# Finding an Unusable Past: Why has Eugenics Gone Missing from the History of American Economics?

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## Abstract

Darwinian and eugenic ideas were influential and popular in Progressive Era; reform economists and other progressives routinely appealed to their authority. But eugenics is all but absent from the history of American Progressive-Era economics. Why? One aspect of this puzzle is a historiographic tradition that misconstrues eugenics, treating it as an aberrant, pseudo-scientific, laissez-faire doctrine, a successor to Gilded-Age social Darwinism, and a prelude to German National Socialism. Eugenics, in short, represents everything progressives are seen to oppose.

This essay argues that the traditional view is doubly incomplete: wrong about the nature of eugenic thought, and wrong about the nature of progressive thought. With respect to eugenics, new scholarship shows convincingly that Progressive-Era eugenics was, in fact, the broadest of churches. Eugenics was mainstream; it was widespread; it appealed to an extraordinary range of political ideologies, not least to the progressives, and it was – as state control of human breeding – a program that no social Darwinian could consistently endorse. Eugenics also survived the Nazis.

With respect to the progressives, it is important that, in an era before Mendelian genetics became established, Darwinian thought was protean enough to accommodate a wide range of political views. In particular, it was still unsettled as to whether human heredity was Lamarckian or Darwinian, and whether natural selection operated at the level of the individual or of the collective (e.g., the race or nation). Thus could reformers argue for eugenic improvement through environmental improvement, and could argue that selection operates not among competing individuals, but among competing races. Progressives did not reject survival-of-the-fittest doctrine. On the contrary, they embraced it. They argued that the new industrial capitalism was *dysgenic* – tending to select for the unfit – and that the state must therefore take over from nature the essential selectionist task of weeding out the unfit.


"Being cowards, we defeat natural selection under cover of philanthropy: being sluggards, we neglect artificial selection under cover of delicacy and morality." – George Bernard Shaw

"I would never entrust the faulty product of evolution with the task of revising its own evolved structure." – Stephen J. Gould

## 0. Preface

American economics comes of age as an expert policy science during the Progressive Era (roughly 1890-1920), an interval that marks the high-water line of biological approaches to social and economic problems. Eugenic and Darwinian ideas deeply influenced American economics and the other newly professionalizing social sciences, especially sociology and psychology. The roster of Anglophone economists (and other social scientists) who embraced eugenic ideas and policies is extraordinary, in both its breadth and in its ideological diversity: Francis Amasa Walker, Irving Fisher, A.C. Pigou, John Maynard Keynes, and Sidney Webb among them.

The progressive social scientists, those who led the Progressive-Era movement for labor reform, were especially attracted to eugenic ideas. Scholars like Henry Rogers Seager, Edwin Alsworth Ross, John R. Commons, Charles Richmond Henderson, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, journalists like Paul Kellogg of the *Survey* and *The New Republic*'s Herbert Croly all invoked eugenic ideas for various causes, especially to justify the exclusionary labor and immigration legislation that is a central legacy of the Progressive Era (Leonard 2003a, 2004).

And yet the influence of eugenic thought upon American Progressive-Era economics has gone largely unremarked. The silence is fairly deafening.[1] This essay considers one aspect of this historiographic puzzle: why eugenics, in particular, has gone missing from the history of American Economics? Before the historiography, some history.

## 1. Introduction

American economics became a professional, expert policy discipline during the Progressive Era – so called for its reform spirit, and for its reform legislation – an era which begins a vastly more expansive state relationship to the economy. By the first World War, the U.S. government created the Federal Reserve, amended the Constitution to institute a personal income tax, established the Federal Trade Commission, applied existing anti-trust laws to industrial combinations and to labor unions,

[1] There are a few exceptions: Dennis Hodgson on Francis Amasa Walker, and Annie Cot on Irving Fisher. Sandy Darity has examined Progressive-Era racism, which is connected to American eugenics, and David Levy and Sandy Peart have written extensively on eugenics in Victorian-Era England.

restricted immigration, regulated food and drug safety, and supervised railroad rates.[2] State governments regulated working conditions, banned child labor, capped working hours, and set minimum wages. By the 1910s, more than forty states had instituted inheritance taxes. Local governments municipalized gas and water companies. Professional economists, especially the progressives among them, played a leading role in the Progressive-Era transformation of the state's relationship to the American economy.

What is less well known is that the Progressive-Era transformation of the state's relationship to the American economy was deeply informed by an influential, biologically based movement for social and economic reform – eugenics. Progressive-Era economics, like the regulatory state it helped found, came of age at a time when biological approaches to social and economic reform were at (or near) their apex.

In justifying labor legislation, progressive economists joined eugenic thought to their theories of wage determination to argue that the superior, deserving poor could be uplifted only by removing from the labor force groups deemed biologically unfit – groups they called "unemployables." Blacks, immigrants, and those defective in character or intellect were regarded by progressives active in labor legislation less as victims of industrial capitalism, than as threats to the health and well being of the worthy poor and of society more generally. Progressive-Era reform economics ultimately argued that eugenic treatment of the biologically unfit – the so-called industrial residuum – was a necessary means to the end of uplifting the worthy poor (Leonard 2003). Many reformers also included women in the class of "unemployables," if for somewhat different reasons (Leonard 2004).

**2. The influence of eugenic thought**

It is hard to overestimate the influence of Darwinian and eugenic ideas in the Progressive Era. I believe one cannot fully understand the economic ideas that underwrote labor and immigration reform without also understanding the Darwinian and eugenic thought that crucially informed them. If the relationship between American labor reform and the biology of human inheritance seems to the modern

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[2] U.S. efforts to tax wealthy and high-income persons predate the passage of the 16th Amendment in 1913. A temporary federal inheritance tax was passed to finance the Spanish-American war, and, in 1894, Congress passed legislation, later ruled unconstitutional, taxing (at 2%) all annual incomes above $4,000. By 1906, President Roosevelt was agitating for a US personal income tax.

reader unexpected, it is only because eugenics, new scholarship notwithstanding, is still widely misunderstood – regarded as an aberrant, pseudo-scientific, laissez-faire doctrine, a kind of 20th-century successor to Gilded-Age social Darwinism, that was wholly abandoned after the eugenic atrocities of German National Socialism. In short, eugenics was everything the Progressives are seen to have opposed.

But the Progressives were not that progressive and eugenics was, in actual fact, the broadest of churches. Eugenics was not aberrant; it was not seen as a pseudo-science; it was not laissez-faire; it rejected social Darwinism, and it was not abandoned after Nazi atrocities. Eugenics was mainstream; it was pervasive to the point of faddishness[3]; it was supported by leading figures in the emerging science of genetics[4]; it appealed to an extraordinary range of political ideologies, not least to the progressives; it was – as state control of human breeding – a program that no social Darwinian or proponent of laissez-faire could consistently endorse, and it survived the Nazis.[5]

History of eugenics traditionally focused upon movements in the US, the UK, and in Third-Reich Germany; but we now know that eugenic thought was commonplace elsewhere, influencing scholars, writers, scientists and policy makers in virtually all non-Catholic western countries, and in many others besides: there are scholarly treatments of the eugenics movements in Canada, France, Japan, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Romania, China, Latin America, and elsewhere.[6]

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[3] Eugenic ideas were faddish enough to become a staple at country fairs, with their "fitter family" competitions, and even to make their way into the funny pages. See this Buster Brown cartoon, from circa 1903: http://www.geneseo.edu/~easton/humanities/busterbrown.html

[4] Paul and Spencer (1995:302) argue that, before the 1930s, Thomas Hunt Morgan was the only Mendelian geneticist to reject the eugenicist idea that socially undesirable traits were the product of bad heredity.

