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Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016. \$45 hardcover). Pp. xiv+250. ISBN 978-0-691-16959-0

In a nutshell, Thomas C. Leonard's book, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era*, is a tale of discombobulating paradoxes. First, there is the title itself, "illiberal reformers," which might easily perplex the amateur reader, offend his/her sensibilities, but stir intellectual curiosity. Two questions arise: how is it possible for an illiberal ideologue to positively reform the society he/ she is a member of, and, conversely, how could a reformer generally be associated to illiberal practices and mentalities? The author answers both questions by properly providing non-elusive meanings of the title first two words: whilst 'illiberal' merely combats the ideological assumptions of classical liberalism, 'reformer' does not necessarily have an unconditional sympathetic connotation. The author contends that reformism during the progressive era was about implementing certain substantial transformations of some dominant policies, generating both positive and negative effects. "Progressivism reconstructed American liberalism by dismantling the free market of classical liberalism and erecting in its place the welfare state of modern liberalism" (Leonard 191).

Second, there is the historical period itself: by and large, historians, economists, intellectuals, political scientists and pundits have termed the age between the 1880s and the early 1920s the 'Gilded Age' and the 'Progressive Era', generally without putting forward sufficient clarifying distinctions. This is precisely what Thomas Leonard commendably achieves. On the one hand, the 'Gilded Age' mythology and its narrative ingredients: capitalism, rough individualism, big businesses, boost economy, industrialism, imperialism; on the other, the 'Progressive era' epitomizing reformism, welfarism, administration, expertise, pragmatism, moralism, positivism, collectivism. Both syntagms have been idiosyncratically used to explain the mainstream development of American politics, economy and society; in fact, as the author suggests,

they should be seen as distinct sides of the same coin, as both have become explanatory models for the unprecedented modernization and development of the United States.

However, the book places a special emphasis on political economy. In order to illustrate the above-mentioned ideological distinctions and underpinnings, one might easily notice that the progressive reformers attempted to put to work an alternative strategy to the ‘invisible hand’ economic doctrine of self-regulating markets by designing the ‘visible hand’ dogma of the scientific administrative state (22). Consistent with the dialectical approach, one might easily explain the birth of labor unions and riots of the period (appraised by the progressive scheme) as spontaneous responses to the monopolistic tendencies and savage capitalism of big businesses and bosses (defended by the Gilded Age schemata). To illustrate the importance of this dialectical evolution of the period, it is enough to consider the fact that “from 1881 to 1905, American workers organized an average of four strikes per day, more than 36,000 in total” (4)! But political economy alone could not match the new aspirations of the progressive ideologues; instead, as the author argues, the new academic discipline of *economics* became instrumental for launching the expertise, the managerial efficiency and the scientific pretensions of the progressives (19, 105). Carefully collected and wielded economic data served as key arguments for the progressive justification of racism, nativism, anti-immigration policies and regulation of labor. Furthermore, the arguments were supposed to be formulated in a non-speculative manner, resulting out of the disinterested and objective calculations of outstanding experts militating for the general public interest and welfare of Americans. Therefore, in the spirit of Leonard’s overall temperate ironical overtone, “Progressivism was first and foremost an attitude about the proper relationship of science and its bearer, the scientific expert, to the state, and of the state to the economy (and polity)” (38), while the expert became the plenary figure of the time. “The practical man knows how. The scientific man knows why. The expert knows how and why” (37).

The brilliant and triumphant experts were not only economists: in fact, the most distinguished of them married happily academic pedantry

