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The Intellectual Legacy of Progressive Economics: A Review Essay of Thomas C. Leonard's *Illiberal Reformers*†

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Thomas Leonard's 2016 book Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era *argues that exclusionary views on eugenics, race, immigration, and gender taint the intellectual legacy of progressive economics and economists. This review essay reconsiders that legacy and places it in the context within which it developed. While the early generations of scholars who founded the economics profession in the United States and trained in its departments did indeed hold and express retrograde views on those subjects, those views were common to a broad swath of the intellectual elite of that era, including the progressives' staunchest opponents inside and outside academia. Moreover, Leonard anachronistically intermingles a contemporary critique of early-twentieth-century progressive economics and the progressive movement writ large, serving to decontextualize those disputes—a flaw that is amplified by the book's unsystematic approach to reconstructing the views and writing it attacks. Notwithstanding the history Leonard presents, economists working now nonetheless owe their progressive forebears for contributions that have become newly relevant: the "credibility revolution," the influence of economic research on policy and program design, the prestige of economists working in and providing advice to government agencies and policy makers, and the academic freedom economists enjoy in modern research-oriented universities are all a part of that legacy.* (*JEL* A11, B15, D82, J15, N31, N32)

1. *Introduction*

Thomas C. Leonard's book *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* offers a revisionist history of the ideology and public advocacy of the pioneering economists who founded the American Economic Association in 1885 and, toting their scholarly wisdom, strode confidently onto the national stage to spread the new gospel of the social sciences during the following decades, right up to the present. The relevance of the history Leonard recounts is renewed in the contemporary intellectual climate for several reasons: the

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high prestige of economics as a field when it comes to adjudicating contemporary academic and policy debates; the return of the very same economic issues in the present that once motivated that founding generation to put the new tools of their science to work in the public sphere; and controversies over whether the presumed nonjudgmental objectivity of "genuine" science has had a negative effect on the search for truth by excluding the perspectives of the historically marginalized.

But the book's revisionism goes too far, well into the realm of anachronism. Leonard projects a contemporary ideological critique of progressive economics back onto the circumstances of its birth. Instead of presenting the intellectual history as it happened, Leonard conjures a legacy for progressive economics dating back to Plato and subsequently to mercantilism, a set of positive and normative beliefs about the economy that were supposedly swept away by Adam Smith in inventing the modern field of economics and propounded by classical and then neoclassical economists since. In that schema, the progressives and the "institutionalist" school they engendered within the economics profession appear as vestiges of a false creed whose temporary influence between 1885 and the widespread revival of a neoclassical framework for economics and policy in the second half of the twentieth century constituted an intellectual retrogression. And the continued influence of progressive-era research questions and policy solutions, such as the minimum wage, appears as yet another flirtation with heresy, one that must be challenged by showing that its promoters back then had dark and self-interested motives. Hence the necessity for the author's intervention.

Motivated history is not good history. And the approach the book takes is particularly unlikely to yield fruitful insight: sweeping statements about what "the progressives" believed, festooned with cherry-picked quotes and out-of-context examples, without much of a hearing for either their opponents or for debate and disagreement among themselves. The result is a powerful brief arguing that the intellectual movement of that era has a decidedly problematic legacy on eugenics, racism, gender equality, immigration, and in countless other ways that would give pause to anyone looking to elevate their legacy. But all, or at least much, of that history was known—revealed decades ago.[1] Progressive-friendly historians have known for a long time that almost all their heroes turned a blind eye toward the racism that flourished in their own heyday. For African Americans, that era was what historian Rayford Logan (1954) called the "nadir" of the post-emancipation years. The era's racial backsliding was, in part, the result of less-than-honorable political dealings by white progressives and populists that left black Americans in the lurch. Between 1890 and 1910, lynchings were at an all-time high, while disenfranchisement, peonage, and segregation were increasingly enforced against a powerless people both by law and terror.

Historical writings on the Progressive movement have changed focus over the years. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the sunshine period of New Deal liberalism's endorsement at the polls, books like Charles Madison's *Critics and Crusaders* (1948) and Louis Filler's *Crusaders for American Liberalism* (1961) celebrated the heroic victories of the "crusaders"—whom the authors of that history saw as their own intellectual forebears. But powerful revisionist works challenging the claims of objectivity in history as a social science have since shown that like-minded scholars and their predecessors were reluctant to confront original scholarship and critiques by the likes of

[1] For example, Furner (1975).

W. E. B. DuBois in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1967 [1899]) and *Black Reconstruction* (1935). Those scholars labeled DuBois's scholarship about the black community as inadmissible advocacy precisely because he was black and therefore "biased." And in the 1960s, a new generation of "New Left" historians cast further aspersions on the progressive legacy, on the grounds that they were in effect in cahoots with the business establishment to hold back the threat of socialist revolution.

Leonard goes further than any of these, arguing that problematic associations discredit the entirety of the legacy of progressivism and progressive economists, rendering all of their ideas suspect and all their scholarship tainted by leftist-but-"illiberal" ideology. In that ambitious project, he fails.

This essay begins in section 2 by placing the emergence of progressive economics in the proper context. Section 3 reconsiders the theory of the labor market that Leonard ascribes to progressive economists—the heart of his argument that their retrograde views taint their scholarship—and it contrasts that false picture with what they actually espoused. Section 4 considers the role those economists played in policy making and in nascent government bureaucracies starting in the late nineteenth century, a particular source of controversy for Leonard. Section 5 then turns to the views of economists outside the progressive movement and others in the intellectual elite, which read as similarly exclusionary to a contemporary sensibility as those voiced by the progressives, albeit with a different ideological flavor. That is in contrast with the generally enlightened picture Leonard paints of those opponents. Section 6 then asks what contemporary economists working in academia and in economic policy-making agencies owe to the generation that founded their profession in the United States. Section 7 concludes.

2. *The Intellectual and Political Background of Progressive Economics*

Progressive economics grew out of a very particular moment in American history. On the one hand, the Union had won the Civil War largely on the ideology of "free labor"—that a man born to toil could, through hard work, skill, and thrift, rise to become a property owner and the employer of others. It was the threat slavery (particularly its westward expansion) posed to the continuation of that system by blocking out opportunity for whites, not abolitionism itself, that spurred the Union to go to war to prevent its own dismemberment by secession. As the war went on and the Confederacy proved totally intransigent in the face of a moderate free-labor policy that left slavery in place where it had long existed, the Union army operating in the South came face to face with both the horrors of slavery and the enthusiasm of the enslaved population at the army's arrival as agents of emancipation. Increasingly, black soldiers served in that army, and abolitionism and the inclusion of freed slaves in the community of free labor came to characterize the war's ideology in the North. The premise of Radical Reconstruction, starting in 1866 and then extending into the Grant administration, was that the federal government had a duty to protect the free labor of former slaves from Southern attempts to yank it back in practice, even after slavery was legally abolished.

