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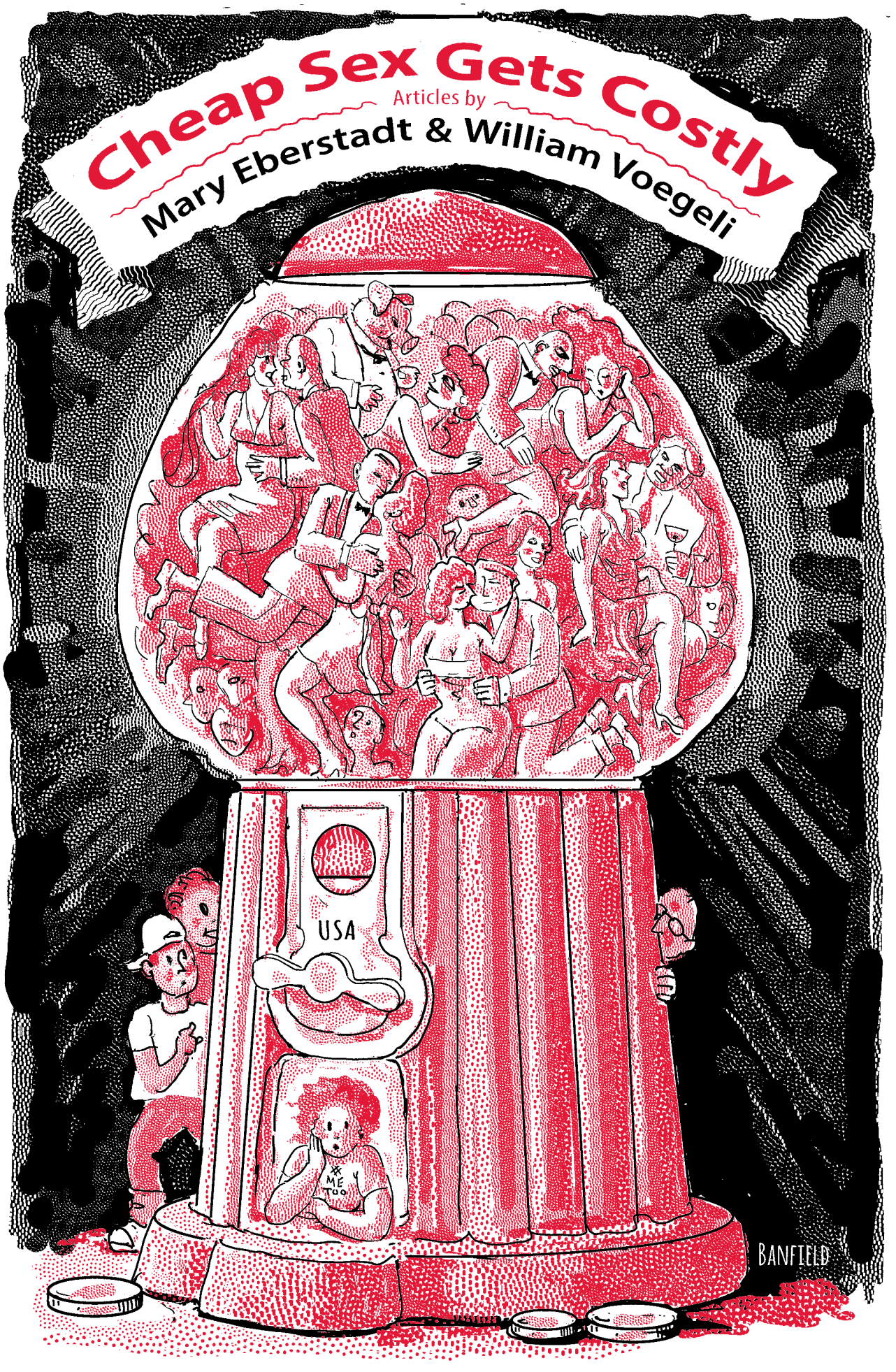

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Book Review by Bradley C.S. Watson

Hundred Years' War

The Progressives' Century: Political Reform, Constitutional Government, and the Modern American State,
edited by Stephen Skowronek, Stephen M. Engel, and Bruce Ackerman. Yale University Press, 544 pages, $100

Common experience, and modern psychology, validate the truism that people tend to see what they're looking for. In the professional realm, confirmation bias—that is, the tendency of investigators to seek and elevate that which confirms their preexisting hypotheses—is likely to constrain the gaze of even the most determined and experienced souls, and perhaps *especially* the most determined and experienced. *Déformation professionnelle*, as the French call it, is a condition that can only afflict the well-trained, or at least the long inured.

