

Expertise in Democracy:  
The Dilemma of Economic Reform in the Progressive Era

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**Abstract**

The Progressive Era economic reformers we call the progressives permanently changed the relationship of the American state to the economy. In blueprinting and beginning construction of the welfare state, the progressives faced two foundational tensions. The first tension concerned government's dual role as both instrument and object of reform. The progressives placed their fondest hopes for economic reform in a government they also judged inadequate (absent political reform) to the task. The second, related tension concerned the consequences of progressive political reform for democracy: the expert-led administrative state the progressives imagined was at odds with other progressive goals for expanding and promoting democracy. This paper explores both tensions by considering Progressive Era reformers on both economic reform and political reform during their remarkably successful campaign to erect the welfare state and create demand for economic expertise.

## 1. Introduction: the paradox of democratic elitism

The Progressive Era economic reformers we call the progressives permanently changed the relationship of the American state to the economy. In blueprinting and beginning construction of a more expansive government role in the economy, however, the progressives faced two foundational tensions.

The first tension concerned government's dual role as both instrument and object of reform. As partisans of expertise, the progressives believed that the improvement of society, economy and humanity would be designed and superintended by economists and other scientific experts. And, as partisans of the state, the progressives believed that this expertise should be provided by government. But the progressives' impulse to use government as the agency of improvement was in tension with their view that American government, and the party system, were, at all levels, ineffectual, corrupt and inefficiently decentralized. Before government could remedy the disorder, inefficiency and injustice progressives saw in the Gilded Age economy, it would be necessary to remedy the disorder, inefficiency and injustice they saw in Gilded Age government and politics. The first tension, then, was that the progressives placed their fondest hopes for economic reform in a government they also judged inadequate (absent political reform) to the task of economic reform.

The second, related tension concerned the consequences of progressive political reform for democracy. Progressives advocated for a modern administrative state, one that would subordinate party bosses and the patronage system to expert advisors and a professional civil service. 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). The good government economic reformers imagined – social control by scientific experts -- was thus in tension with the goals of other leading progressives, such as Jane Addams, who sought to expand and promote popular democracy. "The cure for the ills of democracy," Addams wrote, "is more democracy" (*Democracy and Social Ethics*, 1902: 10-11).

This paper explores the tensions of social scientific expertise in democracy during its formative years by interrogating the ideas of the first economic experts – the Progressive Era social scientists who created demand for social scientific expertise and then provided it. Was expert social science seen to protect democracy or to undermine it? Should experts lead or only serve the public? Did economic reform, for example, protect democracy by reigning in industrialists seen to have dangerously outsized influence in politics? Or did economic reform instead undermine democracy by, for example, installing technocrats and investing them with state powers largely beyond the reach of democratic oversight? Or both? And was science to be regarded as an elite enterprise, accessible only a priesthood of the scientifically trained, or were ordinary people educable, capable of understanding the increasingly complex choices before policy makers sufficient to oversee them?

## **2. A revolution so rapid, so extensive, so complete**

The last one-third of the nineteenth century witnessed truly spectacular changes in American economic life. Following the Civil War, the United States industrialized on a revolutionary scale; the ensuing growth in productivity, in output, and in wealth was unprecedented in human history. Industrialization coincided with the development of a transportation and communication infrastructure; railroad and telegraph networks both measured and fostered the new national scope of American markets. The transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy gave rise to a set of profound social dislocations, among them “urbanization,” a rubric that characterizes the effects of the migration from farm to factory and the explosive growth in American cities. Urban workers, particularly those residing in immigrant slums, faced substandard housing, poor public health, and unemployment, especially during the economic depressions of the 1890s.

Growth in labor demand was met, in part, by immigration to America on a large scale, which introduced polyglot peoples with disparate cultural and religious traditions. Fully 60% of Chicagoans in 1889 were foreign-born. By 1910, twenty-two percent of the U.S. labor force was foreign-born. Coincident with industrialization, nationalization, urbanization, and immigration were the 1880s rise of labor unions (craft and mass) and the 1890s consolidation of industry into pools and trusts. The concentration of labor and capital intensified the recurrent and sometimes

violent labor conflict, for which names like Haymarket, Homestead, and Pullman still serve as synecdoches.