The free-labor coalition in the North fractured over the economic issues that increasingly dominated national politics, especially after the Panic of 1873 and the long depression that ensued. An element of the Republican Party had already become disenchanted with the Grant administration's slow pace of abandoning populist economic policies—namely the income tax and departure from the gold standard—adopted during the crisis of the war. Those so-called

"Liberal Republicans" also resented the empowerment of urban political machines in many states and scandal-ridden patronage politics on the federal level—for which they held Grant responsible. When the crisis hit and unemployment spiked, the Liberal Republicans—led outside formal politics by E. L. Godkin, the influential editor of *The Nation* (then a classically liberal periodical)—opposed any measure to relieve the suffering of the unemployed. They argued that unemployment benefits inculcated unwillingness to work and impaired the proper functioning of the labor market. Liberal Republicans also increasingly came to view the Reconstruction project as a failed effort to overturn the natural hierarchy of races, an effort that was only serving to impede the economic recovery of the South by unwise interference in its labor market. That was conveniently synchronous with the political aims of the "Redeemer" faction in Southern politics that sought to put an end to federal protection for former slaves.

There was a concurrent evolution among the nation's intellectual elite: away from religion, abolitionism, and the leadership of the clergy, and toward the new "social sciences," which in many cases took as their starting point the crisis of faith engendered by the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. More generally, the waning of traditional lines of authority through urbanization and industrialization impoverished many who had social status as small farmers and brought in whole new populations of economic migrants from abroad. That crisis coincided with the institutionalization of professional research, first in German universities, then in England and the United States, as higher education once devoted to educating the children of the elite as undergraduates, primarily in a religious tradition, moved instead to take on the societal production of knowledge. The social sciences were well situated: they offered both truth and moral edification, in the form of human uplift, and for the wealthy benefactors of the new foundations, they offered a way to gain both prestige and societal relevance right off the bat. The American Social Science Association (ASSA), founded in 1865, aimed to do just that. It incorporated researchers, journalists, and both political and bureaucratic office-holders, with the aim of formulating what might now be termed "best practices" in a number of different departments: law and jurisprudence, finance, education, health, and "social economy." The ASSA adopted a disinterested, pragmatic, reformist point of view, until the political and ideological questions roiling the country in the 1870s and 1880s made their presence felt inside the organization as economic dislocations intensified.

This introduction of the natural science of evolutionary biology into the nascent social sciences by the appearance of "social Darwinism" catalyzed ideological cleavages among these high-minded purveyors of truth. Darwin's theory of random variation and natural selection was meant to apply to the world of nature. No special moral purpose was involved in its operation. But Herbert Spencer in Great Britain and William Graham Sumner, a professor of sociology at Yale and a leading member of the ASSA, furnished a teleological component—natural selection implied "survival of the fittest." "Fittest" for what was not always clear, but it appeared that the elite of the 1880s—nationally, racially, and individually—deserved to be where they were because in the competition to survive, nature had endowed them with the sharpest teeth and claws and cunning.

That was what allowed Sumner to say "competition … is the law of nature … she grants her rewards to the fittest … without regard to other considerations of any kind." If we tried to amend it, he continued, the only way would be to "take the rewards from those who have done better and give them to those who have done worse. We shall favor the survival of the unfittest and we shall accomplish this by destroying liberty." There might possibly be room for private charity, but help from the government was virtually criminal. There was no defense for "legislation which forces one man to aid another." "The man who has done nothing to raise himself above poverty" too readily found that "social doctors flock around him bringing the capital which they have collected from the (other class), and promising him the aid of the State to give him what the other had to work for" (Sumner 1914, p. 25).

As popularly understood, social Darwinism's interpretation of evolution is justly reproached for defending the harsh conditions imposed on the poor by inequality and social domination, but it could cut in two directions. A man less familiar to general readers, Frank Lester Ward, took on the conservative social Darwinists head to head in his 1883 work, *Dynamic Sociology*. He declared that when a "well clothed philosopher on a bitter winter's night sits in a warm room well lighted for his purpose and writes on paper with pen and ink in the arbitrary characters of a highly-developed language the statement that civilization is the result of natural laws and that man's duty is to let nature alone . . . [to] work out a higher civilization he simply ignores every circumstance of his existence. . . If men had acted upon his theory there would be no civilization and our philosopher would have remained a troglodyte" (quoted in Commager 1967).

But Ward, a polymath in such sciences as paleobotany, paleontology, and geology, and for many years a bureaucrat working for federal scientific agencies, was a believer in evolution in his own way, a "reform Darwinist." (Leonard prefers the awkward term "progressive social Darwinist.") The difference was that for Ward, man was not a mindless plant or animal, waiting for centuries to reach a new stage of development. By using the power of mind to interfere with the so-called laws of nature through social innovation and material invention, humans could push ahead toward a plateau of existence with a better life for all of society's members. The job of experts trained in social sciences, uncommitted to and unconstrained by political affiliations or self-interest, was to find the effective and "correct" methods for giving progress a burst of acceleration.

Leonard calls Ward "the intellectual spearhead of the progressive assault on laissez-faire." This description is correct in one respect: he definitely saw himself as taking part in, if not leading, a progressive counter-attack. "The commercial and financial journals are filled with hostile flings at 'Government meddling' and 'bureaucracy'" he wrote, and then listed an array of government actions by France, Germany, Britain, and the United States helpful to economic growth. *Dynamic Sociology* announced that "It is fashionable to declaim against the so-called 'bureaucracy' of modern times but this is only a part of the attempt of sagacious capitalists to manufacture public sentiment to counteract the steady current of rational conviction toward the conclusion that society must arouse to its own interests and take the welfare of its members more directly into its own hands."

Where Leonard's characterization of Ward goes wrong, however, is that he was not the "intellectual spearhead" of the progressive assault on laissez-faire, or at least not the only one. In the 1880s, the ideological conflict migrated from the organs of elite, though formally inexpert, opinion to the ivory tower, a distinction that Leonard elides in his sweeping characterization of progressive economics. And the academic success of the interventionist, progressive counterattack, insofar as it was successful, came through the deployment of the weapons of academic conflict: empirical evidence, the nascent concept of peer review, the formal mechanisms by which individuals are deemed experts or excluded from expertise, and the formation of professional organizations.

