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Race in the History of Economics: The Missing Narratives?

About:

Thomas Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 264 pages, ISBN 978-069116959-0

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Leonard's *Illiberal Reformers* was published in 2016 and provoked a large number of academic and non-academic comments—balanced analyses and historiographical discussions, vitriolic criticisms as well as outstanding praise. An unusual fate for a book on the history of economics, its discussion extended well beyond specialised journals into mainstream fora in economics and history. A symposium, massive press coverage in the US and in the UK, a mention in a documentary, and multiple podcasts and interviews—this widespread reception suggests the need for a further review, focused on the broader significance of the book, more than four years after its publication.[1] Adding to this considerable debate are Leonard's own subsequent responses to criticisms (Leonard, 2018). While Leonard's work influenced different literatures and audiences, this essay focuses on the book's reception within the community of historians of economics.

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[1] See the extensive list of press articles, academic and non-academic reviews, and author's interviews on Leonard's website: *https://scholar.princeton.edu/tleonard/illiberal-reformers* [Retrieved 14th October 2019]. Missing from the list of reviews is Steinbaum and Weisberger (2017).

The first part summarises my interpretation of the book. The second part is a review of academic reviews of *Illiberal Reformers*. The last part is a short essay on the state of the scholarship on "hierarchical thinking" in the history of economics.

1. Diving Deep into Hierarchical Minds

Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era immerses the reader into the "hierarchical thinking"[2] that underlay much of the knowledge produced during the American Progressive Era, i.e., the period of social and political reforms spanning the 1890s to the 1920s. It is a fascinating read for the many details it provides on a wide range of characters, institutions and events. Whilst elitism, racism, sexism, as well as classism, are by no means phenomena confined to this moment in history, arguments such as the danger of "race suicide", concrete policies such as restrictive immigration legislation or sex-specific minimum wages, as well as specific practices of advocacy and expertise first appeared during this period.

The book is divided into two parts: the first four chapters describe "The Progressive Ascendancy" in three acts (Chapters 2-4), the second part is devoted to what Leonard describes as "The Progressive Paradox" (Chapters 5-10). The first act of the "Ascendancy" is about the rise of contemporary faith in scientific management. The first chapter describes how the progressives' political economy was invested with a scientific as well as moral authority, primarily through its transformation "from a species of public discourse among gentlemen into an expert, scientific practice" (20). The "new political economy", both an academic and an advocacy project aiming at reforms, was, according to Leonard, fundamentally elitist. Leonard presents the reformers as a heterogeneous range of individuals—"the professor of social sciences, the scholar activist, the social worker, the muckraking journalist, and the economic expert advising or serving the government" (x) whose unity rests upon their common belief in the possibility of improvement and "progress" of humankind using the tools of social sciences. "All were intellectuals" (11) driven by moral outrage.

> The protest of the progressives originated not out of personal suffering but rather out of moral and intellectual discontent with the suffering (and enrichment) of others. (7)

[2] The term hierarchical thinking refers to the building of hierarchies between human beings, resulting in classification into inferior and superior groups, entitled to different rights and duty. See Peart and Levy (2008) for a more general perspective on hierarchy in economic thought.

For Leonard, the reformers set themselves at a distance from society not only as a result of class prejudice, but also through their "self-conception as disinterested agents of reform" (7). Throughout the book, emphasis is placed upon the claim that the progressives' conception of science was undemocratic: because they denied autonomous individuals the ability to choose and define the common good (and the means to attain it), they are characterized as *illiberal*.

