Wisconsin progressives

Prominent UW scholars deemed blacks, women and the disabled innately inferior and undeserving of many rights.

By Thomas C. Leonard

Some readers will know that Wisconsin was so identified with the progressive reform movement of the early 20th century that American progressivism used the “Wisconsin Idea” as a prototype. Other readers will know that the progressives permanently altered the course of America’s economy and its public life. What readers may not know is that the progressives, in Wisconsin as elsewhere, were not that progressive.

The original progressives shared three common goals, according to one of the first accounts of progressivism, Benjamin Parke DeWitt’s 1915 volume, The Progressive Movement. Those goals, he wrote, were: to make government less corrupt, to make government more democratic and to give government a far bigger role in the economy.

Granting DeWitt’s characterization, significant tensions between all three of these goals were evident.

Progressives passed many pro-democratic reforms. Amending the U.S. Constitution in 1920 to give women the vote and in 1913 to require direct election of U.S. senators are celebrated examples. But woman suffrage...
Wisconsin progressives had regressive beliefs happened only after African-Americans in the Jim Crow South were effectively disenfranchised.

Many progressives simply ignored the plight of African-Americans, but others justified the brutal re-establishment of white supremacy. Princeton University professor Woodrow Wilson told his Atlantic Monthly readers that the freed slaves and their descendants were unprepared for freedom. African-Americans were “unpracticed in liberty, unschooled in self control, never sobered by the discipline of self support, never established in any habit of prudence … insolent and aggressive, sick of work, (and) covetous of pleasure,” Wilson.

The ideas behind the Wisconsin Idea
By Thomas C. Leonard

Who were the original progressives? What inspired these scholars and activists to lead the Progressive Era crusade to dismantle laissez-faire and remake American economic and political life? And why were the progressives so ambivalent about the poor, offering uplift to those groups they judged capable of self-government but exclusion to those groups they judged inferior — immigrants, African-Americans, the disabled and women?

The first progressive generation was born largely between the mid-1850s and 1870. More often than not, the progressives were children of Protestant ministers and missionaries. The sons were expected to continue the family calling, and the daughters were expected to stay home, and both wanted neither.

Instead they channeled their reform energy into new progressive professions they created — the expert economist, the professor of social science, the scholar-activist, the social worker and the investigatory journalist. Their vocations and methods were new, but their mission remained the same — to build a righteous Kingdom of Heaven on earth. In the language of the day, they preached a social gospel.

The American Economic Association (AEA), founded in 1885, embodied the social gospel’s distinctive blend of liberal Protestant ethics, veneration of science and the evangelizing activism of pious, middle-class reformers. Economist Richard T. Ely was the prime mover behind the AEA’s establishment and the standard bearer of American progressive economics. Ely saw economic reform as a calling and described the reformer’s work as a mission to “redeem all our social relations.”

Social gospel economists, like all progressives,
wrote in 1901. Jim Crow was needed, Wilson said, because without it, African-Americans “were a danger to themselves as well as to those whom they had once served.” When President Wilson arrived in Washington, his administration resegregated the federal government, hounding from office large numbers of black federal employees.

Economist Richard T. Ely, who came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1892, approved. “Negroes are for the most part grownup children, and should be treated as such,” he declared.

Ely’s protégé, UW labor historian and economist John R. Commons, who came to personify the Wisconsin Idea, was more militant. Black suffrage, Commons said, was not an expansion of democracy but a corruption of it. Blacks were unprepared for the ballot, and giving it to them had served only the interests of the rich.

Apparently forgetting the valor of the black soldiers who served in the Civil War, Commons wrote in 1907, “by the cataclysm of a war in which it took no part, this race, after many thousand years of savagery, was suddenly let loose into the liberty of citizenship, and the electoral suffrage.”

UW sociologist Edward A. Ross, another Ely protégé who became a leading public intellectual of American progressivism, was not to be outdone when it came to contempt for his imagined inferiors. Black suffrage, he said in 1912, was the taproot of American political corruption. “One man, one vote,” Ross wrote, “does not make Sambo equal to Socrates.”