The American Economic Association (AEA) was founded in 1885 with a platform that explicitly rejected laissez-faire, by a group of German-trained scholars, including Richard Ely, Edwin Seligman, and Henry Carter Adams, all of whom attacked both the highly theoretical methodology and the formal admonitions to nonintervention taken by the established expositors of political economy and the orthodox elements of the ASSA. During the AEA's first year of existence, the Knights of Labor ballooned to 800,000 members. Then, in May of 1886, the Haymarket Riot unleashed one of the country's periodic Red Scares: the fear that radical immigrants were poised to overthrow the status quo.

The labor movement of those years was not anticapitalist, and indeed the influence of the free-labor tradition on the ideology of the Knights was evident: they claimed that in order to attain the property ownership that had been the eventual reward to every laborer before industrialization, in the new economy it was necessary for workers to organize to win it. But labor organizations were still seen as a threat, and in the aftermath of Haymarket, several of the AEA's leading members found themselves under assault by university administrators and boards over the danger perceived in their teaching and scholarship. At the same time, others of the younger generation, including Arthur Hadley and Frank Taussig, who shared the same German training but not the anti-laissez-faire ideology, moved to join forces in a bid to elevate professionalism above ideological conflict. The result was a narrowing of the range of opinion within the organization and the economics profession generally: the old guard came to accept the empirical critiques of the new generation, while the most radical members of that generation either moderated their views or were unable to find university employment. The result of that moderating tendency, in turn, was the abdication of intellectual leadership of the progressive movement, as it came to be, to outside opinion leaders, including journalists and politicians, with academics on the sidelines offering expert advice. In return, they gained the employment protections we have come to associate with academic freedom. That is the origin story of the group of economists at whom Leonard's book takes aim.

3. *The Theory and Empirics of the Labor Market*

The linchpin of Leonard's argument that the exclusionary, retrograde views espoused by progressive economists discredit not only their own scholarship, but also that of their intellectual descendants, is the idea that their theory of the labor market incorporated those racist views into scholarly practice. It's important to understand that background for the book's characterization of contemporaneous disputes over how the labor market works and what, if anything, could profitably be done to improve earnings and working conditions for the industrial and agricultural poor. Leonard's aim isn't a factual reconstruction of the debate, but rather, to use a caricature of it as a tentpole to get his more ambitious argument off the ground.

For example, Leonard characterizes the progressive case for the minimum wage as follows: "A legal minimum wage, applied to immigrants and those already working in America, ensured that only the productive workers were employed. The economically unproductive, those whose labor was worth less than the legal minimum, would be denied entry, or, if already employed, would be idled. For economic reformers who regarded inferior workers as a threat, the minimum wage provided an invaluable service" (Leonard, p. 140). Similarly, earlier in the book he characterizes the progressive theory of the labor market as follows: "the progressives ultimately turned the living standard theory of wages into the theoretical construct they called 'race suicide'" (p. 86). As we will see, these characterizations of the progressives' theory of the labor market slot them into an elaborate intellectual-historical construction—one almost entirely conjured by Leonard.

Leonard is right to ascribe great importance to the issue of labor: contemporaries, even those like Edwin Seligman who did not consider themselves specialists in labor economics, also pointed to the "labor issue" as the distinguishing feature of the debate between the "old" and "new" economics, at least in 1886—in the torrid aftermath of the Haymarket Riot. But Leonard's characterization of this war of ideas is even more sweeping. He writes:

> As long as people have recorded their views on economic life, there have been two constants of political economy. The first constant has been to distinguish two opposed methods of economic coordination: market exchange and administrative command. The second constant has been to scorn markets and to esteem administration (p. 79).

Leonard traces the latter view back to Plato and Ancient Greek society: privileging politics above economics, and yet depending on labor, trade, and finance for the prosperity upon which their political power was built, Greeks developed the notion of a natural hierarchy that bound some people—outsiders, foreigners, slaves, and women—to the necessary-but-subordinate role of laborers, traders, and money lenders. "The Greeks relegated the dirtiest labor to slaves, who had no choice, indeed could have no choice, since nature fitted them for slavery" and "The polis depended on economic practices its culture disdained. Confronted with this intellectual tension, the Greeks resolved it with a scheme of social, political, and biological hierarchy. The question of labor's value has been entangled with these hierarchies ever since … The Greek model had extraordinary staying power in Europe. Two thousand years later, an aristocracy still monopolized land ownership, ruled the polity and the economy, and claimed supernatural bases for its privilege … Social class remained identified with productive function" (p. 80).

"Then everything changed," Leonard writes. Namely, the French and American revolutions overturned ancient political hierarchies, and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1950 [1776]) did away with the economic theories underpinning them. Instead, "The United States in 1790 was a rare thing: a liberal Republic. Scarcity, the scourge of classical political economy, seemed absent; land and natural resources were hyperabundant" (p. 82).

Leonard's highly schematic history is, needless to say, not reflective of mainstream historical interpretation, which does not divide world history so neatly into pre- and post-redemptive phases, each with a corresponding, coherent ideology, political history, and economic system. Neither the progressive economists themselves, nor their contemporaneous ideological opponents, nor any intellectual historian analyzing economic debates of the late nineteenth century has characterized their positions in this way, because regardless of whether Leonard's interpretation of each piece of that elaborate puzzle is correct, no one studying the matter would draw a line between the development of economic thought between ancient Greece and the period in question. The reason Leonard draws this anachronistic link with ancient Greece is to put meat on the bones of his skeleton argument: that progressive economists were wedded to a retrograde hierarchical theory of the labor market that infects all of their analysis and all of their policy prescriptions.

Interestingly, however, aspects of Leonard's schematization are similar to the views expressed by the progressive economists who are otherwise the targets of his criticism. For instance, he validates the idea that the United States started as an egalitarian nation of smallholding property owners who were displaced by urbanization and industrialization after the "market revolution" of the nineteenth century. He writes "The American frontier 'closed' in 1890, and with it the traditional safety valve for urban unemployment, westward migration to claim free land" (p. 29). This is a restatement of the "frontier thesis" associated with Frederick Jackson Turner, a historian who trained under Ely at Johns Hopkins and whose theories about why social conflict arose in the Gilded Age were highly influential in driving progressive economists to make the argument that while laissez-faire orthodoxy may have been appropriate to the agrarian, smallholding economy of the country's first century—when, so the argument went, there was always the option of going west to escape unemployment—the problems of industrialized wage labor raised the need for an alternative model of the labor market and alternative policies to regulate it.

The frontier thesis was influential, but as an actual interpretation of the function of the frontier in American economic or political history, it has long been abandoned. The imaginary frontier line linking lightly populated areas was an artificial construct, and agricultural settlement of the far West continued right up to the eve of the First World War and beyond. As cities developed, some workers may have looked for new opportunities, but the flow of migrants was always positively, rather than negatively, selected and the "safety valve" is now recognized as unsustainable mythology. Land was never as free as historical myth would have it, and those who settled it tended to have the capital already in hand to get their concern off the ground. It should be noted that Turner himself never articulated the "safety valve" theory in writing, even though posterity—including Leonard, apparently—has erroneously ascribed it to him. Turner did neglect the question of whether and how land on the frontier was allocated to newcomers and how secure their tenure was—and recent scholarship that could be characterized, at a stretch, as partly resurrecting the frontier thesis focuses on this question, in contrast with other countries that had the equivalent geography, but not the same distributive mechanisms and legal security.[2]

In any case, while he appears to agree with their historical interpretation, Leonard does not agree with the progressive economists in drawing the conclusion from the frontier thesis that laissez-faire labor market policies ought to be abandoned. His view is rather that the closing of the frontier presented an existential challenge to progressive theories about how the labor market works and how it should work. According to his presentation of what the progressives believed, what was true and worth preserving about the old free-labor argument was its automatic assumption that the "prudent, penniless beginner," to use Abraham Lincoln's phrase, would be a white, male, "American" worker. The market revolution, on the other hand, made one giant competitive labor market where there had previously been entitlement by birth, subjecting those "Americans" to market forces they had heretofore avoided. Thus, according to Leonard, what motivated the progressives to reform the labor market was a desire to recreate the hierarchical condition that had existed ex ante with a raft of exclusionary laws that bestowed a minimum wage, decent working conditions, and stable employment on that in-group while foisting the dirty work—or no work at all—on immigrants, minorities,

[2] This is what Garcia-Jimeno and Robinson (2009) call the "conditional frontier thesis."

and women, in order to prevent them from undercutting white men's wages. (That this presentation of the changes wrought by the market revolution in the late nineteenth century—replacing an ancient hierarchy with a free market—is at odds with Leonard's presentation of the egalitarian free market of smallholders established at the country's birth is never reconciled.)

Leonard does not even attempt a factual intellectual history of where progressive economics came from, who its real ideological opponents were, and why its diverse adherents came to advocate for the labor reforms that became core to the progressive cause. Crucially, and contra Leonard, they did not believe that labor "shouldn't be in the market" or that "the worker's claim was determined by his political and social standing" (p. 86). Rather, their positive theory of the labor market was that workers were paid what they could get, and, to simplify enormously, their normative theory was that workers should get more.[3]

Section 2 addresses the rise and fall of the notion of free labor. The impetus for the progressive economists who favored labor-market reforms came from their conviction that those who relied on their labor to make their living were increasingly denied access to the American dream (though it was not yet called that) of property ownership, upward social mobility, and economic security—prerequisites to live independently of the whims of the boss or property owner. The growing belief that wage labor was the permanent lot of the majority of the labor force after the frontier had been "closed" (though not, we hasten to add, *because* of its actual gradual disappearance) led those economists to embrace the view that those benefits could only be won through labor organizing and state intervention in the labor market. In that interpretation oriented toward bargaining power, the threat of strike breaking and labor outsourcing was acute, and the exclusionary aspects of the progressive economists' scholarship and policy program were motivated by their fear of a resulting "race to the bottom" to overcome any gains labor might make.

Their intellectual and ideological opponents, on the other hand, saw labor competition as not only the labor market's "natural" state—their positive theory—but also considered that its highest state. We have already related the social Darwinist theories attached to William Graham Sumner. Sumner did not have a wide following among academic economists, and his closest imitator, Simon Newcomb, was not himself a trained economist, but rather an astronomer who published orthodox economics tracts in the popular press. John Bates Clark, on the other hand, was part of the circle that founded the AEA, but his work increasingly ventured into theory and the influence of the European neoclassical economists Léon Walras, William Stanley Jevons, and, above all, Alfred Marshall. Clark was known, in his day, for a strongly neoclassical theory of the rental rate of capital, and for espousing views to the effect that any intervention in the labor market would thwart the "natural" adjustment of factor prices, which, if left undisturbed, would eventually bring about the optimal allocation of national income shares to capital and labor.

Clark's theory became, and remains, the clearest articulation of the neoclassical theory of the labor market and wage setting in the American intellectual context. Contemporary economists who accept this theory do not, for the most part, take it as far as Clark did, verging on the normative

[3] In fact, this is precisely what Samuel Gompers, the founder and long-time head of the American Federation of Labor, articulated, as quoted by Leonard. While progressive economists remained nonpartisan with respect to both formal politics and the internal politics of the labor movement, it would be fair to characterize their ideology as aligned with that of the AFL.

or moralistic, though factor shares that are constant and optimal in the long run is implied by the macroeconomic concept of the balanced growth path, given restrictions on population, technology, and taste parameters. Contemporary economists also have a theory of human capital to further refine their interpretation of the labor market and of wage setting, but it is, essentially, a complication of Clark, not a departure.

Meanwhile, recent studies of wage setting find a substantial and increasing role for firm-specific bargaining that cannot be explained by worker-side characteristics, the traditional observable variables associated with the human capital tradition, or with the idea that a competitive labor market equilibrates returns to worker-side characteristics across firms.[4] In essence, contemporary debate about the determination of who gets what in the labor market sounds increasingly like the disputes that raged in the 1880s, and that fact is not unrelated to the publication of Leonard's book, which uses that resonance to tie what might be termed the resurgence of progressive or institutionalist economics back to its intellectual progenitors, and, in turn, to their more disreputable views on race, intelligence, and population control. But what also distinguishes both the contemporary debate over how the labor market works and its predecessor is the relevance of new data and statistical techniques to cast doubt on theoretical received wisdom.

4. *The Beginnings of Economic Policy*

The first president of the American Economic Association was Francis Amasa Walker, at the time serving as president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The son of a well-known Harvard professor of political economy, Walker was very much a member of the Boston Brahmin establishment. He was a General in the Civil War and the Director of the United States Census of 1870, in which position he railed against the patronage that dominated the agency, impeding work that he saw as essential to governing the industrializing postwar economy. Following his exasperated resignation, he served as Commissioner of Indian Affairs during the violent years of the mid-1870s, returning to the Census after his proposed bill of reforms was passed through Congress by Representative James Garfield shortly before he was nominated for the presidency. The 1880 Census Walker oversaw thereafter was considered the most effective of the nineteenth century—although, as will be discussed below, recent scholarship casts doubt on that reputation.[5]

Walker was a generation older than the economists who took the lead in founding the AEA, though as America's leading quantitative social scientist of the day, he agreed to lend his name to their endeavor. They all shared the conviction that their newly won professional expertise ought to be brought into the public sphere to exercise a rationalizing, constructive influence—against what they had all experienced as the tired doctrines of laissez-faire espoused in the more intransigent confines of the ASSA. In fact, it was that conviction that closed off the ideological disputes of the AEA's early years, with the pull of rising professional credibility and public influence exerting a powerful moderating effect.[6] The staunchest of the laissez-faire economists and members of the ASSA had themselves been pushed into opposition to the postwar Grant administration by their perception that political patronage had disempowered the credentialed elite, and the Liberal Republicans with whom they affiliated migrated between the

[4] See, for example, Card, Heining, and Kline (2013); Card et al. (2016); and Song et al. (2016).

[5] Carter and Sutch (1996).

[6] Weisberger and Steinbaum (2016), Furner (1975).

major parties, depending on which appeared more committed to rooting out corruption and handing power back to where it rightfully belonged: themselves.

Following Walker's lead, his younger colleagues similarly accepted positions either employed by newly formed federal, state, and local agencies or advising them from university positions. The most well-known and well-regarded example of that was the so-called "Wisconsin Idea," in which Ely and his students John R. Commons and Edward A. Ross, once all three had gathered at the University of Wisconsin, exercised a wide influence over state policy thanks in large part to the sympathetic ear of the state's progressive governor, Robert La Follette. That gave rise to early experiments with state living- and minimum-wage policies, workplace-safety regulation, and social insurance, as well as rate regulation for railroads, telegraphs, telephones, water, and electricity. The goal was not to take over those utilities, but to make sure that their prices were reasonable and not simply "what the traffic would bear." Anathema as this might be to laissez-faire proponents, the citizens of Wisconsin liked it enough to reelect La Follette three times and then send him on to the Senate for the rest of his life. In time, La Follette argued, even investors in the regulated industries came to like it because fair regulation brought them higher returns, since it was "scientific," by which he meant less prone to the boom-and-bust cycle that traditionally afflicted natural monopolies with high fixed costs.

In Leonard's hands, all of this takes on a sinister air. For example, apparently in reference to Walker's work reforming the Census—again, rooting out the patronage that had impaired its work—Leonard writes "Walker already appreciated how economic expertise cashed out in political authority" (p. 29), though elsewhere he uses the corruption and graft that proverbially plagued Gilded Age government agencies as a rhetorical weapon against the progressive economists who advocated that they be reformed. The influence that progressive economists (not to mention nonprogressive ones) had over policy is recast as an elitist bid to, first of all, stamp out individual rights, and second, to capture the public largesse to provide a full employment program for economists. "The fledgling economists, fingers in the wind, cast their lot with the administrative state," he writes (p. 27). And of the progressives' aims to influence policy, Leonard writes "The duties of administration would regularly require overriding individuals' rights in the name of economic common good" (p. 22) and "They [progressive economists] always gave the moral whole primacy over the individuals it subsumed" (p. 24).

But the brain trust of the Wisconsin Idea did not seize the reins of power. La Follette offered the voters a program, they voted to put it into effect, and the experts then worked out the details which, in a modern economy, were complex. The people's will was not snatched away, but put into execution by appointed experts under the final authority of elected officials—exactly the way credentialed economists working now imagine their research gets operationalized in policy. That was why the state was sometimes called a "laboratory for democracy." And the same group of scholars, along with progressive lawyers led by Louis Brandeis, founded the American Association of Labor Legislation to organize and advocate for these initiatives across states.[7] The idea was

[7] Leonard claims that AALL began life as part of the AEA, but that is not quite correct. Ely certainly wanted the AEA to perform a similar function, at least during his stint as founding secretary from 1885 to 1892. But it was precisely the evolving identity of the AEA and similar professional associations against advocacy, even advocacy couched in social science, that led Ely and his colleagues to look to the AALL, which was independent from its birth in 1905–06. See Gee (2012).

to test model legislation in friendly territory and then use referendum campaigns to expand it to other states and, eventually, enact it on the federal level.

Ely and his coterie were definitely on the left of the economics profession and in public life, but the tendency to influence policy in a technocratic direction was not by any means confined to them. Their intellectual rival, Arthur Hadley, who eventually served as president of Yale, was also commissioner of the Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics, and such easy transitions and dual appointments between universities and the growing bureaucracy were increasingly the norm as the expanding realm of economic policy sought expertise wherever it could be found. Another conservative economist, Jeremiah Jenks, led the economic staff of the United States Industrial Commission, an inquiry into the dual issues of monopolization and labor unrest during the McKinley administration, which, characteristically of that era, espoused a hybrid policy platform of rejecting outright breakup of trusts or public ownership of major industries, but collaborating in industrial policy with demonstrably conservative labor unions.

It's instructive to return to Francis Amasa Walker's actual record administering the 1880 Census to gain insight into the real motivations of progressive economists when it came to influencing policy. Carter and Sutch (1996) show that Walker systematically and secretly excluded from the published tabulations of occupations many children, women, and elderly men who were nevertheless recorded as having an occupation by census enumerators. Those scholars speculate that he feared the totals the enumerators had racked up for women and older men would seem improbable or even scandalous to the general public. Child labor was also a sensitive political issue at the time, and Carter and Sutch speculate that Walker might have been afraid of fueling public protest if he published figures suggesting the problem was on the rise.

These actions (which go unmentioned by Leonard) certainly do not redound to Walker's credit in hindsight, but it's important to note that he appears to have been motivated not by an ideology he sought to impose on the government, but rather by a moderating tendency to avoid inflaming the public. Indeed, many of the progressive economists offered their reformist scholarship and policy proposals in this spirit: to tame and moderate in a time of high political and ideological tension, and they quite consciously self-censored in order to do that. A letter dated May 1, 1886, the very day that the strike leading to the Haymarket Riot was called, Arthur Hadley wrote a letter to Henry Carter Adams declining (initially) to join the AEA thanks to its ideological mission statement. Hadley wrote:

> The fact that the principles are true, only makes the danger of misinterpretation more serious. … My sympathies are in many respects strongly with the movement. My inclinations would have led me to join it from the first. But I was afraid, and still am afraid, of getting into a position which would do practical harm both to me and to others, where I should seem to be made an advocate of measures and maxims which I cannot but regard as dangerous in the extreme.[8]

In other words, the truth of what might be a controversial statement about the economy mattered less than its political implications. This concern really did color the progressive economists' scholarship, and if he stuck to these grounds, Leonard would have a better case that their political motivations got the better of them.