[5] Sweden, for example, greatly expanded its coercive sterilization laws during World War II .More than 60,000 Swedes, over 90 percent of them women, were sterilized from 1941 to1975 (Broberg and Tydén 1996,109 –10). The other Scandanavian countries also greatly expanded their eugenic practices after the second World War, as part of what historian Daniel Kevles (1999: 437) calls "the scientifically oriented planning of the new welfare state."

[6] On Canada, see McLaren 1990. On France see Schneider 1990. On Japan, see Suzuki 1975. On Russia see Adams 1990. On the Scandanavian countries, see Broberg and Roll-Hansen 1996. On Romania, see Bucur 2002. On Latin American, see Stepan 1991. On China see Dikötter

By 1933, American demographer and eugencist Paul Popenoe could boast that eugenic sterilization laws obtained in jurisdictions comprising one hundred and fifty million people (Kevles 1995: 115).[7]

Eugenic thought not only crossed national borders, it also crossed political ideologies, traversing an extraordinary range of political views. Ideologically, the eugenics movement certainly attracted reactionaries, such as Madison Grant, author *The Passing of the Great Race*. But eugenics also won proponents of a quite different politics, from Margaret Sanger, the Birth Control advocate who began intellectual life as a radical anarchist (a protégé of Emma Goldman's), to national socialists such as Karl Pearson, Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw, to social conservatives such as Francis Galton, founder of modern eugenics, and Charles Davenport, head of the Eugenics Record Office at the Cold Spring Harbor Biological Laboratory, to the *sui generis* feminist and economist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Writing a monograph-length survey of eugenics for the *QJE*, James A. Field opined that "Eugenics is [one of the most] hopeful application[s] of science in social reform" (1911: 1-2).[8]

One is not surprised to find eugenic advocates proselytizing, as when Karl Pearson suggested that "Socialists have to inculcate that spirit which would give offenders against the State short shift and the nearest lamp-post" (Pearson [1887] 1901: 307-08), or when Sidney Webb devised a novel term, "adverse selection," to describe what he saw as English race suicide, a term for the process by which the unfit outbreed their biological betters:

> Twenty-five percent of our parents, as Professor Karl Pearson keeps warning us, is producing 50 percent of the next generation. This can hardly result in anything but national deterioration; or, as an alternative, in this country gradually falling to the Irish and the Jews (1907: 17).

Biological justifications for social and economic reform naturally appealed to those, such as Irving Fisher, founder of the American Eugenics Society, who served as officers in eugenic organizations. But the influence of eugenic ideas extended well beyond the organizations dedicated to eugenic research

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1992.

[7] Eugenic sentiments can even be found among scholars from traditionally black colleges. Miller (1917) worried about the lower fertility of the Howard University professoriat —"the higher element of the negro race"—when compared with the average African American. See also Hasian 1996.

[8] The crucial question, which biologists have mostly failed to comprehend, Field says, is "what eugenic policy promises the maximum increase of human welfare?" For "aid in answering that question," Field argues "the economist is needed" (1911: 66-67).

and proselytizing.[9]

Justices Louis Brandeis and William Howard Taft joined the infamous *Buck v. Bell* Supreme Court decision, where O. Wendell Holmes wrote that "The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes." "Three generations of imbeciles," they agreed, "is enough."[10] President Theodore Roosevelt called "race suicide" – "the elimination instead of the survival of the fittest" – the "greatest problem of civilization," and he regularly returned to the theme (1907: 550).[11] President Calvin Coolidge, in 1921, warned of the perils of race mixing: "Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides. Quality of mind and body suggests that observance of ethnic law is as great a necessity to a nation as immigration law." Coolidge said "America must remain American" when he signed the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which imposed racial quotas by design, which radically curtailed immigration from eastern and southern Europe.

The intellectual influence of eugenics extended well beyond the public sphere.[12] Virginia Woolf confided to her diary that "imbeciles" "should certainly be killed". T.S. Eliot favorably reviewed eugenic articles from journals such as *Eugenics Review*. In 1908, D.H. Lawrence indulged in an extermination fantasy:

> If I had my way, I would build a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly, and a Cinematograph working brightly, and then I'd go out in back streets and main streets and bring them all in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed; I would lead them gently, and they would smile at me (cited in Childs 2001: 10).

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[9] I owe to Dan Rodgers this distinction between the professional eugenicists, who founded and staffed the eugenics organizations, and the vastly larger number of scholars, writers and policy makers influenced by eugenic ideas.

[10] *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200, 208 (1927) USSC.

[11] For the leading role of economists in promoting race-suicide arguments in the context of immigration, see Leonard 2003a: 714-721.

[12] I owe the following examples to Donald Childs's (2001) fascinating volume, *Modernism and Eugenics.*

Not all eugenic remedies were as extreme as lethal chambers or compulsory sterilization for the unfit. But few disagreed with the diagnosis – that some races (and other groups) are biologically inferior, and these unfit races (and other groups) are the root cause of social and economic problems. And few opposed the eugenic prescription – that the state can and should plan human breeding so as to reduce the proportion of the unfit.

Thus does the new scholarship in the history of eugenics now adopt a broader perspective on eugenics, understanding it as "a biologically based movement for social reform" (Schneider 1990: 4), one that "belonged to the political vocabulary of virtually every significant modernizing force between the two world wars . . ." (Dikotter 1998: 467).[13] Seen this way, it is perhaps less surprising that the fledgling economists who blueprinted and began erecting the key structural elements of what would become a permanently established welfare state, made ready recourse to biological explanations of economic problems.

**3. Who were the Progressives?**

Progressive-Era historiography employs a sometimes bewildering variety of labels to describe the left-liberal social theorists and reformers who promoted the idea that an activist state, as guided by social-scientific expertise, should reform markets in the name of advancing a social welfarist vision of the common good (Fried 1998: ix). The diversity of terminology among historians reflects, in part, the scope and heterogeneity of American reform movements in the Progressive Era: nativists, Social Gospelers, temperance advocates, muckrakers, birth-control advocates, eugenicists, charity reformers, settlement house workers, pacifists, good-government advocates, city-beautiful advocates, and conservationists.

I adopt the old-fashioned term "progressive," in recognition of the reformers' (rare) agreement on the cause of labor reform through legislation, and their shared belief in what Linda Gordon (1992, 36) calls the "progressive traditions of statism and . . .expertise." Labor reform was the very heart of the progressive agenda, as was the belief in the virtues of an expert technocratic vanguard to justify and to promote the labor-reform agenda.

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[13] Among the eugenics scholars who take this view are Daniel Kevles (1995, 1999), Diane Paul (1995), Leila Zenderland (1998).

Perhaps no group better embodied this progressive *ethos* than American reform economists. The reform economists' impulse to set the world to rights was powered by a potent combination— the German academic social activism they had admired as graduate students, and the Protestant Social Gospel's evangelical will to remake society.

When, soon after its founding, the reform-minded American Economic Association (AEA) transformed itself from an agency of Christian social reform into a more scholarly and scientific professional organization (Coats 1960), the progressive economists' creed of activism through expertise – what Mary Furner (1975) calls "advocacy" – did not disappear; it relocated. Perhaps wiser after the academic-freedom trials at the end of the nineteenth century, the progressive economists founded organizations outside universities to conduct research on the labor problem and to lobby, advocate, and rake muck.