**Frank elitism and democracy**

One fundamental but less conspicuous tension in DeWitt’s troika of progressive goals was between expertise and democracy. The Wisconsin Idea greatly expanded government’s role in the economy, but it also relocated political authority within the state, moving power from the courts and parties to the new independent agencies of the executive, and from judges and legislators to bureaucratic experts.

How could progressives return government to the people while simultaneously placing it beyond their reach in the hands of experts? They could not. If democracy meant, as DeWitt characterized it, control of the many, then government by experts was, by its nature (and indeed, by design) less democratic.

Economic reformers fell into two camps regarding the tension between expertise and democracy. The more egalitarian progressives, such as Jane Addams and John Dewey, wanted more democracy and more expertise, but never really figured out how to get both. They usually appealed to some notion of instruction, such as university extension, hoping it would lead the electorate to make better choices and become more actively engaged in civic life. But the people invariably disappointed them.

The Wisconsin men were not egalitarians. They were frank elitists who applauded the Progressive Era plunge in voter participation and openly advocated voter quality over voter quantity.

So long as the United States was plagued with inferior races and classes, Commons said, it could not be a democracy at all, only an oligarchy disguised as one. It was high time, Ely said, to abandon the outmoded 18th-century doctrine that all men were equal as a false and pernicious doctrine. Ross, likewise, granted that democracy had once made sense, but no more. The new industrial economy demanded the leadership of “superior men,” he said.

Ely granted that public education could uplift ordinary
“One man, one vote does not make Sambo equal to Socrates.”

— Edward A. Ross
UW sociologist from 1906-37, commenting on black suffrage

people. At the same time, he doubted that all Americans were educable. How many? Governing New York City would be easier, Ely ventured in 1882, “if thirteen per centum of the poorest and most dependent voters were disenfranchised.”

Ely’s elitism did not soften. The “human rubbish heap,” he wrote in 1922, was far larger than a submerged tenth. The intelligence testers had scientifically demonstrated that 22 percent of U.S. Army recruits were hopelessly inferior.

Ely lauded the Army IQ testing, because it enabled the state to scientifically inventory the fitness of its human stock. We census our farm animals and test our soils, Ely observed. Surely it was no less important to take stock of our human resources, ascertain where defects exist and apply suitable remedies. We have gotten far enough, Ely said, “to recognize that there are certain human beings who are absolutely unfit, and should be prevented from a continuation of their kind.”

UW president on ‘human defectives’

UW President Charles Van Hise concurred. Americans, he said, must abandon their individualism for the good of the race. Individuals were only stewards of their heredity — holding genetic resources, like land resources, in trust for future generations.

Van Hise demanded that the “defective classes” surrender control of their genetic resources, writing in 1910, “Human defectives should no longer be allowed to propagate the race.” Whether by involuntary sterilization or segregation in asylums, hospitals and institutions, the methods of conserving human heredity, Van Hise warned, must be thoroughgoing.

Addressing a visiting delegation of more than 100 of Philadelphia’s leading citizens, which had come to Madison on an “expedition” to study the virtues of the Wisconsin Idea, Van Hise told them in 1913, “we know enough about eugenics embraced the state as their chief agency for redeeming society. “God works through the State,” Ely professed, more so than through any other institution, including the church. Labor historian and economist John R. Commons told audiences that the state was the greatest power for good that existed.

Many reform organizations began in churches and voluntary groups, but, ultimately, nearly all progressives turned to the state. Government compulsion promised economic reform that was faster and farther reaching. Wisconsin sociologist Edward A. Ross put it this way: Removing control from the ordinary citizen and handing it to the government provided “the intelligent, far-sighted and public-spirited” a longer lever with which to work.

The belief in social engineering

When Ross memorably described Progressivism as “intelligent social engineering,” he was idealizing the government expert as an applied scientist. The social engineer worked outside politics (or, better, above it), proceeded rationally and scientifically, and pursued neither political power nor pecuniary gain but only the public good, which the engineer could identify and enact. It was the scientific spirit, Ross said, that provided “the moral
so that if that knowledge were applied, the defective classes 
would disappear within a generation.”