Instead, *Illiberal Reformers* is filled with selected quotations from "social control" progressives expressing disdain for the

[8] Steinbaum and Weisberger (2016).

intelligence of people on whose side they professed to be. But familiarity with the whole body of public writings and behavior of the leaders in actual battle during the early 1900s paints a different picture, whatever opinions they may have entertained in later life when sadness and disillusion set in. Ida Tarbell's muckraking history of the Standard Oil Company was a long, attention-demanding book that ran serially in *McClure's*, a popular and inexpensive magazine. So did Lincoln Steffens's *Shame of the Cities*, and similar exposures of corruption and injustice in other mass-audience periodicals. Jane Addams's story of her life at Hull House in the slums of Chicago showed nothing resembling contempt for the people among whom she and her followers chose to live and work. Leonard sniffs at those "bold women" for calling themselves "settlers, not neighbors," a distinction entirely without a difference when it came to actual behavior. La Follette, campaigning for reform in rural Wisconsin, would hold audiences of farmers spellbound for hours with the reading of public reports loaded with statistics to prove to them how they were being swindled by excessive railroad shipping charges—proof, if ever it was necessary, that expertise and empirical analysis need not be at odds with populist politics.

More problematic than sweeping statements that reinterpret expert influence over economic policy as a plot to subsume the individual in service to the state, Leonard stretches the archival record to provide evidence in favor of his argument. He refers to an editorial in the *New Republic*, one of the leading progressive organs of the era, as attacking the Bill of Rights, when in fact the editorial is attacking the interpretation of Constitutional rights as protecting the "freedom" of individuals from state regulation of private contracts, the view the Supreme Court espoused during the so-called "Lochner era," when it struck down state and federal regulations on "free-market" principles it read into the constitution.[9]

Leonard's view is informed by the so-called "public choice" approach to economic scholarship, which reinterprets economic policies enacted through legislation and administration as attempts by contending interest groups to profit at the public's expense and channel ostensibly reformist principles to their own ends. Successful though that view might be in interpreting individual instances of public policy for private benefit, enacted under the banner of reform, it doesn't work as an overall interpretation of the progressive movement in politics and policy, as Richard Yeselson shows in his intellectual history of "New Left" history and the career of Gabriel Kolko, to whom we return in the conclusion.[10]

Moreover, contrary to Leonard's idea that academics who were ideologically friendly to state action advocated for the establishment of large agencies staffed by those very same economists on careerist grounds, no full-employment program for economists has ever been as successful as laissez-faire dogma. Again, it was precisely by retreating from a broad-based challenge to the status quo that economics claimed the position of authority it has enjoyed since—very much including the abundant job opportunities available to newly minted PhDs in all three major career paths open to them: academia, government, and the private sector.

The point is that incentives for state action can operate in both directions, and frequently have done exactly that in the history of economics as a discipline. But notwithstanding the actual dynamics of professionalization within economics as an academic discipline, Leonard writes "*Laissez Faire* was inimical

[9] See Rahman (2016) for a discussion of progressive views of the Constitution and of the New Republic in particular.

[10] Yeselson (2015).

to economic expertise," an argument that carries the useful implication that economists' advocacy for laissez-faire views is an admission contrary to professional interest. All of this just reiterates the special point of view that Leonard brings to the history of progressive economics—not intellectual history so much as motivated myth making.

5. *The Exclusionary Legacy of Laissez-Faire*

The theme of *Illiberal Reformers* is that progressive economists embraced reactionary ideas, which influenced their contributions to economics and to policy so thoroughly as to discredit them altogether. But those exclusionary views were not unique to the progressives in their day, and if they retain any influence at all in the present intellectual context, it is rather through the intellectual descendants of the progressives' opponents, the expositors of laissez-faire, whatever their rhetoric about individual liberty.

We have already touched on the influence of social Darwinism and noninterventionist theories of the labor market on the decision at the federal level to abandon Reconstruction, leaving the South's black population to be ruled by the Redeemers and the Jim Crow system without the federal intervention that was the Civil War's greatest legacy for the freed slaves. The same group in the political and intellectual elite had their own reasons for seeking to exclude immigrants: they feared them as the detritus of European labor deported to the colonies for fear of their rabble-rousing powers at home. They argued some should be deported forthwith for their radical views—or indeed, following Haymarket, executed—but a much larger fraction of the immigrant working population was threatening simply because they exercised the right to vote. They thus replaced the rightful elite with urban political machines and demanded a say over the conduct of economic policy. Indeed, immigrants were quite useful as cheap labor—particularly when workers of longer standing managed to organize unions and achieve some measure of social power—and in that context, laissez-faire dogmatists were happy to espouse the view that everyone was equally entitled to supply their labor. But immigrant populations became more problematic when they gained political power for themselves. The laissez-faire faction found it easy to adhere to high principles of individual rights in some contexts, but not in others.

Going beyond the labor market per se, another strand of what might be called laissez-faire identity-based exclusion concerned relief for the unemployed and other forms of policy-based redistribution for those not in work. Godkin, Newcomb, and Sumner excoriated the interference with competition and natural selection. According to their own dysgenic (and scientifically illiterate) theory, any such "class legislation"—meaning redistribution of income—would eventually breed constructive involvement in the economy out of beneficiary populations, and so harm the larger economy by reducing the supply of labor. Godkin mounted this exact argument against Reconstruction, since Redeemers argued that the evident reduction in labor supply by freed black workers as compared with former slaves indicated a racial and hereditary disinclination to work that had to be surmounted by handing supervisory power over labor supply back to local elites. And similar ideas lent a convenient backstory for conservatives' own advocacy of mandatory sterilization of the "unfit" and underemployed as a means of disciplining labor.

A debate that took place at an AEA meeting in 1893 is instructive in this respect. Edward A. Ross (then the association's secretary) and a prominent conservative, Franklin Giddings of Columbia, confronted the issue of agrarian populism. Against Ross's sympathetic take, Giddings replied "Why, throughout the long years of his affliction, has [the farmer] always come off the worse in the contest? There must be something wrong in his own makeup…. If you want to reach the root of the farmers' difficulties, you will have to begin with the farmers' minds." The implication that if group disparities persist for long enough, they must reflect innate group characteristics as opposed to exclusionary social, political, or economic structures, was common among laissez-faire proponents of that time, and that assumption is arguably a persistent intellectual legacy of an ideology that sees "the market" as inherently egalitarian.