Academic economists traded not just on the relatively newfound authority of their professorial chairs, but also on the expert, specialized knowledge they could offer to those writing reform legislation. As Daniel Rodgers puts it: "expert policy counsel, in fact, turned out to be the ground on which laissez-faire's professional critics regrouped and refashioned a position of influence. By the end of the century, the students of the first German-trained economists were working hard to established new forms of authority by colonizing the social space between university professorships and expert government service" (Rodgers 1998: 108). In the U.S., Progressive-Era reformers essentially invented what we today take for granted, the of academic experts who advises policy making bodies.

Two of the most influential reform organizations were the American Association for Labor Legislation (AALL) and the National Consumers League (NCL). Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpol (1984, 726) call the AALL the "leading association of U.S. social reform advocates in the Progressive Era." Mostly forgotten today, the AALL was a key labor-reform advocacy group, influential in effecting Progressive-Era legislation regulating workplace safety, minimum wages, maximum hours.

The AALL was founded in December 1905 at the Baltimore AEA meetings, principally by two of Gustav Schmoller's students, Henry Farnam of Yale and Adna F. Weber of the New York Bureau of Labor Statistics (Rodgers 1998: 236).[14] The first group meeting was in early 1906. Richard T. Ely

[14] Henry Farnam, the Yale economist who co-founded and personally funded the AALL, was an early adopter of eugenic ideas. He argued in 1888 that: "Every effort ...to remove what Malthus

was the AALL's first president, and John R. Commons was its first executive secretary. The latter position was soon taken over by Commons's protégé John B. Andrews, who led the organization for many years, overseeing its transformation from scholarly muckraking shop to politically powerful pressure group. Irene Osgood (who became Irene Osgood Andrews), another Commons disciple, served as the AALL's assistant secretary.

Henry Rogers Seager was involved from the very beginning, serving as its third and fifth president (Commons was the second to hold the AALL presidency). Princeton's Walter Willoughby was the fourth president, and Irving Fisher served as the sixth AALL president. The AALL masthead practically mapped the interlocking directorates of American progressivism: Jane Addams of Hull House, Charles Richmond Henderson, University of Chicago sociologist, and the head of Charities and Corrections, Paul Kellogg, editor of the *Survey*, an influential progressive organ, Louis Brandeis, AALL legal counsel until appointed to the Supreme Court by Woodrow Wilson, and Wilson himself, even after he became President of the United States.[15]

The NCL, led by the indomitable Florence Kelley, was less academic, was run by women, and was more skillful politically (Rogers 1998: 236). Josephine Goldmark**,** sister-in-law to Brandeis, was active in the NCL leadership, and supervised the production of the Brandeis Brief, an annotated compilation of social science reports defending maximum-hours (and in later versions, minimum-wage) legislation for women. The NCL assembled local consumer leagues that, before embracing legislation, emphasized moral suasion: raising the consciousness of genteel consumers of ladies garments produced

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called the "positive checks " to populations, without at the same time increasing the preventative checks, must result in an increase of the very classes which are least able to take care of themselves, and render more and more imperative the solution of that exceedingly difficult problem which Mr. Arnold White calls "sterilization of the unfit" (Farnam 1888: 295). "We are," said Farnam,"by means of our very improvements, setting forces in operation which tend to multiply the unfit " (ibid).

[15] Many other AALL leaders were progressive economists active in labor reform: Father John Ryan, author of *A Living Wage*, Matthew B. Hammond, Royal Meeker (appointed by Wilson to be US Commissioner of Labor). Elizabeth Glendower Evans, Massachusetts minimum-wager and a friend of Louis and Alice Brandeis, was affiliated with the AALL. The AALL also attracted some academic economists less obviously reformers, such as Harvard's Frank Taussig. In later years, Institutionalists such as Wesley Claire Mitchell, Leo Wolman, and Walton Hamilton were members of the AALL General Administrative Council.

under sweatshop conditions, using NCL labels (rival to the Union label) that certified satisfactory work conditions. Alice Goldmark Brandeis, was an active member of the Consumer's League and secretly paid the expenses of the Washington NCL office (Bary 1972).

The NCL tapped progressive economists for advisors and board members. Commons served as NCL president from 1923 to 1935. Seager, A.B. Wolfe of Oberlin College, and Arthur Holcombe of Harvard, were members of the NCL minimum-wage committee as early as 1909 (Hart 1994: 209, n. 94). Ely and Father John Ryan of Catholic University were also active NCL advisors.

No single entity can stand in for the heterogeneous and fractious reform groups that have, at one time or another, earned the label of "progressive." But, in the realm of labor reform, the AALL economists and their NCL allies make for an excellent synecdoche, given their impeccable reform credentials, their preference for bureaucratic, statutory approaches over democratic, collective bargaining, and their faith in social science, the state, and their own disinterested expertise as reliable guides to the social good.

**4. What drew the Progressives to eugenics?**

Eugenic ideas were not new in the Progressive Era. There were ancient antecedents, such as Plato's *Republic*. But even the modern incarnation of eugenic thought, which is conventionally dated to Francis Galton's first eugenics publications in the mid-1860s, was essentially ignored for a generation. When in 1868 W.R. Greg proposed a society in which "paternity should be the right and function exclusively of the élite of the nation," he understood that the prospect was remote in time (1868: 361). Galton's moment comes only toward the end of his long life, when, in the Progressive Era, the new expansion of state power meant that it was now possible to have not only eugenic thought, but also eugenic practice. The practice of eugenics, eugenic legislation, says eugenics historian Diane Paul, had to "[await] the rise of the welfare state" (Paul 1995: 6).

What drew progressives to eugenics was the same set of intellectual commitments that drew them to labor and other reform legislation. "For progressive reformers," historian of eugenics Daniel Kevles writes, "eugenics was a branch of the drive for social perfection that many reformers of the day thought might be achieved through the deployment of science to good social ends"(1998: 211).[16] Just

[16] This is not to suggest that the progressives were utopian; they were not. It is the case, though, that some utopian communities practiced eugenics as part of their philosophy of living.

as labor and goods markets could no longer be left unregulated, so too, must the state take over from "nature" the project of selecting the fittest human beings. Irving Fisher captured this expansive view of social control when he said: "the days of laissez faire have gone forever. There is no longer any field of human activity into which it is not acceptable both as the right and the duty of the state to intervene, by investigation and by remedial action" (1906–07: 591). The progressive intellectual commitments were:

(1) A belief in the explanatory power of scientific (especially statistical) social inquiry to get at the root causes of social and economic problems;

(2) Belief in the legitimacy of social control, which derives from a organic conception of society as prior to and greater than the sum of its constituent individuals;

(3) Belief in the efficacy of social control via scientific management of public administration;

(4) Belief that experts are both sufficient and necessary for the task of wise public administration.

Progressives believed deeply in the power of social scientific inquiry. Late Victorian scientists, like Galton, already regarded science (especially the science of society) as a high, even spiritual, calling. In the Progressive Era, especially in the United States, progressive economists and other reformers regarded science as a means for understanding social and economic problems, and also as a policy method – scientific management of public administration – for setting the world to rights.[17]

By "scientific" the progressives meant, roughly, "statistical" in the sense of observation, measurement, tabulation, and some rudimentary kinds of inference. As with scientific racism or any system that assumes a human biological hierarchy, eugenics requires measurement. A ranking presupposes that racial (or other) types are distinguishable, and it also generally requires a fixity of

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John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida community is an interesting example of social control of human breeding, where "social control" is not equivalent to "state control." (See Karp 1982).

