



The Progressive Legacy Rolls On: A Critique of Steinbaum and Weisberger on *Illiberal Reformers*

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The September 2017 issue of the *Journal of Economic Literature* contained a review essay that fell far short of reasonable scholarly standards. Authored by Marshall Steinbaum and Bernard Weisberger, the article attacks Thomas Leonard's 2016 book *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics and American Economics in the Progressive Era*, published by Princeton University Press. Using severe and condemnatory descriptors throughout their essay, Steinbaum and Weisberger accuse Leonard of engaging in "motivated history," of making "sweeping statements about what 'the progressives' believed, festooned with cherry-picked quotes and out-of-context examples," of pushing historical revisionism "into the realm of anachronism" (2016, 1065), of being "filled with selected quotations" to cast progressives in a poor light (*ibid.*, 1075), of painting a "false picture" of progressivism (1066), of engaging in "motivated myth making" (1077), and of serving "the current sustained attack on progressivism and its works that has moved the country steadily rightward for some forty years" (1082).

These and other similar charges are serious, but Steinbaum and Weisberger come nowhere near demonstrating them. Not only do they neglect to deliver any of the promised examples of "selected" or "cherry-picked" quotes in Leonard's work, but they also fail to substantively engage with the large body of evidence he presents. What appears instead is a 20-page display of Steinbaum and Weisberger's enthusiasm for progressive politics and the progressive identity.

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In the outset of Steinbaum and Weisberger's *JEL* essay, they state that "motivated history is not good history" (2016, 1065). Economists are capable readers of motivation, and do not see scandal in motivation per se. But motivations must be judged, and some motivations are worthier than others. As a work of history, Leonard's study may be understood as an exploration of the dangers of scientific hubris and specifically of how the progressive-era embrace of administrative "expertise" opened the door to the policies of sterilization, eugenic hereditary planning, and heightened support for immigration restrictions. Leonard's purpose is to show why early 20th century progressivism gravitated to and openly cultivated such illiberal policies. The explanations he posits—an embrace of "scientific authority" and an enthusiasm for expert-guided control—are not radical or unusual. Indeed, they are conspicuous themes in progressive-era administrative theory. But, as Nicola Giocoli (2017, 161) has noted, Steinbaum and Weisberger somehow manage to completely miss this central argument of Leonard's work.

What we find in Steinbaum and Weisberger's own product is the primary motivation of offering modern followers of progressivism a redemptive escape from the baggage of their racist and eugenicist forebears. It is a job for Houdini, and the history that Steinbaum and Weisberger offer shows no such deftness. Their review proceeds on the supposition that progressivism is praiseworthy. Since Leonard's study explores the historical relationship between progressivism and racial eugenics, his book collides with the historical picture of a praiseworthy progressivism that Steinbaum and Weisberger uphold, and they formulate an attack so as to reconcile historical progressivism with the identity and selfhood of progressives today. Ideological collision rouses turbulent passions, but such passions should be held to standards of intellectual responsibility and decency.

I find myself in agreement with Giocoli's erudite "review of a review" (2017, 157). But Steinbaum and Weisberger's review, appearing as it does in the *Journal of Economic Literature*, warrants further attention. The review is littered with factual mistakes and imprecisions big and small; as Giocoli notes, "there would be grounds to counter almost every single statement" (*ibid.*, 163).² But I will focus on central

2. Even on smaller matters, Steinbaum and Weisberger's essay is awash in errors of detail and presentation. For example, Steinbaum and Weisberger characterize Francis Amasa Walker as "a General in the Civil War" (2017a, 1073)—confusing an honorary brevet to brigadier general that Walker received in July 1866, over a year after the war's conclusion, for his actual rank and responsibility during the war. They credit progressive economist Edwin R. A. Seligman's 1911 book, *The Income Tax*, as "an important element in [the Sixteenth Amendment's] 1913 passage" (*ibid.*, 1079), but the amendment itself actually passed in 1909 as part of an unsuccessful and largely unrelated attempt to block the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act. Seligman's book emerged as a post hoc contribution to the amendment's ratification, which occurred with only modest regional opposition some three and a half years later. They claim to find "anachronism" in Leonard's passing reference to the hereditary theories of ancient philosopher Plato while discussing the 19th century origins of eugenics (*ibid.*, 1065; see Leonard 2016, 109), even though Karl Pearson (1909,

problems with the review.

