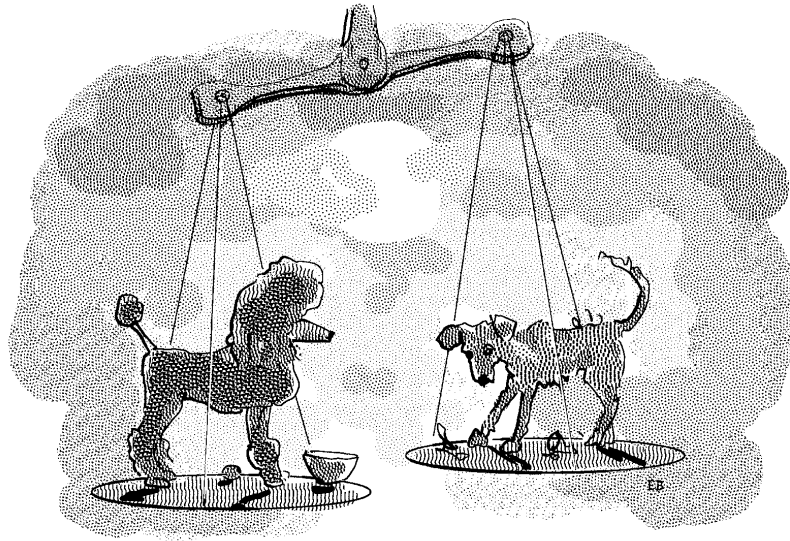


## THE LEFT'S DIRTY LITTLE SECRET

*Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era*, by Thomas C. Leonard.  
Princeton University Press, 264 pages, \$35 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper)



**I**N THE HALF-CENTURY OR SO PRECEDING the Great Depression, the chattering classes of America were unusually animated by their enthusiasm for eugenics. Until fairly recently, their attachment to that baleful project has received sparse attention in historical treatments of the Gilded Age and the Progressive era, certainly nothing commensurate with the importance bestowed upon the subject by the most influential intellectuals and political figures of the period.

The reasons for this neglect are not hard to divine. Eugenics later came to be inextricably intertwined with Nazism and the Holocaust. After World War II, the stench of that association proved too much to bear. A second, related reason warrants more than passing notice: the most outspoken and influential eugenics enthusiasts were, virtually to a person, Progressives, many of whom praised, and were praised by, German authorities in the 1930s for their views on the imperative of improving the genetic endowment of the human population. This is, to say no more, embarrassing to mainstream academic opinion today, which remains deeply wedded to a distinctively benign view of progressivism and its works.

With conspicuous exceptions, most textbook histories that deal with the late 19th and early 20th centuries treat Progressives as apostles of compassionate enlightenment in politics, government, and matters intellectual, which is to say, as public-spirited devotees of (among other things) democratic political reform, redistribution of income, national healthcare, labor and consumer protection, and activist government generally. Their opponents, on the whole, tend to be painted as avatars of acquisitiveness, defenders of misanthropic racial and class distinctions, and proponents of laissez-faire in economics and politics—in brief, as champions of what progressive historians pejoratively came to call Social Darwinism. This account not only leaves much out, it fundamentally distorts the truth. In fact, the most potent forms of Social Darwinism arose from within the ranks of Progressives themselves, and left a mark on the political culture far greater than the dreams of their social and political opponents.

**I**N HIS BOOK *ILLIBERAL REFORMERS* Thomas Leonard shows not only that the most thoroughgoing social Darwinists were Progressives, but that eugenics lay at the very center of the Progressive program

for the betterment of the human condition. Eugenics was not the only arrow in their reformist quiver, to be sure, but it powerfully brought together three interlocking propositions that agitated the minds and hearts of most Progressive thinkers: a dogmatic faith in science and the scientific method, a comparable belief in the malleability of human nature and how it might be directed toward socially and economically beneficent goals, and, finally, supreme confidence in the power of government, when controlled by experts like themselves, to achieve those goals. Although diverse aspects of these themes have been articulated previously in other places, Leonard, a research scholar and lecturer at Princeton, weaves them artfully into a masterly account of the intellectual currents that came to dominate American politics in the first half of the 20th century and, in many respects, dominate it still. He does so, moreover, in an eminently fair-minded way that gives the devil his due before the guilty verdict is announced.

