Review Article

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A critique of Marilyn Lake's *Progressive New World*

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Abstract

This review article provides a critique of Marilyn Lake's *Progressive New World*, a monograph that postulates that Australian/Australasian transpacific exchange shaped the development of American progressivism. The review outlines the major contours of her claim, notes her ambivalence concerning her overall position, and critiques her decision to not explain/examine differences in the political culture of the United States of America and Australia. The review seeks to overcome this problem by examining key differences in the cultural history of both societies and draws on the insights of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy and America*. The review (a) develops a model which provides a means to understand how one society can impact another; (b) contrasts the origins of progressivism in the United States of America and Australia; (c) examines the work of the Australian scholar Michael Roe, who postulated that American progressivism was the independent factor impacting Australian developments; (d) distinguishes between two types of progressivism – racist conceit, pure and simple, and broader social reforms, which may or may not entrench racist conceit; and (e) examines various dimensions of progressivism which Marilyn Lake has used in developing her claim.

JEL codes: B10, B22

Keywords

Alexis de Tocqueville, arbitration, Australia, Australian ballot, electoral reform, immigrants, Indigenous people, maternity and infant allowances, Michael Roe, minimum wage, New Zealand, racist conceit, trade unions, United States of America, women's suffrage

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Time marches on in a straight line, one second at a time. That which occurs during this relentless march however, what we call social phenomena, does not occur in straight lines; it is messy, complicated and confusing. The lot of the scholar is to try and make sense and explain that which has happened. A starting point is the examination of data. The next step is to see patterns within this data and to develop general or conceptual statements. A corollary of scholarship is to employ Occam's razor.

Marilyn Lake in *Progressive New World* is interested in the links between English-speaking settler-societies in Australia, or sometimes Australasia with the inclusion of New Zealand, and the United States of America in the latter part of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century.[1] Lake's major claim is that her *Progressive New World* 'offers a new history of progressivism as a transpacific project shaped by Australasian example and the shared experience and racialised order of settler colonialism' (p. 4). Putting to one side whatever the progressive project entailed, this statement sees Australasia as an initiating, if not dynamic, force in interacting with America. This review article critically examines her analysis and rejects this claim. It concludes that the respective experiences of Australia/Australasia and the United States of America during the so-called Progressive Era were substantially different – they were sui generis.

The review outlines the major contours of Marilyn Lake's claim, notes her ambivalence, or alternatively, her uncertainty concerning her overall position and critiques her decision to not explain/examine differences in the political culture of the United States of America and Australia. The review seeks to overcome this problem by examining key differences in the cultural history of both societies and draws on the insights of Alexis de Tocqueville's (1966) *Democracy and America*. It then goes on to develop a model which provides a means to understand how one society can impact another; contrasts the origins of progressivism in the United States of America and Australia; examines the work of the Australian scholar Michael Roe (1984), who postulated that American progressivism as the independent factor impacting on Australian developments; distinguishes between two types of progressivism – racist conceit, pure and simple, and broader social reforms, which may or may not entrench racist conceit; and examines various dimensions of progressivism which Lake has used to sustain her claim.

The word 'progressive' implies that there is a better way of doing things. The settler-societies of Australasia and America saw themselves as breaking away from their European pasts and creating new, 'better' societies. Progressivism is associated with vitality and initiative and assigns an important role to education and intellectual elites in forging a new way forward. Progressivism has a connotation of the wholesale embrace of reform and the state playing a major role in bringing about such reforms.

Lake refers to progressivism's 'ambiguous character' stating while it embraced reforms to promote the welfare of the white race, especially the position of men, it marginalised, discriminated against, repressed and sought to diminish 'inferior' others. Whether defined by race, colour, religion, nation of origin, or any other socio-economic dimension, these 'others' were seen as being antithetical to the needs of white racial purity and survival. If we see progressivism as an exercise in racial conceit, then what Lake sees as a contradiction easily transforms into a logical whole.

Lake maintains that '[t]he story of transpacific reform campaigns can best be understood through the lens of personal friendships, shared enthusiasms and professional

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networks. Ideas circulated through conversation, conferences, and correspondence' (p. 17). Her account mainly focuses on American interactions with Charles Henry Pearson, Alfred Deakin, Catherine Helen Spence (especially her 1893–1894 tour of America), Alfred Inglis Clark, Henry Bournes Higgins, Vida Goldstein (1902 American tour) and New Zealand Labour bureaucrat Edward Tregear.

