

*Race, Eugenics & American Economics
in the Progressive Era*

ILLIBERAL
Reformers



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PROLOGUE



Illiberal Reformers tells the story of the progressive scholars and activists who led the Progressive Era crusade to dismantle laissez-faire, remaking American economic life with a newly created instrument of reform, the administrative state. If many of their names are unfamiliar today, the progressives changed everything, permanently altering the course of America's economy and its public life.

American economic reform acquired its scientific and political authority during the turbulent economic times between the collapse of Reconstruction in 1877 and the US entry into the First World War in 1917. During these four decades, the period of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, the United States became a modern, urban, industrial, and multicultural world power, its spectacular rise propelled by an industrial revolution that transformed America. The vital national issues of the late nineteenth century—economic depression, financial panic, labor conflict, money wars, big business, immigration, and the tariff—were economic in nature, and public discourse placed economics at the center of a vigorous national debate over where and how government should respond to the consequences of an economic transformation that reached into the country's remotest corners.

Part I of *Illiberal Reformers* tells the story of the progressives' ascendancy, in three acts. In the first act, seizing the opportunity of recurring economic crisis, the progressives, many of them Protestant evangelicals on a self-appointed mission to redeem America, turn professional, finding different ways to make reform a vocation. The progressive economists completely remade the nature and practice of their own enterprise. From 1880 to 1900, both fostering and benefiting from a revolution in American higher education, the progressive economists established economics as a university discipline, transforming American political economy from a species of public discourse among gentlemen into an expert, scientific practice—economics.

Other economic progressives brokered their ideas in journalism, in reform organizations, in the community, and in public life. But they too were engaged with fundamentally economic questions—unemployment, low wages, long hours, workplace safety, industrial consolidation, immigration, and more—and they too undertook social investigations designed to produce economic knowledge and to influence public opinion and policymakers. The progressives gave us the professor of social science, the scholar-activist, the social worker, the muckraking journalist, and the economic expert advising or serving in government.

In the second act, the economic progressives forged the new authority of social science into rhetorical weapons, helping convince Americans and their political leaders that *laissez-faire* was both economically outmoded and ethically inadequate. Industrial capitalism, progressives said, created conflict and dislocation, operated wastefully, and distributed its copious fruits unjustly. Moreover, the new economy featured novel organizational forms—trusts, natural monopolies, industrial corporations, and industrial labor unions—and a rapidly increasing economic interdependence wrought by the furious pace of economic growth. 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 administrative state, guided by expert social scientists—a model of economic governance progressives borrowed from scientific management.

In the third act, the economists joined their progressive allies in a crusade to reform and remake American government. If an administrative state were to be the new guarantor of economic progress, it would need to be built. By March 1917, the end of Woodrow Wilson's first term, it was. Countless additions would later be made to the new regulatory edifice, but the "fourth branch" of government was established.¹ The US government now directly taxed personal incomes, corporations, and estates. It dissolved prominent industrial combinations in steel, oil, tobacco, and sugar. Its new Federal Reserve regulated money, credit, and banking. Its new Federal Trade Commission supervised domestic industry, and its new Tariff Commission regulated international trade. State and federal labor legislation mandated workmen's compensation, banned child labor, compelled schooling of children, inspected factories, fixed minimum wages and maximum hours, paid pensions to single mothers with dependent children, and much more.

The establishment of the fourth branch marked an epoch-making change in the relationship of government to American economic life. It also shifted political authority within the state, moving power from the courts and political parties to the new independent agencies of the executive, and from judges and politicians to bureaucratic experts, who represented themselves as objective scientists above the political and commercial fray, administering progress for the good of all.

THE PROGRESSIVE PARADOX

The economic progressives fashioned the new sciences of society, founded the modern American university, invented the think tank, and blueprinted and framed the American administrative state. Progressives built these vital institutions of American life to carry out the twinned principles at Progressivism's core: first, modern government should be guided by science and not politics; and second, an industrialized economy should be supervised, investigated, and regulated by the visible hand of a modern administrative state. In so doing, they reconstructed American liberalism.

There was a price to be paid, however, a price *Illiberal Reformers* explores in its second half. Part II of *Illiberal Reformers* also has several acts, but each tells the same dark story—the campaign of labor reformers to exclude the disabled, immigrants, African Americans, and women from the American work force, all in the name of progress (Chapters 8, 9, and 10, respectively).

The progressives combined their extravagant faith in science and the state with an outsized confidence in their own expertise as a reliable, even necessary, guide to the public good. They were so sure of their own expertise as a necessary guide to the public good, so convinced of the righteousness of their crusade to redeem America, that they rarely considered the unintended consequences of ambitious but untried reforms. Even more so, they failed to confront the reality that the experts—no less than the partisans, bosses, and industrialists they aimed to unseat—could have interests and biases of their own.

Of course the experts *did* have interests and biases, which manifested most conspicuously in their responses to what was the supreme economic question of the day: is labor getting its due? Politically charged and analytically

daunting, the “labor question” encompassed the most compelling economic issues of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, and is taken up in Chapter 5.

Economic progressives either ignored the plight of African Americans during the brutal reestablishment of white supremacy in the Jim Crow South, or, as in the case of Woodrow Wilson, justified it. Progressive economists provided essential intellectual support to the cause of race-based immigration restriction, which, in the early 1920s, all but ended immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe. Such progressive exemplars as Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, and Edward A. Ross promoted an influential theory known as *race suicide*, Ross’s term for the notion that racially inferior immigrants, by undercutting American workers’ wages, outbred and displaced their Anglo-Saxon betters.

The same theory—that so-called unemployable workers were innately disposed to accept lower wages—was readily adapted to apply to African Americans, the disabled, and women. The leading lights of American economic reform advocated regulation of workers’ wages and hours to bar or remove the unemployable from employment, on the grounds that their inferior nationality, race, gender, or intelligence made their economic competition a threat to the American workingman and to Anglo-Saxon racial integrity.

It is important to understand that the progressive campaign to exclude the inferior from employment was not (merely) the product of an unreflective prejudice. Progressive arguments warning of inferiority were deeply informed by elaborate scientific discourses of heredity. Darwinism, eugenics, and race science recast spiritual or moral failure as biological inferiority and offered scientific legitimacy to established American hierarchies of race, gender, class, and intellect.

