



## Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era, edited by Thomas C. Leonard

Daniel Platt

To cite this article: Daniel Platt (2016): Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era, edited by Thomas C. Leonard, Journal of Cultural Economy, DOI: [10.1080/17530350.2016.1258587](https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2016.1258587)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2016.1258587>



Published online: 01 Dec 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era**, edited by Thomas C. Leonard, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016, 264 pp., \$35.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780691169590/ \$19.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9780691175867

In his 1897 essay ‘The Path of the Law’, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. drew a contrast between the narrow formalism of postbellum political thought and the dawning age of pragmatic policy-making. ‘The black-letter man may be the man of the present’, he declared, ‘but the man of the future is the man of statistics and the master of economics’. Holmes’s bold modernism foreshadowed the rise of the regulatory state, with its fine levers of power and its legions of educated experts, but it signaled subtler historical developments as well. It is difficult to read the jurist’s deference to the statistical sciences without anticipating his gradual turn toward hereditarianism, culminating in his defense of eugenic sterilization in *Buck v. Bell* (1927). It is also hard not to place his language of economic mastery in the longer history of the field’s staggering ascent in the political imagination over the course of the twentieth century, with all its unsettling consequences.

That state-building, race-making, and economic knowledge should appear so entwined in Holmes’s mid-career thought ought not to surprise, for as Thomas C. Leonard demonstrates in *Illiberal Reformers*, a braided discourse of race, state, and market ran through many of the most pressing political conversations of the Progressive Era, particularly those propelled by the budding ranks of professional economists. Leonard, an economist who has published extensively on the history of the discipline, does not simply document the racism that pervaded the writings of those men who created the field and helped to craft administrative governance in the United States. Instead, he analyzes how notions of immutable racial difference performed important intellectual work within progressive economic thought and how the regulatory posture of economic progressivism likewise cultivated a eugenicist worldview. The result is a persuasive, if often familiar, portrait of the early twentieth century as an essentially illiberal epoch when the impulse to secure the good fortunes of the social whole underwrote dramatic interventions in both the market economy and reproductive life.

While the book is divided into two sections, ‘The Progressive Ascendancy’ and ‘The Progressive Paradox’, Leonard’s narrative really unfolds in three movements. The first charts the emergence of a cohort of ‘economic progressives’ in the last decades of the nineteenth century who drew on different forms of professional authority in order to speak for the economic interests of society. Many of these men held doctorates in political economy, often from German universities, while others were trained in history, political science, or sociology. Uniting them in Leonard’s account were profound institutional, intellectual, and moral ligatures. The American Economics Association (est. 1885) and the American Association for Labor Legislation (est. 1905) loom especially large as organizational spaces where figures like Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons and William Willoughby forged public identities as disinterested experts. These institutions attracted men who shared not only a common educational pedigree but also a distinctive philosophical orientation, ordered around the supremacy of the common good and a disdain for ‘individual liberties as archaic impediments to needed social and economic reforms’ (p. 24). They also drew figures with thick roots in American Protestantism, who understood the struggle against laissez-faire in strikingly moral terms. Twenty-three of the American Economics Association’s 55 charter members were clergymen, and many of the remaining 32 considered the religious calling before deciding, as Henry Carter Adams did, that economics, while ‘of a lower order than dealing directly ... with the souls of men’, was ‘work which a follower of Christ may do’ (p. 14).

The moral outrage stirred by poverty, corruption, and labor strife, combined with a faith in the expert’s ability to transcend the myopia of self-interest, led the economic progressives to the local

and federal state in the first two decades of the twentieth century. There, they worked to construct legal mechanisms that would allow them to supplant the market as managers of commercial life, from the anti-trust powers of the Federal Trade Commission to the supervisory tools of the Federal Reserve. The rise of modern regulation is a familiar story, but Leonard summarizes it well, noting that the growth of the administrative state provided additional anchors for the economists' expanding dominion. The economics profession and liberal governance, he suggests, matured in tandem. Also nurtured in these formative years was a cast of mind that conflated the commercial market with human reproduction as two forces responsible for shaping the health of the nation and yet highly susceptible to irrational feedback and regressive tendencies. Just as business survival under the predatory conditions of *laissez-faire* was 'likely to mean something else than fitness for good and efficient production', as John Bates Clark asserted, so too was free procreation seen as 'wasteful, slow, inhuman, and indifferent to progress' (p. 103). The slippage of metaphors between the biological and the economic indicated more than rhetorical embellishment, in Leonard's estimation. Eugenics and economic reform joined in the language and life pursuits of people like Irving Fisher, Edward Ross, and Sydney and Beatrice Webb, he argues, because they shared and reified an illiberal privileging of society over individual, science over sentiment, and man over nature.