**L**eonard divides his book into two main parts. “The Progressive Ascendancy” (Chapters 1-4) recounts the intellectual origins of the Progressive intel-

lectual establishment, including its fascination, not to say preoccupation, with Darwinian concepts, the influence of German historicism, and the wholesale embrace of social science expertise as a cure for political ills. Among the more original features of Leonard's research is his discussion of how and why the American economics profession came into being. Contrary to commonly accepted accounts, the major expositors of the dismal science in the late 19th century were anything but apostles of Adam Smith or laissez-faire. Truth be told, they distrusted the capacity of markets to remedy the social and economic consequences of large-scale industrialization. Markets needed not freedom, they believed, but expert management, and who better to provide that than men exquisitely trained in the newly reinvigorated academic science devoted to getting and spending?

Worthy of special note here is the author's emphasis on Progressive economists' embrace of themes associated with the Social Gospel movement. He points out, for example, that of the 55 charter members of the American Economics Association (AEA) founded in 1885, 23 were clergymen. A goodly number of the rest had either studied for, or seriously contemplated, a religious career. Virtually to a man, all would have agreed with the observation of Richard T. Ely, the AEA's first secretary, future president, and, *inter alia*, the young Woodrow Wilson's tutor at Johns Hopkins, that "God works through the State." It was no accident that delegates to the Progressive Party convention of 1912 concluded the event by singing and marching to "Onward Christian Soldiers."

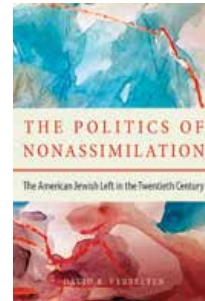
**T**HE SECOND PART OF *ILLIBERAL REFORMERS*, "The Progressive Paradox" (Chapters 5-10), explores what Leonard calls the "unstable amalgam of compassion and contempt" that characterizes Progressive policies regarding employment, race, and eugenics. The picture he paints is not a pretty one, dominated as it is by the crude Darwinian suppositions that guided most economic and social reformers. In their efforts to remediate the defects of markets through social engineering, these reformers devoted enormous energy to questions of race and class. Believing that nature in its wisdom had contrived to place northern Europeans at the top of the evolutionary scale, leading economic thinkers sought to eliminate the social dysfunction and inefficiency that resulted when lesser human types saturated labor markets.

Eugenic logic inspired the first minimum wage laws—the idea being that employers would invariably prefer the genetically superior to the *lumpenproletariat*. Being well compensated, the former would have an added incentive to breed, while the latter would presumably end up in some dismal social swamp—abandoned, forgotten, and, more likely than not, childless. Leonard's account of the origins of minimum wage laws should bury forever the opinion that Progressive social reform was principally motivated by a desire to better the lives of the poor. Similar notions informed immigration restrictions enacted by Congress in 1924. The new law severely restricted entrance to the United States by all except select persons of northern European extraction, who would in the fullness of time give birth to and rear the best and brightest.

**M**INIMUM WAGE AND IMMIGRATION policies were but two expressions of a eugenics mindset that imagined a universe in which "the fit" (all those sturdy northern European types like the Progressive intelligentsia) would be encouraged to breed, while "the unfit" would be discouraged. Without putting too fine a point on it, the short history of eugenics thereafter is essentially the story of how the definition of "unfit" expanded while the methods to discourage their multiplication became increasingly coercive.

These intersecting lines of thought culminated in the enactment of involuntary sterilization laws, beginning with Indiana and eventually imitated by 32 other states. No goose-stepping, brown-shirted thugs here, just ordinary folk inspired by Progressive propaganda to enact laws that would improve mankind by adjusting the contents of its gene pool through compulsory sterilization. To paraphrase a commercial jingle once deployed by a leading American chemical company, "Better things for better living through surgery," and never mind whether the patient consented or not. Beginning in 1907 and over the next five decades, nearly 70,000 people would be involuntarily sterilized. As Leonard suggests, what is striking about the development of American eugenics is the ease with which its barbarism was masked under the rubric of good intentions and social approval, justified at every turn by what passed for respectable scientific research. So respectable indeed that the Supreme Court bestowed an 8-1 benediction on involuntary sterilization in the infamous case of *Buck v. Bell* (1927). Although many people today would shudder at the thought,