Lake focuses on issues associated with electoral reform, including extending the franchise to women and enabling them to stand for parliament; immigration; industrial relations, especially arbitration and the minimum wage; women's suffrage; maternity and infant allowances; and attacks on and the destruction of Indigenous peoples as exemplified by the seizure of lands, the breakup of families and the taking away of children in what has become known as the 'stolen generation'.

It is not clear that Lake herself actually subscribes to her claim of Australasian leadership in transpacific exchange. Elsewhere she says, 'Australian visitors frequently observed, Americans were shackled by conservative political institutions, whose elitist, undemocratic character was shaped by the late eighteenth century by the founders of a settler colonial republic forged more than one hundred years earlier' (p. 19). Lake attaches a note to this statement, really the only discussion note in over 40 pages of notes, which I will come to after reproducing what she wrote in the next paragraph.

> Transpacific comparisons highlighted the limits to Americans' readiness to and ability to adopt new ideas and implement desired reforms. A federal constitution that inscribed states' rights and the principle of individual liberty, together with a long-established, two-party system that marginalised minorities and women, entrenched formidable barriers to change. Individualism and voluntarism remained powerful creeds in public life (p. 19).

This qualification creates the impression that Lake is unsure about the 'ability' of America to embrace or adopt developments and ideas from elsewhere, such as Australia/Australasia.

Now to the note. Lake states, 'It is beyond the scope of this book to explain the differences in political culture between the United States and Australia' (n. 102: 259). Her decision to not undertake such a task constitutes a major weakness of *Progressive New World.* If one is wanting to examine the impact of ideas and precepts from one society on another, it would seem not only reasonable but also necessary to develop an understanding of their respective cultures before any serious analysis of external impacts can take place. If you do not know or even care about respective starting points, how can you know how or where you are travelling?

The following discussion seeks to overcome this omission. Let us begin with a rudimentary differentiation. Britain established six colonies in what is now called Australia, beginning in 1788. The colonies, except for South Australia, were founded by convicts. After serving their sentences, convicts were set free. The history of Australia in the 19th century was one of adopting democracy and self-rule, or independence from the British. This was achieved when Australia federated and became a Commonwealth on 1 January 1901. Because of the harshness of the climate and the small population, there was an expectation that the state would play an active role in resolving problems.

America was also colonised by the British, with the process starting almost two centuries before Australia. In 1790 America had a population of 4 million (United States, 1793),

Table 1. American and Australian populations: 1880–1881, 1900–1901 and 1920–1921.

United States of America		Australia	
Year	Population	Year	Population
1880	50.2 million	1881	2.3 million
1900	76.2 million	1901	3.8 million
1920	106.5 million	1921	5.4 million

Source: United States Department of the Interior Census Office (1882), United States Census Office William R Merriam, Director (1901), United States Department of Commerce Bureau for the Census (1921) and Caldwell (1987: 26).

while Australia, or more correctly New South Wales (Sydney) had 1000 (Caldwell, 1987: 25). America gained independence through the Revolutionary War as against Australia, where there was an exchange of documents at 60 paces (or maybe 17,000 km). America imported slaves from Africa. It fought a Civil War from 1861 to 1865 to abolish slavery, which resulted in the death of 750,000 Americans (Nasaw, 2012). Australia has a history of racism, but nothing which compares to that of America resulting from its enslavement of Africans. In America during the 19th century, young men went west searching for new land and opportunities (Turner, 1921). The overwhelming majority of Australians live in a small number of capital cities on the coast. The centre is too dry and arid to 'go west'.

Another way to compare Australia and America during the Progressive Era is in terms of population size. Table 1 shows the populations of both nations for 1880–1881, 1900–1901 and 1920–1921. America's population in this period grew from 50.2 million to 106.5 million, while Australia's population grew from 2.3 million to 5.4 million. Are these differences in scale worth considering, or is it too difficult to know how to make sense of them and so is it best to ignore them?

These are just basic facts and data. A more significant difference is in the way in which Australia (and New Zealand) and America are governed, or more particularly the role of the state. Australia had a positive or active role for the state, a role which was sometimes described as 'socialism without doctrine'. America has adopted a different role, as alluded to by Lake in the qualification presented above. This different role starts with the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville, following his tour of America in the 1830s. In *Democracy and America*, he observed,

> The more we reflect upon all that occurs in the United States, the more we shall be persuaded that the lawyers…form the most powerful … counterpoise to the democratic element … The courts of justice are the visible organs by which the legal profession is enabled to control the democracy … Scarcely any political question arises in the United States that is not resolved … into a judicial question. (de Tocqueville, 1966: 278–280)

Judges can and have trumped the democratic element; they have acted to tame the 'gutsy passions' of the masses.