with bureaucratic duty (John R. Commons, Richard T. Ely, Irving Fisher, Arthur Holcombe, Jeremiah Jenks, Simon N. Patten, Henry R. Seager); the list of energetic progressive experts in the service of the administrative state included sociologists (Charles Horton Cooley, Charles R. Henderson, Edward A. Ross), social gospelers (Walter Rauschenbusch, Josiah Strong), journalists and intellectuals (Herbert Croly, Vernon Parrington, Benjamin DeWitt), jurists (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Louis Brandeis, Felix Frankfurter) and even presidents and notable politicians (Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, Robert LaFollette) (xiii, 11). Even if certain dividing issues generated minor disputes and dissenting opinions among prominent members of the progressive movement, there was a large consensus regarding certain recognizable doctrinal traits and salient orientations: first, the progressive mindset opposed both liberal individualism and laissez-faire economy; second, a peculiar type of nationalist impetus bumped into their strategic goals; third, certain collective rights encompassed by the public good desideratum prevailed over individual rights; fourth, pragmatic efficiency and scientific management were envisaged as key tools of holistic reforms; fifth, the progressive experts identified monopolies, trusts and big businesses as the most dangerous enemies of American society at large, and, finally, they almost prophetically anticipated the savior - the administrative state through specialized bureaucratic agencies (8-10).

Designing the 'fourth branch' (42) of the American government – independent, objective, scientific and expertise-guided bureaucratic agencies – became the central goal of progressive reformism coalescing and enclosing all visionary efforts and political actions. Thomas C. Leonard sagaciously ends the first part of his book by pointing at the final step of the all-encompassing reorganization of American politics, economy and society at the turn of the twentieth century: the bureaucratization of public life. According to the slogan 'the end excuses means', the author melancholically registers the negative side of the reformist over-determination of progressive strategists in the second part of his work, confronting the reader with the perplexities, paradoxes, inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in the processes of 'reform'. The progressive reformers went so far as to dismiss even the

constitutional principle of separation of powers, declaring it “inefficient and obsolete” (65); the progressive state was anthropomorphically imagined as a “social organism” (24, 101) endowed with ultimate rationality and honest moralism. The efficient and scientific administrative state was the champion and the general welfare was its glory. Through the methods of surveillance, investigation and regulation, the sanctified, expert-conducted, interventionist and paternalist bureaucratic agencies of the administrative state could operate both overarching social control (44-45) and social engineering. The latter, implying “not only scientific knowledge but also scientific virtue” (34), became respectable due to the unquestionable pomposity of scientism. Even if “the systematic gathering of social and economic facts, quantitative and qualitative, formed the core of the progressives’ scientific sensibility” (69), the progressive ideologues and reformers equated science with efficiency; they understood scientific and positive political action as the very spirit of the age and efficiency as being its ethos, characterized by “modernity, organization, orderliness, and objectivity” (55).

Around the turn of the twentieth century, scientific administration was, accordingly, the most appropriate action strategy. Purporting administration, not politics, “some American cities replaced mayors with city managers” (64), and the very scientific experiment in administration was the state of Wisconsin, managerially organized in compliance with the most rigorous assumptions of the German scientific state (40-42) and the welfare statism taught by German political economists in universities (17-18). Although eulogized for their rhetoric in defense of the ‘forgotten man’, Thomas Leonard assesses the regulative, interventionist and managerial policies of the progressives as substantially protectionist, not equalitarian (185). The movement of social gospel made one step forward, rejuvenating the American protestant spirit and pretending that the object of salvation in the modern world would be society, not the individual soul (12-13, 22).

The second part of Thomas Leonard’s work leaves room for exclusions through the use of pseudo-scientific propaganda and derailed arguments. Immigrants, women and the disabled are those excluded with