For these reasons, Leonard is wrong to present the progressives as uniquely prone to exclusionary views. They certainly did express their own exclusionary views, but those views were motivated by seeking to increase the bargaining power of a narrowly defined set of workers, eventually taking shape in the hands of Commons and Ross as an elaborate racist typology legitimating exclusion from the labor market. For their intellectual adversaries, on the other hand, the exclusion was motivated by *their* ideology: that extending full political and human rights to "outsider" groups risked overturning the social hierarchy and impairing the proper functioning of the market, because members of those groups could not be trusted to supply their own labor and thus required the supervision of employers to do so—its own elaborate, racist typology.

Progressives have enlarged the sphere of those deemed worthy of advocacy—too slowly and with notable lacunae, to be sure, as was the case with the exclusionary elements of the New Deal and the premature abandonment and retrenchment from the lofty goals of the civil rights movement. But calls for excluding minorities and immigrants from the labor market and advocacy for involuntary restrictions on the birthrate are simply not to be found among critics of laissez-faire ideology today. In fact, labor-market discrimination against historically marginalized groups and resulting disparities in earnings, employment, and wealth, are perhaps their greatest concern, whereas their opponents argue, like Giddings, that such discrimination doesn't exist and those disparities are caused by differences in underlying characteristics, heritable or otherwise. That is why it matters that we get this intellectual history right.

6. *So What Do We Owe the Progressives?*

Why does it matter what the progressive economists believed and whether their theories were or were not tainted by retrograde and exclusionary views? Contemporary economists have a great deal to thank them for: nothing less than the origination, professionalization, and high status and influence of their discipline in American policy and public life. Furthermore, the very critique they brought to orthodox economics as they found it shares much with the current state of the field: scholars analyzed new sources of data using methods that cast doubt on the received wisdom of old models, which had themselves been accepted largely in the absence of evidence.

The main idea in what became known as "institutionalist" economics was that the truth of how the economy worked could only be discerned from close and particularized study. This was a reaction against what they viewed as overly general and abstracted theories, which either had little relation to actual economic outcomes or, insofar as they did carry predictions about how the world works, were overly optimistic and proven wrong by the reality of the modern, industrialized economy.

Publications by institutionalist scholars tend to be long, dry, and exhaustive, with little in the way of what modern economists would recognize as either a clear statement of theory or an empirical test of that theory. But their approach nonetheless resonates with current trends in the field, with its emphasis on narrowly defined claims backed up with evidence that is directly relevant to those claims, and where the central issue hovering over the work is its inferential value beyond the very specific context being studied. Just as with economics now, the institutionalists implicitly retreated from an ambitious stance about what economics as a field says, while at the same time embracing an expansive role for economists in academia and public life as purveyors of advanced tools for analyzing data and making nuanced policy recommendations, or critiquing those of others. On the other hand, the distinguishing characteristic of neoclassical economics, both in the nineteenth century and today, is exactly that willingness to hold forth about what "economics says," beyond the content of what it actually is that economics does or doesn't say.

Take a book like Edwin Seligman's *The Income Tax*, published in 1914, for example. It is an exhaustive account of the occasions on which an income tax, and its predecessor, a class tax, had been enacted in many different countries and municipalities, what mechanisms had been used to collect it and on whom its incidence fell, in contrast with what were then the more typical methods of federal public financing, tariffs, and excise taxes. The conclusion was that, far from being an untested and radical idea, the income tax had been tried and had worked as intended and without harming other economic outcomes. The publication of the book was highly influential in swinging expert opinion behind the Sixteenth Amendment, an important element in its 1913 passage, and Seligman's work had a wide influence in spurring other countries to move to income taxes as a standard feature of national public financing, as well.

If it were written today, a book like Seligman's would essentially be a literature review of estimates of the elasticity of taxable income to an income tax taken from various quasi-experimental studies, with its recommendation that statutory rates be adjusted accordingly and the tax base tightened to stymie observed tax avoidance behavior. That book would look very different than Seligman's: it would have many more estimating equations, regression tables, and robustness checks for the identifying assumptions of the different underlying studies. In fact, it would look like Emmanuel Saez, Joel Slemrod, and Seth Giertz's 2012 paper in this journal.[11] But it would not be a very different book. A similar comparison might be made between a 1920 book by John Andrews and John Commons, *Principles of Labor Legislation*, and David Card and Alan Krueger's *Myth and Measurement*, whose twentieth anniversary edition now includes an introduction that reads very similarly to Richard Ely's 1884 article "Past and Present of Political Economy."[12]

The expertise in analyzing data and providing policy advice across a range of applications, at the same time as the field transcended overt ideological conflict, is what made economics and economists indispensable to policy makers and the growing apparatus of state policy. That tendency has increased in leaps and bounds, if anything, accelerating recently, as compared with earlier periods, as the types of actors making claims ostensibly driven by original data analysis have proliferated from academic departments and public agencies to interest groups and the private sector. That expanded market for economic expertise has, in turn, fed back to the academic departments that credential economists, providing the demand necessary to expand graduate student enrollment and the employment opportunities that have bid up faculty salaries.

[11] Saez, Slemrod, and Giertz (2012).

[12] Andrews and Commons (1920); Card and Krueger (2016); Ely (1884).

There are other possible outcomes: economics could have gone the way of pure math or the social sciences that remained more inward-looking. Part of the reason for the alternative approach economics took may be due to the role that optimization plays in economic theory, as it migrated from an assumption bounding the behavior of economic agents within models to a larger, normative approach to evaluating real-world outcomes. That leap is not entirely due to the progressives, because they started from the second assumption of pragmatism while, for the most part, bypassing the first about individual rationality. But it was the progressives who first made the case to economists that they ought to have one foot in the public debate and convinced the public and their representatives that economists were worth listening to and could be trusted to have their interests aligned.

Furthermore, that link has served economists not just by having our advice listened to (and remunerated), but also in having it protected. Henry Carter Adams, Richard Ely, Edward Ross, and John Commons were only some of the economists who suffered professionally for expressing controversial views in public. In Adams's case, the views in question were that American industrialists were cynically exploiting xenophobia to defeat labor organizing, and the post-Haymarket crackdown on radical immigrants was an unconstitutional infringement on their right to free speech and association. Adams's hounding from Cornell University is not an episode that appears in *Illiberal Reformers*, since it reflects advocacy on behalf of the individual rights of outsiders that Leonard alleges progressives did not engage in.