Professional academics, nominally dedicated to objectivity, have not proved immune to deformation—or outright capture by professional interests—in their efforts to regulate the ebb and flow of respectable opinion. The American academy, long enjoying various forms of insulation and privilege, is uniquely positioned to generate moral hazard in the realm of ideas. A case in point is the idea of Progressivism, as it was transmitted by American academics, especially historians, throughout the 20th century. Progressivism argued for an overturning of the principled American constitutionalism of fixed natural rights and limited, dispersed power. In its stead, self-styled Progressives sought to privilege an organic, evolutionary model of the Constitution, facilitating the authority of experts who would be dedicated to the expansion of the public sphere and political control, especially at the national level. The Progressive intellectual synthesis is based on a transformation in American political thought that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, stemming from the confluence of social Darwinism, pragmatism, and German idealism. Elements of this intellectual Progressivism were exemplified by such thinkers as John Dewey, W.E.B. Du Bois, William James, Francis Lieber, William Graham Sumner, and Lester Frank Ward, and such political actors as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. By the early 20th century, the historicism at the heart of Progressivism—the belief that history itself leads ineluctably to ever greater improvement—came to dominate key academic disciplines, such as law and political science.

As Winston Churchill is reputed to have said, "History will be kind to me for I intend to write it." In large measure, the first scholarly interpreters of Progressivism were also its intellectual architects, and later interpreters were in deep sympathy with its premises and conclusions. Too many scholarly treatments of the Progressive synthesis have been products of it, or at least insufficiently mindful of the hostility of Progressivism to the founders' Constitution, not to mention to the realm of the private, including conscience itself. For much of the past century, Progressivism was interpreted as a populist, or occasionally an intellectual, movement that was ultimately assimilable to the basic contours and deepest concerns of American politics.

Writing after the dust had settled and after the Progressive era had morphed into the

New Deal, leading progressive historians, who fancied themselves historians of Progressivism, wrote with the considerable authority that 20th-century American academia provided. They declared it was time for citizens to move along, for there was really nothing (or at least not much) to see in Progressivism. And where there was something, it was often a lost promise, an unfulfilled yearning, an unrequited love for an American damsel who too often resisted progressive advances that would in no wise have compromised her integrity. These scholars offered up interpretations and historiographies of the Progressive era, and they cemented in the American mind the image of Progressivism as a rather warm, fuzzy movement for change whose time had come and gone. Richard Hofstadter's mid-century consensus view of American intellectual history, for example, clearly evident in books like *The Age of Reform* (1955), deemphasizes the depth of philosophic disagreement that separated the founders of Progressivism from the founders of the American republic. And indeed, continuities in the American tradition, rather than important disjunctions, were long emphasized by scholars across the scholarly spectrum.

Enter the "claremont school" of political science, which picked up where American historians never left off. Consisting of scholars associated in one way or another with Claremont McKenna College, Claremont Graduate University, or the Claremont Institute, the "Claremont School" has sparked one of the most important intellectual and political movements of recent years: the reconsideration of the Progressive intellectual synthesis—the Progressive idea—which has had such a large influence in American political, philosophical, religious, historical, and policy arenas over the past century. Scholars in the Claremont orbit have long emphasized that the U.S. Constitution—and indeed any form of limited government—rests on the understanding that there are permanent principles of political right derivable from a proper understanding of human nature, including the fact that humans are politically equal, and fallen, beings. In rejecting any account of an unchangeable human nature, the Progressives went deep to attack the heart of American constitutionalism.

Now, this reconsideration of the Progressive synthesis has spread to more mainstream political science circles—or perhaps it's better to say it can't be ignored in such circles anymore. Witness *The Progressives' Century*, a sprawling volume edited by Stephen Skowronek and Bruce Ackerman of Yale, and Stephen M. Engel of Bates College. As the editors allow in their introduction, the Progressives were insurgents who "pressed a comprehensive critique of the old order," including its constitutional foundations. For Progressives, institutional constraints on the national government had to give way to allow for programmatic action, part of an all-out "assault on limits." In this sense, they were unabashedly anti-constitutional.

The editors insist that Progressivism is now on the defensive as a result of contemporary conservatives laying siege to it. Alas, the 21 contributors the editors have assembled don't do much to cash out this claim. Dealing with a few central questions and many ancillary ones, this catch-all volume has a cumulative effect similar to the historical works that went before it—it makes the Progressive synthesis appear more diffuse, and more mainstream, than it is. Rather than claiming Progressivism is on the defensive, it would be more accurate to observe that it has merely had to defend itself—for the first time—as a result of the recent siege. But even the need for an intellectual defense would come as news to a lot of contemporary progressives, including many contributors to this volume, who are still under the mistaken impression that their wholesale rejection of the founders' Constitution is as American as apple pie. Important as the conservative counterinsurgency has been, it still has a ways to go.