Economic progressives were profoundly influenced by Darwin and other evolutionists. Chapter 6 shows how the economic progressives (and their critics) drew deeply on evolutionary science’s conceptions of heredity, progress, competition, selection, fitness, organism, and the role of human beings in controlling nature. Chapter 7 shows the uses economic progressives made of race science and eugenics, the social control of human breeding.

Among other things, biological ideas offered Progressivism a conceptual scheme capable of accommodating the great contradiction at the heart of Progressive Era reform—its view of the poor as victims deserving state uplift and as threats requiring state restraint.

This unstable amalgam of compassion and contempt helps explain why Progressive Era reform lent a helping hand to those it deemed worthy of citizenship and employment while simultaneously narrowing that privileged circle by excluding the many it judged unworthy. Progressive Era reform at once uplifted and restrained, and did both in the name of progress. In practice, only white men of Anglo-Saxon background escaped the charge of hereditary inferiority, and even members of this privileged group were condemned as inferiors when they, as with *The Jukes* and other “white trash” families studied by eugenicists, were judged deficient in intellect and morals.²

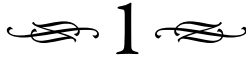
The roster of progressives who advocated exclusion of hereditary inferiors reads like a Who’s Who of American economic reform. It includes the founders of American economics: Edward Bemis, John R. Commons, Richard T. Ely, Irving Fisher, Arthur Holcombe, Jeremiah Jenks, W. Jett Lauck, Richmond Mayo-Smith, Royal Meeker, Simon N. Patten, and Henry R. Seager.

They were joined by the founders of American sociology, Charles Horton Cooley, Charles Richmond Henderson, and Edward A. Ross; pioneering social-work professionals, such as Edward Devine, Robert Hunter, and Paul U. Kellogg; and leading Protestant social gospelers, such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Josiah Strong. University presidents, such as the University of Wisconsin’s Charles Van Hise and Stanford’s David Starr Jordan, vigorously advocated exclusion of hereditary inferiors, as did such political journalists as Hebert Croly, such jurists as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and many other progressive luminaries, not least US Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Their causes varied, as did their justifications, but they all advocated the exclusion of immigrants, African Americans, women, and the disabled.

The progressives were not the only Progressive Era intellectuals to traffic in reprehensible ideas. Conservatives and socialists also drank deeply from the seemingly bottomless American wells of racism, sexism, and nativism, and they, too, borrowed evolutionary and eugenic ideas in support of their politics.

But the progressives command the historian’s attention, because they prevailed. It was the progressives who fashioned the new sciences of society, founded the modern American university, invented the think tank, and created the American administrative state, institutions still at the center of American public life and still defined by the progressive values that formed and instructed them.

Eugenics and race science are today discredited. But the progressive vision of how to govern scientifically under industrial capitalism lives on. Expertise in the service of an administrative state, what progressives called social control, has survived the discredited notions once used to uphold it. Indeed, it has thrived.



Redeeming American Economic Life

ECONOMIC REVOLUTION

When American economic life transformed itself in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the world had never seen anything like it. A furious expansion of railroad networks, fueled by government loans and land grants, opened a vast continental market. American business, powered by a transformative set of new production technologies, industrialized on a revolutionary scale. Interstate commerce grew so rapidly that hundreds of local clock conventions had to be replaced by a national system of standardized time in 1883.

In 1870, the last of the Civil War amendments to the US Constitution was ratified. Thirty-five years later, the US economy had *quadrupled* in size. American living standards had doubled. US economic output surpassed each of the German, French, and Japanese empires in the 1870s. It overtook the nineteenth century's global colossus, the British Empire, in 1916.

The industrial juggernaut propelled the American economy upward but did so undependably. Financial crises triggered prolonged economic depressions in the 1870s and the 1890s. Growth also distributed its copious fruits unevenly, creating vast industrial fortunes alongside disgruntled rural homesteaders and a newly visible class of the urban poor, a contrast journalist Henry George encapsulated as *Progress and Poverty*, a runaway best seller.

The transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy—and from rural communities to a metropolitan society—produced social dislocations so unprecedented as to require new words, such as *urbanization*, a term coined in Chicago in 1888 to describe the migration from farm to factory

and the explosive growth of America's industrial cities. Just over half of American workers in 1880 worked on farms. By 1920, only one-quarter remained on the land.¹ Crowded into tenements, urban workers confronted substandard housing, poor sanitation, and recurring unemployment.

Industry's voracious but volatile demand for labor was met by immigration to America on a grand scale, which introduced polyglot peoples with disparate cultural and religious traditions. Fifteen million immigrants arrived in the United States between 1890 and 1914, and nearly 70 percent of the new arrivals were Catholics, Jews, and Orthodox Christians from southern and eastern Europe. Most congregated in the cities. In 1900, three out of four people in New York City, Chicago, Boston, and San Francisco were immigrants and their children. By 1910, the foreign born accounted for 22 percent of the US labor force and for 41 percent of non-farm laborers.²

Industrialization and immigration gave rise to a labor movement whose growth was as fitful as the economy's. Labor unions grew explosively from 1880 to 1886, from a mere 168,000 to 1.2 million members. The violence of the 1886 riots in Chicago's Haymarket Square undid these gains. Organized labor then recovered its 1886 level in 1900, after which another surge doubled union membership to 2.4 million in 1904.³

Labor conflict was rampant and sometimes violent. From 1881 to 1905, American workers organized an average of four strikes per day, more than 36,000 in total.⁴ Names like Homestead (1892), where steelworkers engaged in pitched battles with Carnegie Steel's armed strike breakers, and Pullman (1894), a strike that brought US railroads to a standstill until President Grover Cleveland deployed US Army troops to quash it, still commemorate the industrial violence of the era.

The turn of the century produced a new form of economic organization, the consolidated firm, or "trust." Between 1895 and 1904, a sweeping merger movement consolidated scores of American industries: 1,800 major industrial firms disappeared into 157 mergers. Nearly half of the consolidated giants enjoyed market shares of more than 70 percent.⁵

The new industrial behemoths were of a scale Americans could barely comprehend, 100 or even 1,000 times larger than the largest US manufacturing firms in 1870. John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company was capitalized at \$100 million in 1900. James Duke's American Tobacco Company reached \$500 million in 1904, and the United States Steel Corporation was valued at \$1.4 billion at its creation in 1901.⁶

Historian Thomas Haskell described the American economic transformation of the late nineteenth century as “the most profound and rapid alteration in the material conditions of life that human society has ever experienced.”⁷ Those who lived through it recognized its revolutionary aspects.