Lake's lens mainly focuses on developments with women, children, immigrants and Indigenous people and on locations in California, Chicago, Boston, New York and Boston. She briefly refers to the American South and the treatment of African Americans

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and Turner's (1923) thesis of the closing of the frontier in the West. African Americans, especially in the South, were kept in their place by violence and the Supreme Court of the United States' 'separate but equal' *Plessey v. Ferguson* decision in 1896. Lause (2017) has demonstrated that the so-called Turner thesis of how democracy and egalitarianism spread across the West was nothing more than a fantasy: the West was tamed by big money from the East or Britain in the slaughter and marginalisation of those who got in the way. America had its Pinkertons to break up strikes, take on unions and indulge in nefarious practices (O'Hara, 2016), something Australia lacked. A major difference between these two settler-societies was the scale of the use of violence. H. Rap Brown once said, '[v]iolence is as American as cherry pie' (ForbesQuotes, n.d.). Add violence to a judiciary stacked against the popular will, and you have two different types of societies: two different starting points for their respective uptakes of progressivism.

In seeking to arrive at an understanding of how the ideas of one society can impact another, it might be useful to develop a model of how such transfers might occur. The following, which is an adaptation of Dabscheck (1998), attempts this task. It might be useful to conceive of a nation-state as comprising a spectrum of practices and ideas. The notion of a spectrum implies that different practices and ideas concerning various sectors or parts of the nation-state exist. Most Americans, for example, would concede that the North is different from the South, the East coast is different from the West coast and cities are different from each other and rural communities and so on.

In examining a spectrum at a particular point in time, it may be possible to identify a dominant paradigm, or equilibrium. Such a notion is not meant to imply stasis or rest. It is simply an analytical device to synthesise the essence of a particular nation-state at a certain moment. The various individuals, groups and organisations involved in the nation-state will struggle with each other in trying to realise the attainment of their respective goals, such as progressives trying to implement their agenda. These struggles between protagonists will move the dominant paradigm backwards and forwards, to the advantage or disadvantage of the protagonists concerned. A dominant paradigm having been established will provide the base from which the next round of struggle between protagonists will occur, ad infinitum. Those involved in such struggles will seek to move the dominant paradigm closer to their desired position, to, in effect, 'load the dice', making it easier to compete in the struggles that lie ahead.

Spectra and dominant paradigms can be identified for Australasia and America. A three-step process can be employed to test Lake's claim of Australasian progressives shaping the American experience. Firstly, identify common examples of progressivism on respective spectra. Secondly, examine whether American examples were home grown or were based on Australasian experience, or did they occur independently of each other? Third, determine whether or not there was a change in the dominant American paradigm.

Lake's presentation of the progressive paths that occurred in Australasia and America is conducted in a relative vacuum. There is an implicit assumption that they formed in the same way. Her emphasis on both being settler-societies with people who speak the same language conveys a sense of 'sameness'. The origins of American progressivism can be traced back to American economists being educated in Germany in the 1870s and 1880s. Germany was then regarded as the world leader in political economy and rejected the 'invisible hand' of laissez-faire economics and advocated a positive role for state

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intervention (Leonard, 2016). A distinctive characteristic of American progressivism was for educated experts to conduct research, rely on 'reasoned' persuasion and voluntary benevolence as well as philanthropy to bring about change.

Antecedents in Australia and New Zealand were different. This can be illustrated by considering the ideas that influenced Henry Bournes Higgins in his period as president of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration from 1907 to 1921, especially his famous 1907 *Harvester* case, which rejected the 'higgling of the market' and established a 'living wage' to enable an unskilled labourer and his family of five to live in a condition of 'frugal comfort' (*Ex Parte*, 1907: 7). Higgins' decision was influenced by the writings of the Fabian socialists Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb (1911 [1897]) and *Rerum Novarum* (The Workers' Charter), the 1891 Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII. Higgins borrowed the 'higgling of the market' from Webb and Webb (1911 [1897]: 654–702) and the 'living wage' and 'frugal comfort' from *Rerum Novarum* (1960 [1891]: 32–33 + 6).

In a bibliographic note, Lake provides a list of works 'on historians' diverse and shifting accounts of progressivism', which, with one exception, are published and/or focus on the American experience (n. 22: 254–255). The exception is *Nine Australian Progressives* by the Australian historian Michael Roe (1984). He examines the influence of American progressivism in such areas as public health, architecture and town planning, education, public service administration and industrial arbitration. Roe sees America as being the independent factor impacting Australia. Lake has not considered the implications of Roe's work for her claim of Australia/Australasia being the independent, causative factor in transpacific exchange.