Historian Thomas Haskell characterizes the economic transformation of this period as “the most profound and rapid alternation in the material conditions of life that human society has ever experienced” (1977: 1). Importantly, those who lived through the time also recognized its revolutionary aspects. John Dewey marveled in 1899 “one can hardly believe there has been a revolution in all history so rapid, so extensive, so complete” (in Ross 1991: 148). The era also witnessed intellectual and political transformations as well – progressive ideas, some of which represented a real break with the past, came to dominate public discourse, and eventually led to the reform legislation that we today recognize as the foundation stones of the welfare state. (Eisenach cite).

### **3. The rapid rise of academic social science**

The intellectual transformation of the Progressive Era, with its newly prominent ideas about the role of national government in the economy, owed much to the influence of intellectuals and reformers who had only recently established their *bona fides* as social scientists, this by fomenting and benefiting from another extraordinary transformation, the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century rise of the American research university. Encouraged and led by educator/entrepreneurs such as Johns Hopkins’ Daniel Coit Gilman, political economy became an academic discipline. This change in the locus of economic knowledge production brought with it a change in the status of economics. American political economists had long opined on economic affairs, of course. But the institutionalization of economics as an academic discipline, and the new orientation of American colleges toward science and research, made possible the novel idea of economic expertise – the notion that professional economic knowledge was distinguishable from and epistemically superior to amateur economic opinion.<sup>1</sup>

The Progressive Era change in the status of economists -- from amateurs to professionals, from public intellectuals to expert advisors – did not happen overnight. But American

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<sup>1</sup> This section is heavily indebted to Parrish (1967).

economics, all but non-existent as a field of academic inquiry before 1870, and merely nascent by 1880, was, by the turn of the century, established in the new university order.<sup>2</sup>

The wealth generated by the vertiginous ascent of industrial capitalism created both the industrial fortunes which built the new research universities, and a rapidly growing middle class with the desire and means to pay for higher education (Parrish 1967: 8). Cornell (1868), Johns Hopkins (1876), Clark (1889), Stanford (1891), Chicago (1891), all built from scratch, threw off the cleric-run classics curriculum of American college instruction, adopted the investigatory spirit and methods of the modern German universities, and offered “practical” courses, notably political economy, which were often taught by the Young Turks who had founded the American Economic Association in 1885. The new universities’ intellectual example, and also their competition, induced the old-line colleges to catch up.

In 1870, college courses in Latin outnumbered courses in political economy 7:1. In 1880 the ratio had actually increased, to 10:1. By 1890, however, the ratio decreased to 3:1, and by 1900 it was down to 2:1 (Parrish 1967: 9). At leading schools in 1900, there was parity. Harvard’s Charles Dunbar estimated in 1891 that, at the leading universities, the hours of weekly university instruction in economics had increased six- or seven-fold in the since 1876. (“The Academic Study of Political Economy”, QJE, July, p. 400). By 1912, only English had more undergraduate majors than Economics at Yale (Parrish 1967: 10).<sup>3</sup>

This rapid growth in academic social science carried with it complementary forms of professionalization – the development of decent library resources, graduate instruction and (eventually) the granting of PhDs, the founding of professional associations, and the founding of scholarly journals. The older generation of political economists, men such as Dunbar, had very

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<sup>2</sup> Before the first centennial of the American republic, political economy was largely practiced outside the colleges. As Jürg Neihans (1990) remind us, Europe was not altogether different in this regard. Richard Cantillon was a banker. David Hume was a philosopher who made his living as an essayist and librarian. Francois Quesnay was a court physician. When Robert Malthus became famous, he was a parson. David Ricardo brokered stocks before joining Parliament. Karl Marx was a journalist and agitator. John Stuart Mill worked for the East India Company.