Simon Nelson Patten, a pioneering progressive economist at Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, saw in industrialization an age of material abundance so unprecedented as to form a new basis for civilization. Wisconsin economist Richard T. Ely, the standard bearer of progressive economics, cofounded the American Economic Association in 1885 to organize and promote the new political economy required, he said, to comprehend a “new economic world.” Frederick Jackson Turner told his fellow historians they were witnessing nothing less than the birth of a new nation. One can hardly believe, John Dewey marveled at the turn of century, “there has been a revolution in all history so rapid, so extensive, so complete.”⁸

Patten, Ely, Turner, and Dewey were all progressive scholars making a case for economic reform, and none were strangers to hyperbole. But here they did not need to exaggerate. Conservative observers marveled no less at the speed and scope of the American industrial revolution. In 1890, David A. Wells, an influential Gilded Age defender of free trade and sound money, described the economic changes since the Civil War as the most important in all of human history.⁹

* * * * *

Revolution, which suggests abrupt discontinuity or rupture, is an imperfect term for changes wrought over forty years. But *revolution* is not inappropriate when we recognize that the late-nineteenth-century American economic transformation launched the United States on a permanently different economic course, with profoundly far-reaching and long-lived consequences. Between the end of Reconstruction and the United States’ entry into the First World War, the speed and scope of economic change was such that few Americans could be spectators only. Welcome or not, change was thrust on them, and there was no choice but to meet it.

Ordinary Americans met economic change with responses as different as their situations. Some responded by embracing new opportunities, freedoms, and identities. Middle-class women went to work outside the home, glimpsing the prospect of greater economic independence and, for some, even a vocation other than motherhood. Young people found the new pleasures of

city life liberating. Former journeymen started their own businesses, and some met with success. University enrollments more than quadrupled, giving women and a burgeoning middle class their first chance at higher education. Immigrants did not find streets paved with gold, but many found refuge from starvation, pogroms, and peonage.

For other Americans, change offered not new opportunities but new constraints, not new freedom but new oppression, not new identities but new stigmas. The brutal reestablishment of white supremacy in the American South confronted African Americans with disenfranchisement, debt peonage, and organized racial terror. Native Americans, decimated when Europeans colonized America, were decimated again by coerced relocations, carried out by a postbellum US Army in need of new missions. Egged on by agitators like Dennis Kearney, white mobs attacked Chinese immigrants, accusing them of undercutting the American workingman.

Hard money and deflation punished farmers and other debtors. When they joined the migration to the cities, farmers and journeymen discovered their hard-won skills mattered less. They might command higher compensation at the factory, but employment threatened their republican self-identities. Having been raised to disdain the “hireling,” they now accepted wages themselves. A boss told them what to do, and did not care whether his factory hands had once owned land or other property.

Those disenfranchised, damaged, and devalued during the Gilded Age met change individually and also collectively. Farmers formed cooperatives, skilled workers organized trade unions, men joined fraternal groups, women started clubs, and immigrant communities created a host of mutual aid societies, which provided credit, insurance, and other mutual services. Evangelicals founded youth associations, the Salvation Army, and other agencies organized to redeem the impressionable and the fallen.

Activists such as Ida Wells exposed mob violence against African Americans and organized antilynching campaigns, at home and abroad. African Americans chose to leave the South’s racial caste system, their migration northward quickened by job opportunities created during mobilization for the First World War.

These grassroots movements were an essential part of America’s many and varied responses to the economic, social, and political consequences of industrialization. American historical writing began telling the stories of ordinary Americans in the 1970s. Before this historiographic turn, Progress-

sive Era histories were political and focused on those who made reform a vocation—the progressives. It is their story that *Illiberal Reformers* tells.

THE ECONOMIC PROGRESSIVES

The longstanding emphasis on politics and reform professionals was itself a progressive legacy. The earliest accounts of Progressivism, written by such historians as Benjamin Parke DeWitt, were self-portraits.¹⁰ They painted ordinary people into the background as passive victims of the rough winds of economic change. The progressives filled the foreground, a vanguard of selfless scholars and activists leading the People—if not any recognizable people—in a crusade against wealth and privilege.

To conceptualize the period as Progressive was to define it by its politics and to associate Progressivism with an elite class: political figures like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, university social scientists, settlement-house workers, muckraking journalists, conservationists, Prohibitionists, and birth controllers.¹¹ 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.¹²

Progressives did not work in factories; they inspected them. Progressives did not drink in saloons; they tried to shutter them. The bold women who chose to live among the immigrant poor in city slums called themselves “settlers,” not neighbors. Even when progressives idealized workers, they tended to patronize them, romanticizing a brotherhood they would never consider joining.¹³

The distance progressives placed between themselves and ordinary people was not the product of class prejudice alone. Some progressives came from privilege, but far more were children of middle class ministers and missionaries, a number of whom struggled before finding vocational outlets for their intellectual and reform energies. The few who had known real deprivation, such as Thorstein Veblen, never romanticized it.

The distance progressives placed between themselves and ordinary people instead had its origins in the progressives’ self-conception as disinterested agents of reform. As they devised ways to make reform a vocation, the progressives found themselves poised between the victims and the beneficiaries of economic transformation. Most opted not to choose sides. Instead, they

portrayed themselves as the representatives of the common good, uniquely positioned to transcend personal, class, regional, and partisan interests.

If progressives agreed that they represented the common good, they regularly disagreed on what the common good was. W.E.B. Du Bois and Woodrow Wilson, for example, held entirely opposed views of the proper role of whites and blacks in American life.¹⁴ Senator Robert La Follette vigorously opposed American entry into the First World War, while his one-time Wisconsin compatriot, progressive economist Ely, accused him of aiding the enemy.¹⁵

Ely and his University of Wisconsin colleagues, John R. Commons and Edward A. Ross, campaigned to bar immigrants they judged racially inferior, while other progressives, such as settlement-house worker Grace Abbott, upheld the America tradition of openness to newcomers, as we shall see in Chapter 9. The same trio of Wisconsin academics crusaded against the evils of alcohol, while John Dewey believed progressives had causes more important than the saloon. Theodore Roosevelt preferred to regulate the trusts, while “the people’s lawyer,” Louis Brandeis, wanted to break them up, as discussed in Chapter 4.