predilection from the progressives grandiose society daydream and the justificatory arguments are extracted from the so-called scientific discourses of heredity (Darwinism, eugenics and race science). To start with, out of the three fundamental Darwinist ideas, only evolution and common descent conveniently matched the progressives' ideological thinking; the third and the most problematic, natural selection, was considered inconsistent with the progressive dogmas of scientism and efficiency and rather specific to the logic of free market liberal capitalism which had traditionally endorsed the dogma of 'the survival of the fittest' (91-92). While the concept of evolution mirrored the progressive views on modernization and emancipation and the concept of common ancestry served as a fine ideological justification for the progressive commitment to racist discourses on heredity, the Darwinist idea of natural selection contrasted their pleas for interventionist and regulatory actions, so that only artificial or social selection would eliminate accidents and undesirable outcomes in economy and society (98). Eugenics was a central pillar of progressive social reform and the method of implementing artificial selection: breeding, or excluding the unfit from further procreation, would be effectively carried out through "scientific investigation and regulation of marriage, reproduction, immigration and labor" (109); in other words, eugenics would contribute to the intelligent management of heredity, first and foremost by identifying and solving the problems of race degeneration, race suicide and race inferiority (103, 117-118). In this respect, the progressives' arguments were delusive and their actions hilarious: for instance, Leonard informs us, "they staged 'fitter family' and 'better baby' competitions at state agricultural fairs nationwide" (113). Both race science and eugenics were used as rationale for the restriction of immigration and the protection of nativism. Whilst nativism was about the preservation of Anglo-Saxonism in order to conserve racial integrity (126-127), immigration control was one of the most obsessive tenets of the progressive mindset. Once again, baffling arguments and twisting policies exaggerated the 'immigrant problem': to exemplify, social gospeler Walter Rauschenbusch argued that "the evils of industrial capitalism were not native to Anglo-Saxon America, but were imported by immigrants from the south and east of Europe [sic!]" (125);

furthermore, several congressional laws restricted and barred various categories of immigrants, alongside anarchists, polygamists and epileptics, and “The Expatriation Act of 1907 required American women who married foreigners to surrender their US citizenship” (142-143)!

Another neurotic stance of American progressivism was related to answering the ‘labor question’. The cornerstone of progressive reformism, regulating labor became consistent with establishing minimum wages, fixing maximum working hours per day, arbitrating wage disputes, setting certain safety criteria, and, last but not least, reducing unemployment and marginalizing the unemployable. The complexity of the labor question was fundamentally grounded on two ideological premises: i) the reconstruction of the labor theory of value and ii) the establishment of principles and criteria for both employment and unemployment. First, the progressives rejected the liberal marginal-product theory of wages according to which workers’ wages resulted from the value of the product and enthusiastically adopted the living-standard theory of wages, robustly socialist in spirit, according to which wages should cover a minimum family set of needs (85-87). Then, the principles guiding labor policies should be the ‘family-wage’ (i.e., the living needs of a family should be covered by the wage of the family man) and the ‘mothers-of-the-race’ (i.e., the exclusion of women from the labor market in order to protect motherhood and improve heredity) (173-182).

Throughout his dispassionate analysis of progressive thinking and reforms, Thomas C. Leonard frequently acknowledges certain paradoxes, inconsistencies and even contradictions. In line with the present review, two of them look solid. First, attempting a comprehensive reform of the American public life at the turn of the twentieth century, the progressives denounced both socialism and plutocracy (39), but their urge on bureaucratization, regulation, control, surveillance and efficient business-like management of all sectors of public life made them both socialists and plutocrats. Second, if Benjamin Parke DeWitt, one of the most important ideologues of the movement, correctly articulated the ultimate three goals of progressivism (i.e., cutting down government corruption, democratizing government and increasing the federal government’s interference in economy), then, Leonard tells us, “the realization of any

one progressive goal worked to undermine the other two” (49). But, probably, one of the most paradoxical figures of the movement was the most notorious as well – President Woodrow Wilson. Consecrated by scholars and the public alike as the champion of liberal internationalism, popular sovereignty and world peace, Wilson’s writings, speeches and initiatives unveil, as Thomas Leonard suggests, the typical figure of the illiberal reformer. Repudiating natural individual rights (25), defending segregation laws (50), defying the constitutional principle of checks-and-balances (66), supporting anti-immigration policies and racist considerations (157), President Wilson epitomizes the ambivalent and versatile personage of the movement. It is precisely these paradoxes, inconsistencies and contradictions, as Thomas Leonard points out, that have divided the progressive legacy: “Those who admired the progressives ignored or trivialized the reprehensible and wrote lives of the saints. Those who disliked the progressives ignored or trivialized the admirable and wrote lives of the proto-fascists” (189).

GABRIEL C. GHERASIM

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania