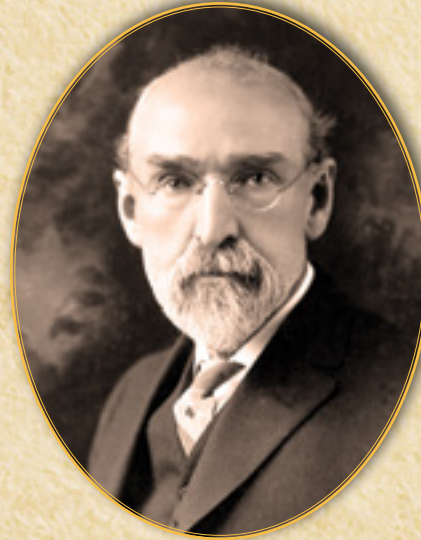


Wisconsin progressives

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



“Human defectives should no longer be allowed to propagate the race.”

— **Charles Van Hise**
UW president from 1903-'18 and a founder of the Wisconsin Idea

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

had regressive beliefs



“By the cataclysm of a war in which it took no part, this race (blacks), after many thousand years of savagery, was suddenly let loose into the liberty of citizenship, and the electoral suffrage.”

— **John R. Commons**
UW economist and labor historian
from 1904-'33

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,

“Negroes are for the most part grownup children, and should be treated as such.”

— **Richard T. Ely**
UW professor and director of the School of Economics, Political Science and History from 1892-1925



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.

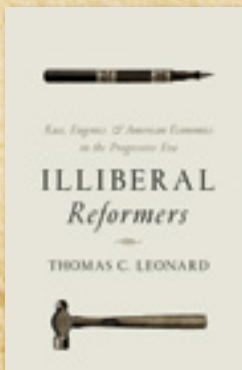
How could progressives return government to the people while simultaneously placing it beyond their reach in the hands of experts? They could not. If democracy meant, as DeWitt characterized it, control of the many, then government by experts was, by its nature (and indeed, by design) less democratic.

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



“Inspired by the slogan ‘sterilization or racial disaster,’ Wisconsin passed its forcible sterilization law in 1913, with the support of the University of Wisconsin’s most influential scholars, among them President Charles Van Hise and Edward A. Ross.”

— From Thomas C. Leonard’s “Illiberal Reformers”

**“One man,
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— **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



Van Hise Hall has towered over the Madison campus since 1967. It is named after Charles Van Hise, the revered UW president from 1903-'18.

JAMES STEAKLEY PHOTO

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 progressive policy. The progressives feared that if firms were permitted to hire whomever they chose to, the work would necessarily go to 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 undercutting 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

capital of the expert, the divine spark that keeps him loyal and incorruptible.”

Ross’s metaphor of the social engineer captured the extravagant faith of progressive economists in their own wisdom and objectivity, a mostly unquestioned assumption that they could and would represent an identifiable public good. Ross’s metaphor also implied that America’s economic challenges were as comprehensible and tractable as the purely technical problems addressed by engineers on the factory floor.

His engineering metaphor turned incorrigible differences into preventable errors. Financial crisis, economic panic, violent labor conflict and money wars were thus tamed into bad planning, inefficient practices and unscientific management. In an era of recurring economic crisis, the social engineer was an appealing conceit. Within certain limits, Ely announced in his influential textbook, *An Introduction to Political Economy*, “we can have just such a kind of economic life as we wish.”

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-healing machine politics. Why would progressives place their fondest hopes in government, an institution they judged wholly inadequate to the task?

The answer, of course, was that progressives planned to reform government and the party system as well. During 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 leaders that laissez-faire was both economically outmoded and ethically deficient. Industrial capitalism, progressives said, created conflict, operated wastefully and distributed its copious fruits unjustly. Moreover, it produced novel organizational giants — trusts, industrial corporations and labor unions. Free markets, to the extent they ever could, no longer self-regulated.

Progress, the economic progressives 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



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

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. WI

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had the ingredients to make the first operational prototype. The University of Wisconsin was already a key hub of American progressive economics. Ely, Commons and Ross were among the most vocal national voices for reform. The university and the state Capitol were collocated in Madison. Gov. Robert La Follette and University President Charles Van Hise had been undergraduate classmates, both of whom, influenced by former UW President John Bascom, believed deeply in the efficacy and wisdom of scientific government.

La Follette, then a progressive Republican, unleashed the Wisconsin faculty on the statehouse. By 1908, all the economists and one-sixth of the faculty held appointments on Wisconsin government commissions, including Van Hise. Commons, whom Ely had recruited to Madison in 1904, traveled State Street between the university and the Capitol so regularly that he wore a groove into it.

Blurring the lines between academic research and political activism, Commons and his allies pushed through legislation that established regulatory commissions, restricted working hours, fixed minimum wages, regulated utilities and compensated industrial accident victims.

By 1912, two books extolling the virtues of the Wisconsin Idea had been published, Frederic C. Howe’s *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* and Charles McCarthy’s *The Wisconsin Idea*. Both authors were pro-

gressives and former students of Ely’s.

Howe’s book claimed that the partisans and politicians, made obsolete by university experts like Commons, had all but disappeared from the statehouse in Madison. The field was left to the experts, who brought scientific efficiency into every corner of the state. In Wisconsin, Van Hise said proudly, political science had moved away from “political” and toward “science.”

This was the Wisconsin Idea: The university was a creature of the state and had a duty to supply the state with beneficial knowledge. Therein lay a crucial ambiguity, however. Wisconsin, like the United States more generally, was multifarious. Progressives argued that a well-run government, like a well-run business corporation, should enlist the aid of expert administrators. Ely maintained that administering a great city

was a harder job than running a great railroad company.

But the purpose of the corporation was to maximize profit. What were the analogous purposes of Wisconsin? What was the public analog to corporate profits, the end to which public administrators applied their expertise? Or, what did Wisconsin want?

Van Hise conceived of the public good as what was good for the public. The extremely complex problems of government should not be left to an unprepared electorate, Van Hise said — what was needed was a “government of experts.”