But just how far should the conservative counterinsurgency go? According to the editors, its reappraisal of the modern American state and the Progressive ideas that underlie it has already "grown

more radical" and "polemical." So just who are the radicals in the story? The editors' sympathies, like those of the mid-century historians, seem clear enough. Although they grant that "[c]onservative revisionism all but compels a broad reconsideration of the rise of Progressivism as the pivot point in the development of modern American government," one cannot help sensing that this admission is meant largely to provide fodder for the "American political development" subfield of political science with which they are associated. *Déformation professionnelle* is as likely to creep into this subfield as any other, especially when "objectivity" precludes the deep attachment to the Constitution, and to the regime, that is experienced by the conservative counterinsurgents who appear to the editors, and many of the contributors, to be the radicals.

It is the counterinsurgents—"rejectionists" in the editors' lingo—who are renouncing what "should be familiar to most Americans," including especially faith in government's ability to solve socio-economic problems. The rejectionists would even go so far as to undermine our purported confidence in enlightened expertise and leadership. In the end, the editors' counsel is that it's best not to "choose sides on the legacy of progressivism." Surely we can build consensus around that.

The chapters that deal most squarely with the rejectionists—those by Ken I. Kersch of Boston College and Steven M. Teles of Johns Hopkins—convey the tone of the volume, even as they do a commendable job of offering a quick if incomplete guide to some of the most trenchant criticism of the Progressive synthesis. Kersch notes that Progressivism is now central to accounts from the intellectual Right as to how the founders' Constitution was abandoned. This marks a shift from earlier conservative interpretations—which tended to concentrate on countermajoritarian "activist" judges—toward a more robust political theory of the American Founding which the rejectionists juxtapose against the rampant historicism of the Progressives. In short, the center of gravity of constitutional conservatism has moved away from the law schools to the discipline of political science. It is being articulated by "Straussian political theorists," writes Kersch, who are capable of engaging the elaborate theory of Progressivism and offering a rebuttal that "cuts much deeper" than the earlier legalist-originalist one.

But Kersch insists that things are complicated when it comes to the Progressive synthesis, which was "diverse and often self-contradicting." The insights—or "obsessions," as the author prefers—of the Straussians are tinged with "religious foundationalism" and "dog-whistle implications" demanding "an oathlike allegiance" to natural law. Serving this fundamentalism of the rejectionists are "apocalyptic stories of faith and heresy, salvation and damnation, friends and enemies, loyalty and treason" and "constitutional McCarthyism," revealing "the very egoism they hold damnable in their enemies." The only thing apocalyptic in all this is Kersch's purple prose.

Kersch argues that the new critique of Progressivism has overcome past divisions on the Right, forging a new conservative political movement, at both the intellectual and populist levels. These "movement" implications are taken up by Teles in his examination of the intellectual and popular channels through which the new critique of Progressivism was spread. The political theorists moved their ideas through think tanks like the Claremont Institute and the Heritage Foundation, and then opinion journalists like Jonah Goldberg and Glenn Beck. The Tea Party movement was given a "coherent account of the fall" by intellectuals who explained and defended the founders' Constitution against progressive assaults.

The Claremont circle figures prominently in Teles's account. He's right to suggest it is responsible for the remarkable resurgence of interest in the founders' political theory, dormant for so long among intellectuals blinded by the Progressive synthesis. In good political science fashion, Teles bases much of his analysis on interviews, especially with scholars in the Claremont orbit. Alas, like many a political scientist, he is not quite at home with the zoological specimens he is studying, so he sees them as curiosities. To him, they appear unlike an earlier generation of more congenial Straussians, who were willing to make peace with a progressivism that, while occasionally overreaching, was ultimately a mere response to political necessities, and one that could be squared with constitutional norms.

This is a large volume that contains enough material to be of use to students of various aspects of the progressive phenomenon. But it would have been a lot better had the editors troubled themselves to include one or two unapologetic rejectionists—assuming they know any.

Bradley C.S. Watson is professor of politics and Philip M. McKenna Chair in American and Western Political Thought at Saint Vincent College. His most recent book is an anthology of leading scholarly critics of progressivism, Progressive Challenges to the American Constitution: A New Republic *(Cambridge University Press).*