The upshot was a pattern of conflict and cooperation that led to shifting political alliances and to a reputation for fractiousness. “The friends of progress,” Benjamin Parke DeWitt lamented in 1915, “are frequently the enemies of each other.”¹⁶

As diverse and fractious as Progressive Era reformers could be, they all drew on a shared, recognizable, and historically specific set of intellectual understandings, what Daniel Rodgers has termed “discourses of discontent.”¹⁷ First, progressives were discontented with liberal individualism, which evangelicals called un-Christian, and more secular critics scorned as “licensed selfishness.”¹⁸ As we shall see in Chapter 2, the progressives were nationalist to the core, though they reified the collective using many names besides *nation*, such as the state, the race, the commonweal, the public good, the public welfare, the people, and, as discussed in Chapter 6, the social organism.¹⁹ Whichever term they used, progressives asserted the primacy of the collective over individual men and women, and they justified greater social control over individual action in its name.

Second, progressives shared a discontent with the waste, disorder, conflict, and injustice they ascribed to industrial capitalism. The furious pace of change had produced unprecedented economic volatility and social disloca-

tion. Many believed the remedy was improved efficiency, the quintessentially progressive idea that the application of science, personified by the efficiency expert or social engineer, could improve virtually any aspect of American life. Efficiency, in business and public administration, is the story of Chapter 4.

Monopoly describes the third source of progressive discontent. Industrial capitalism had brought forth unprecedented and gigantic forms of economic organization—trusts, pools, and combinations. Antimonopoly rhetoric comprised a host of objections to big business—destruction of small business, monopoly profiteering, unfair trade practices, deskilling of labor, exploitation of workers—joined with the longstanding republican fear that centralized economic power corrupted politics.²⁰

Progressives used the language of anti-individualism, efficiency, and anti-monopoly for varying purposes. But nearly all progressives used this rhetoric. And nearly all agreed, moreover, that the revolutionary consequences of industrial capitalism required rethinking and reforming American economic life and its governance. As Ely put it, *laissez-faire* was not only morally unsound, it was economically obsolete, a relic of a bygone era.²¹ Whatever free markets had once accomplished, they now produced inefficiency, instability, inequality, and a tendency toward monopoly.

Few progressives were content merely to deplore the diseases of a modern industrial economy. America needed, they agreed, a new form of government, one that was disinterested, nonpartisan, scientific, and endowed with discretionary powers to investigate and regulate the world's largest economy, as well as to compensate those exploited, injured, or left behind—the administrative state.

Nothing was more integral to Progressivism than its extravagant faith in administration. The visible hand of administrative government, guided by disinterested experts who were university trained and credentialed, would diagnose, treat and even cure low wages, long hours, unemployment, labor conflict, industrial accidents, financial crises, unfair trade practices, deflation, and the other ailments of industrial capitalism. Chapter 3 tells the story of how a small band of scholars remade the nature and practice of their discipline, transforming themselves into expert economists in the service of the administrative state.

The progressives had different and sometimes conflicting agendas. But nearly all ultimately agreed that the best means to their several ends was the administrative state. In this crucial sense, Progressivism was less a coherent

agenda of substantive goals that it was a technocratic theory and practice of how to obtain them in the age of industrial capitalism. The heart of Progressivism, as historian Robert Wiebe famously summarized it, was its ambition to “fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means.”²²

* * * * *

Illiberal Reformers tells the story of the progressive scholars and activists who enlisted in the Progressive Era crusade to dismantle laissez-faire and remake American economic life through the agency of an administrative state. Historians, just like everybody else, work with the tools they have at hand. I am a historian of economics, and *Illiberal Reformers* shines its narrative lamp on the progressive economists. But this is not their story alone, and had it been, they would not have recognized it.

American economic reform in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era featured a large, eclectic, and sometimes fractious cast. Most would not have called themselves economists, but nearly all were engaged with fundamentally economic questions—unemployment, low wages, long hours, workplace safety, industrial consolidation, immigration, and more. All of them, not just the academics, undertook social investigations designed to produce economic knowledge and to influence public opinion and policymakers.

They inspected factories; mapped city slums; compiled wages and working hours for legal briefs; exposed corruption in government and malfeasance in business; did casework for scientific charity organizations; practiced scientific management, calculated family budgets and tax revenues; and measured the bodies and intellects of immigrants, schoolchildren, and Army recruits. *Everything*, as Jane Addams said, could be improved.

The progressives in economic reform were intellectuals with graduate schooling, and many had training in political economy. But most chose to pursue their reform vocations outside the universities, brokering their ideas in reform organizations, in journalism, in the community, and in public life.

The new research universities, exemplified by Johns Hopkins University (1876), were founded not to reproduce their faculties but to send civic-minded men and women into the world so they might improve it. The path-breaking graduate seminar in Historical and Political Science at Hopkins, directed by historian Herbert Baxter Adams and political economist Richard T. Ely, produced many talented scholars, but the University was no less

pleased with the careers of Woodrow Wilson or journalist Albert Shaw. Graduates who remained in academia, such as Edward A. Ross and John R. Commons, were the antithesis of the cloistered scholar. They were public figures who threw themselves into economic and social reform, as they were expected to do.

The progressive economists made alliances; formed associations; and shared ideas, offices, and personnel with many other scholars and activists. Their progressive allies and colleagues included figures such as sociologists Charles Cooley, Albion Small, and Charles Richmond Henderson; ministers of the social gospel Washington Gladden and Lyman Abbott; settlement-house workers Jane Addams and Florence Kelley; labor reformer Josephine Goldmark; efficiency expert Frederick Winslow Taylor; municipal reformers Edward Bemis and Frederick Cleveland; scientific charity leader Edward T. Devine; social surveyor Paul U. Kellogg; journalists Albert Shaw and Walter Weyl; lawyers Louis Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter; and reform-minded politicians Robert La Follette, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson, among others.

Some economic reformers were in reform organizations, some in the university, some in the community, some in public life, and some in all four. All were intellectuals that had turned off the expected scholarly path of the classics, theology, and philosophy to study the new social disciplines created to put reform into action—economics, politics, sociology, and public administration. They followed different paths to different places, but all of the progressives found a way to make a vocation of reform.

REDEEMING AMERICAN ECONOMIC LIFE

The first generation of progressive scholars and activists was born largely between the mid-1850s and 1870. Unlike the generation of 1840, which included such members as Henry George; Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.; William Graham Sumner; and Lester Frank Ward, the progressives were too young to have served in the Civil War.²³

Nearly all descended from old New England families of seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay background, families that, like America itself, had gradually moved westward. More often than not, progressives were the

children of Protestant ministers or missionaries, fired with an evangelical urge to redeem America. The sons were expected to continue the family calling, and the daughters were expected to stay home, and both wanted neither.