<sup>3</sup> The course of American political economy’s establishment as an academic discipline is usefully tracked by the increasing currency of its new name. “Economics” is exceedingly rare in university catalogues and other literature in 1870s; “political economy” predominates into 1890s. But by 1900, “economics” has displaced the older term altogether (See Parrish 1967).

little specialized training, rarely more than a single undergraduate course taught as an adjunct to moral philosophy, and they published as public intellectuals, writing for lay audiences in the newspapers and other periodicals. The new economists had graduate training and (increasingly) PhDs, taught graduate students, and increasingly wrote for one another, publishing in the new scholarly journals they founded and edited.<sup>4</sup>

The 1880-1900 revolution in American higher education benefitted no group as much as the social scientists (Coats 19xx: p. 435). American social *science* simply did not exist at the time of the Civil War.<sup>5</sup> By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, social science, most especially economics, had established itself as an academic discipline. Political influence was somewhat later in arriving – it awaited the beginnings of the welfare state. But when governments did undertake the investigation and reform so characteristic of the Progressive Era, they turned to the new experts – academic economists were hired as expert policy counselors and expert civil servants – thereby enlarging and lending additional authority and prestige to the new idea of economic expertise.

### **3. Laissez-faire as a barrier to expert social science**

The various social and economic upheavals that attended the extraordinary Gilded Age and Progressive Era rise of industrial capitalism made it increasingly difficult for political economy to preach the doctrines of free markets, which the progressives, who saw disorder, inefficiency and unfairness all around them, disparaged as do-nothingism. The idea of a beneficial, self-regulating order arising from voluntary market exchange was dismissed by economic reformers as so much laissez-faire dogma, a doctrine perhaps suitable for Adam

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<sup>4</sup> The *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (Harvard, 1885); *Political Science Quarterly* (Columbia 1886), *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Pennsylvania, 1890); *Journal of Political Economy* (Chicago, 1891); the JHU journal, the Wisconsin journal.

<sup>5</sup> Haskell: “When the American Social Science Association was founded in 1865, there were no specialized professional social scientists in this country. . .”, There were, of course, scholars and laymen engaged in social inquiry, but Haskell argues that their inquiry was not *professional*, in the sense that it was “not decisively oriented to any ongoing, disciplined community of inquiry” (cite).

Smith's day, but made obsolete by the new era of industrial capitalism, which featured not only new organizational forms – trusts, pools and large labor unions – but a rapidly increasing economic and social interdependence wrought by the furious pace of growth-induced specialization. Edward A. Ross, born on a frontier Iowa farm, characterized the new century's economic life:

“Nowadays the water main is my well, the trolley car my carriage, the banker's safe my old stocking, the policeman's billy my fist . . . I rely on others to look after my drains, invest my savings, nurse my sick and teach my children. I let the meat trust butcher my pig, the oil trust mould my candles, the sugar trust boil my sorghum, the coal trust chop my wood, the barb wire company split my rails.” (1907 *Sin and Society*, p. 3).

In the depression of the 1890s, the unemployment rate rose above 18 percent. Moreover, the traditional remedy for unemployment – the safety valve of “unlimited” land in the American west – was seen as no longer efficacious: the “closing” of the American frontier was announced coincident with the 1890 Census (Fogel 2000, p. 115). In the 1890s, a new economic order seemed to require a new economics, which lent credibility, or at least opportunity, to the reform economists who had one on offer.

Of course, much depended upon the nature of that new economics, not least its scientific credentials. In the early years after its founding, the AEA wrestled with the tension between its social activism (what Mary Furner 1975 called advocacy) and its desire to be scientific and professional (what Furner called objectivity).<sup>6</sup> The economists' association began life as an organization of reform – a leading group in the progressive assault upon laissez-faire – but also as a vehicle of professionalization (Haskell 1977: 183). Dorothy Ross characterizes the progressive economists' dilemma as a “double ideological freight” – “the reformist concern of the discipline and the vocational ambition of their profession” (1991: 279). Too much advocacy, of the sort that led the association to purge Richard T. Ely in 1892, risked undermining the scientific *bona fides* crucial to professionalization and influence. But too much objectivity, by

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<sup>6</sup> Furner 1975, Ross 1991, Haskell 1977, Church 1974.

the very same token, risked marginalizing the association, threatening influence via scholarly irrelevance.<sup>7</sup>

Too much advocacy also risked undermining professional goals by threatening the economists' still small beachhead in the academy, as was learned by Ely at Wisconsin, Ross at Stanford, and Edward Bemis at Chicago (among others), all of whom were persecuted by plutocratic University trustees unhappy with public utterances deemed too "socialistic" or otherwise unfriendly to the economic interests of the respective university's benefactors. But, if the disciplinary threat of those who ran the new universities made "socialistic" politics a threat to the hopes for professionalizing economics, so too did espousal of old school laissez-faire doctrine. It was not merely that the transformed economic conditions of the 1890s seemed to demand new economics; the professionalizing economists had already seen that laissez-faire dogma (of the sort that characterized mid-19<sup>th</sup> century American political economy) was a non-starter as a professionalizing strategy. After all, as historian Louis Menand put it, "the expertise required to repeat, in every situation, 'let the Market decide' (or, as Sumner liked to say, 'Root, hog or die') is not great" (p. 302).<sup>8</sup>

Leading American economists did not need to embrace "socialism" to see the point: laissez-faire was an impediment to the professionalization of economics. Consider the address of Francis Amasa Walker, "The recent progress of political economy in the United States," given at the third annual meetings of the AEA. This paper has been much quoted for Walker's famous line that laissez-faire "was not made the test of economic orthodoxy, merely. It was used to decide whether a man were an economist at all" (cite). But Walker's point was not to erect a

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<sup>7</sup> Furner's (1975, 322) influential thesis on the tension between advocacy and objectivity sees it persisting for the first two decades of the AEA. Only circa 1905, "[w]ith professionalization, [does] objectivity gr[o]w more important as a scientific ideal and also as a practical necessity." Church (1974), in contrast, sees professionalization as the means that allowed the reform economists to pursue reform in the guise of objective science. Haskell's (1977) somewhat extraordinary reading treats the ideological pull of reform as minimal; confined chiefly to the person of Ely, and quickly overcome (by 1892) by the far stronger imperatives of professionalization.

<sup>8</sup> Menand continues: "which assumption offers a more promising basis for a field of inquiry: the assumption that societies develop according to underlying laws whose efficiency cannot be improved by public policy, or the assumption that societies['] . . . progress can be guided by scientific intelligence?" (p. 302).



straw man of the sort that Richard T. Ely employed when characterizing American economics before the arrival of the new, ethical economics retailed by the founders of the AEA. In fact, Walker's point was to distinguish "serious economists," who had always understood that laissez-faire was a merely a maxim, one always "carefully qualified" by exceptions, from the untrained epigones who made laissez-faire into a faith. Walker said of the latter group, "I don't think that I exaggerate when I say that, among those who deemed themselves the guardians of the true faith, it was considered far better that a man should know nothing about economic literature, and have no interest whatever in the subject, than that, with any amount of learning and any degree of honest purpose, he should have adopted views varying from the standard that was set up" (1889, cite).

Walker attacked the phony "guardians of truth" not for laissez-faire as such, but for arguing from the authority of dogma rather than the authority of economic science. He condemned laissez-faire when it was part of a catechism, while also insisting that serious investigation could, on case-by-case basis, recommend it. Indeed Walker pointedly accepted that laissez-faire was "a practical rule of wide range and high validity," where exceptions should be made "only upon clear grounds of urgent public interest" (cite). And, the burden of proof should rest was upon those who, like Walker himself, proposed to intervene.

Moreover, the removal of the barrier of dogmatic laissez-faire to "economic investigation and speculation," would greatly benefit economics as a discipline. Economics would have a crucial, ongoing scientific task – to determine when exceptions are to be admitted. And then, political economy ceases to be a finished work . . . political economy becomes something which never is, but is always to be, done; growing with the growing knowledge of the race, changing, as man, its subject-matter, changes; something which, in the nature of the case, must be the work, not of one mind but of many (cite).

Rising to his theme, Walker enthused, "In such a work who would not wish to join?" (cite). And, importantly, the new work unleashed "should at once heighten the popular interest in political economy, increase the number of its students, and intensify the instinct of union and cooperation" (cite).

Sometimes, "do nothing" was the correct policy, other times not. Walker's point was that economic science not economic dogma should decide. Economic science could adjudicate. The welfare state was coming, though in what form no one yet knew, and Walker saw that the

profession could benefit mightily if it could successfully create demand for its expertise in deciding which interventions conduced to the public interest and which did not.

