

Los Angeles and the Progressive Tradition

by Peter Dreier

Los Angeles today is very similar to what New York was a hundred years ago—a city of enormous wealth and great disparities between rich and poor. New York was a city where new industries were booming, but there were sweatshops, slums, and public health crises. Out of that cauldron of social problems came the progressive movement. It started in New York among immigrants, who began organizing labor unions, middle class reformers who started settlement houses, and writers like Jacob Riis, who exposed conditions in the slums and factories to public scrutiny. Politicians like Al Smith, Robert Wagner and Meyer London were elected to local and national public offices, and they were the voices of the immigrant workers, the sponsors of legislation for affordable housing and tenement house and workplace reform. There were clergy involved in supporting that movement. There were people in the upper class, mostly women, who started the first generation of philanthropies that helped the working class movement, the union movement, the housing reform movement, the public health movement. After the Triangle Fire, there was a huge spate of legislation to improve working conditions in factories.

L.A. is comparable to that today. It's an immigrant city which has enormous wealth and yet more poverty than any other city. It has an incredible set of grassroots organizations. It's got rich people who are progressive, organized through groups like the Liberty Hill Foundation. It has journalists like Harold Meyerson and others who are exposing social problems and shaping the public debate. It has clergy who participate in social justice activities. It has an enormous amount of interracial cooperation between African-American, Latino, white and Asian activists.

The progressive movement in New York laid the intellectual and political foundations for the New Deal twenty years later. The people that spearheaded the movements in New York, like Frances Perkins and Robert Wagner, later became the people who were organizing to get the minimum wage, to get Social Security, to pass the Wagner Act. The progressive movement in L.A. today may be laying the intellectual and political foundation for the next New Deal—so that my students and young people in the DSA Youth Section will inherit a movement that will not only change Los Angeles but eventually change the country.

One example here in California was the overwhelming vote in November rejecting Arnold Schwarzenegger and his corporate rightwing agenda. Mike Harrington said that what DSA should be is the left wing of the possible, which sometimes means taking risks and going beyond conventional wisdom. Two years ago the California Nurses Association took a risk and began to challenge an extremely popular governor on his health care, fiscal and tax agenda, on his rapid move to the right after his first year in office. I'm pleased to say that one of my good friends is here tonight, David Johnson, the organizing director of CNA. Now it's conventional wisdom that Arnold was vulnerable, but then only a handful of people who could see that—CNA was in the forefront.

As a college professor I know that there's an enormous myth about young people, that they're apathetic, that they're indifferent. Across this country tens of thousands of college students and young people who are not in college are, just a little bit below the surface, idealistic. Their cynicism is only that deep. If they're given an opportunity and an outlet for their idealism, they take advantage of it. For example, there's an enormous anti-sweatshop movement in this country: two hundred colleges have anti-sweatshop codes of conduct. I think progressives, whether they are professors or union leaders, must mentor and recruit the next generation of activists.

Sometimes I worry that the left in academia, the kind of postmodern, postcolonial, armchair lefties who teach in a lot of our colleges, actually have a negative impact on a lot of students, because they tell them how awful things are, how capitalism is terrible, and then they give them absolutely no idea about what to do about it other than to go to the library and read more theory. One of the things I and other faculty do is try to get our students involved in what might be considered reformist activities—reforms that lead to progressive change—what Andre Gorz called “non-reformist” reforms and I call “stepping stone reforms.”

The organizing happening here in L.A. and around the whole country, can have a ripple effect. That's what DSA has helped to do: remind people that you don't have to be a radical just on-line or in the classroom, that you can be a radical in the streets and the union halls and the churches and the synagogues by engaging in real reform. This is much more complicated than theorizing about what a perfect society would be like. DSA has played that role, linking the near and the far, theory and practice, reformism and radicalism.

When Mike Harrington was dying of cancer, he came to Boston to give a speech at an anti-poverty organization. I asked then Mayor Ray Flynn [whom I worked for at the time and had previously introduced to Mike] if he wanted to go to hear Mike speak because he probably wouldn't be alive for very much longer, and if he wanted to get together with him afterwards. Ray said, "I got a better idea. Let's proclaim Michael Harrington Day, and give him a key to the city." How many big city mayors will make a day for a leading socialist? Ray did that because he was so taken with Mike. In fact, lots of times when Flynn would ask me about different issues he would say, "What would your friend Mike do about this?"

Mike would have been impressed by the new mayor of our 21st century city of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa. He was a union organizer. He was the head of the ACLU. He came out the barrio and grew up very poor. His father was an alcoholic, beat his mother—he overcame incredible obstacles. He dropped out of high school, and went back and then graduated from UCLA. He worked his way up through the labor movement and then was elected to the state legislature, becoming Speaker of the Assembly. When he was term-limited out of the legislature he ran for the LA City Council and was elected. When he ran for Mayor the first time in 2001 he lost, but he ran again and won in 2005. Now we have a progressive mayor, thanks in large part to this impressive network of grassroots organizations, labor unions and community and environmental organizations. Many of them have lifted up some of their leaders into positions of electoral power. It's a network of activists that work closely with elected officials, like Congresswoman Hilda Solis, and it's just remarkable what L.A. has become.

I have an idea for a new TV show. It's about the mayor of a big city who gets elected president of the United States in about twenty years. It's about the internal workings of the White House under this progressive president, who had been Mayor and Assembly Speaker, and who eventually gets national health insurance passed, and raises the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. He's able to cut the military budget in half, put that money into public education, child care, and a program of stronger environmental regulations and green industry. He pushes through a bill, making gay marriage legal in all fifty states. I haven't written a word of this yet, but I think it will be a hit. And I think I know what to call it: *Left Wing*.

Peter Dreier is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and Director of the Urban and Environmental Policy Program, Occidental College. He is co-author of The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City. Peter was recognized at the Convention Dinner. This article is taken from his remarks.

Visit Our Web Site:
www.dsausa.org