The well-known history of the creation of the American Economic Association and its social gospel component is recast as a narrative of reformers "turned illiberal" (Chapter 2). The task of the newly organized experts was "not merely to serve the social good but also to identify it for others", and "teach … the poor what they should want" (15). Based on a common understanding and discontent with liberal individualism, a rejection of "waste, disorder, conflict, and injustice they ascribed to industrial capitalism" (8), and a strong anti-monopoly mindset, their epistemic values merged with what Leonard qualifies as an "extravagant faith in administration" (9). Chapter 3 describes how economists became experts "in the nation's service and [their] own" (28), at the Federal and state level, the "Fourth Branch" made of federal agencies, as well as in private advocacy organizations. As Leonard correctly remarks, old-school laissez-faire (unlike later ordo- or neo-liberalism) was a "non-starter as a professionalizing strategy" (28): How much scientific expertise is required to repeat 'let the Market decide'? (28). Leonard then details various examples of the deployment of this expertise, including a short history of the American Association for Labor Legislation (AALL), presented as the exemplary 'think tank' made of public reformers and university professors (35-38).

> The AALL was a pioneer in the new social space colonized just outside the expanding boundaries of the university and government … close enough to influence, but far enough to claim independence. (36)

In this second act of the ascendancy, Leonard describes how the progressives' material interests—creating a market for expertise—were aligned with the content of their ideas through the metaphor of the social engineer (34) employed by the state. The third act was the effective application of the progressives' ideas. Chapter 4 is built around the central notion of efficiency—efficiency in production as in administration, in citizenship and in motherhood. The underlying aim was the perfection of humankind based not only on science, but crucially also on scientific *management* (63). At the end of Woodrow Wilson's first term, the "fourth branch" was established (45), shifting power to the new independent agencies of the executive and signalling the rise of bureaucratic expertise. Efficiency required measurement, and Leonard describes the various institutions created to produce data and monitor policies—research divisions and a multitude of "bu-

reaus".[3] From home economics to the conservationist movement, Leonard traces links to almost everything that defines the period.

The "progressive paradox" is the topic of the second part of the book. According to Leonard, the "price to be paid" by this makeover of American liberalism was the exclusion of "the disabled, immigrants, African Americans, and women from the American workforce, all in the name of progress" (xi). Measurements, scales, timeclocks, ability tests, the use of averages to define the "normal", were implemented to segregate groups and traits judged as pathological. This second part opens on the issue of wages (Chapter 5). "What Should Labor Get?" is presented as the "supreme economic question" (76) of the time. The following chapters on Darwinism (Chapter 6) and eugenics (Chapter 7) can be described as the treasure trove where progressives found the scientific authoritative statements to exclude a wide range of persons: the "unemployable" (Chapter 8), immigrants (Chapter 9) and women (Chapter 10).

Chapter 5 describes the plurality of wage determination theories that existed at the turn of the century. While Leonard does not mention the many contemporary practices of wage setting, he attributes a central benchmark role to John Bates Clark's theory of marginal productivity, eliding the fact that his theory was marginal at the time. Clark's political position, that there must be a middle ground between anarchy or *laissez faire* on the one hand, and socialism or total state control of wages on the other, is contrasted with the progressives' position in favour of a living wage as plainly exclusionary (84). The idea behind a common view on wages was that some individuals, due to their low standards of living, accept low wages. The same argument was behind the formula of "low wage races". As Leonard argues, the "living-standard theory of wage determination was less a theory than a way of formulating a widespread anxiety" that if employers were left to hire whoever they wanted, "the work will always go to the lowest bidder" (88). "[L]abor productivity being irrelevant", it implies a "race to the bottom" (88). Common contemporary arguments on the "degradation" of labour that resulted from this "race to the bottom", especially those made by economists who favoured competition—such as Marshall, Edgeworth or Pigou—are not used as comparison. Leonard describes how this living standard argument

[3] The "fourth branch" usually refers to institutions that influence politics and are not the government, e.g. the press, interest groups, etc. In Leonard's usage, it refers to autonomous government agencies staffed by experts. A list of these agencies created during the progressive era is not provided by Leonard, nor does he explore their history, except for some war committees. On his use of the term "fourth branch", see Leonard (2015, 50, footnote 1). The "bureaus" include the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics created in 1895 and the U.S. Census Bureau created in 1902.

was linked to the "race suicide" hypothesis, connecting the standard of living hypothesis to racialist claims (88).