[17] The reformers who founded the AEA and later the AALL were empirically minded, and a key selling point of the new reform economics they advocated was its methodological opposition to what they regarded as the excessively abstract, deductive approach of late classical political economy. See Barber 1987.

racial types.[18] It is no accident that the notable proponents of human hierarchy in economics (and in social science more generally) were pioneering statisticians: Galton, Pearson, Francis Amasa Walker, Richmond Mayo-Smith, Irving Fisher, Jeremiah Jenks and Walter Wilcox, were all statisticians – by training and or by inclination. They regarded statistical measurement and inference as the method that put the "science" in social science. The first two of Pearson's (1909) "bricks for the foundations of [eugenics]" were announced as follows: "[first] we depart from the old sociology, in that we desert verbal discussion for statistical facts, and [second] we apply new methods of statistics which form practically a new calculus" (1909: 19-20). Statistics were seen by progressives as the scientific foundation for reform via legislation. Said reformer Lester Ward: "if laws of social events could be statistically formulated, they could be used for scientific lawmaking."[19]

The progressives also believed strongly in the legitimacy of social control, a catch phrase of Progressive-Era reformers, as it was for their successors, the Institutionalists. "Social control" did not refer narrowly to state regulation of markets. E.A. Ross (1901b), who popularized the term, employed it in a broader, sociological sense, to describe the various ways in which society "can mold the individual to the necessity of the group," which, in the context of eugenics, meant a "program for survival" of the race (in Furner 1975: 309).

The legitimacy of social control meant, in practice, the legitimacy of state control.[20] Lester

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[18] The putative fixity of racial types, most commonly measured by the "cephalic index" – the ratio of skull length to width – was a key concern of eugenicists. Working for economist Jeremiah Jenks, who headed President Roosevelt's 1907 U.S. Immigration Commission, the pioneering physical anthropologist Franz Boas took biometric measurements of thousands of European immigrants and their American-born and foreign-born children. Boas found the American-born children differed significantly from their immigrant parents and their foreign-born siblings in cephalic index and in other biometric measures, and that measured differences between the immigrants and their foreign-born children were less than those between the immigrants and their American-born children. Boas concluded that there was no racial fixity but rather "a great plasticity of human type" and that the environmental advantages of the United States explained the greater change among American-born children of immigrants.

[19] Ward, *Glimpses of the Cosmos* III: 45-47.

[20] Ely wrote in his autobiography: "there are certain spheres of activity which do not belong to the individual, certain functions which *the great co-operative society, called the state* must perform to keep the avenues open for those who would gain a livelihood by their own exertions" [emphasis

Ward, who coined many neologisms, devised the term "sociocracy" to describe the "scientific control of the social forces by the collective mind of society" (Fine 1956: 263). For progressives, the legitimacy of state control derived from an illiberal and organic conception of the state as an entity prior to and greater than the sum of its constituent individuals. Progressives, who criticized excessive individualism, ordinarily opposed the Liberal tradition that treated the individual as prior to the state, that saw the state as something called into being by contracting individuals, and which, therefore, derived legitimacy solely from the consent of its creators. Washington Gladden, a leading Social Gospeler and ally of Richard T. Ely, argued that "the idea of the liberty of the individual is not a sound basis for a democratic government." The Liberal emphasis on individual freedom, Gladden argued, was "a radical defect in the thinking of the average American" (McGerr 2003: 217).

The progressives somewhat anti-democratic impulses also informed their view of how reform should be devised and implemented. They believed that academic experts were both sufficient and necessary for the task of wise public administration. Experts were sufficient, because they could and would suspend their own interests to circumvent (or better, transcend) the messy business of interest-group machine politics. As one widely read eugenics text put it: "government and social control are in the hands of expert politicians who have power, instead of expert technologists who have wisdom. There should be technologists in control of every field of human need and desire" (Albert Wiggam's *New Decalogue* 1923 cited in Ludmerer 1972: 16-17). Experts were necessary for the task of wise public administration, because the modern conditions of industrial capitalism no longer permitted a quaint liberal individualism, but demanded wise government by expert elites – a view we can call technocratic paternalism. The idea was that the benignly-motivated experts should interpose themselves, in the name of the social good, to better represent the interests of the industrial poor, for whom many reformers felt contempt as much as pity.

In this context, the appeal of Eugenics to the progressive mind is evident. Eugenics necessarily rejects individualism in favor of a collective – "the race" or the nation; eugenics regarded unfettered industrial capitalism as dysgenic, both because improved well being thwarts natural Malthusian checks, and because capitalism promotes the inferior, low-wage races; eugenics boasted an air of scientific authority, especially with its emphasis on statistical measurement; and eugenics opposed laissez-faire

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added] (1938: xx).

values, by substituting an objective, expert determination of the social good for a subjective, individual determination of the social good.[21] Thus were eugenics and progressivism complementary rather than antagonistic trends.

**5. Why the neglect of eugenics in the history of American economics?**

There are, no doubt, many reasons why Progressive-Era eugenics seems to have gone down the memory hole of the history of economics. First, "eugenics" remains a dirty word. The atrocities perpetrated by German National Socialism in the name of eugenics have not only tainted the term, but have so colored our view of eugenics, that even professional historians have struggled not to retroactively implicate the eugenic ideas of a very different time and place.[22] Second, and related, contemporary scholarship sometimes inclines to apologize for the now unfashionable enthusiasms of revered ancestors, particularly those who do not fit the standard profile of a eugenicist (Childs 2001). Third, trends in historical writing are often late in arriving to the history of economic thought. The contemporary understanding of the history of eugenics comes from a revisionist history-of-science literature that dates "only" to the 1980s and 1990s, and, what is more, this recent literature is itself mostly unacquainted with the history of political economy.

Without rejecting any of these hypotheses, the present essay considers another cause of the amnesia with respect to eugenics' influence on the nascent social sciences of a century ago: the historical conflation of eugenics with social Darwinism. Traditional accounts tend to identify eugenics with social Darwinism, or depict it as a 20th- century successor movement. The conflation of eugenics with social Darwinism has lead to a set of historiographic problems, some of which I try to unpack here.

**A. Social Darwinism**

First, the conflation of eugenics and social Darwinism has promoting a misunderstanding of eugenics, which departs from social Darwinism in important ways, not least that eugenics assigns to the state and not to nature the task of selecting the fittest. Second, the term "social Darwinism" is itself problematic. The biological and social sciences have been intellectual trading partners for at least two

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[21] This paragraph is indebted to Searle 1998: 25-26.

[22] Historian of eugenics Daniel Kevles describes his early work as "coming to terms with a dirty word" (Cited in Adams 1990: 226).

centuries.[23] So, by itself, the notion that biological ideas might influence social science (or *vice versa*) is neither surprising nor intrinsically objectionable.