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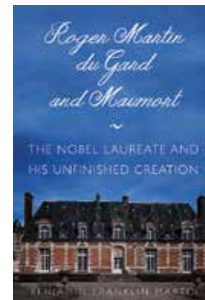
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few recoiled in horror when Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, citing compulsory vaccination laws as precedent, upheld Carrie Buck's coerced sterilization, saying "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

The case and public reaction to it perfectly illustrate a theme that can be found on almost every page of Leonard's book: how ostensibly decent, intelligent people can convince themselves and others in fairly short order that odious forms of governmental coercion are essentially beneficent. Indeed, the American eugenics movement cannot be understood apart from its advancement under socially impeccable auspices. The Rockefellers, Carnegies, and Harrimans generously supported its development both here and abroad; it received the approval of leading newspapers and general circulation magazines as well as journals of elite opinion; and with comparable ease, many of its more obnoxious methods were enthusiastically embraced by the most prominent social reformers and political leaders.

**S**OME MIGHT SAY THAT THE DARK DAYS of American eugenics, with their coercive and racialist overtones, are behind us. Perhaps. Leonard ends his book on a somewhat pessimistic note. On the one hand, it is clear that valuable lessons have

been learned from past excesses; on the other, he is wary about the enduring appeal of building a more perfect humanity. As he points out in his Epilogue, the early Progressives did not pause in their utopian quest as they traduced civil liberties across a wide front. Are their intellectual heirs in our day similarly inclined? It seems unlikely that compulsory sterilization laws will soon reacquire the popularity they once enjoyed, for example.

But the disposition that led to their enactment appears to be alive and well, as witness judicial orders and proposed legislation in a number of states that would mandate contraception as a condition for welfare benefits. Indeed, notwithstanding the instructive cautionary lessons of Leonard's book, the utopian dream of eugenic disposition would appear to be stronger than ever. The crudely coercive techniques justified in the past in the name of improving mankind's lot must surely be viewed as quaint or barbaric by practitioners of modern biotechnology who spend their days manipulating embryos in Petri dishes.

Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) is here to stay, as is its close cousin, Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD). One of the results of legalized abortion has been the

commodification of pre-born human life and the concomitant expectation among many prospective parents that they are entitled to a perfectly healthy child. Gene-editing techniques such as CRISPR, though still in their early stages of development, offer the prospect that parents will not only be able to eliminate specific diseases and defects, but to enhance embryonic capacity for traits deemed to be desirable, such as intelligence, looks, or athletic ability.

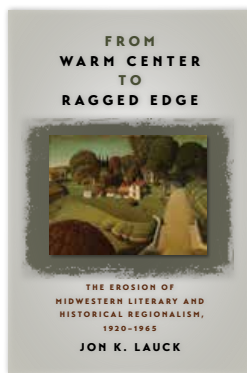
Among other things, CRISPR and even newer gene-altering techniques open the door to modification of the human germline. So far, ART and PGD are still largely unregulated fields of endeavor. But to imagine that the power they unleash will remain in the realm of private decision-making is, to say no more, naïve. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* presented one option for where genetic technology was likely to take us. Are we doomed to translate his fiction into reality? Thomas Leonard had no occasion to address modern genetics, but the evidence presented by *Illiberal Reformers* offers little to support an optimistic answer to the question.

*Michael M. Uhlmann is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute, and professor of government at Claremont Graduate University.*

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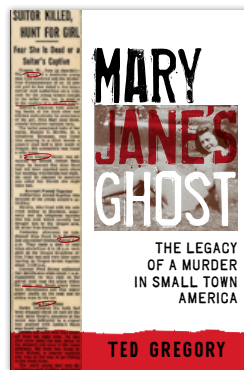
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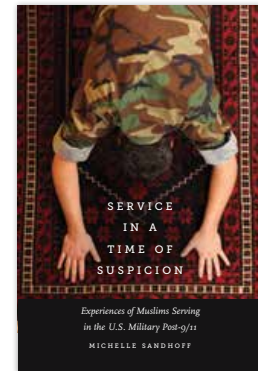
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