A distinction will be made here between two types of progressivism. Type I is racist conceit, pure and simple. This refers to the various manifestations of progressivism which trade on racial hatred, judicial and extrajudicial means to dominate, discriminate and diminish those races and other socio-economic categories seen as being inimical to and/or threatening the survival of the white race, or white Anglo-Saxons. Type II policies are concerned with (broader) social change. They may or may not have unintended or intended consequences which will entrench racist conceit.

It might appear unlikely that Australasia could 'teach' America anything when it comes to progressivism of Type I. America enslaved Africans for almost two centuries before a civil war and still experiences problems with wiping the stain of this experience and its aftermath from the Stars and Stripes. Australia, or most of its colonies, utilised convict labour. They were freed when they served out their time. Moreover, their skin was of the same colour of those who had held them captive. Problems associated with poverty and religious differences between free settlers and convicts were problems imported from Britain, and of a different order to that of America's experience with slavery and its long-lingering aftermath.

Both Australia and America treated Indigenous peoples in similar ways – appropriating their land, herding them into reservations or protectorates, raping, breaking up families and stealing children, attempting to destroy their cultures and languages, introducing diseases, perpetuating discrimination and blocking opportunities for self-determination. They also had similar attitudes to immigrants from non-Anglo-Saxon parts of Europe and Asia and instituted discriminatory immigration policies. In terms of the model

developed above, their respective approaches to progressivism Type I were developed independently.

There was one exception, however, where Australia helped America enhance the dominant paradigm when it came to racist conceit, pure and simple. Several Australian colonies introduced a government-printed ballot, distributed at electoral booths and signed by electoral officials to overcome corruption in elections. What was called the 'Australian ballot' necessitated the ability of being able to read and write to lodge one's vote. This requirement could be used against those who lacked such skills and/or were not fluent in English. The Australian ballot was embraced in America, especially the South, to disenfranchise African Americans and immigrants arriving from mainland Europe and Asia (Lake, pp. 77–78). This is an example which is consistent with Lake's claim.

To reach this conclusion, however, we are forced to drop the normative connotations associated with the word 'reform' – that reform is something 'good'. Consistent with the model developed above, there is only change, and the nature of change is that it results from the incessant struggles of the various individuals, groups and organisations, who are seeking to move the dominant paradigm to a position which enhances their interests. There are those who benefit from change, and those who do not.

Lake's final chapter is devoted to attempts by Indigenous people in America and Australia to escape the yoke of Type I progressivism. Most of the material examines the American scene, with only a few pages being devoted to developments in Australia. Lake's account points to how Indigenous Australians drew inspiration from Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (p. 238). The causation here is inconsistent with Lake's overall position. Moreover, as interesting as this chapter may be, it seems superfluous to a book ostensibly designed to demonstrate how Australasia shaped American reform – Occam's razor!

Three dimensions of progressivism of Type II can be distinguished: electoral reform, suffragettes and women's rights and industrial relations. As already pointed out, America adopted the Australian ballot, which it used to disenfranchise 'undesirable' others. Catherine Helen Spence was unable to convince Americans of the virtues of proportional representation because the last thing dominant elites wanted was to provide minority groups with a means to enhance their electoral success. Spence's activities do not support Lake's position.

Lake and others, such as Woloch (2017 [2015]), have pointed to the long history of feminist and suffragette movements in America. It is not as if this is something that America learned from Australasia. While Australasia was ahead of America in terms of electoral reform and more broadly defined women's rights, American developments marched to the beat of their own drums rather than a cooee from Australian suffragettes and feminists. In 1902 the Commonwealth of Australia passed legislation to enable women to vote and stand for parliament. In 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment of the American Constitution was ratified, which granted women the right to vote.

Both nations saw a need to respond to problems experienced by women in their role as 'Mothers of the Nation'. In 1912, a federal Labour government provided a one-off payment of five pounds to mothers whether married or not, but not to Indigenous women. This was intended to enhance family life and to avoid the necessity of children of 'poor'

families being placed in orphanages. In America, consistent with the German roots of its progressivism, a Children's Bureau was created to conduct research into the plight of children born into poor families – another strike against Lake's claim.