The progressives' urge to reform America sprang from an evangelical compulsion to set the world to rights, and they unabashedly described their purposes as a Christian mission to build a Kingdom of Heaven on earth.²⁴ In the language of the day, they preached a social gospel.

The term *social gospel* describes a late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century form of liberal Protestantism that pursued economic and social improvement through a scientifically informed mission of social redemption. It originated in liberal Protestantism's efforts to reckon with radically changed socioeconomic conditions and with modern scientific investigations into the origins of humankind and of Christianity's sacred texts.²⁵

At the collapse of Reconstruction, American Protestant churches were no force for economic reform. The same was largely true of American political economy. The best-selling text in the second half of the nineteenth century was Arthur Latham Perry's *The Elements of Political Economy*, which taught students that providential design explained the remarkable capacity of free markets to promote the good of all.²⁶ Social mobility made America doubly blessed. "There is nothing to hinder any laborer from becoming a capitalist," Perry wrote, "nearly all our capitalists were formerly laborers."²⁷

When T. E. Cliffe Leslie surveyed American political economy for his English readers in 1880, he described it as sectarian, and he scorned Perry's treatise as little more than a Sunday School catechism. But American Protestantism, like American political economy, utterly transformed its relationship to economic reform.

The American Economic Association (AEA), founded in 1885, embodied the social gospel's distinctive amalgam of liberal Protestant ethics, veneration of science, and the evangelizing activism of pious, middle-class reformers.²⁸ Clergyman Josiah Strong (1847–1916), author of the best-selling *Our Country*, an exaltation of Protestant Anglo-Saxon manifest destiny, praised the AEA for its Christian political economy.²⁹ Of the AEA's fifty-five charter members, twenty-three were clergymen, many of them national leaders of the social gospel movement, including Washington Gladden and Lyman Abbott.³⁰

Richard T. Ely, the prime mover behind the AEA's establishment, exemplified the social gospel view of economic reform. The good Christian should

be concerned with this world, Ely said, not with the next. The good Christian must go among the poor, as had Christ, lifting up even the most degraded by providing them personal contact with “superior natures.”³¹ The economic reformer’s calling was to “redeem all our social relations,” Ely declared, by establishing an earthly kingdom of righteousness.³²

The AEA economists were young. Ely was thirty-one years old at time of the AEA’s founding. Woodrow Wilson, a recent graduate student of Ely’s, was twenty-eight, and had just begun his academic career at Bryn Mawr College. Edward W. Bemis, another newly minted Ely student, was twenty-five, then at Amherst College. Edwin R. A. Seligman, freshly appointed at Columbia College, was twenty-four. Among the senior charter members, John Bates Clark was, at thirty-eight, the oldest by four years.

In redirecting American Protestantism from saving souls to saving society, the social gospellers enlarged and transformed the idea of Christian redemption. John R. Commons, an Ely protégé who rose to the front ranks of progressive economics, affirmed the social gospel view that society was the proper object of redemption.³³

Just as salvation was increasingly socialized, so too was sin. Edward A. Ross, like Commons, was a student of Ely’s at Johns Hopkins who became a leading public intellectual of American Progressivism. Ross’s *Sin and Society* summarized the view that sin was no longer a matter of inborn immorality. Sin, Ross wrote, was social in cause.³⁴

Redeeming America required more than a reformed church. Social gospellers built an impressive network of voluntary agencies to encourage Christian betterment: Christian youth associations, Christian summer camps, the Salvation Army, immigrant settlement houses, and a host of other organizations intended to redeem to the impressionable, the fallen, and the newly arrived.³⁵ Ultimately, however, the social gospel economists, like all progressives, turned to the state.

Arthur Latham Perry had seen the hand of God in the way free market exchange benefited all. The social gospel economists, who opposed free markets but not divine purpose, relocated Him to the state. “God works through the State,” Ely professed, more so than through any other institution, including, he implied, the church.³⁶ Commons told his Christian audiences that the state was the greatest power for good that existed among men and women.³⁷

The AEA’s intellectual leaders—Henry Carter Adams, John Bates Clark, and Simon Nelson Patten—were not quite as outspoken as Ely and Commons,

but they too understood economic reform as a method of redeeming American economic and political life. Adams was born in 1851 in the frontier state of Iowa. His father, Ephraim Adams, was a Congregationalist missionary who had moved his family to the wilderness so that they could dedicate their lives to building a Christian commonwealth west of the Mississippi.³⁸

Henry intended to follow in his father's footsteps, enrolling at Andover Theological Seminary in 1875. But when he could not be born again, Henry abandoned the ministry for political economy. Economics, Adams wrote to his father upon leaving the seminary, was "work of a lower order than dealing directly—profoundly—with the souls of men, but it is work which a follower of Christ may do."³⁹ As Edwin R. A. Seligman remarked when memorializing him, economic reform was just a different path to Adams's original end, the redemption of America.⁴⁰

Most of the AEA's intellectual leaders made a similar journey. John Bates Clark planned to enter the ministry until his Amherst College mentor, Julius Seelye, persuaded him to study political economy instead of enrolling at Yale Divinity School.⁴¹ John R. Commons's mother, Clara Rogers, expected John to become a minister. He did not, finding his reform calling in economics. Recalling his graduate student days at Johns Hopkins, where Ely instructed him to do case work for the Baltimore Charity Organization Society, Commons said that being a social worker as well as a graduate student in economics was his "tribute to her longing that I should become a minister of the Gospel."⁴²

Edwin R. A. Seligman, scion of a prominent German-Jewish banking family in New York, was the only Jew among the AEA charter members. But Seligman also sought refuge from the constraints of his religious inheritance, becoming an active supporter of his colleague Felix Adler's Society of Ethical Culture. No less than his social gospel colleagues, Seligman was impelled by a felt ethical obligation to improve the conditions of American economic life.