At times, conceptual affinities dissolved into outright crossover, as Leonard demonstrates in the narrative's third and most compelling portion, on the eugenic origins of protective labor laws. Across several chapters, the text traces how the question of what labor was owed in the Industrial Age led progressive economists to the living-standard theory of wages, which held that workers deserved and would struggle until they received an income adequate to their needs and wants. Historians of consumer politics have long regarded this discourse as integral to the growth of the American welfare state, but Leonard adds that for many partisans it carried significant racial connotations as well. The standard of living, declared John Graham Brooks, first president of the National Consumers League, was always a 'question of race' (p. 134). Convinced that 'the meat-eating Anglo-Saxon' could not compete on the tolerance of indignities with those inferior peoples built for poverty, progressive economists refined an economic-eugenic argument for combating class conflict through immigration restriction, selective birth control, and minimum wage laws (p. 133). Such workplace regulations in particular would prevent the unfit from underbidding their biological betters, forcing short-sighted employers to hire more productive, if more expensive, workers and ultimately contributing to social peace and advances in the industrial arts. The exclusion of inferiors from both the gene pool and the labor pool thus not only traded in a similar illiberal logic but also were understood as conjoined solutions to the same social problems. Rather than treating economic anxiety as a cover for racial antipathy or racism as derivative of economic tension, Leonard's narrative suggests that for the progressive economists, race and class were, in important ways, indistinguishable. The biological was the economic, and vice versa.

Leonard does not, as other have, push this argument to the conclusion that the regulatory project was always and necessarily bound together with a discourse of human hierarchy, leaving *laissez-faire* as the only viable path for racial egalitarians today. Instead, he seems to share the progressives' economic outlook and regret that the will to order one realm of life fostered injustices in another. At times, *Illiberal Reformers* reads like a cautionary tale for contemporary experts, urging them to resist the odious logics of chauvinism and temper their confidence as agents of rationality. It is as a missive to the economics profession that the book, which covers much that has been explored in existing historical scholarship, makes the most sense. If it succeeds in chastening the field's more global ambitions, it will have done important work. Those more familiar with the intellectual currents of the Progressive Era will still find much of value here, however. Leonard's discussion of the Social Gospel as a pervasive influence on progressive social science is a compelling corrective to histories of American modernity that overemphasize secularism and the triumph of the technical. His extensive research in the published writings of turn-of-the-century economists – the primary source basis of the book – yields a wealth of fascinating historical nuggets, like Thorstein Veblen's belief that the leisure class was genetically disposed to conspicuous accumulation. And though many other

texts have considered the period's vexing status as both the fount of modern liberalism and a high-point of reactionary and segregationist impulses, *Illiberal Reformers* makes one of the stronger and more coherent cases for seeing that puzzle as perhaps not so puzzling at all, through the organizing theme of philosophical illiberalism.

Yet, there are facets of Leonard's narrative that call out for additional research and deeper analysis. One issue especially germane to the story of disciplinary hubris is the question of what actually constituted the research agenda of academic economics in the early twentieth century. While *Illiberal Reformers* brims with tales of the political work of leading economists, there is little indication of how these men defined the boundaries of their scientific community or evaluated the veracity of scientific statements. The interchangeability in the text of terms such as economists, economic progressives, and progressive economists flags an ambiguity about who exactly fit within the professional fold and leads one to wonder both whether the field possessed or ever developed the resources to dismiss eugenics as bad science on its own and whether economics itself was more of a science or a rhetorical cloak in this period – whether, to borrow Andrew Lang's memorable phrasing, economics was in the business of providing illumination or simply political support. Relatedly, one learns little of how economists were received by other interested professionals in this period, such as medical and public health experts, lawyers, and business leaders, or other political constituencies, such as farmers, wage workers, or socialists. If one open question of modern history is how a discipline with such contested claims to expertise came to command so much influence in public life, one might ask how groups with similar aspirations responded to its ascent and wonder whether the lingua franca of hereditarianism did not help to smooth the field's passage into the political mix. That preeminent economic organs, such as the *Publications of the American Economic Association* (est. 1886) and the *Journal of Political Economy* (est. 1892), served as early clearinghouses for the hereditarian writings of Frederick Hoffman, Carlos Closson, and others invites one to consider whether eugenics played some important role in getting the consuming public in the figurative door. Finally, there is the matter of endings, on which the text has surprisingly little to say. What role did economics play in the mid-century decline of eugenic science? Did the field disavow its racist roots, such as anthropology, and did economists struggle to adjust their discourse to the post-hereditarian culture? Were there ways in which other languages of difference, such as value or risk, served to continue the discriminating work of race in economic thought after the midcentury shift?

