

POLITICS AND URBAN REFORM

Introduction

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The meaning of “urban reform” has been contentious among historians for decades. In the Progressive Era was it a movement of the righteous to overcome the corruption and wicked rule of the evil bosses? Or was it a struggle by declining Yankee elites to hold on to their power and status, increasingly threatened by the rise to power of new and energetic immigrant groups? Urban reform seems to be best understood today as a collection of political movements, overlapping but distinguishable by the diverse goals of the participants.

While historians once spoke of an era of reform, it is now viewed as a continuous political process that surges and retreats with the ever-changing configuration of society’s problems and the conflicts they engender.

The Western Reserve has long been a locus of reform activity, with deep roots in the ethical concerns of its Yankee settlers. In the 19th century, leaders arose in Ohio to do battle for women’s rights, the abolition of slavery, and prohibition. With the tides of industrialization, immigration and urbanization sweeping over of the Western Reserve in the late 19th century, reformers turned their efforts to alleviating the harsh effects of the transition from agrarian to industrial life.

This morning we are going to hear from Paul Hillmer about some of the less prominent Progressives whose work provides significant insights into the motives and accomplishments of turn-of-the-century activists. Singling out for analysis the important but often neglected issue of electoral reform, Robert J. Kolesar is going to show how external — almost extraneous — political issues were used to defeat that reform initiative. And finally, Stanley Kent will discuss the diverse roles of lawyers and judges in politics and in political reform. He promises to examine what effect, if any, the so-called merit selection of judges might have on the operation of our justice system.