The two following chapters consider the relationship between Darwinism, eugenics and "economic reform" in a broad sense. Pointing out that there was "something in Darwin for everyone" (90), Leonard describes the plurality of meanings and metaphors using evolutionary thought as a background and the progressives' preference for artificial selection (98). What they found in Darwinism, just as in eugenics, was scientific authority (105). The next chapter describes the variety of eugenic thought in economics, with an emphasis on well-known eugenic examples (in particular in John Commons' and Irving Fisher's respective works). The selection of authors serves to emphasise the description of the tension at the heart of many reformists' ideas at the time: the notion of separating the good and deserving from the bad and irrecuperable.

This tension is explored at length in the debates about the "unemployable" (Chapter 8). While neither new nor specific to reformism, the tension was racialized and essentialized during the period using the new and consensual language of eugenics. The term "unemployable" was popularized by Sidney and Beatrice Webb (131) who had a long list of "parasites", "unfits" and "low-standard workers" which threatened the "Anglo-Saxon" standard. Chapter 9 describes the debates regarding immigration and the same arguments on hereditary inferiority and degradation. Central in each case was the desire to make inferiority "legible" (138).

At the end of the chapter on the "unemployable", Leonard produces a very interesting analysis of some of the arguments behind the advocacy for minimum-wage legislation. In the context of the debates on the restriction of immigration in the 1910s, journalist and social reformer Paul Kellogg argued in favour of a "tariff" on immigrant labour "compelling all immigrants to earn at least $2.50 per day or else be denied entry" (159). According to Leonard, the tariff was, in fact, a minimum wage or floor wage, pushing firms "to hire only the most able immigrant workers" (159). Standing fifty per cent higher than the average lower-skilled worker wage, the tariff was expected to reduce the proportion of the 'unemployable' in employment. Why these "unemployable" would be employed in the first place, what the implications were for the theory of wage determination, or the conception of competition at large, were not at all the focus of the debates: the negative effect on unemployment was consensual, and considered a good thing. Embracing a minimum wage "for its power to exclude" was a stance based on the assumption of the inability of some individuals, here lumped into groups, "to command a minimum wage" (159), rather than on wage rigidities that might prevent adjustment of supply and demand of labour.

In the United States, the first minimum wage legislations were sex-specific. The last chapter of the book reconstructs the debate on the employment of women as undercutting the male breadwinner family wage (Chapter 10), that too being framed as illiberal. Many economists, regardless of their theory of wages, framed the problem of women's labour as separate and specific, with the family wage principle an axiom beyond discussion. Many would not endorse the principle of differentiating between fathers and childless men, but would differentiate women based on their marital status, a contradiction pointed out by many feminist scholars at the time. Leonard provides three explanations for the existence of this "gendered regime of labour legislation". First, "[m]aternalism was just too integral" (182). Second, sex-specific legislations were transitory and strategic: Imposing minimum wages for women, just as restricting hours of work for children, was politically more acceptable as a first step, that could then be generalized to the entire labour force. The third explanation relates to a public choice view of expertise: highly educated women facing barriers to enter academia created their own market for "feminine" expertise regarding specific feminine policies.

2. A Review of Reviews

Leonard's book has had a contrasted reception, to say the least—which in many ways highlights the significance of the book. Reviews in the general press have generally been very positive, emphasizing what is maybe not well-known by the general public—eugenics generally being associated with conservatives rather than progressives. Academic reviews have been more varied. The discussion around one major theme illustrates this. Many reviewers of *Illiberal Reformers* stressed how the flagship example of minimum wages was one of the most interesting sections of the book because it uncovers the exclusionary arguments endorsed by a majority of economic reformers (see e.g. Giocoli, 2017; Hansen, 2018; Platt, 2018). That the negative impact of minimum wages on employment was seen as a good thing by labour reformers on eugenic grounds is a central and substantial contribution to the literature. But the material Leonard deploys on minimum wages, and his interpretation of it, have also been criticized. According to historian Christine Manganaro, herein lies the "revisionist core of the book" (Manganaro, 2017, 472). Using the general term of "minimum wage", whose common referent is the federal minimum wage introduced in 1938, to refer to sex-specific states legislation, "failing to mention labour organizing for fair wages and protections, Leonard claims that the minimum wage was actually a racist and sexist legislative move by expert reformers—an angle on the past that reads as a 'gotcha' about a type of policy often celebrated for being just" (Manganaro, 2017, 473). Another historian, Randall Hansen

