projects of the 1960s, until it was stopped by preservationists during the 1970s.

The most sensitive critics of communism sometimes sounded like American preservationists: For example, Vasclaw Havel spoke of reviving small shops and small farms to restore the character of the cities and the countryside, which had been destroyed by the massive scale of communist development. The largest voluntary organization to form in Russia immediately after the fall of Communism was the association for historical preservation, and a growing environmental movement forced Russia to abandon plans to redirect the flow of its northern rivers.[v] The fall of communism made it clear that the old political categories no longer make sense: Newscasters described the remaining communists, who were trying to stop reform, as "conservatives."

Today, we are at a political turning point, just as the West was in the nineteenth century, when the distinction between progressive and conservative first became important.

Then, it was becoming obvious that capitalism had not kept all its promises: it had freed people from feudal ties, as its supporters claimed, but it was creating a factory system that was even more oppressive in some ways. "Utopian socialists" founded small experimental communities that did away with private property, which they considered central to capitalism. But socialism did not become important politically until it began backing practical policies to change the larger society that were in keeping with the most important economic fact of the time, the rise of large-scale industry.

Today, it is becoming obvious that modernization has not kept all its promises: it has freed us from scarcity, but its nine-to-five jobs, its day-care centers, its suburbs where you cannot live without a car, its shopping malls filled with identical chain-stores, its paved-over landscapes, and its expert planners and managers, look more and more like a new form of oppression. The appropriate technology movement came up with small, utopian experiments that rejected the consumerism and dependency that are the central principles of modernization. The attack on technocracy will become important politically when we begin backing practical policies to change the larger society that are in keeping with the most important economic fact of our time, the fact that economic growth is now a threat to the natural environment and to the social environment.

---

[i] Paul Goodman, *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative* (New York, Vintage Books, 1971) p. 191.

[ii] Sar A. Levitan, Richard S. Belous, and Frank Gallo, *What's Happening to the American Family?: Tensions, Hopes, Realities*, revised edition (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins Press, 1988) p. 131.

[iii] Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York, Basic Books, 1973) p. 29

[iv] *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 30, 1988, p. A20.

[v] James Billington, "The Russian Search for a New Identity," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 31, 1990, p. Z-6.

*This essay appeared in New Perspectives Quarterly, Fall 1995, in a slightly different form and under the title "Toward an Appropriate Politics."*