Part of the motivation for founding the AEA was to offer some measure of self-protection in solidarity. In the event, the organization mostly did not serve that function, declining to intervene in its "official" capacity in nearly every case in which academic freedom was arguably threatened for ideological reasons. It was not until Ross was summarily dismissed from Stanford University in 1900 that the AEA passed a boycott measure in retaliation, and the university nearly did not survive the resulting exodus of scholars. Ely, meanwhile, received the full-throated support of the University of Wisconsin when he was challenged by a member of the state Board of Regents in 1894, and the endorsement of academic freedom made by the investigating commission (though ghost-written by the university's president) protected the university's scholars and their contributions to the Wisconsin Idea, endorsing them as the work of disinterested, outside experts operating in service to the state and thus shielding them from political retaliation thereafter.

Economists ignore the valuable protections for academic freedom at their peril, especially as the controversial issue of inequality returns to the fore in public debate, as it was in the Gilded Age. As Republicans and Populists vied for power in the contested politics of 1890s Kansas and Nebraska, the entire economics faculties of the state universities were forced to resign, their posts advocating for or against the gold standard seen as part of the spoils of winning statewide office. Preventing that was why provisions for tenure review by peers and shared governance were incorporated into institutional missions, accreditation documents, and, in some cases, in statute. That threat to their institutional status may seem remote from the experience of contemporary economists, but it could easily happen again. The protections for economics won by Adams, Ely, Ross, and Commons remain extremely valuable, and potential threats to them are not just a theoretical possibility but one to be vigilantly guarded against.

7. *Conclusion*

"Everybody was doing it" is not an excuse for the endorsement of a sterilization policy that was not merely misguided, but cruel in its implementation and false in its rationalizations, no matter how wide or narrow the set of intellectual and societal peers who voiced support. But it must at least be said that no eugenicist with any progressive links realized that the notion of innate inferiority could open the door to the mass murder of living populations. The concept of "progress" itself, swelling from the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, with its great, perhaps overwhelming, impact on all aspects of society in that era, denied that such a radically evil act could be possible in an enlightened society. It took the Nazi reign of darkness in a Germany that had been among the world's leaders in the arts and sciences to remind liberals and progressives, as Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out, that Satan was still a very active presence among humankind.

Nonetheless, it is bad and tendentious history to use the involvement of some progressives in eugenic advocacy as a club with which to beat historians and economists into denial of the positive and admirable achievements that they contributed to the strengthening and improvement of American democracy. Leonard himself lists a number of those achievements. They include the progressive income tax, federal regulation of railroads, the breakup of gigantic trusts, the exemption of labor unions from antitrust prosecution, the eight-hour day for public works and railroad employees, mandated compensation for workers injured on the job, assurance of the purity and safety of food and drugs, and the prohibition of trade in goods made with child labor plus, as he puts it, the federalization of Western lands "in the name of conservation" (p. 44). State and local governments, in their turn, regulated and inspected factories; passed laws setting maximum hours of work and minimum wages, especially for women; mandated compulsory education for children; and "municipalized" streetcar companies and gas and water utilities.

The real target of Leonard's book is this legacy, not the legacy of exclusion, eugenics, racism, and xenophobia. But contemporary economists who research the effect of the minimum wage do not remotely subscribe to the same views as the progressive-era economists who pioneered its study. In fact, their key finding, a minimal disemployment effect, is at odds with Leonard's characterization of progressive motivations. Leonard also devotes some attention to advocates for women's suffrage, who expressed many of the same retrograde, exclusionary views, often in harsher terms since many of them did not share the economists' motivation for social uplift. But, needless to say, that history does not invalidate the argument for women's suffrage, nor does the borderline-racist public record of some prominent abolitionists discredit the movement to end slavery in the United States, necessary though it is to subject that record to disinterested historical criticism.

In hunts for the soul of Progressivism with a capital "P," so many different actors with varying and sometimes even clashing motives were unearthed that an article in *Reviews in American History* in 1982 suggested that it might be impossible to reach a single defensible definition of what made a progressive (Rodgers 1982). The standard view of the movement, in fact, was a repudiation of the heroic legend of authors like Filler and Madison.

Starting in the 1950s, a new wave of scholarly interpretations began to deconstruct that story. Works by Richard Hofstadter, Samuel Hays, Robert Wiebe, and Gabriel Kolko argued that the progressives were old stock Americans who, realizing that they were becoming a shrinking proportion of the population, set about making sure that the “new” immigrants of the post–Civil War boom were educated in the true American habits and values of the sturdy pioneers. Some revisionists claimed that in fact the driving engine of progressivism had really been the wish to regulate and convert a wildly competitive and socially restless nation into one less radical—that, in fact, the movement was a “triumph of conservatism,” shutting off socialist and other alternative systems to corporate capitalism. It is only recently that the progressive hospitality to eugenics was added to this revisionist literature, as in the recent book by Adam Cohen, *Imbeciles* (2016). It sets forth the sad story of how a young woman, Carrie Buck, deemed by “scientific” tests to be “feeble-minded,” was sterilized under a Virginia law that was upheld as constitutional by a Supreme Court that included progressive icons Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis, both of whom concurred with the decision.

But it could be argued that perhaps a small binding thread might be found, not in the determination of all the movement’s leading lights to build an ideal society, but on simple outrage at the glaring flaws of the one they inhabited, the one created by concentrated corporate power unhindered by the countervailing power of state regulation and worker organization. Americans think of themselves as a moral people, and could any such people look at sweatshops, slums, children working in mines and glass factories, the brazen theft of public lands, the deliberate thwarting of competition, or the purchase of voters, judges, and lawmakers to gain profit-making advantages and not have the word “wrong” written large on their minds? Or thinking that the nation would not be a better and more democratic one in the absence of such ugliness? That other kinds of ugliness were tolerated does not remove the benefits of progressivism’s victories over the harshest types of inequality.

Leonard’s book fits into the current sustained attack on progressivism and its works that has moved the country steadily rightward for some forty years. Leonard affects to be even-handed and says in an epilogue that “Progressivism is too important to be left to hagiography and obloquy” (p. 44). To his credit, he does not single out any contemporary opponent for personal abuse. But all things considered in his mind, he finishes with the statement that “It is well known”—a vague and catch-all assertion at best—“that modern liberalism permanently demoted economic liberties. Few twenty-first-century progressives think that minimum wages or maximum hours or occupational licensing unjustly infringe upon a worker’s right to freely contract on her [sic] behalf.”

Few indeed—and with good reason! And after some 180 and more pages of such charges leveled at progressivism then and now, it is fair to say that, despite the author’s good intentions and thorough search for what he wishes to find, if this book is not obloquy, it is a superb imitation.

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