found the minimum wages section "fascinating", but added that Leonard provides "little sense of relative impact of these theorists (was Kellogg really responsible for U.S. minimum wage policy?)" (Hansen, 2017, 242). The two arguments—that Leonard exploits resonances with the present day, and a linear model of the influence of ideas—are at the heart of the contrasting reviews of *Illiberal Reformers*.

A common feature of the more critical reviews is to challenge Leonard's cast of characters. Leonard constantly points out that not all and not only progressive economists held hierarchical views about humankind. However, as Furner points out, Leonard's narrative—that these exclusionary views defined the progressives rather than the progressive era—is seen as "essentializing" a "progressive mind" (Furner, 2018, 328-329). In another review, Bateman fleshes out alternative teams of characters that would have led Leonard to tell a different story (Bateman, 2017). While Bateman focuses on the delimitation of progressivism in relation to religion and American liberalism, Scorresone and Schweikhardt (2017) challenge what Leonard frames as homogeneous views on economic reform and expertise within the American Economic Association (AEA). Furner similarly criticizes Leonard's tendency to homogenize diversity within discourses on trusts and monopolies, approaches and records in terms of policy, thoughts on the limits of government interventions, and conceptions of wage determination (Furner, 2018, 329-331). She highlights the important role played by disagreements on empirical studies in political debates (Furner, 2018, 332). Furner ultimately questions the use of the term "illiberal" for its power to essentialize what was a broader spectrum of epistemic and political values (2018, 332). For many reviewers, Leonard says little, except for a few mentions, of conservatives, "status-quo eugenicists", or likewise of liberal progressives, or even "progressives of a corporate liberal persuasion" (Furner's expression, 2018, 331). Furthermore, no space is devoted to "the social scientists who changed their views along the way" (Trent, 2017, 225). Of course, one has to make choices, but Leonard's selection has been received sceptically by the majority of historians, whether specialists of progressivism (Bateman, 2017; Furner, 2018) or eugenics.[4]

In addition to the choice of characters, reviewers insist on the lack of a benchmark to compare the representative progressive reformer (Platt, 2016, 3). According to Scoresone and Schweikhardt, Leonard's book leaves it unanswered whether racism was "unique to progressives or shared by a generation" and whether their racism was "worse" than others' (2017, 411). In view of the consensus on eugenics in scientific circles, and the widespread racism in American society, Bateman wonders, "why should we expect that any academic econo-

[4] On the issue of eugenics proper, Manganaro challenges his "selectivity" (2017, 473) while Trent talks about "commission and omissions" (2017, 225).

mists would have rejected eugenics?" (Bateman, 2017, 721). In this environment, he goes on, "[i]t must have taken a very unique kind of person to have tried to build a career and maintain professional credibility if they were opposed to something that was not just widely accepted in the scientific community, but was unopposed by that community" (Bateman, 2017, 721). Actually, there were some exceptions (which Leonard does not ignore but mentions only briefly), which might have served as heuristic stories to help understand mainstream thought at the time.

The perceived lack of synchronic comparison is reinforced by a lack of diachronic comparison. For example, in the paragraphs devoted to the Dillingham Commission, Leonard does not mention what came before or after the commission in terms of practices in the long history of immigration in America.[5] This point is made by Jacobson (2018), who insists on continuity with the past, and Hart (2016), who insists on a continuity within the interwar period. The necessity of this longer view is also emphasized by Platt in relation to the history of economic knowledge itself—pointing to political economy's deeper epistemological vulnerability to eugenic thought than other disciplines due to its closeness to power (Platt, 2016, 1). Thus, the "progressive paradox"—that the progressive version of American liberalism means the exclusion of many—failed to compare to other exclusionary mindsets. Leonard's description of the many exclusionary views and practices at work is powerful. Yet, how the excluded groups were treated before or after the progressives' interventions and what changed along the way is not developed in the book.

In a very concise review, historian James Trent rightly points out "The strength of *Illiberal Reformers* lies in its cautionary tale. Even the most careful and caring social reform can have within it the seeds of oppression." (Trent, 2017, 225) He adds that Leonard's book "begins with the presupposition that free market liberalism, devoid of intervening reform, would have rendered vulnerable people in those decades better off. Unfortunately, this assumption drives the book's data and analysis" (Trent, 2017, 225). This general orientation of the book is noted by almost every reviewer. Giocoli argues that Leonard protects himself from "the danger of scientific hubris" by relying on strong classical liberal values, which produces "a distinct Hayekian flavor in this story" (Giocoli, 2017, 7). Steinbaum and Weisberger's (2017) review in the *Journal of Economic Literature*, perhaps the most critical of all, once described Leonard's perspective as "libertarian"—a word that disappeared from the published version of the review.

[5] The United States Immigration Commission, known by the name of its chairman, William Dillingham, worked between 1907 and 1911 to examine the causes and consequences of immigration in the United States. The main recommendation of the final report was a limitation of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as from Asia considered as a threat to the American society.

The two diametrically opposed reviews by Steinbaum and Weisberger (2017) and Giocoli (2017) are extreme cases of recurrent comments.[6] As a reaction to this, Leonard suggests that readers who read his book as emphasizing the progressives' legacy today are projecting a criticism not based on his text (Leonard, 2018, 384). However, *Illiberal Reformers* does rely on resonances with the later period of American history and the present—in a later response for example, Leonard qualifies the 'illiberal progressives' as "America's best and brightest" (2018, 393), a clear reference to Halberstam's 1972 book on the Kennedy administration. In his answer to the symposium' reviews on his book, Leonard wrote that it would be interesting to write the history of the progressives' legacy characterized by what Scheall (2018) called "a political epistemology"—a faith in scientific management of the society. Bishop remarks that it would be interesting to see what Leonard thinks of later "central planning, centralized authority and decrease in classic liberalism" (Bishop, 2016, 356). It is true that there is no direct analysis in *Illiberal Reformers* of how bureaucratic expertise today (or after the progressive era) excludes some groups, but there are strong implicit allusions to a tainted legacy. Contrary to Levy and Peart (2016) however, Leonard implies rather than states some of the normative claims underpinning the book. An explicit acknowledgment of his stance would have been beneficial, as his readers, who hold different opinions on the book and on classical liberalism, seem to have 'misread' *Illiberal Reformers* in the same way, i.e. as implying these strong values. This narrative is echoed by Hammond's genuine question:

> Leonard's preferred alternative to the Progressives' intellectual and ethical commitments is classical liberalism with its emphasis on the primacy of the individual and protection of political, economic and civil liberties. … But liberalism carries its own dangers of antinomian individualism and social isolation if it is not secured by sound ethics and understanding of human nature. How can we know that a return to classical liberalism is progress? (Hammond, 2016)

I would like to add three points that I did not see articulated in the reviews I read, using the notable absence of any analysis of Walter F. Wilcox's work as a stepping stone example. Wilcox (1861-1964) graduated from Columbia University after a traditional research visit to Germany, and wrote his PhD on divorce—he "demonstrated" that women's freedom has a negative effect on population growth and how it implied "race suicide". He later became chief statistician of the

[6] Giocoli's review is in fact an answer to Steinbaum and Weisberger's harsh review. See also Steinbaum and Weisberger's following answer to Giocoli (2018). Many of Giocoli's arguments relate to the reputation and status of Leonard in the field the history of economics, established by his superb series of papers published before the book. The grand narrative of *Illiberal Reformers* does not appear in these previous works.