The social gospel claimed adherents in all the fledging American social sciences. The founder of the United States' first sociology department, Albion Small, was a graduate of the Newton Theological Seminary and a social gospeler.⁴³ His sociology colleague at the University of Chicago, Charles Richmond Henderson, was a minister who served as the university's chaplain. Just as Ely regarded the state, so Henderson regarded the new social sciences, as a God-given instrument of Christian economic reform. To aid

the reformer, Henderson wrote in 1899, “God has providentially wrought out for us the social sciences and placed them at our disposal.”⁴⁴

The social gospel also deeply informed the pioneering social work of progressives like Jane Addams of Chicago’s Hull House, who “settled” in poor urban neighborhoods to live among the dispossessed. Christianity, Addams said, was not a set of doctrines, but something immanent in humanitarian efforts to uplift fellow human beings, to find good in even the meanest places.⁴⁵

The social gospel reformers, as postmillenarians, believed that a Kingdom of Heaven on earth could be built without Christ’s return. Christian men and women, providentially equipped with science and the state, would build it with their own hands. In other words, the social gospelers believed they already held the blueprints for social and economic redemption.

The task of the social gospel reformer was that of the preacher—not merely to serve the social good but also to identify it for others. In Richard T. Ely’s formulation, the economic reformer consciously adopts an ethical ideal, shows how it was to be attained, and “encourage[s] people to strive for it.”⁴⁶ Redemption required more than providing the poor with what they wanted but lacked; it required teaching the poor what they *should* want.

The social gospel went into decline during the First World War. The Great War’s slaughter and uncontrolled irrationality mocked the progressive idea of spiritual and social progress through enlightened social control. But social gospel economics also suffered from developments internal to American social science. By the outbreak of the war in Europe in 1914, American economics had become an expert, scientific discipline, establishing a beachhead in the universities by 1900 and in government soon thereafter. Between 1900 and 1914, the imperatives of professionalization pushed progressives toward an economics less encumbered by social gospel pieties.⁴⁷

Professional economics’ turn away from the crusading language and imagery of the social gospel was neither sudden nor solely a matter of maintaining its scientific and professional bona fides.⁴⁸ The social gospelers recognized that the growing diversity of American Progressivism made their vision of a Protestant Christian commonwealth too sectarian. Catholics, Jews, Orthodox Christians, and others, millions more of whom had arrived on US shores between 1890 and 1914, held rather different views of what religious ethics demanded of the state.

When they recast their evangelical language in a more secular form, the economic progressives fashioned a discourse of an ethical science in the service of society. But even as they secularized their Christian idiom, they did not abandon the evangelical idealism driving their reform mission. Instead, they reconstituted it, making the social gospel into what historian David Hollinger has called the “intellectual gospel.” The intellectual gospel represented scientific inquiry as itself a kind of religious calling, found religious potential in science, celebrated science in a religious idiom, and believed that “conduct in accord with the ethic of science could be religiously fulfilling.”⁴⁹

The progressives venerated science not only because it was their necessary instrument of social improvement. For the social gospel progressives at the forefront of American economic reform, science was a place of moral authority where the public-spirited could find religious meaning in scientific inquiry’s values of dispassionate analysis, self-sacrifice, pursuit of truth, and service to a cause greater than oneself.

2

Turning Illiberal

The elder statesman the young progressive economists tapped for the first AEA presidency was Francis Amasa Walker, then forty-five. A member of the pre-progressive Generation of 1840, Walker missed a key formative experience of the AEA's founding core: graduate education in Germany. To obtain advanced instruction in political economy, which was all but unavailable from the sleepy, postbellum American colleges, American reformers traveled to the German universities, which, in the 1870s and early 1880s, were regarded as the world's finest in political economy.¹

Germany exposed the young Americans to the ideas of the German Historical School of political economy, with its positive view of state economic intervention, quintessentially compulsory insurance against sickness, industrial accidents, debility, and old age. Most of their German professors—most influentially, Adolph Wagner and Gustav Schmoller of the University of Berlin, Johannes Conrad of the University of Halle, and Karl Knies of Heidelberg—were hostile to the idea of natural economic laws, which they disparaged as “English” economics, a swipe at the classically liberal tendency of political economy in Great Britain.²

Richard T. Ely noted that the young Americans quickly abandoned “the dry bones of orthodox English political economy for the live methods of the German school.”³ To understand contemporary economic life, the Germans said, you needed to know each nation's past, a study they called *Nationalökonomie*. If an economy was the path-dependent product of a nation's unique development, then its workings were not unalterable natural laws, they were historically contingent and subject to change. The right kind of government could control and shape a nation's economic life.

The German economists, though sometimes mocked as “socialists of the lectern,” were no friends of revolutionary socialism. They successfully positioned their welfare statism as a reformist *via media* between the extremes of English laissez-faire and proletarian dictatorship. Ely made clear the German academics were not socialists in the “vulgar” sense of the term, referring to the revolutionaries of Germany’s Social Democratic Party. The “socialists of the lectern” were, rather, socialists in a broader sense, men who believed social problems could no longer be left to individuals or voluntary associations, but must be dealt with by an expert-guided state.⁴

Perhaps even more influential than the German professors’ statism and historicist method was their professional status. Wilhelmine Germany accorded its university professors political and scientific authority, enough that they formed part of the German “mandarin” class, an intellectual elite whose authority derived from their special education and their influence in the upper reaches of the civil service. In the mandarins’ self-conception, they were not mere bureaucrats but an elite uniquely capable of transcending politics and objectively identifying the public good.⁵ The Kaiser himself, Wilhelm I, attended Schmoller’s lectures.⁶ Harvard’s Frank Taussig (1859–1940), among the most distinguished of America’s Progressive Era economists and a man not prone to gushing, recalled his Berlin professors as having achieved “a degree of perfection . . . that astonishes the world.”⁷

German university professors in the 1870s and early 1880s occupied a social space as yet nonexistent in the United States: the academic scientist of society, with political influence and social standing. The American graduate students who traveled to Germany met there a new and compelling idea: economic reform could be a vocation, even a distinguished one.

PROFESSIONALIZING BY PROFESSING ECONOMICS

The progressives returned from Germany with their evangelical zeal to redeem America still hot if now tempered by the latest ideas in political economy and informed by a working model of economic reform. But their German professors’ enviable scientific and political authority had no American equivalent whatsoever.