#### **4. Social Control: the locus of economic expertise**

The idea that economists could advise upon the proper scope of state intervention in markets was rooted in a set of interlocking intellectual commitments: first, an extravagant, almost religious belief in the epistemic and moral authority of science, a belief that comprised their view that the still nascent sciences of society could explain and control the causes of economic ills. Even before economics was established as university discipline, disciplinary pioneers like John Bates Clark marveled at the power of applied scientific knowledge. In “The Scholar’s Duty to the State” (1878) Clark argued that economics’ systematic understanding of the causes of poverty was vastly more valuable than charity, which remained pre-scientific:

“The farmer who irrigates a number of acres may raise a crop. The chemist who discovers a means by which the alkali that now ruins the land may be converted into fertilizer, will do more than a million farmers. So the economist who can devise a means of removing the cause of extreme poverty, with the consequent ignorance and brutality, will do more than many charitable associations for the permanent benefit of the poor.”  
(in Recciuti 200x, p. 28)

In the Enlightenment tradition, progressives regarded scientific knowledge as both the driver and the guarantor of social progress.<sup>9</sup>

But science was, of its nature, an elite enterprise – Clark’s chemist possesses knowledge the farmer does not. If economic science were to be placed in the nation’s service (the Princeton University credo announced by Woodrow Wilson in 1896), it required the leadership of socially minded social scientists. This was a second foundational progressive commitment, that intellectuals should guide social and economic progress, a belief erected upon two subsidiary faiths, a faith in the disinterestedness and incorruptibility of experts, and a faith that expertise could not only serve the social good, but also identify it.

A third progressive commitment further reinforced the emergent problem of scientific expertise for democracy: the progressives believed in a powerful, centralized state, conceiving of national government as the best means for promoting the social good. In the progressive view, government was the necessary agency of expert-guided reform.

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<sup>9</sup> D. Ross “American Social Science and the Idea of Progress”.

This last commitment reflected one of the most striking intellectual changes of the American Progressive Era, one with far reaching consequences, -- the “assault on the idea of individualism itself” (Rodgers 1982, 124). American economic reformers departed from the deeply rooted Lockean sensibility of their classical liberal forebears, including that of their more proximate ancestors, the Gilded Age Mugwump liberals, who were also reformers, but stayed within the individualist tradition characteristic of American political culture since its founding.<sup>10</sup>

The progressive economists, like all educated people of their generation, were weaned upon Anglo-American individualism, with its natural rights-based foundation. But most became nationalists of one sort or another, a rejection of the individualist tradition caused by a powerful confluence of late-nineteenth-century intellectual influences: the German historical school’s view that the nation is an organism, something greater than the sum of its constituent individuals; the Protestant Social Gospel’s move from individual salvation to a collective project of bringing the Kingdom of heaven to earth; the liberating effects of Pragmatism, which seemed to license most any departure from previous absolutes, provided such departures proved useful; and the indigenous American tradition of human hierarchy, which posited a hierarchy not of individuals, but of groups, especially races.

The reformers’ organic priority of the nation or state or society<sup>11</sup> was perhaps best embodied in the Progressive Era’s catchphrase, “social control,” popularized by Edward A. Ross’s *Social Control* (1901), a book that was in print until 1932, and sold, Ross boasted, in the hundreds of thousands. “A survey of the foundations of order” (to quote the subtitle of the book), social control, for Ross, did not refer narrowly to state regulation of markets, but described a broader “system of control, [which], like the educational system, is charged . . . with the shaping of individuals” (Ross 1896, 521). Individuals were but “plastic lumps of human dough,” Ross (1901, 168) maintained, to be formed on the great “social kneading board.”

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<sup>10</sup> This and the next few paragraphs borrow from Leonard (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Ely, like many progressives with German training, conceived of the state not as the agent of society, but as coextensive with society itself. Ely referred to the state as the “great cooperative society.” Progressive terminology for the group varied, but progressives systematically rejected the liberal idea that the individual is prior to the group. “Whether ‘state,’ or ‘nation,’ or ‘society,’” Henry Carter Adams (1886, 16) wrote, “the fundamental thought is the same. The thing itself brought into view is an organic growth and not a mechanical arrangement.”