Census Bureau. Wilcox is also known (Darity, 1994) for being close to white supremacist Alfred Holt Stone. Also, it seems that Wilcox held racist views on his own (see Aldrich, 1979). This example leads one to wonder why some individuals are not part of Leonard's story, particularly when they do address major questions regarding "race" and gender, while at the same time they do not correspond to the representative "progressive reformer"; it leads also one to wonder how to describe the deep hierarchical aspect of entire systems of thought that seems shared by a diversity of actors.

My first point concerns how inferiority was assigned to different groups—minorities, women. While the same analogies and opposition were used, the practices and experiences of domination were different. For example, inferiority, in the case of gender, is not combined with enforcement of social distance from women but is rather based on complementarity narratives. Likewise, "social control" of the disabled and of the immigrant can in fact refer to a variety of practices.[7] Inferiority was not assigned in the same way to women and minorities (for example) and through the same practices, and Leonard does not really analyse these differences, or how it constitutes a system of thought. Rather, Leonard focuses on conceptions of inferiority in relation to state intervention advocacy.

Second, in moving towards what Furner calls the "excavation of a more complex social and intellectual order", highlighting the diversity of progressives' interests, I would like to emphasize the deep consequences of some measurement practices that are somewhat neglected in Leonard's history. I am explicitly referring to the role of racial statistics in defining the American population, reaching back to 1790. In addition to the catalogue of written prejudices which Leonard provides, it would have been relevant to explore the evolution (representation and measurement) of some of the foundational categories in operation—starting with "race" itself. This could have put more emphasis on another understudied element in Leonard's book: the practices of big businesses (not only the progressives' conception of corporate practices)—as racism and sexism were not confined to law makers and public policies. Continuity between the state's and businesses' use of some categories and practices could have been pointed out to observe the unique features of the era. In essence, an exploration of the longer history of hierarchical thinking in the discipline of economics could have helped distinguishing what the specific legacy of this period might have been. This is not intended as a further criticism of *Illiberal Reformers*, but as a response to the questions which the reviewers' debates have raised. Rather than the historiography of progressivism and state intervention, my view is more directed to-

[7] One way to explore this issue is to consider the intersectionality of gender, race and class historically—how comparisons were made, relations drawn and differences underlined.

ward the historiography of "race", and hierarchical thinking in general. The other books reviewed by Manganaro and her review itself also pointed in this direction.[8]

Finally, Leonard made clear choices and built a strong narrative and he has produced a powerful revision of the progressive era history, especially needed in the field of history of economics. Returning to the minimum wage example, Leonard's reconstruction of the history of minimum wages using exclusionary rhetoric is extremely interesting. Read alongside rather than against other aspects of minimum wage justifications, the reconstruction highlights some major ambiguities. Making the screening of inferiors the sole objective of minimum wage however does not accurately capture the complexity of the debates of the time, particularly the arguments that were proffered on exploitation and low-wage *occupations*, not only "low wage workers". Balancing these two strands—minimum wages as exclusionary *vs.* egalitarian, and choices to explore ambiguities rather than build clear-cut narratives, ultimately depends on the audience you are targeting and which historiography you believe is to be "corrected".

3. Reframing the History of Economic Thought?

It is not my purpose to add another critical assessment of Leonard's book to the wealth of reactions that it already sparked. Rather, I would like to reflect on the feeling of indecisiveness that can be experienced from reviewing these reviews. As I now explain, it should, I believe, be analysed in relation to the current state of the field of history of economics.

Audiences

A first element to be brought to the analysis has to do with disciplinary boundaries and identities. As the previously reviewed reviews indicate, Leonard's book has been widely discussed outside the field of history of economics. One interesting element emerging from my reading of reviews written for different audiences is that Leonard is sometimes presented as an economist, an historian, an intellectual historian, and an historian of economic thought/knowledge or of economics. Reviewers in one field tend to acknowledge and praise originality of the book as far as it adds something new to the existing literature in their own identified field and discipline. Historians praised the section dealing with economic knowledge, insisting that

[8] Along with *Illiberal Reformers*, Manganaro reviews *Measuring Manhood: Race and the Science of Masculinity, 1830-1934* by Melissa N. Stein (2015) and *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* by Alexandra Minna Stern (2016).

the general history of eugenics was not original. As historian Hart puts it:

> *Illiberal Reformers* offers little that is new on the history and legacy of eugenics. Its strength lies rather in demonstrating how eugenics and economics walked hand-in-hand during the Progressive Era. (Hart, 2016, 566)

Conversely, historians of economics and economists would praise the book for inserting economists' contributions into a wider frame related to eugenics and political involvements.

As such, Leonard's reception testifies to the not-so-recent transformations of the practices of historians of economics, who have been embracing a wider set of historiographical perspectives and audiences. This trend necessarily questions established boundaries and fosters potential reproaches of lack of precision, originality and/or balance. Nancy MacLean's Democracy in Chains suffered a similar fate. In this book, MacLean recounts the foundation of the Virginia school of political economy by James Buchanan in the context of the anti-segregationist move of the 1960s and its influences on the radical right movement to the present. In both cases (Leonard and MacLean), the audience of the books extends beyond academic circles and this has triggered heated, even violent, debates, which cannot be disconnected from current political debates in the United States.[9]

Strawman

One recurring criticism addressed to Leonard and MacLean revolves around the idea that they tend to build a unitary representation of their object of study. Steinbaum and Weisberger (2017, 1077) label Leonard's endeavour as "motivated myth making" and Bateman (2017, 721) laments that Leonard's historiographical choices led him to build a straw man, "a representative 'economic reformer'". One is left wondering to what extent the present context does subsume the historical endeavour. In particular, the books have been *read* and *used* as ways to attack all economic reformers' mindsets as tainted by elitism and racial biases in the case of Leonard, and all public choice economists as fascists, in the case of McLean.[10]

Leonard's response to the accusation of constructing a "straw man" points to "the challenge of multiple audiences that a less internal history of economics unavoidably confronts" (Leonard, 2018, 388). While he recognizes that "too much lumping in the prefatory chap-

[9] Incidentally, the two controversies involved some of the same scholars; see the 2019 symposium in *Research in the History and Methodology of Economics*, 37B. In their introduction to the symposium, Farrant and Scheall sum up the reception and heated debates, and they provide a list of the reviews. For in-depth critical reviews of MacLean, see Burns (2018) and Fleury and Marciano (2018).

[10] Does addressing a large audience require leaning toward a strong unifying narrative? Why should it? Such questions go beyond the scope of this essay.

ters is a legitimate charge" (Leonard, 2018, 387), Leonard defends his broad unification of a progressive mindset. Responding to Jacobson, he agrees that continuity with the past is an important element, but he insists that there were also "innovations" introduced during this period (my own earlier remark is precisely to point to the deeper structural aspects of these innovations). One crucial element Leonard advances is that "until fairly recently, America's 'race' problem was mostly absent from the literatures with which historians of economics are most engaged with" (Leonard, 2018, 386). This is an important element that helps explain the importance of the book for the history of economics subfield.

Corrective Narratives

This "necessary corrective" narrative (Furner, 2018, 338) is an important achievement of the book. The important question Leonard asks in his 2018 response is central to understanding the project:

> [W]hy did so many scholars decide that progressives' reprehensible views merited little or no consideration? Why, did it take so long for a "necessary corrective" to the conventional historiography to be accepted? (Leonard, 2018, 393)

It is hard to write on silences; in this case, the silences of the historians of economics. While Leonard points to pioneering works in the history of economic thought, and hundreds of references in adjoining fields, the historiographical framing regarding history of economic thought is absent from the book, while at the centre of his 2018 answer to reviewers.[11] The relative neglect of "race" in history of economics certainly has several causes and is in itself a subject to be studied. "Race" in economics have a particular American history. Studying the history of American economics is relatively recent and gained momentum in the 1990s.[12]

More generally, the idea that hierarchical thinking as well as the identity of economic agents are separate subjects, distinct from the analysis economic thought still defined the mainstream of the field. Separate generally means unequal attention or importance granted to the subjects. An analogy with gender can be useful here: there are (a few) separate contributions on women economists or gender issues, but very few analyses of the gendered aspects of economic thought.