These queries in particular gesture toward two literatures, which *Illiberal Reformers* does not engage, but which may provide critical context for fully understanding the meaning of the discipline's extended entente with hereditarian thought. The first concerns the longer history of economic knowledge, as one among many fields of the natural and human sciences and as a variation on older discourses of commerce and wealth. As Michel Foucault, Philip Mirowski, and others have argued, the modern economics of Adam Smith, J. S. Mill, Irving Fisher, and John Maynard Keynes did not simply build upon the classical foundations of the mercantilists or the Physiocrats (Foucault 1970; Mirowski 1989; Schabas 2006). Instead, the notions of wealth, worth, exchange, and circulation that have ordered economic knowledge since at least the neoclassical turn of the nineteenth century, if not earlier, owe their coherence to deeper themes in Western scientific culture. For Foucault, it was the invention of man as both a transcendental subject and an empirical object of knowledge around the years of the French Revolution that accounted for the epistemological similarities between David Ricardo's theory of value, Georges Cuvier's historical taxonomy, and Franz Bopp's comparative philology. For Mirowski, it was the brief, wondrous life of the law of the conservation of energy, poached from nineteenth-century physics that provided economics with an essential, if flawed, model of systemic stability and historical certainty. Metaphor does not help to organize knowledge in these accounts as much as it produces empirical relationships and governs the boundary between fact and fiction. Yet, for both Foucault and Mirowski, epistemic regimes are unsteady contraptions, and in the latter's account, the early decades of the twentieth century were especially heady times for economics, as it was in this period that physics began to abandon the doctrine of conservation,

leaving the dismal science clinging to a language of predictable finitude that had lost its primary referent.

Might racial determinism, a theory of history with broad abilities to account for all manner of human and social data, from war and prosperity to artistic capacity and political trends, have played some role in preserving the foundations of economic knowledge in these years? Could the migration of economists away from the avowed, if fundamentally incomplete, egalitarianism of Smith and Mill and toward a powerful new model of transhistorical difference at the turn of the century indicate an epistemic vulnerability patched up by eugenic thought? If what economics borrowed from physics, in Mirowski's reading, was an 'idea of persistence, of invariance, and of independence from the passage of time', then it seems worth considering whether hereditarianism, a worldview touting the supremacy of inborn dispositions over the passing influences of the environment, was enlisted to perform similar work in a moment of drift and doubt (Mirowski 1989, p. 60). An inquiry into that possibility would seem to point not simply toward the eugenic origins of the regulatory state but, on a deeper level, to the troubling moorings of modern economic knowledge.

Moreover, it would invite deliberation on the relationship between race and 'the economy', the idea advanced in a second literature, associated with Timothy Mitchell and others, that at some point between the end of the Progressive Era and the dawning of the postwar era, 'the economy' emerged as an autonomous object of study and administrative care (Mitchell 1998). For Mitchell, this dramatic turn in political discourse was intimately linked to the ascendant economics profession, the interwar collapse of the gold standard, and the postwar project of decolonization. It was particularly as the global taxonomy of the imperial order was disintegrating that 'economies' became conceptualized as self-contained, semi-organic entities that nations were responsible for nurturing and whose conditions could be compared and evaluated. Economics, in this reading, supplied a language of difference that sustained international hierarchies, sanctioned neo-imperial interventions, and redefined the primary role of the state, in the developed as well as the developing world, as the custodian of its economy rather than a guarantor of rights or a vehicle of popular will. The job of government was increasingly understood as keeping the lines of credit lubricated, steadying cyclical turbulence, and yoking social goals to the engine of commerce through carefully engineered incentive structures. Alexandra Minna Stern has persuasively argued for hereditarianism's persistence into the 1940s and 1950s as a binding substance in the 'family-nation-civilization triumvirate' of postwar liberalism (Stern 2005, p. 183). Leonard's study seems to provide a point of departure for further revision, linking race, reproduction, and the family to the intellectual hegemony of 'the economy' as well. After all, it was likely not from physics or philology that 'growth', the keyword of American political economy from the Keynesian 1950s to the Clintonian 1990s and beyond, stemmed but from such life sciences as biology and demography, which were so central to eugenics in the first place.

Drawing out these connections will surely require robust collaboration between historians of capitalism, scholars of science and scientific culture, and reflexively-minded economists, who, as *Illiberal Reformers* demonstrates, can be remarkably adept at unpacking the logics that organize the specialized discourse of their field. Indeed, it is the work of patient and pathbreaking economists like Mirowski and Leonard that has opened up so much critical territory for those studying the history of economic knowledge from other disciplinary vantage. *Illiberal Reformers* places the consequential alliance between economics and eugenics in the Progressive Era in clear focus and suggests exciting new lines of inquiry for scholars interested in the tangled history of race, state, and market in modern America.

## References

- FOUCAULT, M. (1970) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Random House, New York.
- MIROWSKI, P. (1989) *More Heat than Light: Economics as Social Physics; Physics as Nature's Economics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- MITCHELL, T. (1998) 'Fixing the Economy', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 82–101.

SCHABAS, M. (2006) *The Natural Origins of Economics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

STERN, A. M. (2005) *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Daniel Platt

*Brown University*

 daniel\_platt@brown.edu

© 2016 Daniel Platt

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2016.1258587>