
In 1970, Peter Filene wrote a persuasive “Obituary for the ‘Progressive Movement’” in the *Atlantic Quarterly*, arguing that, although there may have been a progressive *era* in American history during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, identifying and defining a cohesive, progressive *movement* had proved impossible. He urged historians to abandon the mission. Nearly fifty years after Filene’s article, discussion continues unabated concerning whether there was a progressive movement, who were its main characters, and what were its chief characteristics.

Yet another entry in the historiography of progressivism, Leonard’s *Illiberal Reformers* nonetheless marks a significant departure. Although the dominant attitude toward progressivism in surveys, textbooks, and the popular imagination will doubtless continue to be positive for some time, Leonard’s Princeton-published study demonstrates that a darker view of progressivism has become a respectable position. Criticism of progressive reformers has been building for some time, on the left and the right. Left-leaning historians have long been troubled by the paternalistic and bourgeois character of progressive reform, and those further left have complained of the tameness of such reform—the failure, from the Marxist critics’ perspective, to seek a wholesale demolition of the capitalistic economic system that was the ultimate source of the social evils the progressives targeted. Critics on the right, meanwhile, have emphasized the progressives’ facile utopianism and the popularity among them of eugenic notions of human improvement, including promotion of birth control and sterilization—even, in some cases, coercively applied. Some problems have been widely acknowledged by historians of all stripes, such as progressives’ weakness on the issue of race, ranging from indifference to active promotion of segregation.

For Leonard, however, criticism of progressivism rises to the level of condemnation. In his reading, racism, sexism, and nativism are not incidental weaknesses that mar an otherwise laudable program of reform; they are central to the story of progressivism. Leonard’s focus is on the economic views of progressive thinkers, and thus the main characters are the new breed of professional economists associated with the nascent American Economic Association, such as Richard Ely, John R. Commons, and Simon Patten; but sociologists, theologians, and public intellectuals such as Edward A. Ross, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Herbert Croly also figure...
prominently. In part 1, Leonard outlines the progressive economic vision, which was a conscious inversion of the old, individualist, and laissez-faire concept of economics that had dominated nineteenth-century political economy. The progressives’ animus toward individualism, however, led them to privilege the role of the expert. If society’s future could not be determined by the unregulated interaction of self-interest-pursuing individuals, then it must be guided by a cadre of experts using the tools of the powerful, national, administrative state. Who better to organize such an endeavor than professional economists and sociologists, who would base their decisions on objective science rather than subjective preference?

In part 2, Leonard unfolds the implications of the “progressive paradox”—the “strange and unstable compound of compassion and contempt” (189) that animated the progressive political program. This paradox was expressed, for example, in the crusade to eliminate poverty by a combination of welfare programs to provide material assistance to the poor and enforced sterilization to prevent the proliferation of people who would be genetically predisposed to be poor.

Not much of Leonard’s material is entirely new. The secondary sources cited throughout the footnotes indicate that historians have been bringing to light the reprehensible aspects of major progressive thinkers’ views for some time. Jonah Goldberg covered some of the same territory in Liberal Fascism (2008). But obscure secondary sources needed a sweeping, general history that put these concerns front and center, and Goldberg’s book, published by a conservative, non-university press, could be dismissed (fairly or not) as partisan polemics. Leonard’s book offers a broad, forceful treatment and will have to be taken seriously by anyone seeking to understand and evaluate progressivism.

Leonard’s determination to depict the progressives as villains, however, comes at a cost. Consider the case of Monsignor John A. Ryan, the one Catholic figure who enters Leonard’s story. Without question, Ryan belongs to the progressive movement in many ways, and on various economic matters he was explicitly an ally of progressive leaders such as Richard Ely. Yet Leonard fails to do justice to Ryan’s views. He includes Ryan in a list of minimum wage advocates who believed that “removing the inferior from work benefited society by protecting American wages and Anglo-Saxon racial integrity” (161). Ryan was in favor of minimum wage legislation, to be sure, but this description of his motives is misleading at the least. Ryan also vocally and consistently opposed birth control and compulsory sterilization, yet in this work that features the eugenic views of progressives prominently and identifies Ryan with progressivism, Leonard never mentions the fact. (A more thorough treatment of Ryan’s
relationship with progressivism, with particular focus on eugenics, can be found in chapter 3 of Christine Rosen’s *Preaching Eugenics* [Oxford University Press, 2004].) One suspects that detailed investigation of other figures would likewise reveal views that are more nuanced than Leonard characterizes them.

Along similar lines, Leonard never systematically explores the complex question of what exactly constitutes racism and sexism. He seems to be disturbed not only by progressives’ *application* of the science of intelligence in, for example, racially-charged eugenic sterilization programs, but also by the *science* itself. Granted that there was much pseudo-science going on under the guise of intelligence science, the implication that there is no legitimacy whatsoever in IQ testing and data is questionable.

Even more problematic is Leonard’s concept of sexism, which seems to censure any recognition of differential sexual roles. Contemporary orthodox Catholics might agree that patriarchal progressives were unduly dismissive of the capacity of women to take on and succeed in various public roles, but to deny that there was any value in the traditional model of a nuclear family headed by a male breadwinner (which was defended by, for example, John Ryan) seems a bridge too far.

The book is a valuable corrective to conventional views of progressivism, and it helps to clarify our picture of the progressive era in important ways. Nonetheless, some of the implicit theoretical premises and conclusions are problematic. It raises serious questions about progressive ideas and policies—which is a significant achievement—but it does so from a position that is insufficiently critical of the progressive verities of our own time.

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There are many prescriptions for the renewal of genuine political conservatism in the United States, and this is one of the most interesting for readers of the *Catholic Social Science Review*. Yuval Levin is the founding editor of *National Affairs*, and is the Hertog Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. He was chief of staff of President George W. Bush’s Council on Bioethics, and served on the domestic