[11] Leonard refers briefly to Aldrich (1979), Bateman (2003), Cherry (1976), Cot (2005), Darity (1994), Fiorito (2013), McCann (2013), Peart and Levy (2005; 2008)—see: Leonard (2016, note 45 and 59, 217); Leonard (2018, note 25, 395). We can add the other articles of the special issue of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, in which Cot (2005) is published, including Rutherford's comment and Dimand (2005).

[12] On the difficulty to even write "race" without quotation marks in Europe, see Berg, Schor and Soto (2014).

One example is the lack of consideration of gender in the history of consumption theories, empirical analyses and practices.[13]

Interestingly, Leonard rightly points out that *Illiberal Reformers* contribution on gender was mainly ignored by reviewers except for a few brief mentions (Leonard, 2018, 387). Why the mainstream of the history of economics ignores or treats as a separate field the historical works available on this subject (produced by feminist economists and some historians of economic thought), even when it relates to the core canon of authors, is still an open question. While historiographical revolutions have radically transformed research practices and objects of study in other fields of history since the 1970s—from cultural and social history, to gender and post-colonial history, to recent trends in history of science and history of knowledge—there has been no comparable changes in history of economics.

The Long View

The unsettled nature of the historiography of hierarchical thinking calls for further research. That historians disagree is, in my opinion, a good thing, especially in the history of economics, where issues such as "race" and gender are under-researched. The energy wasted in defending the great men—whether Commons or Buchanan—is also worth studying. It tells us about historians' representations of the world, and their visions of the value of history for the present.

I interpret the confrontational aspect of many of the debates ignited by Leonard's book as a sign that more research is needed. Platt, for instance, poses a series of very interesting questions on the time period that stands in between *Illiberal Reformers* and *Democracy in Chains*:

> What role did the economists play in the mid-century decline in eugenic science? Did the field disavow its racist roots, such as anthropology, and did economists struggle to adjust their discourse to the post-hereditarian culture? Were there ways in which other languages of difference, such as value or risk, served to continue the discriminating work of race in economic thought after the mid-century shift? (Platt, 2016, 3)

[13] Historian Joan Scott described this "separate and unequal" state in departments of history in the 1980s. "In the case of women's history, the response of most non-feminist historians has been acknowledgment and then separation or dismissal ("women had a history separate from men's, therefore let feminists do women's history, which need not concern us"; or "women's history is about sex and the family and should be done separately from political and economic history"). In the case of women's participation, the response has been minimal interest at best ("my understanding of the French Revolution is not changed by knowing that women participated in it"). The challenge posed by these responses is, in the end, a theoretical one. It requires analysis not only of the relationship between male and female experience in the past, but also of the connection between past history and current historical practice." (Scott, 1986, 1055). This state of acknowledgement and separation characterizes most of the work on gender and "race" in today's history of economics.

In that sense, the passionate reception calls for a long-view history of hierarchical thinking in economics. How to describe the shift from the "catalogue of inferiority" (Leonard, 2016, 129) regarding the various "quality of workers" (133) to choices in human capital investments, which economist and social reformer Edith Abbot framed as the view according to which individuals "choose to stay incompetent" (1905, 301)? One way to bridge the analysis of inferiority and the development in human capital era is to document the history of ability measurement. Described in *Illiberal Reformers* as primarily state policies, ability tests would later become, in the 1960s, the core of private corporations' strategies to avoid compliance with anti-discrimination laws (see, the history of the Griggs decision). What the permeability of practices, from Federal state agencies to private corporations, tells us on the evolution of the authority of economists and economics, and more generally on knowledge produced along hierarchical value systems, is still very much an open question.

Setting aside the praise and vitriol, reading the book and the debates on 'facts' and framing demonstrates the real value of Leonard's book. It is to make us further reflect on our "educated beliefs and presumptions" (Hammond, 2016) and their role in the production of economic knowledge, as well as on the production of narratives in the history of economic thought.

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