Lake's examination of the interactions between Australasia and America on industrial relations mainly focuses on Henry Bourne Higgins' 1907 *Harvester* decision and the 1915 publication of his 'New Province For Law And Order' in the *Harvard Law Review.* It is not clear that Lake has read *Harvester.* Her notes do not contain a reference to *Harvester*. Nor has she examined two other articles Higgins published in the *Harvard Law Review*, in 1919 and 1920. She has relied on the 1915 article and Lack and Fahey (2008). Lake has not consulted other secondary sources on Higgins and his jurisprudence, such as Macarthy (1969), Callaghan (1983), McQueen (1983) and Rickard's (1984) biography of Higgins.

There were three components to Higgins' approach to industrial relations. They were the recognition of unions, arbitration and a minimum (or living) wage. None of these precepts was embraced in America. They were successfully resisted by those opposed to unions and regulation around a rhetoric of voluntarism and individualism. In addition, Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 to 1924, was opposed to state intervention in industrial relations. He said he preferred 'red-blooded rugged independence and will power' to state protection which would emasculate American working men (p. 8).

Even when legislation in America was enacted which regulated different dimensions of industrial relations, captains of industry launched legal challenges which de Tocqueville's' judges invariably declared invalid. Forbath (1989) provides an exhaustive analysis of the jurisprudence of this era, including a 16-page list of cases and their fate at the hands of the judiciary (Forbath, 1989: 1237–1248, 1253–1256).

The attitude of the courts to the employment of women during the Progressive Era constitutes an exception, with a preparedness to uphold protective legislation under the 'police power', which meant or translated to 'the health of the community'. This came to an end in 1923, when the Supreme Court declared in *Adkins v. Children's Hospital* as unconstitutional any legislation that interfered with the contract of employment. Woloch (2017) has provided an extensive analysis of the struggle for women's employment rights during the Progressive Era period. She does not include any input from Australian progressives in the dynamics of this era. Industrial relations is another strike against Lake's claim.

Several other problems with *Progressive New World* should be noted. The first concerns the organisation of material, or the sequence of chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on labour reform and is followed by two chapters on women's suffrage and 'Mothers of the Nation'. The latter chapter then morphs into a discussion of the treatment of Indigenous people. This is followed by a chapter on labour investigators crossing the Pacific, and the final chapter examines Indigenous challenges to the racist conceit of progressivism, mainly in America. The two chapters on labour, chapters 4 and 7, should have been presented together, with that on Pacific travellers, chapter 7, preceding that on labour reform, chapter 4, given the chronology of events examined. Similarly, the last chapter should have followed the two chapters (5 and 6) on women's suffrage and 'Mothers of the Nation', given the basic similarity of material covered.

The second problem concerns repetition. Lake employs a methodology, what she calls a 'lens of personal friendships…circulated through conversation, conferences, and

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correspondence' (p. 17). In such interactions, her protagonists essentially repeat themselves in expressing the same ideas in different forums. This is especially the case with the tours of Catherine Helen Spence and Vida Goldstein. Lake would have been well advised to utilise a more thematic approach which summarised the essence of the ideas of her different protagonists rather than one which amounted to little more than variations on a few themes laced with observations on the cordiality of interactions and travel schedules. There is also a repetition of factual material across chapters which makes for dull reading. It is as if Lake has no confidence in the ability of readers to remember such information. My guess is that this is a monograph that will only be read by specialists who should either know or have the ability to retain such information. She needed to devote more thought to enhancing the presentation and readability of her material – Occam's razor again.

Third, Lake says that 'the formation of the first Labor government in the world [occurred in Australia] in 1910' (p.162). Well, it did not. Andrew Dawson formed the first such government in Queensland in December 1899; it only lasted a week (Murphy, 1975: 165). Chris Watson formed the first Labour government at the national level in Australia from April to August 1904. Andrew Fisher was a Labour Prime Minister from November 1908 to June 1909. What is disturbing here is that Lake has made such a basic error which was not picked up by the readers of her manuscript, whom she mentions in her acknowledgements (pp. 297–298), who are presumably historians.

Finally, Lake fails to provide a conclusion where the threads of *Progressive New World* are drawn together and broader insights provided. *Progressive New World* and its readership would have benefitted from such a conclusion.

Progressive New World documents exchanges which occurred between like-minded persons in Australasia and America who described themselves as progressives. Such transpacific changes did not shape American reform, except for the Australian ballot being used to marginalise minority groups antithetical to the racist conceit of American progressives, which entrenched rather than challenged the dominant paradigm. It is difficult to see, with the above exception, how Australasian developments had any impact on America, American progressivism or America's dominant paradigm. While Australia/Australasia and America were settler-societies and spoke the same language, their respective experiences during the so-called Progressive Era were substantially different – they were sui generis.

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1. See Patmore and Stromquist (2018) for a comparative examination of labour issues in Australia and America.

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