

## BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 233, \$35 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-691-16959-0.

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Thomas Leonard's *Illiberal Reformers* is a significant contribution to the historiography of the Progressive Era, by one of the finest scholars working in the field. The book is divided into two parts. The first, consisting of four chapters, is a narrative of the rise of the Progressive Era economists to prominence as experts in social reform. They built their reputation on a discourse of political neutrality and disinterested science aimed at building (or enhancing) the common good. In the second part, containing six chapters, Leonard exposes the paradoxes of the progressive reforms and discourse. Since the experts argued they were acting on behalf of the common good, it is certainly a contradiction that many of them judiciously worked on selecting who could and could not partake in the commonality of good they planned to create.

In chapter 1, Leonard describes the fast-paced economic transformations before and during the Gilded Age, defines who the progressive economists were, and narrates the history of how progressive thought evolved from religious, morally inclined social thought into the scientific-expert discourse of neutrality that supported the idea of building the common good. It is an introductory chapter without much novelty. It contains the narratives one could easily find in other works such as Dorothy Ross's classic *Origins of American Social Science* (Ross 1991).

The following chapters in the first part present a first-rate interpretation of the progressives' rise as social experts. In chapter 2, Leonard describes how the predominant economic thought in the United States became increasingly inimical to laissez-faire ideas by establishing that the previous liberal thought was, first, unsound in morals, and, second, anachronistic. As the progressives' mentor Richard Ely declared in 1887, while in the late 1700s and early 1800s the great masters of political economy demanded that the government *not* intervene, in his time the call of the new age should be *do intervene* (Ely 1887). Moreover, if there were things to be done, Ely argued that they should be left for the then new professionals of society, a "wise (and disinterested) minority," who knew how to do them (Ely 1887, p. 117).

Chapter 3 is the longest and most interesting one in the first part. Particularly noteworthy is the narrative of how the first American Economic Association (AEA) president, Francis Amasa Walker, along with the early AEA officials, endeavored to find a place for the new professional economists in the "administrative state." As Leonard puts it: "The tasks of the administrative state were never-ending" (p. 29). Thus, the building of the fourth branch of government, the administrative state—first in Wisconsin, then in Washington—is the perfect narrative to close the argument initiated in chapter 2. Perfectly fulfilling their roles as the advocates of Ely's "do," the illiberal

progressives, instead of finding a place for themselves among the existing institutions, created their own place in the form of the fourth branch of state. The first part ends with a chapter showing the intervention “method” of the progressives. That was basically to transplant ideas of control, planning, and management already used in business to organize the society at large through government.

The second part contains much of the novelty Leonard has published in economics journals. Still, even for those acquainted with his previous work, the plentiful collection of progressives’ prejudices and racist thought the author presents is rather shocking.

Chapter 5 discusses the “supreme economic question,” according to John Bates Clark: “Is labor getting its due?” Three theories, situated in a fuzzy area between positive and normative economics, attempt to illuminate the answer: the classical wage-fund doctrine, Clark’s marginal productivity theory of wages, and the standard-of-living argument. The progressives, such as Ely, defended that wages must meet the “habitual standard of living” of the wage-earning classes. This argument led to the idea that some individuals, because they were habituated to lower standards of living, could drive down wages, since employers would always want to pay the lowest possible wage.

The following chapter deals with the quintessential modern science of the Progressive Era: Darwinism. There was something in Charles Darwin for everyone. Conservatives and progressives, the political right and left, and social scientists both academic and popular developed arguments based on Darwinian thought. However, in Leonard’s opinion, Darwin’s ambiguity regarding the question of whether evolution means true progress (implicating a natural and spontaneous betterment), or simply change and adaptation to the physical environment, left an open door for the progressive argument of artificial selection. Artificial selection stated that society should take action in creating its future, reforming and controlling the unwanted consequences of its natural (or spontaneous) evolution.

Chapter 7 links the progressives to the eugenics movement in the United States. It is from this chapter on that the shocking narrative of the ideas of progressive economists starts. In this chapter, Irving Fisher and Edward Ross make an appearance as the two progressive economists most closely involved in “preaching eugenics” as a modern and necessary science. Another narrative in the chapter revolves around the fluctuating position of Simon N. Patten, one of the most difficult progressive characters to decipher.

In the following chapters, Leonard tells how progressives planned to exclude—from the job market and, in general, from the common good they planned to create—Slavs, southern Europeans, Asians, Blacks, and women. Furthermore, those with “inborn incapacities” (or mental/physical disabilities) were also to be excluded—noting that the concept of disability was rather stretched among progressives. Chapters 8 to 10 deal respectively with the exclusion of “the unemployable,” “immigrants and the unproductive,” and women. These chapters reveal some of the important questions for the science of those times, such as elaborating on a “catalog of inferiority,” creating different techniques to measure “inborn incapacities,” discussing “race suicide” (the thesis according to which the “good races” were gradually diminished on par with “inferior races”), and the establishment of a minimum wage to exclude the “less productive” from the job market.

Since the book involves all the progressives under an all-encompassing interpretative scheme, studies about individuals could add nuance to Leonard's thesis. For a very recent example in this journal, Luca Fiorito and Cosma Orsi (2016) showed how John Commons publicly disavowed his early anti-Semitic beliefs about Jewish workers.

In summary, *Illiberal Reformers* is an excellent case study about one of the most important ideas that historians of economic thought can convey to economists (and to social scientists in general): the risks of overconfidence in science. The history of science continually shows us how ideas once considered scientifically sound turned out to be, sometime later, morally unsound and anachronistic. The fact that scientists can be wrong must be regarded as an important "tool of the trade" when we want to transfer ideas from the theoretical world to the real world, the one inhabited by real people. Thus, *Illiberal Reformers* is a great study for reminding us of this insurmountable fact of practicing social science.

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## REFERENCES

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 Fiorito, Luca, and Cosma Orsi. 2016. "Anti-Semitism and the Progressive Era Social Science: The Case of John Commons." *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 38 (1) (March): 55–80.  
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Mario Garcia-Molina and Hans-Michael Trautwein, eds., *Peripheral Visions of Economic Development: New Frontiers in Development Economics and the History of Economic Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 342, \$163 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-13890-922-9.

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This volume offers a selection of papers from two conferences promoted by the European Society for the History of Economic Thought in Latin America: "Core and Periphery Countries," held in Argentina in 2012, and "Path Dependence in Economic Development," held in Colombia in 2013.

Inspired by the idea of "peripheral visions," which points to a conceptual framework of great interest to the history of economic thought, the editorial introduction does an excellent work in presenting this perspective. It also describes how peripheral vision is present in each chapter and how it contributes to the theme of economic development.

Since peripheral vision is important "at capturing movement and in situations with poor light," the use of the metaphor in the book reflects both the "recognition of patterns in a changing environment" and the ability of seeing at the edges of the visual field, "capturing dynamics at the periphery" (p. 1). In a broad sense, all the chapters in this volume relate to the idea of peripheral vision, at least in the sense that they offer reflections on peripheral regions in the world economy. Nonetheless, only a number of chapters fully deserve the metaphor.