Inspired by the slogan “sterilization or racial disaster,” Wisconsin passed its forcible sterilization law that same 
year. When Charles McCarthy queried Ross on the merits of 
it, Ross replied: “I am entirely in favor of it.” When the 
appalling death toll of the First World War quickened eugenic 
fears, Ross, voicing a sentiment held by many, bemoaned the 
“immeasurable calamity that has befallen the white race.”

‘Race suicide’ and the minimum wage

Such attitudes formed the underpinning of a key pro-
gressive policy. The progressives feared that if firms were 
permitted to hire whomever they chose to, the work would 
necessarily go the lowest bidder, an argument that first was 
racialized when applied to Chinese immigrants, who were 
stigmatized as Coolies. As Ross put it, the Coolie “cannot 
outdo the American,” but “he can underlive him.”

Commons later would extend the indictment to all Asians. 
Ultimately, the disabled, Catholics and Jews from southern 
and eastern Europe and women all were accused of under-
cutting the American (read: Anglo-Saxon) workingman.

Worse, progressives said, the American workingman 
refused to lower his living standard to the Coolie level, 
instead opting to have fewer children. Thus inferior groups 
were allegedly outbreeding their biological betters, a notion 
Ross named “race suicide.” As Commons put it, economic 
competition “has no respect for the superior races,” so “the 
race with lowest necessities displaces others.” President

President Charles Van Hise left his mark 
on the University of Wisconsin-Madison. 
Sitting atop Bascom Hill is a granite 
booulder bearing a cast bronze plaque that 
highlights a 1904 quote from Van Hise, 
which sparked the Wisconsin Idea.

The progressives’ confidence in their own expertise as 
a reliable, even necessary guide to the public good was 
matched by their faith in the transformative promise of 
the state. On its face, this was a puzzle. Progressives, 
after all, attacked late 19th-century American government 
as corrupt, wasteful and chaotic, a well-founded critique 
during the notorious heyday of spoils-system patronage 
and ward-heeling machine politics. Why would progres-
sives place their fondest hopes in government, an institu-
tion they judged wholly inadequate to the task?

The answer, of course, was that progressives planned 
to reform government and the party system as well. Dur-
ing the Progressive Era, then, government served a dual 
role for progressives — simultaneously an instrument and 
an object of reform.

Progressives had convinced Americans and their political lead-
ers that laissez-faire was both economically outmoded and ethi-
cally deficient. Industrial capitalism, progressives said, created conflict, 
operated wastefully and distributed 
its copious fruits unjustly. Moreover, 
it produced novel organizational gi-
ants — trusts, industrial corporations 
and labor unions. Free markets, to 
the extent they ever could, no longer 
self-regulated.

Progress, the economic progres-
sives argued, now required the 
visible hand of a powerful regulatory state, guided by 
university trained experts, who would diagnose, treat and 
even cure low wages, long hours, unemployment, labor 
conflict, industrial accidents, financial crises, unfair trade 
practices and the other ailments of industrial capitalism.

UW-Madison, the hub

If the regulatory state were to be the new guarantor of 
economic progress, it would need to be built. Wisconsin
Theodore Roosevelt called race suicide “the greatest problem of civilization.”

One key eugenic solution, first proposed by Ely, was a legal minimum wage. A minimum wage, went the theory, improved heredity by ensuring that only the most productive immigrants, presumed to be Anglo-Saxon, were admitted, and also by idling inferior workers already in the workforce. Only the most productive, deserving workers kept their jobs, and they could afford to support larger families, thus averting a race to the racial bottom.

The original progressives were deeply ambivalent about the poor. This is, I think, the great contradiction at the heart of Progressive Era reform. Progressives felt genuine compassion for “the people,” which is to say, those groups they judged worthy of American citizenship and employment. The deserving poor were offered the helping hand of state uplift.

Yet progressives simultaneously scorned the millions of ordinary people who happened to be disabled, or of an “inferior” race, or female. The so-called undeserving poor were offered the closed hand of state exclusion and restraint.

This amalgam of compassion and contempt helps explain why Progressive Era reform at once uplifted and excluded — and did both in the name of progress.

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