Ross had been deeply influenced by his mentor (and father-in-law), pioneering sociologist Lester Frank Ward, who belonged an earlier generation, and who brought to American social science two influential claims: (1) that human beings can scientifically direct the course of their history – i.e., progress requires purpose and direction -- and (2) that the nation, not the individual, is the proper unit of explanatory account. *The New Republic's* Walter Lippmann (1914, 266), in his influential *Drift and Mastery*, called the substitution of purpose for tradition “the profoundest change that has ever taken place in human history.”<sup>12</sup>

But note how Lippmann, writing on the eve of War in Europe, simply assumed what Ward had once had to argue – Ward’s (second) claim that purpose was *social*. Progress required more than purpose: the traditional American emphasis upon individual self-help, after all, was nothing if not purposeful. Progress now was seen to require *social* purpose. “Purposeful activity must henceforth be recognized as a proper function not only of the individual,” read Richard Hofstadter’s (1944, 64) gloss on Ward, “but of the whole society.”

But how would socially purposeful activity – what Ross called social control – be made operational? Even if there existed, as Ward had it, a “collective mind of society,” and even if the collective mind of society were knowable, who would be charged with reading it? And, having read the mind of society, by what authority and by what methods would its aims be realized?

The reform economists’ vague language of cooperation and Christian brotherhood, characteristic of the 1880s, gave way during the 1890s to a more concrete embrace of state compulsion. Most progressives involved in economic reform, including those like Florence Kelley, who originally preferred voluntary cooperation and moral suasion to legislation, came around to the idea that state compulsion was the best vehicle for promoting their vision of the collective good. By the 1890s, social control, in practice, meant state control.

##### **5. Sociocracy: to serve or lead the public interest?**

The progressives’ extravagant faith in the moral and epistemic authority of social science was matched only by their faith in their own effectiveness and objectivity, a mostly unquestioned

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<sup>12</sup> “We can no longer treat life as something that has trickled down to us,” Lippmann continued; “we have to deal with it deliberately, devise its social organization, alter its tools, formulate its method, educate and control it. In endless ways we put intention where custom has reigned. We break up routines, make decisions, choose our ends, select means” (267).

assumption that economic experts could and would act rationally in the public interest. Ward's sociocracy was thus not only scientific, it was also technocratic: if public administration could be separated from politics, then social scientists could administer public policy and realized progress in the form of more efficiency, greater order, and more fairness.

When Edward A. Ross famously described progressivism as “intelligent social engineering,” he was invoking the technocratic ideal of the government expert qua engineer. The social engineer works outside politics (in public administration), proceeds rationally and scientifically, and pursues only the public interest and not personal power or private gain (Ross 1907, 41).

The economic expert qua social engineer may have been an unrealistic vision, but it need not have been undemocratic, at least insofar as the expert merely served the public interest, rather than lead it. In practice, however, and like others at the forefront of economic reform, Ross was an elitist; he regarded the anti-democratic features of reform via social control not as a regrettable shortcoming, but as a positive benefit. This elitism did not characterize all progressive reformers drawn to scientific expertise. Ward, for example, was relatively egalitarian, if naïve; he imagined that sociocracy would eventually produce a legislature schooled in the latest social science, and that the electorate was scientifically educable.

But among the social scientists (like Ross) attracted to eugenics, there was, as among all eugenicists, an unabashed distrust of democracy (Kevles 1986: 76). As Ross put it: “removing control further away from the ordinary citizen and taxpayer is tantamount to giving the intelligent, far-sighted and public-spirited a longer lever to work with.”<sup>13</sup> The case for technocratic governance was likewise put baldly by Irving Fisher (1907: 20), another leading eugenicist among Progressive Era economists (Cot 2005). Fisher said: “The world consists of two classes —the educated and the ignorant — and it is essential for progress that the former should be allowed to dominate the latter. . . . Once we admit that it is proper for the instructed classes to give tuition to the uninstructed, we begin to see an almost boundless vista for possible human betterment.”