In 1880, the United States had *three* faculty members at the leading schools devoting most of their time to political economy. The prospects for

making a vocation of economic reform in the university looked dim. But they brightened, and rapidly.⁸

The same industrial revolution that roused the Christian consciences of the progressives poured a geyser of new money into American universities, producing another revolution, this one in higher education. Capitalists' industrial fortunes lavishly endowed new universities built from scratch: Ezra Cornell (1868), Cornelius Vanderbilt (1871), Johns Hopkins (1876), Jonas Clark (1889), Leland Stanford (1891), and John D. Rockefeller (Chicago 1891).⁹

The doubling of American living standards made college accessible to a larger pool. Between 1870 and 1900 the number of students at American universities quadrupled, as did the ranks of American faculty members. Graduate student enrollments increased explosively, from 50 to nearly 6,000.¹⁰ In 1903, William James could refer to the "PhD Octopus."¹¹

The new universities threw off the cleric-dominated classics curriculum of traditional American college instruction and adopted the investigatory spirit and methods of the modern German universities. They offered more practical courses, notably political economy. Hopkins and Chicago broke all precedent by giving priority to graduate research and teaching over undergraduate instruction. The new research universities' intellectual example, and also their competition, spurred the colonial era colleges to catch up.

The growth of instruction in political economy can be measured against the classics, the longstanding foundation of the traditional college curriculum with which the upstart social science disciplines were vying. In 1880, college courses in Latin outnumbered courses in political economy by ten to one. By 1890, however, the ratio had decreased to three to one, and by 1900, it was down to two to one. At leading schools in 1900, there was parity. By 1912, only English had more undergraduate majors than did economics at Yale University.¹²

The course of American political economy's establishment as an academic discipline was tracked by the increasing currency of its new name, "economics." The name was exceedingly rare in university catalogs and other literature in the 1870s. "Political economy" predominates well into 1890s. But by 1900, "economics" had displaced the older term altogether.¹³

At the time of Civil War, professional social science simply did not exist. There were, of course, scholars engaged in social inquiry. But as Thomas Haskell argued, their inquiry was not professional, in the sense that it was neither

specialized nor “decisively oriented to any ongoing, disciplined community of inquiry.”¹⁴

The economists built their disciplinary community in the academy in relatively short order, from roughly 1880 to 1900. They led graduate students in German-style research seminars, granted PhDs, and wrote as specialists for one another in a half-dozen scholarly journals they founded and edited.¹⁵ Textbooks setting out the new domain of American economics, such as Richard T. Ely’s *Introduction to Political Economy* (1889), quickly appeared.¹⁶

The 1880–1900 revolution in American higher education established economics as a university discipline, transforming American political economy from a species of public discourse among gentlemen into an expert, scientific practice—economics. As A. W. Coats judged it, the late-nineteenth-century revolution in American higher education benefited no group as much as it did the economists.¹⁷

The American university gave the economists more than academic chairs, a decent library, and students. The American university gave the economists scientific authority—a gift not elsewhere obtainable and one that was essential to the progressives’ mission of scientifically redeeming American economic life.

The economists understood that economics, like all the infant social sciences, needed the protection of the university. The economists who became academic leaders used their institutional clout to secure a permanent place for economics in the American university. Seven of the AEA’s fifty-five charter members presided over major universities, including Brown, Cornell, Illinois, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Northwestern, Princeton, Wisconsin, and Yale.¹⁸

The economists professionalized, as all professions do, in the hope of monopolizing authority over a given area of knowledge and practice. The AEA was organized not merely to arrange scholarly meetings and promote the field. The AEA was formed to exclude other claimants to economic knowledge by making them outsiders and amateurs.

But unlike medicine, law, and engineering, the economists failed to enlist government to enforce the disciplinary boundaries they wanted recognized. It was illegal to practice medicine, law, or engineering without state permission, but anyone could lawfully practice economics without training or a license. So even though the economists successfully organized their learned

society, they still needed the university to recognize and legitimize their claims to scientific authority.¹⁹

The change in the status of economists—from gentlemen amateurs to specialized professionals, from public intellectuals to scientific advisors—was rapid. All but nonexistent as a field of academic inquiry before 1870 and merely nascent by 1880, American economics was, by the turn of the century, established in the new university order.

Looking back from 1925, Princeton's Frank Fetter, speaking at an occasion honoring Richard T. Ely, marveled at the economists' accomplishments. It would be hard to find anywhere in the history of scholarship, Fetter claimed, "a higher average of success and achievement than this little band of pioneers attained."²⁰ Discounting for ceremonial hyperbole, Fetter had a point. The first generation of progressive economists had created, essentially *ex nihilo*, two new and influential vocations in America: the professor of economics and the expert economist in the service of the administrative state.

THE END OF THE AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL

The progressive economists, like all educated Americans of their generation, had been weaned on Anglo-American individualism, with its natural-rights foundation. In the classically liberal model, a well-ordered society channeled self-interested market behavior into socially beneficial outcomes. Economic progress was not planned; it was a natural by-product of a healthy commercial society. Government's function was limited to ensuring an institutionally healthy environment for mutually beneficial trade.

The progressives called it *laissez-faire*. As Christians they judged *laissez-faire* to be morally unsound, and as economists they declared it functionally obsolete, a quaint relic now buried by the realities of Gilded Age capitalism. A political economy written before the introduction of railroads, Ely wrote, "can scarcely be sufficient in the year 1885."²¹

The progressives' German professors had taught them that economic life was historically contingent. The economy wrought by industrial capitalism was a new economy, and a new economy necessitated a new relationship between the state and economic life. Industrial capitalism, the progressives argued, required continuous supervision, investigation, and regulation. The

new guarantor of American economic progress was to be the visible hand of an administrative state, and the duties of administration would regularly require overriding individuals' rights in the name of the economic common good.

The progressives' break with their classically liberal roots was one of the most striking intellectual changes of the late nineteenth century, one with far-reaching consequences. Progressives embraced holism, drawn by a powerful confluence of postbellum intellectual currents: the German Historical School's view that a nation was an organism, something greater than the sum of the individuals it comprised, Darwinian evolution's implication that the individual's inalienable natural rights were only a pleasant fiction, the Protestant social gospel's move from individual salvation to a collective project of redeeming America (indeed, the world), and the liberating effects of philosophical Pragmatism, which seemed to license most any departure from previous absolutes, provided it proved useful.

Ely, firing the early shots of his AEA insurgency, made clear that progressive economists rejected the "fictitious individualistic assumption of classical political economy" and instead placed society above the individual.²² Washington Gladden, a charter member of the AEA and America's most influential social gospeler, condemned individual liberty an unsound basis for a democratic government. The tradition of respect for individual liberty, Gladden preached, was "a radical defect in the thinking of the average American."²³

John R. Commons said that social progress required the individual to be controlled, liberated, and expanded by collective action.²⁴ Columbia progressive economist Henry R. Seager (1870–1930), an early student of Simon Nelson Patten's, declared that the industrial economy had simply obviated the creed of individualism.