But many historians, at least since Richard Hofstadter's (1944) influential *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, have tended to reconstruct "social Darwinism" as a Bad Thing, something that *is* objectionable. "Social Darwinism" is now less a description of Darwin's ideas applied to society, than it is a kind of blanket indictment – a catch-all term for the Gilded-Age ideology of those who defended the brutish aspects of American capitalism that the progressives are seen to have opposed: individualism, laissez-faire economics, imperialism, racism, militarism, and so on. In short, the Hofstadter reconstruction made "social Darwinism" connote the use of Darwinian ideas – as reduced to phrases such as "survival of the fittest," "natural selection," and the "struggle for existence" – to explain and to justify a ruthless laissez-faire capitalism of late 19th-century America.[24]

There are, broadly, two problems with the Hofstadter version, as several generations of revisionist historians have pointed out.[25] The first is that those who wished to justify Gilded-Age *laissez faire* rarely made recourse to Darwin or to other biological theories. The second is that critics of the late 19th-Century social order, including progressive who wished to reform it, *did* make recourse to biological ideas, citing, for example, the failure of natural selection and the need for state selection (eugenics).

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[23] The theory of natural selection was, to pick a prominent example, influenced by Malthus's population dynamics.

[24] "Why the conflation?" is a question too involved to pursue here. The historians' rendering of social Darwinism as a kind of synecdoche for all Progressive-Era ideologies that looked objectionable in retrospect is of a piece with a Whiggishness that is characteristic of Progressive-Era historiography more generally. Progressive-Era histories, are (often) not just presentist, they are (often) also Whiggish in Herbert Butterfield's (1931) original sense of the term, that is, they depict their subject as a gradual march of progress, where good, forward-looking liberals continuously struggle with and ultimately overcome bad, backward-looking conservatives (Mayr 1990: 301). Hofstadter, Eric Foner indicates, was writing as early as 1939, something of a historical low ebb for laissez-faire: it was the eve of war, the U.S. was still in the midst of a prolonged crisis of industrial capitalism, and Hofstadter had only just left the Communist Party.

[25] The previous paragraph is indebted to Roger Bannister (1979), a leading revisionist critic of Hofstadter's thesis.

American plutocrats who used Darwin to defend the Gilded-Age social order were, it turns out, scarcer than hen's teeth (Wylie 1959). Business apologists for *laissez-faire* more commonly invoked religion, Horatio Alger mythology, the American republican tradition, and even, if less frequently, classical political economy.[26] Darwinian defenses of *laissez-faire* among scholars, who were more likely to know Darwin, are not much easier to find. Even the paradigmatic social Darwinians, Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, don't fit the Hofstadterian profile perfectly.

Spencer is certainly the prototypical social Darwinian. He defended laissez-faire on evolutionary grounds, and his intellectual prominence made him the personal embodiment of what came to be called social Darwinism.[27] Spencer's synthetic philosophy aspired to demonstrate that "social science is not to guide the conscious control of human evolution, . . . [because] such control is an absolute impossibility" (Hofstadter 1944: 43).

But even Spencer fits the Hofstadterian profile imperfectly. Spencer was not happy with the label of "Darwinian," in part because his own theory of evolution pre-dated (or at least was published before) Darwin's *Origin of Species*. What's more, Spencer was no "hard" hereditarian; he was, in fact, a leading Lamarckian, and some reformers found themselves in the awkward position of relying upon Spencer's defense of the idea that characteristics acquired during an individual's lifetime can be transmitted to progeny. Spencer was also an active opponent of both imperialism and militarism, and he particularly resented the use of his phrase, "survival of the fittest," to justify imperial wars in the name of preserving the English race.[28]

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[26] Historian R.J. Wilson wrote: "it is true that in the last half of the 19th century great numbers of Americans were ideologically committed to the notions of competition, merited success and deserved failure. But it is not true that this commitment was grounded on Darwinian premises. No more than a small handful of American business leaders or intellectual were 'social Darwinists' in any sense precise enough to have a useful meaning" (1967: 93).

[27] Both Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace regarded Spencer as the leading thinker of the late 19th century. Hofstadter says of the influence of Spencer: "in the three decades after the Civil War, it was impossible to be active in any filed of intellectual work without mastering Spencer" (1944: 33).

[28] As with John Stuart Mill, the passage of time seemed to transform once radical ideas into conservative notions. Spencer was considered dangerously radical in the early post-Bellum years. Towards the end of his life, Spencer became, for progressives, synonymous with the (Darwinian) defense of laissez-faire. But before the Progressive-Era professionalization of American economics,

Sumner serves as the other paradigmatic social Darwinian in Hofstadter (as in most other accounts, such as Fine 1956). A disciple of Spencer much more than of Darwin (at least with respect to human society), Sumner likewise doesn't completely fit his textbook profile as social Darwinian and apologist for American capital.[29] Sumner, for example, opposed the Tariff, a hot-button apostasy that nearly cost him his academic career. Sumner was also a pacifist, and he openly criticized the American imperial adventure of the Spanish-American War, saying "my patriotism is of the kind which is outraged by the notion that the United States was never a great nation until [this] . . . petty three months campaign . . . " (Hofstadter 1944: 195). Sumner, in one of the essays taken to be a classic text of social Darwinism – "What Social Classes Owe to Each Other" – actually defended (open-shop) organized labor, and argued that collective bargaining would better serve labor's interests than would the statutory approach ultimately favored by Progressives.[30]

Sumner was an advocate for laissez-faire not for industry, and when industry benefitted from policies opposed to laissez-faire, such as the Tariff, Sumner was their enemy. The point here is obvious, but often lost in Progressive-Era historiography – not all departures from laissez-faire will serve the cause of progressive reform, indeed, they can work to entrench the status-quo that reform seeks to change.

As best I can tell, virtually no one consistently described himself (or herself) as a "social

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Spencer's anti-clerical and anti-deistic stances were quite controversial in American colleges, which were institutionally Christian, and where clerics taught Political Economy. This was especially true at conservative Yale, where Sumner's introduction into the curriculum of Spencer's *Study of Sociology* was opposed by the administration, and which Sumner fought for on grounds of academic freedom (see Barber 1988: 147-51).

[29] See Bannister, Roger. 1973. "William Graham Sumner's Social Darwinism: A Reconsideration" *HOPE* 4: 89-109.

[30] The question of whether legislation or collective bargaining would better advance the interests of labor divided the progressives from organized labor. Some progressives close to organized labor, such as John R. Commons, were ambivalent. Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor, came to believe that organized labor would do better with collective bargaining, and became an adversary rather than ally of the progressive economists who advocated statutory approaches to labor reform. After their falling out, Gompers derisively referred to the economists' AALL, as the American Association for the Assassination of Labor.

Darwinian" or as a "social Darwinist." There certainly were no schools of social Darwinism. The term seems to have begun life as an epithet, first used by progressive reformers, and then popularized by sympathetic historians who later chronicled their ideas. (Thus is Hofstadter's book is concerned more with the progressive critics of social Darwinism, than with its proponents).

For our purposes, what matters is that the label of "social Darwinism" is really a misnomer, and also something of a red herring. The progressive critics of laissez-faire did not object to Darwin nor to the use of biological ideas in social science. On the contrary, they themselves used Darwinian (and other biological) ideas in their social science, and, arguably, did so more frequently and more intensively than did the scholars they called social Darwinians. Nor did the progressives argue that Darwin was being misappropriated – wrongly using Darwin to defend, say, laissez faire (when, by hypothesis, Darwin would not). What the progressives objected to was laissez-faire itself.