Elitism was hardly new in American life – but the progressives' case for leadership by a social scientific elite gave elitism a new form and rationale. The new form meant that middle-

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<sup>13</sup> Ross, EA. 1920. *Principles of Sociology* NY: Century, p. 268.

class academics and intellectuals sought to expand their influence in politics over the interests of the moneyed classes (not least the new plutocrats), and also the working classes. Some Left historians, such as Gabriel Kolko (1963) and James Weinstein (1968), condemn the American progressives as “conservative,” by which they mean the progressives served capital rather than with labor. I think this is half right. It is true that the progressives were not the friends of American labor they are often made out to be. But neither was social control a Trojan Horse for the interests of the moneyed class. “The strongest theme in [the social controller’s] work,” as Dorothy Ross argues, “delivered government not to capitalists but to themselves” (1991: 279).

The new rationale for social scientific leadership was a putative meritocracy. During his academic trial in 1894, Ely wrote in his self-defense that he was more an aristocrat than a democrat, noting that “when I use the word ‘aristocrat,’ I have in mind of course not a legal aristocracy, but a natural aristocracy,” an aristocracy of merit.

Ely concluded that natural leaders had a special obligation to lead in the “special service” of social reform.<sup>14</sup> It was not just a matter of “expertise oblige.” Ely rejected the idea that all men are “substantially equal” as “a theory which works disaster, and is, indeed, cruel to those who are in the lower stages, resulting in their exploitation and degradation.”<sup>15</sup> Natural inequality justified and explained the leadership role for experts; Ely believed that reform required “leadership and guidance from superior classes.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, Ely argued that to treat the “feebler members of the community” as the equals of the superior merely caused them to suffer; and to treat the superior members as equal to the inferior robbed them of their feeling of responsibility toward their brethren”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kloppenberg, p. 270, citing Ely 1894 “Fundamental Beliefs of My Social Philosophy” *The Forum* October, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> Ely, *Studies in the Evolution of Industrial Society*, p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Richard T. Ely, 1898. “Fraternalism vs. Paternalism in Government” *Century Magazine* 55 (March), p. 781

<sup>17</sup> Richard T. Ely, “Fundamental Beliefs in My Social Philosophy,” in *The Forum*, 18:173-183 (October, 1894)

The leadership of the superior classes – “the wiser and the stronger” -- Ely imagined, would even be recognized as necessary by the inferior classes. “The truth is that the inequalities among men in character and capacity are simply marvelous,” Ely volunteered. “The ordinary wage-earner feels, and shows that he feels the need of superior leadership. He is looking about and crying out for true leadership. He desires the help of those who are wiser and stronger than he is himself. All of us do . . . . When the inequalities among men are frankly acknowledged, the duty of those of who are favored by the differences among men becomes apparent.”<sup>18</sup>

While Ely argued that progress required a “natural ... aristocracy of merit ... naturally opposed to a false and most pernicious doctrine of equality,” he also advocated for public education, to promote and increase the size of the meritorious. Education, Ely believed, could uplift. But, at the same time, Ely, as a partisan of human inequality, did not believe that all citizens could be educated. Not everybody could qualify for full citizenship.

Ely spoke plainly of the necessary limits human inequality placed upon democracy, in its connection with the social role of expert. “Democracy intelligently understood,” Ely warned, “does not mean that every citizen is qualified to perform all the public functions,” it means only, Ely cautioned, “that he may be trained to that point where can choose qualified public servants.”<sup>19</sup> And, even then, some citizens could not be so trained. “Perhaps the problem of governing New York would be an easier one,” Ely mused, “if thirteen per centum of the poorest and most dependent voters were disenfranchised”<sup>20</sup> And, in all events, Ely said, “Probably no voter should be called upon to vote for more than a three men in a year, even as a maximum.”<sup>21</sup>

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Ely’s conception of democracy seems to me another manifestation of a larger, fundamental tension in progressive reform: the ambivalence that saw the poor and socially marginal as victims in need of social uplift but also as threats requiring social control, a tension I

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<sup>18</sup> Ely, 1894. “The Church and the Labor Movement” *The Outlook* 49, no. (13 January): p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Ely, *Social Observations*, p. 214. This quote and the next are cited in Axel Schafer’s excellent study, *American Progressives and German Social Reform, 1875-1920*.

<sup>20</sup> Ely, *Administration of the City of Berlin*, p. 246.

<sup>21</sup> Ely, *The World War and Leadership in a Democracy*, pp. 95-95.

have argued manifested itself most conspicuously in the appeal to inferior heredity as a scientific basis for distinguishing the poor worthy of social uplift from the poor who should be regarded as threats to economic health and well-being.

Thus did progressives advocate for labor, even as they depicted many groups of workers as undeserving of uplift, indeed as the cause rather than the consequence of low wages (Leonard 2003b). Thus did progressives did advocate for women's rights, even as they also promoted a maternalist vision of economic and family life that would remove women from the labor force, the better to meet women's obligations to be "mothers of the race," and to defer to the "family wage" (Leonard 2005a). Thus did progressives did oppose biological defenses of laissez-faire, even as they also advocated for eugenics, the social control of human heredity (Leonard 2005b). Thus did progressives advocate for peace, even as they championed a military campaign to make the world safe for democracy. Thus did progressives seek to countervail corporate power, even as they also admired the scientifically managed corporation, consistent with their faith in planning, organization and command.

Even the most thoughtful men, such as E. R. A. Seligman, the rare reformer who rejected eugenics as pseudoscientific nonsense, could hold semi-elitist views regarding the role of expertise. Seligman was more cautious than Ely, Ross and Fisher about the limits of scientific knowledge applied by government experts, but he acknowledged that, in the progressive view, the expert was to the state as the priest was to the church. "The scholar," said Seligman, "must possess priestly qualities and fulfill priestly functions, including political activity. His knowledge, as Fische says, 'should be truly applied for society's use; he should get people to feel their true needs and acquaint them with the means of their satisfaction'" (in Fink 1998: 14). That said, the impulse to human hierarchy – the assumption that not all are entitled to share in the fruits of expert-directed progress, owing to their inferiority – correlates rather strongly with the anti-democratic impulse among the social-control progressives.

The idea of social control by scientific elites was shared among all the new social sciences. Social control was the label in economics and sociology; the political-science term was administration, as in public administration. Woodrow Wilson, a student of Ely's and historian Herbert Baxter Adams at Johns Hopkins, was a pioneering theorist of public administration, which sought to centralize and rationalize government, along the lines revealed by scientific



research into politics. Wilson, in the 1912 presidential election, presented himself as the people's champion, but his concept of democracy was, like the social controllers, limited. Stockton Axson, his brother-in-law, observed: "His instinct for democracy involved the idea that, because a democracy is free, it is the more necessary that it be led. His faith in the people has never been a faith in the supreme wisdom of the people, but rather in the capacity of the people to be led right by those whom they elect and constitute their leaders."<sup>22</sup> In Wilson's conception, experts don't merely serve the public interest, they also lead by their superior ability to identify the social good.

For Wilson, as for the economic reformers who taught him, laissez-faire politics was as much a bar to professionalism as laissez-faire economics. The many political reforms enacted in the Progressive Era -- the secret ballot, elections controlled by government, the initiative, the referendum, the recall and city manager system -- commonly present them themselves as pro-democratic, because anti-machine, but they can also be seen as "methods to subvert and undermine the smaller civic associations through which common citizens had previously expressed themselves, so that enlightened elites might rule" (Schambra 19xx, p. 101).

In all events, the new regulation of parties, which had the effect of transforming them from unregulated, private, voluntary associations, into, effectively, public corporations was of a piece with Progressive Era regulation of firms and markets -- it moved real power to expert administrators, regulatory bodies and the executive branch (Eisenach, pp. viii-ix).

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<sup>22</sup> "Wilson wanted to exclude women from public affairs, opposing their right to vote because their place was 'in the home' and their involvement would produce 'the unsexed, masculinized woman.' He also favored Jim Crow laws that excluded African Americans from voting and other basic rights. Nor did he expect Native Americans to assimilate into the nation as citizens." Woodrow Wilson, *Dictionary of American Biography*.