Steinbaum and Weisberger do not do justice to Leonard's scholarship and contributions

By far, the most problematic historical element of Steinbaum and Weisberger's argument is its engagement with the problem of progressive eugenics. Not only do they fail to deliver their promised examples of "selected" or "cherry-picked" quotations in Leonard's work, they also fail to substantively engage with the large body of evidence he presents. What follows instead is an exercise in historical euphemism wherein the faults of progressive eugenicists are acknowledged with a passing nod, only to be quickly historicized as common expressions of the prejudices of the time. To do so Steinbaum and Weisberger shower the charge of *tu quoque!* upon laissez-faire adversaries of progressivism (2017a, 1064, 1066, 1077–1078, 1081), though without doing much to specify or document the charge.

Steinbaum and Weisberger say that "all, or at least much, of [the progressive eugenicist] history was known—revealed decades ago" (2017a, 1065), as though Leonard's documentation is old news. And they imply that Leonard neglected prior scholarly works by Mary Furner (1975), by a new wave of progressive historians such as Richard Hofstadter who investigated matters of race and economic interests starting in the 1950s, and by turn-of-the-century critics of progressive racism such as W. E. B. Du Bois (1899).

Yet one need only open Leonard's text to find these and other relevant works extensively surveyed (Leonard 2016, 36, 49–54, 70, 119–124, and accompanying

24), a founding figure of eugenics, expressly claimed Plato's influence in his own lineage. Steinbaum and Weisberger (2017a, 1067–1068) selectively quote William Graham Sumner, presenting a somewhat notorious descriptive passage on Darwinian characteristics in nature as a prescriptive design even though Sumner never intended as such. In doing so they also decontextualize the passage from Sumner's other known views (see Zwolinski 2013). Throughout the essay they adopt a general practice of presenting unsourced assertions as if they were matters of fact when a stronger citation is warranted. Examples range from a lengthy digression about the political achievements of Wisconsin Sen. Robert La Follette, who occupies a minimal position in Leonard's work, to frequent declarative lists of progressive ideological objectives as if they were uncontested policy accomplishments (Steinbaum and Weisberger 2017a, 1074, 1079, 1081). In another oddity, Steinbaum and Weisberger assert that "Leonard prefers the awkward term 'progressive social Darwinist'" to the term "reform Darwinist" (*ibid.*, 1068), yet the phrase "progressive social Darwinist/Darwinism" does not even appear in Leonard's book, and Leonard *does* use "reform Darwinist/Darwinism," even in a section title (2016, 98, 100, 101, 103). Elsewhere, Steinbaum and Weisberger (2017a, 1072) misquote Leonard while suggesting that Leonard misrepresents progressive beliefs about wage labor; the referenced passage from Leonard (2016, 86) simply summarizes a longstanding progressive grievance against treating labor as a "commodity" and wages as analogous to the prices of material inputs to production.

endnotes). Furner even provided a blurb for the dust jacket of *Illiberal Reformers*, stating that its treatment of progressivism “offers a wealth of new material on discrimination based on gender, race, and class” and “fascinating new evidence of what Leonard terms its ‘dark side’” ([link](#)).³ Moving beyond *Illiberal Reformers*, Steinbaum and Weisberger neglect to inform their readers of any of Leonard’s extensive historiography on progressive eugenics, which ranges from a critique of Hofstadter’s investigation of “Social Darwinism” to more contemporary treatments of progressive legal and economic theory (Leonard 2003; 2005a; b; c; 2009a; b; 2012; 2015; Bernstein and Leonard 2009). And Leonard in fact views Du Bois in particular as highly consistent with his own findings. Although *The Philadelphia Negro* was a “herculean effort with a sophisticated economic analysis” (Leonard 2016, 70), Du Bois’s white progressive contemporaries largely overlooked his documentation of links between race, labor, and immigration policy.