**B. Darwinism**

Progressives opposed laissez faire, but they had no problem with Darwin. Along with many other intellectuals, they mined Darwinian ideas for their various purposes. Darwinism could appeal to a wide range of social scientists because the Darwinism of a century ago was so protean – it was able to accommodate all manner of ideologies. Whether Darwin was influential because of what he said, or in spite of what he said, is a difficult problem in intellectual history, but it is clear that there was something in Darwin for nearly everyone.[31] As historian Leslie Jones puts it: "Individualism and socialism, militarism and pacifism, pro-natalism and neo-Malthusianism, organised religion and agnosticism, all have had their Darwinian exegetes" (Jones 1998). Faithful to Darwin or not, a great range of Progressive-Era social scientists, not least the progressives, routinely worked in a recognizably Darwinian idiom.

Darwinism has never been more influential than it is today, over 140 years since Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwin had worked out his theories twenty years earlier, but, an establishment figure, he feared his social standing would not withstand publication of

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[31] Historian Morse Peckham put the question this way: "Is it true that what Darwin said had very little impact, but that what people thought he said, that is, what they already believed and believed to have been confirmed by Darwin, had enormous impact?" (1959: 40). This question, and related questions, such as "was Darwin a social Darwinist," are still vital and contentious issues in the Darwin industry.

them. Darwin also understood the importance of priority to scientific reputation, however. Upon reading a paper by Alfred Russel Wallace, a then obscure naturalist, that independently proposed the theory of evolution by natural selection, Darwin was moved to hasty publication – his introduction calls *On the Origin of Species* an "Abstract." Darwin orchestrated, without Wallace's knowledge, the unveiling of both men's work at the same meeting (Raby 2001). While Wallace is sometimes granted co-discover credit, it is Darwinism not Wallacism that inspires and exercises contemporary scholars.

Darwin and Darwinism start with only two fundamental premises. First, heritable changes occur randomly in individual organisms. Second, some of these changes offer individuals greater fitness than their peers, that is, offer, via natural selection, a greater chance of surviving and reproducing. If both premises are true, the population to which the individuals belong will *necessarily* evolve, that is, the population will come to have a greater proportion of fitter (with respect to a given environment) traits. Darwin never knew what changed or how it was inherited or what caused its changes – he is said to have died with Gregor Mendel's genetics reprint in his library, with the pages still uncut. Modern Darwinians know that phenotypes (organisms and their behaviors) are influenced by their genes (collectively, the genotype), and that it is the genotype that changes – via genetic mutation and recombination from sexual reproduction.[32]

But modern Darwinism is the product of the evolutionary synthesis begun in the 1930s and 1940s, wherein natural selection was joined to genetics (Mayr cite). Progressive-Era biology had no established consensus on matters that are (mostly) settled today: in particular, Darwinism (and Darwin himself) was ambiguous on (1) whether the individual or the collective is the unit of selection, (2) whether environment can affect heredity, and (3) whether fitness consists solely in survival and reproduction. These basic ambiguities made Progressive-Era Darwinism quite accommodating. In particular, there was ample room for a reform Darwinism, one that took the collective (race or nation) as the unit of selection, that assumed the environment could affect heredity – so that improving bad homes could also improve bad blood – and that saw fitness as something racial, something more than (and sometimes opposed to) brute reproductive success.

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Biological theorizing about human variation (of race, of sex, of social status) had a long history

[32] The preceding two paragraphs borrow from Leonard 2003b.

in the 19th century: scientific racism, for example, precedes the modern flowering of eugenic thought c. 1890 by decades. But with the advent of the ethically and empirically minded social sciences of the Progressive Era (and with the advent of social welfare legislation), biological views of human variation were deployed in the new social scientific task of determining the root causes of social and economic pathologies – criminalism, alcoholism, poverty, prostitution, and the like (Stepan 1986). Darwinian views of human variation proved to be a big tent; Darwin was appealed to by those with quite different, sometimes even opposed views of (1) what human traits could be inherited, (2) the unit of selection, individual or collective, (3) who should do the selecting, nature or state, (4) the nature of fitness (and whether social position accurately measures it), and (5) the nature of competition. Let us take each in turn.

**C. Nature or nurture: what human traits can be inherited?**

No eugenicists doubted that social and economic pathologies were the product of heredity. The question was whether heredity could be influenced by environmental factors. Reformers especially, well into the 1930s, emphasized environmental effects upon heredity, in the Lamarckian tradition.[33] They believed that characteristics parents acquired during a lifetime could be transmitted to progeny. The drinking of an alcoholic father could, for example, poison his "germ plasm," so that his offspring inherited the affliction. It's not that bad habits acquired during a lifetime are imitated by progeny, but that bad habits are (genetically, to speak anachronistically) inherited by progeny. A Lamarckian eugenics was thus possible: improvement of bad homes could also improve bad blood. For a time "euthenics" was briefly in use as a neo-Lamarckian term of art describing eugenic improvement achieved by environmental means.[34]

Some of the earliest eugenics tracts were Lamarckian in orientation. Richard Dugdale's

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[33] Newfield, editor the late 1930s and early 1940s of *Eugenics Review*, gave the socialist Richard Titmuss, a eugenicist with environmental leanings, the following advice with respect to more conservative members of the British Eugenics Society: "If you want to put over any revolutionary idea you please, all you have to do is call it eugenics" (Oakley 1991: 180).

[34] "Euthenics" appears to have been coined by Ellen H. (Swallow) Richards, the author of *Euthenics: The Science of Controllable Environment, A Plea for Better Living Conditions as a First Step toward Higher Human Efficiency*, and a founder of Home Economics, the term that eventually won out over Richard's preferred label of Human Ecology.

(1877) famous *The Jukes,* considered the family history of a "degenerate" Anglo-Saxon clan, and argued that the clan's misfortune was, in part, the product of their degraded environment. The Lamarckians were opposed by the so-called neo-Darwinians, who argued that human heredity was unaffected by environment.[35] And importantly, Darwin himself was, upon occasion, Lamarckian in his views, especially in *The Descent of Man*. "Habits . . . followed during many generations," wrote Darwin, "probably tend to be inherited." (Degler 1991: 352, n 29). And thus could Lamarackians find some comfort in Darwin – nurture could affect nature.

German biologist August Weismann's watershed finding in 1889 – that mice with their tails cut off do not bear short-tailed progeny – was widely seen as a refutation of Lamarckism. Some neo-Darwinian eugenicists read Weismann's result as a crucial experiment, conclusive proof that nature trumped nurture, that the germ plasm of bad heredity was beyond the reach of environmental reform. Other eugenicists were more moderate. Leonard Darwin, a leader of English eugenics for some years, saw eugenics not as a substitute for social improvement, but as a means of defining the useful limits of environmental social reform (Searle 1976: 47-48).

Karl Pearson, and his Galton Laboratory colleagues were agnostic in principle but hereditarian in practice: "We have placed our money on environment,' said Pearson, when Heredity wins in a canter" (ibid).[36] When in 1909, Pearson published a manifesto, offering "bricks for the foundation" of eugenic science, he announced that "the relative weight of nature and nurture must not a priori be assumed but must be scientifically measured; and thus far our experience is that nature dominates nurture, that inheritance is more vital than environment. . . . there exists no demonstrable inheritance of acquired characters. Environment modifies the bodily character of the existing generation, but does not modify the germ plasms from which the next generation springs . . ." (1909: 19-20).

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[35] Environmental factors can clearly affect phentoypes, as with malnutrition or a broken bone. The question with respect to heredity is whether such changes are transmitted to the genotype. Neo-Darwinians argue that environmental changes cannot affect inheritance, barring an environmentally caused change in the genotype, as might be caused, for example, by radiation.