The progressive economists' rejection of individualism and their embrace of what Daniel Rodgers calls the "rhetoric of the moral whole," was perhaps best embodied in Edward A. Ross's concept of *social control*, which referred broadly to all means, public and private, by which "the aggregate reacts on the aims of the individual, warping him out of his self regarding course, and drawing his feet into the highway of the common weal."²⁵ Individuals, Ross maintained, were but "plastic lumps of human dough," to be formed on the great "social kneading board."²⁶

Ross was not merely touting bigger government. He was asserting that the autonomous, self-reliant individual, a figure in both the liberal and republican traditions, was now a fiction in the age of industrialization. An industrial

society shaped and made the individual rather than the other way around. Granted this premise, the only question was who shall do the shaping and molding. The progressives concluded that the shaping and molding should be done by the best and the brightest, those who, uniquely, ignored profit and power to serve the common good—which is to say, the progressives themselves.

Ross's conception of social control owed most to the pioneering American sociologist Lester Frank Ward (1841–1913). Ward was a member of the Generation of 1840, who, like Ross, had been born into humble circumstances on the American frontier. Trained in paleobotany, Ward worked with John Wesley Powell in the US Geological Survey, an early and influential locus of government science. A polymath, Ward became the first president of the American Sociological Association (1906–1907), and he also served as an officer of the American Economic Association. Ward obtained an academic appointment only in 1906, near the end of his career, but he was the intellectual spearhead of the progressive assault on *laissez-faire*.

Ross married Ward's niece, Rosamond, and referred to Ward as "my Master." He dedicated *Social Control* to Uncle Lester and named two of his children for him.²⁷ Ross once opined that if he had met Aristotle socially, he doubted he would find him "a bigger man than Lester F. Ward."²⁸ Some historians have been nearly as reverent, designating Ward as the father of American sociology, celebrating him as the architect of the American welfare state, and, echoing Ross, conferring upon him the title of "the American Aristotle."²⁹

Ward brought to American social thought two claims, both of which became pillars of progressive thinking: first, humanity was the agent of its own destiny, and second, society, not the individual, was the proper unit of explanatory account.³⁰

Ward and Ross, like all reformers, lamented the changes wrought by the industrial transformation of American life. At the same time, however, they saw opportunity in society's very mutability. The industrial revolution had demonstrated that the social order could be changed, and changed rapidly and extensively.³¹ Changing the social order was clearly possible, and the task and opportunity of the reformer was to control change to ensure it was progressive.

Ward's innovation was not the idea that people can shape their own destinies. American individualism was nothing if not purposeful. Nor was it the

concept of progress as such. Both purpose and progress were integral to the free market economics of Herbert Spencer, Ward's biggest target.

What Ward and his progressive successors accomplished was to fashion and legitimize a methodological holism suitable for America. Ward called it the "collective mind of society."

The progressives would give it many names: nation, state, society, the commonwealth, the public, the people, the race, and, especially, the social organism. But they always gave the moral whole primacy over the individuals it subsumed.

Two questions of enormous import loomed. What did society want? And who would be charged with knowing what it wanted?

THE WISE MINORITY AND THE MORAL WHOLE

The second question was easy for progressives. The experts were charged with knowing what society wanted. With their scientific knowledge and public virtue, the experts were uniquely placed to identify Ward's collective mind of society and to act in its best interests. The wise minority, as Ross put it, should be in the saddle.³²

Theodore Roosevelt, for one, was unafraid to say as much. "I do not represent public opinion: I represent the public," he declared. A true leader, Roosevelt explained, recognized the vast difference between "the real interests of the public and the public's opinion of these interests." By implication, Roosevelt knew what the public's interests were.³³

The progressives developed elaborate, often anthropomorphic depictions of society as an organism, as we shall see in Chapter 6. Henry Carter Adams said the social organism had a "conscious purpose." Political journalist Herbert Croly conceived of the American nation as "an enlarged individual." Ross described society as "a living thing, actuated, like all the higher creatures, by the instinct for self-preservation." The state, Richard T. Ely declared, was "a moral person."³⁴

The social organism, like any organism, subsumes its constituent parts, and progressives routinely disdained individual liberties as archaic impediments to needed social and economic reforms. The freshly founded *The New Republic* portrayed Constitutional protection of individual liberties as quaint and retrograde. What inalienable right has the individual, its editors asked,

“against the community that made him and supports him?”³⁵ The answer was “none.”

The New Republic merely echoed what was a commonplace of progressive legal scholarship. Woodrow Wilson, when president of Princeton University, dismissed talk of the inalienable rights of the individual as “nonsense.”³⁶ Roscoe Pound said in 1913 that the Constitution’s Bill of Rights amendments, the core of American civil liberties, “were not needed in their own day, [and] they are not desired in our own.”³⁷ Charles Beard’s withering analysis of the economic origins of the Constitution depicted constitutional law as no more than a tool by which the wealthy oppress the weak.³⁸ The progressives’ discrediting of individual rights was unprecedented, but it was consistent with their view that the health, welfare and morals of the social organism came first.³⁹

Progressives’ social-organism talk was partly motivated by the US Supreme Court decision that limited-liability corporations were legal persons, entitled to some of the same liberties that protected natural persons from the state.⁴⁰ The progressives had an ambivalent relationship with the consolidated firm. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the progressives admired the scientifically managed firm as model of efficiency all organizations, including government, should emulate. However, they believed that business must answer to the state, which it would have to do if the state were an even larger organism, one that subsumed corporate and natural persons alike.

It was one thing to say, as so many progressives did, that society was a person, just as the Court had said a corporation was a person. Many of the analogies held good. The constituent elements (citizens, employees) were subordinate to the purposes of the whole. A well-run society, like a well-run firm, enlisted the aid of expert administrators. Indeed, as Richard T. Ely claimed, administering a great city was a harder job than running a great railroad company.⁴¹ But what did the social organism want? The purpose of the corporation was to maximize profit. Scientific management might find ways to increase profit. The state might tax or regulate the corporation’s profit. But the corporation’s goal was clear. What were the analogous purposes of the social organism? What was the public analog to corporate profits, the end to which public administrators applied their expertise?⁴²

The progressives answered variously, but nearly all agreed that expert public administrators do not merely serve the common good, they also identify the common good. The expert instructed on how to achieve society’s goals, and also on what society’s goals should be.