After diminishing Leonard’s work, Steinbaum and Weisberger set out to rebury progressive eugenics in a layer of euphemism. To describe the set of policies and beliefs that Leonard forthrightly reveals as rampant collectivist illiberalism—eugenics and coerced sterilization programs, immigration restrictions premised on racial and hereditary pseudoscience, the use of minimum wages and labor regulations to drive “unfit” persons or even entire races from the labor force, and outwardly racist “intellectual” defenses of white supremacy—Steinbaum and Weisberger repeatedly deploy a single, remarkably mild adjective: “exclusionary” (2017a, 1064, 1066, 1069, 1071, 1072, 1077, 1078, 1081). The first sentence of their abstract both epitomizes the strategy and highlights its absurdity: What *Illiberal Reformers* claims, we are told, is that progressive economists held “exclusionary views on eugenics” (ibid., 1064). One is left imagining what are the “views on eugenics” that could be considered nonexclusionary! Steinbaum and Weisberger do acknowledge that sterilization, among other similar policies, was “cruel in its implementation and false in its rationalizations” (ibid., 1081), but that moment of relative clarity is an exception.

3. Bradley W. Bateman, in a largely critical review of *Illiberal Reformers* for the journal *History of Political Economy*, writes the following regarding its originality: “no one until now has documented the full extent [of American economists’ advocacy of eugenics].... Leonard has done an excellent job...of uncovering the evidence.... The story of progressivism will never be told exactly the same way again after Leonard’s book” (2017, 718). Furner (2017), in her own extended review essay on *Illiberal Reformers*, specifically credits Leonard for precisely the same contributions that Steinbaum and Weisberger deny him. Even as she acknowledges her own interpretive disagreements with Leonard, she writes that “we will nowhere else find the extensive mining of statements and actions expressing a virulently sordid side of what we have called progressivism. This book is a necessary corrective.”

Steinbaum and Weisberger fail to deliver progressives a redemptive escape from eugenics

In their limited consideration of the particulars of Leonard’s evidence, Steinbaum and Weisberger move into both historical falsehood and stunning disregard of the poisonous influence of eugenicist practices. They attempt to parse motives that differentiate progressive eugenicists like Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, and Edward A. Ross from a supposedly more insidious set of laissez-faire adversaries. The progressives, they concede, “certainly did express their own exclusionary views, but those views were motivated by seeking to increase the bargaining power of a narrowly defined set of workers”—namely the white working class. This concern for worker uplift supposedly is what led the progressives to adopt racial theories “legitimizing exclusion from the labor market” (Steinbaum and Weisberger 2017a, 1078). In short, the ugly means of progressive eugenics retained elements of a more noble and redemptive cause rooted in an abstract labor struggle. Lest there be any confusion that Steinbaum and Weisberger intend partial exoneration of the progressives in making this line of argument, they state it even more directly in a 2016 op-ed anticipating their *JEL* collaboration:

Yes, [Woodrow] Wilson and other Progressives did hold racist views that were common at the time. But they shared those views with their intellectual rivals among ‘free market’ economists and journalists, although each group was motivated by different assumptions in arriving at those views. Moreover, Progressives were motivated not simply by racism as the revisionists imply, but by more generous tendencies—motivations that have been written out of the revisionist narratives by Leonard, [Jonah] Goldberg, [Tyler] Cowen, and other critics. (Weisberger and Steinbaum 2016)

This parsing leads into even stranger historical territory when they juxtapose the euphemized, historicized, and partially exonerated progressives Ely, Commons, and Ross against a laissez-faire strawman:

For their intellectual adversaries, on the other hand, the exclusion was motivated by *their* ideology: that extending full political and human rights to “outsider” groups risked overturning the social hierarchy and impairing the proper functioning of the market, because members of those groups could not be trusted to supply their own labor and thus required the supervision of employers to do so—its own elaborate, racist typology. (Steinbaum and Weisberger 2017a, 1078)

Since subsequent progressives, we are told, “have enlarged the sphere of those deemed worthy of advocacy,” they bear no blame and carry no lingering resemblance to their “exclusionary” predecessors. The ugly baggage of eugenics falls, by default, solely onto the *laissez-faire* camp, and remarkably so without even having to document comparable *laissez-faire* complicity in its designs.⁴

No evidence is provided by Steinbaum and Weisberger to substantiate their desired parsing of motives—neither do they provide any instance of such parsing in the progressives’ own words nor any instance in the secondary literature. Steinbaum and Weisberger simply assert it to be so. Yet in doing so they breeze right past the extensive evidence and detail that Leonard presents in his book. Interestingly enough, that evidence includes numerous examples of progressives espousing the precise “racist typology” that Steinbaum and Weisberger ascribed to their *laissez-faire* opponents: the idea that “members of [‘outsider’] groups could not be trusted to supply their own labor” (2017a, 1078).

Consider for example the following passage by Commons, in which he not only distrusts the ability of African-Americans to supply their own labor without supervision but veers disturbingly close to a defense of slavery:

In the entire circuit of the globe those races which have developed under a tropical sun are found to be indolent and fickle. From the standpoint of survival of the fittest such vices are really virtues, for severe and continuous exertion under tropical conditions bring prostration and predisposition to disease. Therefore, if such races are to adopt that industrious life which is a second nature to races of the temperate zones, it is only through some form of compulsion. The Negro could not possibly have found a place in American industry had he come as a free man... (Commons 1904, 13)

Leonard (2016, 121) quotes that passage and a similar argument by Ross, who asserts, “The theory that races are virtually equal in capacity leads to such monumental follies as lining the valleys of the South with the bones of half a million picked whites in order to improve the condition of four million unpicked blacks” (1907, 137; quoted in Leonard 2016, 121). At evidence in both statements

4. Steinbaum has elsewhere advanced a claim that public choice scholarship is inseparably connected to and motivated by racism (Steinbaum 2017). He has done so on account of a recent book that deploys innuendo and misrepresents historical evidence in an attempt to link public choice theorist James M. Buchanan to segregationist politicians in the 1950s (MacLean 2017; on Steinbaum and MacLean, see Farrell and Teles 2017). It is too hard to resist making note of the extreme inconsistency between this dismissive condemnation of public choice and Steinbaum’s parallel attack on Leonard: One historian’s fabricated claim is sufficient in Steinbaum’s mind to tarnish an entire disliked field of study, and yet we are to politely brush past the overtly racist and eugenicist writings of those progressives who made the liberals like Spencer and Sumner their adversaries. To borrow from Spencer (1851, 212), a rather awkward doctrine, this.

is precisely the “racist typology” that Steinbaum and Weisberger imply was not among the motives of progressives.

Nor are these statements simple aberrations of careless language from their authors’ peripheral contributions. They are recurring themes. Commons (1907, 41), in another work, used an aggressively Darwinian analogy to liken the heredity of African-Americans to the breeding of cattle: “Other races of immigrants, by contact with our institutions, have been civilized—the negro has only been domesticated.” Ross (1901, 88–89) infamously developed the theory of “race suicide” wherein the fertility of an “inferior race” in the presence of a “higher race” could supposedly induce the latter’s reproductive decline, and an accompanying societal dysgenic effect. In his many writings on this subject, he made no effort to conceal that he ranked African-Americans, Chinese, and southern and eastern Europeans as racial inferiors to Anglo-Saxon stock.