[36] When Edith Elderton's research at the Galton Laboratory claimed that the progeny of alcoholic parents did not inherit their parents' affliction, it was vigorously contested by temperance advocates, such as Alfred Marshall, and by Lamarckian eugenicists, like John Maynard Keynes (Childs 2001: 25).

Progressive Lamarckians, like Lester Ward, an American sociologist who trained as a paleontologist, took Weismann's results badly. Ward (1891) thought that if Weismann were right – if acquired characteristics cannot be transmitted to progeny – then reform would be ineffectual. Environmental improvement could be, at best, a temporary palliative, but it could not affect stock, which he saw as the source of economic and social pathology. Thus did Ward find himself supporting Herbert Spencer – a man whose individualism and laissez-faire economics Ward, like other progressives, loathed – because it was Spencer who led the Lamarckian reply to Weismann's neo-Darwinism.

Other eugenic reformers, such as Wallace and American economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman were more sanguine than Ward. They perceived that marriage and mating were important for eugenics, and that social reform influencing marriage could therefore have beneficial eugenic effects. The humane Wallace was a reformer but also a stout defender of neo-Darwinian inheritance. Wallace believed that English society was increasingly dysgenic, but he rejected compulsory eugenics as elitist and barbarous, arguing that eugenic ends could better be realized by a Millian expansion of women's education and their political and economic freedom, which would reduce women's economic dependency and thereby reduce the incentive for women to make dysgenic marriages (Leonard 2004).[37]

Gilman's *sui generis* feminist eugenics, what she called "Humaniculture," envisions women as the enlightened society's eugenic agents. Women have a two-fold role: they select fitter men for marriage and, and they collectively supervise the raising of fitter children. Women select fitter mates with the help of state certification of men's biological fitness; males are required to be eugenically certified, so that women have good information when selecting a mate, and are less likely to make a dysgenic match. Gilman also envisioned that all parenting would be given over to a cadre of professionally trained women, what she called "social parentage."[38] On this view, social reform could

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[37] "Progress is still possible, nay, is certain," said Wallace, "by . . . that mode of selection which will inevitably come into action through the ever-increasing freedom, joined with the higher education of women" (1892: 156). Wallace envisioned selection as "effected through the agency of female choice in marriage" (1890: 335), leaving "the improvement of the race to the cultivated minds and pure instincts of the Woman of the Future," (1890: 337). Taken from Leonard 2004.

[38] These ideas are expressed most compactly in Gilman (1900). "Humaniculture" echoes earlier terminology for eugenics, such as "stirpiculture" and "viriculture." Gilman was a Lamarckian

realize eugenics ends, and do so without Lamarckism.

Modern biology is neo-Darwinian. Progressive-Era Darwinism could, in contrast, still accommodate a Lamarckian view of inheritance, which offered support to the reform variant of eugenics. But recall that Herbert Spencer, apostle of laissez-faire, was also a Lamarckian, a proponent of natural selection but a vigorous disputant of Weismann and the neo-Darwinians. And reformers like Wallace and Pearson, socialists both, were neo-Darwinian with respect to inheritance. So, though many reformers were Lamarckians, not all Lamarckians were reformers and nor did all neo-Darwinians oppose reform. The points are two: (1) the nature versus nurture dichotomy does not map isomorphically upon the conservative versus reform dichotomy, such as they are, and (2) whatever one's commitments, he or she could find something in Progressive-Era Darwinism.

**D. Unit of selection: individual or group?**

Among those who applied biological ideas to social problems, one's stance on the unit of selection better predicted one's view toward social reform. Those who thought in terms of collectives or groups (Ward, Wallace, Pearson) were better disposed to reform than were the individualists.[39] And, since eugenics is the species of reform concerned with the collective called race, eugenics ought to have appealed more to collectivists than to individualists.[40]

Ernst Mayr, dean of American evolutionary biology, has argued that "[F]or most evolutionists, from Darwin on, the individual as a whole, is the principal target of selection . . . ." (1986: 358). The qualifiers "most" and "principal" are important, for Darwin himself allowed, in some places, that human

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eugenicist; thus could better (social) parenting improve the genetic prospects of children born to the unfit. Taken from Leonard 2004.

[39] A 1914 committee of the American Breeders Association said: "Society must look upon germ-plasm as belonging to society and not solely to the individual who carries it" (Laughlin 1014: 16). In 1970, Garret Hardin editorialized in *Science* – in the same year he published the "Tragedy of the Commons"! – that "'My' child's germ plasm is not *mine*; it is really only part of the community store. I was merely the temporary custodian of it" (Chase 1977: 127).

[40] Sidney Webb, an enthusiastic eugenicist, understood this: "No consistent eugenicist can be a 'Laisser Faire 'individualist unless he throws up the game in despair. He must interfere, interfere, interfere!"(Webb 1910 –11: 237). Of course, intellectual inconsistency did not stop many professed individualists from endorsing state control of human breeding.

beings, whom he regarded as subject to natural selection, would assist other members of the group in ways that were altruistic – that is, in ways that did not promote (and may even adversely affect) their individual chances of survival and reproduction. Darwin referred to human sympathy for the less fortunate as "the noblest part of our nature" (*Origin*: 206). [41] But with respect to other animals, though Darwin allowed that species compete with one another to some extent, he also believed that competition among individuals within a species was more intensive and more important for evolution by natural selection.

The question of whether individuals or groups compete clearly mattered for those who would use Darwinian ideas about natural competition to explain economic competition (see below). Reformers employing Darwinian ideas could not avoid competition, but they could avert to group rather than individual competition and still be plausibly Darwinian. Most reformers, and certainly the eugenicists among them, saw races and economic classes (labor and capital) as the competing groups relevant for analysis. Karl Pearson, for example, regarded the English race as an "organized whole;" the idea that races (read: nations) compete is what makes Pearson a *national* socialist (1905: 46). We can represent the views of inheritance and the views of the unit of selection, as below:

| | **Inheritance** | |
|---|---|---|
| | *Lamarckian* | *Neo-Darwinian* |
| *Individual* | H. Spencer | A. Weismann<br>Social Darwinians |
| **Unit of selection** | | |
| *Collective* | L. Ward | K. Pearson, A. Wallace. |

All of these quite disparate thinkers made recourse to Darwin, and, what is more, they did so plausibly enough. Without even considering other ambiguities in Progressive-Era Darwinism – the questions of who shall select the fittest, what fitness entails, and what competition entails – there is, with only two dimensions, a heterogeneity of views that is badly served by the good-bad, progressive-conservative

[41] Modern Darwinism conceives of altruism from the gene's eye view: an individual may sacrifice himself if it increases the likelihood (by saving kin, those carrying a fraction of the same genes) of the genes surviving, albeit it in different phenotypic hosts.

dichotomies of Progressive-Era historiography.

**E. Who should select the fittest: nature or the state?**

Spencer's coinage, "survival of the fittest" is ordinarily associated with laissez-faire, and Darwinian defenses of laissez-faire. But it is a mistake to conflate social Darwinism with selectionist sentiment. The progressive opponents of laissez-faire were themselves advocates of survival of the fittest. They agreed with the conservatives who argued that the racial stock was deteriorating. What distinguished the reform Darwinism of progressives from social Darwinism is the progressive belief that the state, as guided by expert science, could do better than "nature" in the essential Darwinian task of weeding out the unfit.