Even less virulent commentaries by the leading progressives shared the elements of the “racist typology.” Although he expressed concerns about the “race prejudice” of whites against blacks, Ely blamed the latter’s economic woes on “their shiftlessness, their ignorance, their dependence upon credit advances in the farming districts, and their alarming concentration in a few occupations, some of which—particularly as they practice them—are neither educational, uplifting, nor developmental” (1912/1909, 62).⁵ Ely notoriously assailed the “human rubbish-heap of the competitive system,” a large class of “feeble” persons who must be discouraged from breeding lest “social degeneration” result (1903, 163). And he advocated other extreme forms of supervision of certain groups, as here:

[T]here are classes in every modern community composed of those who are virtually children, and who require paternal and fostering care, the aim of which should be the highest development of which they are capable. We may instance the negroes, who are for the most part grownup children, and should be treated as such. (Ely 1898, 781; cf. Leonard 2016, 121)

So who were the supposedly racist *laissez-faire* adversaries of these progressives? Steinbaum and Weisberger (2017a, 1077) tar the liberals Edwin L. Godkin, Simon Newcomb, and William Graham Sumner with favoring “exclusionary” policy simply because they supported free enterprise and opposed the welfare state. Steinbaum and Weisberger also (*ibid.*, 1077–1078) make a convoluted argument involving the sociologist Franklin Giddings, an unlikely choice of anti-

5. Ely then complained of an “immigration problem,” approvingly quoting Francis Amasa Walker’s description of recent immigrants as largely belonging to “beaten races, representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence” (Ely 1912/1909, 63). Other appalling passages from Ely are featured in the compendium “Richard T. Ely: The Confederate Flag of the AEA?” (Thies and Daza 2011).

progressive interlocutor⁶ and certainly not an advocate of *laissez-faire*.⁷ They present a vague and heavily excerpted passage from Giddings's informal comments at an 1893 American Economic Association panel on agricultural woes. They inflate his off-the-cuff remark as being illustrative of a tendency of *laissez-faire* economists to attribute economic failings to “innate group characteristics,” thereby supposedly implying eugenics. Yet in full context, Giddings's comment was a narrow response to remarks about the proposed Subtreasury Plan of constructing federally bonded warehouses to issue credit to farmers in exchange for crop deposits. Giddings's statement came in answer to remarks by Commons (not Ross, as Steinbaum and Weisberger indicate) and was intended to suggest that farm interests had persistently failed to diagnose the economic reasons behind their difficulties in obtaining credit, which in turn undermined their political effectiveness. In fact, Giddings openly conceded the point raised much earlier by Ross that the farmer “does not get the same freight rates that other men get, and that he is taxed more than other men are taxed” (see American Economic Association 1893, 69–72). Thus even Steinbaum and Weisberger's primary archetype of the *laissez-faire* position is misidentified politically and misrepresented in his actual argument.

It is notable that Steinbaum and Weisberger attribute to Sumner and the *laissez-faire* theorist Herbert Spencer a teleological survival-of-the-fittest view that “the elite of the 1880s—nationally, racially, and individually—deserved to be where they were because in the competition to survive, nature had endowed them

6. Steinbaum and Weisberger label Giddings a “prominent conservative” (2017a, 1077), but Giddings's politics often tilted in radical directions, and his social views permitted ample room for state-directed poverty relief programs. Giddings was noted as a lecturer at the Socialist Party of America-aligned Rand School of Social Sciences (see National Civil Liberties Bureau 1919, 13), and on more than one occasion Giddings classified himself politically as an independent Socialist (Recchiuti 2007, 60). On this count it is curious that Steinbaum and Weisberger take no notice of Thomas Nixon Carver, who perhaps comes closest among major figures in that era to mixing some *laissez-faire* economic preferences with a Darwinian and eugenically-inclined social outlook. Carver was far from a doctrinaire follower of *laissez-faire*, however, and he showed enthusiasm for several hallmarks of progressive legislation, notably eugenically-motivated policy positions on both minimum wages and immigration. Carver is briefly discussed by Leonard (2016, 95–96). A more extensive literature on Carver's own progressive eugenic inclinations may be found in Fiorito and Orsi (2017), Peart and Levy (2013), and Levy, Peart, and Albert (2012, 7–21).

7. “Shall we give ourselves over to the belief that *laissez faire* is the last word of social science and the first law of ethics? Assuredly and most emphatically, no! Nothing in the conditions of progress as set forth in the foregoing study so much as hints at other than negative answers to these questions. On the contrary, if the law of evolution as exemplified in human society has been rightly understood, we shall be prepared to find certain very real limitations of the number and extent of the social, political, or industrial metamorphoses which, within a given period, can combine in genuine progress. We shall look to discover a growing necessity for integral social action. We shall expect to hear the ethical consciousness of humanity declaring that society is morally responsible for the costs of its existence” (Giddings 1893, 154).

with the sharpest teeth and claws and cunning” (Steinbaum and Weisberger 2017a, 1067). Never mind, for example, Sumner’s salvos against plutocracy, noted by Leonard (2016, 39–40). Here Steinbaum and Weisberger enlist the work of Richard Hofstadter (1944) to brand Sumner and Spencer as “social Darwinists.” But a growing body of literature (Bannister 1979; Marshall 1979; Bellomy 1984; Riggensbach 2011; Hayashi 2015; Zwolinski 2013; 2015) has challenged Hofstadter’s characterizations and the second-hand caricatures that dominate the Hofstadter-reliant depictions made by non-specialists in the history profession. That literature exposes the historical imprecision of the term “social Darwinism” and challenges its application to Spencer and Sumner. Both men were outspoken anti-imperialists and anti-colonialists, which is to say they rejected the most visible projects of their era to assert societal superiority by way of force. Sumner participated in the founding of the Anti-Imperialist League, and held comparatively liberal racial views for his time. While Ross, Commons, and Ely were advancing racial theories that classified non-white races as inferior beings requiring supervision and control, Sumner was condemning those theories:

There are plenty of people in the United States to-day who regard negroes as human beings, perhaps, but of a different order from white men, so that the ideas and social arrangements of white men cannot be applied to them with propriety. Others feel the same way about Indians. This attitude of mind, wherever you meet with it, is what causes tyranny and cruelty. (Sumner 1899, 176)

The works of Spencer and Sumner alike remain subject to criticism in adhering to suspect evolutionary conventions and terminology of their day, yet in prescriptive policy they tended to favor courses that deprecated state predation on the weak, the vulnerable, and the impoverished. And in that vein—a more nuanced take on Hofstadter—the leading recent scholarly reexamination comes from Leonard himself (Leonard 2009b; 2016, 98–100), offering an important insight that Steinbaum and Weisberger either overlook or do not grasp: Turn-of-the-century Darwinian social thought exhibited both individualist and collectivist strains, and it was especially the collectivist type that advanced state-sponsored experimentation with eugenics.⁸

8. It should be noted that Leonard’s focus in *Illiberal Reformers* is not merely scientism in the abstract but rather a historical instance of progressive scientism. This is not without reason, though neither is it a gratuitous slander against progressives (cf. Steinbaum and Weisberger 2017b). Rather, Leonard selects his historical subject matter precisely because its example illustrates the severity of scientific hubris when taken to its extreme. The sordid history of compulsory sterilization and eugenic planning illustrates that the processes of government, so readily embraced by the progressive reformers of the early twentieth century, are exceptionally dangerous executors of a purportedly scientific design.

So as is abundantly apparent in Leonard's text and, more importantly, the progressive economists' own published works, there was no parsing of "exclusionary" motives that separated the labor-minded progressives from more retrograde and aggressively racist variants of eugenics and white supremacy. Steinbaum and Weisberger simply invent such a separation, and then proceed to ignore the extensive documentation to the contrary provided by Leonard.

Steinbaum and Weisberger ultimately provide only leftist declamation

The parsing of motives that Steinbaum and Weisberger construct leads them further into troubling historiography, as they conclude their review in an exonerative push that extols the accomplishments of historical progressivism, stripped of the eugenics documented by Leonard.⁹ While crediting these progressives for defending the worthy cause of academic freedom, they point to the specific case of Ross's dismissal from his faculty position at Stanford University in 1900. This episode prompted an investigation of the university by the American Economic Association and widespread backlash within the academic community, noting that Ross had been fired over his political viewpoints. It also ranks among the formative events that prompted the creation of the American Association of University Professors in 1915. Steinbaum and Weisberger specifically credit it, along with a handful of other parallel episodes involving the same progressive circle of economists, for establishing the legacy of "academic freedom economists enjoy in modern research-oriented universities" (2017a, 1064).

The casual reader of their review might justly recognize Ross's martyrdom and the significance of the response it provoked. Steinbaum and Weisberger's telling of the event still contains a glaring omission. While Ross was undoubtedly fired for political reasons, the occasion of the political dispute that triggered it was an overtly eugenicist speech he gave to a white labor organizing meeting. As Ross himself described the event:

I tried to show that owing to its high Malthusian birth rate the Orient is the land of "cheap men," and that the coolie, though he cannot outdo the American, can under live him. I took the ground that the high standard of living that restrains multiplication in America will be imperiled if Orientals are allowed to

9. Steinbaum and Weisberger's ideologically motivated enthusiasm for their progressive-era subjects may be seen openly in their other works, calling upon the economics profession to resume the practice of radical political "advocacy" as exemplified by Richard T. Ely (see Steinbaum and Weisberger 2016).

pour into this country in great numbers before they have raised their standards of living and lowered their birth rate... In thus scientifically co-ordinating the birth rate with the intensity of the struggle for existence, I struck a new note in the discussion of Oriental immigration which, to quote one of the newspapers, “made a profound impression.” (Ross 1900a)

Ross’s speech angered the widow of the university’s founder, a railroad industrialist who employed Chinese immigrant laborers and who believed the remarks were intended to inflame racial violence against Asian immigrants—a reasonable fear in the heated racial climate of turn-of-the-century San Francisco. While Ross mounted a defense that stressed the intellectual objectives of his speech, its inflammatory connotations were unmistakable. His concluding line in the speech was this: “we are resolutely determined that California, this latest and loveliest seat of the Aryan race, shall not become, if we can help it, the theater of such a stern, wolfish struggle for existence as prevails throughout the Orient” (Ross 1900b). Even for highly regarded causes such as academic freedom, the legacy of progressivism cannot be so neatly separated from its own troubled eugenicist history as Steinbaum and Weisberger desire.

What has emerged by the end of Steinbaum and Weisberger’s review is less an exercise in history of economic thought than it is an indulgence in leftist ideological declamation. They gleefully call upon the “the positive and admirable achievements” that progressive economists “contributed to the strengthening and improvement of American democracy”—a list that includes income taxes, railroad regulation, food regulation, minimum wages, and the exemption of unions from antitrust laws. Steinbaum and Weisberger’s enthusiasm for these policies, including their modern derivatives, leaves them fundamentally unable to examine their own ideological priors regarding the carefully presented evidence in Leonard’s book. They view the suggestion of a parallel between the appeal of eugenics and other conceded forms of progressive “scientific administration” and planning as an affront to a favored ideological system, but without providing a reasoned response to the suggested parallel.

On this final point, the missed central argument of Leonard’s research emerges as its own caution against the very type of ideological declamation that Steinbaum and Weisberger offer. It is true that few modern progressives would espouse the outwardly racist labor arguments of Commons, Ely, and Ross as their own today let alone their accompanying eugenicist policies. But that was not Leonard’s investigative question. Rather, he sought to understand the hubris that led leading academics of that time in such a profoundly illiberal direction, stamping a great deal of horrendous nonsense with imprints of science, expertise, and prestige. The connection between modern progressivism and the dangers of wielding purported expertise for political design in other areas remains an open point of

inquiry that Leonard does not attempt to answer. It is nonetheless possible to see how simply raising the question of scientism becomes an intellectual stumbling block for the separate project of reinvigorating the politically radical and activism-laden approach to academic work, an approach exhibited by Ely, Commons, and Ross. And as Steinbaum and Weisberger have made abundantly clear, their own investment in that separate project is strong.

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