Laissez-faire theorists who also believed in race degeneration could only argue that ordinary social reform was impeding natural selection. Let nature do its job by reducing dysgenic social reform. The progressive response was to argue that natural selection had ceased to function under industrial capitalism: the trope was "survival of the unfittest," a phrase that seems to have originated with economics writer W.R. Greg (1868). Thus must the state provide what nature no longer does.[42] Many progressives shared the conviction, as Herbert Croly of the *New Republic* put it, that artificial selection could do better than natural selection, that the state had a responsibility to "interfere on behalf of the really fittest" (1909: 190-91).

**F. Who are the fittest and does social position measure biological fitness?**

Croly required the adjective "really" because, on the Darwinian account, the fittest are those Croly wished to reduce, those who survive to reproduce. "Survival of the unfittest" is a contradiction in Darwinian terms. When the race-suicide theorists proposed that persons of "inferior" stock out-competed their biological betters, they stood Darwinism on its head. Many eugenicists thus regarded fitness as a moral or racial attribute, something distinct from (and prior to) brute survival. Indeed, many race-suicide accounts argued that the better class of person, by virtue of racial refinement, refused to

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[42] Lester Ward again provides an illustration. Ward made his career by attacking Social Darwinism. The state of the human race is "deplorable", argues Ward, but science enables the state to do what nature no longer can. "Are we to accept that modern scientific fatalism known as *laissez faire*," asks Ward. No. Since "[t]he end and aim of the eugenists cannot be reproached," Ward concludes, "it is therefore a question of method rather than principle" (1913: 746-47). From Leonard 2003a.

have an adequate number of offspring, allowing the inferior races to outbreed them. Not surprisingly, the races said to be biologically fitter mapped rather well onto traditional racial hierarchies.

Once fitness was defined as something different from reproductive success, the door was open to define fitness with respect to all manner of putative biological hierarchies. And, indeed, the lower races and the inferior sex found themselves assigned to inferiority, whatever their relative fecundity. Even so, not all eugenics, even the conservative variant, was apologized for all aspects of the established social order

The founder of modern eugenics, Francis Galton, believed that talent (especially genius) ran in upper-crust families, so that social rank could proxy for biological fitness. But Galton wasn't a mere partisan of the upper classes; he invoked a kind of selection mechanism in defense of this view, arguing "there can be no doubt but that the upper classes of a nation like our own, which are largely and continually recruited by selection from below, are by far the most productive of natural ability. The lower classes are, in truth, the 'residuum'" (Galton 1869: 86-87).

Other eugenicists in fact, and not all of them reformers, were inclined to view the aristocracy with skepticism, in part because aristocratic privilege was seen as selection-inhibiting, thus promoting dysgenic outcomes. Darwin himself warned of the dysgenic effects of primogeniture in *Descent*, saying that it promoted the survival of feeble-minded older sons (Soloway 1990: 74). W.R. Greg, an important early popularizer of eugenics in England indicted the aristocratic rich along with the idle paupers. Greg worried that those with inherited wealth would "hand down their vapid incapacities to numerous offspring" (1868: 359). "The *élite* lots in life," Greg said of aristocrats, "do not fall to the *élite* of the race or the community" (ibid). Greg saw class privilege as dysgenic.

**G. Competing senses of the term "competition"**

A final ambiguity of Progressive-Era Darwinism concerns what is meant by "competition," and the extent to which competition in nature is an appropriate metaphor for economic competition. Darwin, who insisted upon the descent of man from the "lower" orders of animals – was sometimes read as implying that, thereby, human behavior is animalistic, brutish. On this reading, competition among human beings is akin to competition among animals in nature: the key phrases here are "survival

of the fittest" in "the struggle for existence."[43] Both phrases clearly invoked a vision of competition as nature red-in-tooth-and-claw, an image which was mapped onto the economic competition of the new, raw industrial capitalism. On this account, economic competition is violent, uncooperative and destructive – nature being seen as a threat, something terrifying to be overcome.

The are two difficulties here. The first is that natural selection can select for cooperative behavior – it in no way entails tooth-and-claw conflict.[44] That cooperative behavior can be adaptive is a commonplace of contemporary evolution biology, and it was also known to Progressive-Era intellectuals. Petr Kropotkin, a Russian anarchist, made this very argument in his *Mutual Aid* (1902), where he set out to show how cooperative behavior could be the product of Darwinian evolution, instancing the social insects and many other examples of cooperation in nature. Kropotkin did not reject Darwin; on the contrary, he found in Darwin's natural selection cooperation rather than competition of the tooth-and-claw variety.

The second difficulty is that some Progressive-Era economists, particularly those who subscribed to both marginal utility theory and marginal productivity theories, saw economic competition not as destructive conflict, but as a kind of fair play. John Bates Clark, for example, meant by "competition" the refereed rivalry among firms to serve consumers. Clark saw competition as productive and technologically innovative, something to be promoted, whereas progressives saw competition as destructive.[45] In Clark's account, predatory economic behavior – such as predatory pricing or exclusive contracting by monopolists – is *anti*-competitive, a departure from fair play and a justification for regulatory intervention.

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[43] "Survival of the fittest" is Spencer's phrase; and Darwin makes use of it only in the fifth edition of *Origin*. "The struggle for existence" is due to Malthus.

[44] Thus is Darwin's natural selection (potentially) progressive where Malthus's population dynamics are not. Malthus's doctrine, after all, is a theory of why things never change, and natural selection is a theory of why things continually change – evolution. Indeed, in the theory of natural selection, it is (in part) the pressure of population upon resources that causes organic variation, and potential adaptive improvement, something that Malthus's theory precludes. Where Malthus's doctrine is necessarily pessimistic, natural selection is potentially optimistic.

[45] In fact, the term "competition" had many different and sometimes conflicting meaning in the Progressive Era. Clark himself used the term in at least four different ways (Leonard 2003c: 539-40).

These competing conceptions of economic competition are virtually opposed: Clark's neoclassical view regards competition as fair play, and departures from it are to be policed, whereas the progressives regarded competition as amoral (and perhaps immoral) – nature red in tooth and claw – and departures from it as something to be promoted.

Progressive-Era firms did not seek or lobby for competition in Clark's sense. To the contrary, industrial firms did all they could to undermine Clarkian competition: they combined in the hope of acquiring monopoly pricing power; they employed (what antitrust law still calls) anti-competitive practices such as predation and exclusion; and they used political influence to promote and sustain the high tariff that protected them from import competition.

**6. Conclusion**

Darwinism had a profound effect upon the professionalizing social sciences that greatly influenced the reform legislation that is the hallmark of Progressive Era. But Progressive-Era Darwinism was so protean and malleable that it influenced economists and other social scientists in quite different ways, as the example of eugenics suggests.

The heterogeneity of the "Darwinism" that characterizes Progressive-Era thought arises, I have argued, from the big-tent ambiguity of Progressive-Era Darwinism, which could plausibly accommodate quite different, sometimes even opposed views of (1) what human traits could be inherited (2) the unit of selection, individual or collective, (3) who should do the selecting, nature or state, (4) the nature of fitness, and whether social position accurately measures it, and (5) the nature of competition.

Ironically, the ambiguity of Progressive-Era Darwinism, which allowed economists and other social scientists to bend Darwin to their doctrines, has also provided cover for a Progressive-Era historiography – with its Whiggish dichotomy of good forward-looking progressives, and bad backward-looking conservatives – that is ill-equipped to make sense of the quite heterogeneous ways in which biological thought informed Progressive-Era social science.

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