

RACIAL THOUGHT AND THE EARLY ECONOMICS PROFESSION

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During the first part of the twentieth century racial theories supporting the belief in Nordic superiority developed and thrived in the United States. These theories buttressed the anti-immigration and anti-labor response to the increasing labor unrest of that period. Many economists, working in these areas of economic inquiry, attempted to explicitly integrate these racial ideas into their analysis. This was true of certain writings in economic theory. Eventually, these racial ideas were found to be incorrect and their professional acceptability was severely diminished. However, by the time this rethinking occurred a great deal of damage had been done.

The economics profession emerged in America during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Its founders considered themselves political economists and were "generally interested in socioeconomic problems of their period and with the achievement of social reform." [Spencer p. 452] One of these problems was "The Evil Effects of Unrestricted Immigration."¹ For many, concern about this problem took the form of dismay over continued and increasing non-Nordic migration as well as possible Negro overpopulation.

General Amasa Walker, [1896, p. 828] one of the founders of the American Economics Association (AEA) maintained that the immigrants of the 1880s and 1890s

... are beaten men and beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence. Centuries are against them, as centuries are on the side of those who formerly came to us. They have none of the ideas and aptitudes which would fit them readily and easily to take up the problems of self-care and self-government, such as belong to those who are descended from the tribes that met under the oak tree of old Germany to make laws and choose a chieftain.

While at one time he [1891] argued against the fears of some that the extremely inferior "black race would overwhelm civilization,"

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¹The AEA offered a \$150 prize to the best essay submitted with that title in 1887. [Ely, 1920, p. 27]

he was most noted during the twentieth century for his displacement theory of immigration. [Walker (1899)] According to this theory, immigration threatened the living standards of native labor by forcing wages down, thus causing native labor to decrease their birth rate. Therefore, immigration did not increase the population but solely displaced native births.

Walker was not alone in the early years of the economics profession. Frederick Hoffman's "Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro" was a widely circulated publication of the AEA. Hoffman (p. 95) believed that the high incidence among American Negroes of diseases, such as tuberculosis and syphilis, would lead to their extinction. Better health conditions would not help, however, since

It is not the *conditions of life* but in the *race traits and tendencies* that we find the causes of excessive mortality. So long as these tendencies are persisted in, so long as immorality and vice are a habit of life of the vast majority of the colored population, the effect will be to increase the mortality by hereditary transmission of weak constitutions and to lower still further the rate of natural increase until the births fall below the deaths, and gradual extinction results. [emphasis in original]

Many other leading economists, such as Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, and Thomas N. Carver, were vocal in their racial beliefs before the turn of the century. For example, Ely [1891, p. 402] felt that the "most general statement possible is that the causes of poverty are hereditary and environmental, producing weak physical, mental and moral constitutions." He explicitly rejects economic conditions as a significant cause of poverty, and doesn't even mention the possibility of discrimination. To support his thesis Ely [1891, pp. 403-5] cited the cases of the "Jukes" and the "Tribe of Ismael." These cases became the most often cited by the racialists in support of eugenics measures.

John R. Commons [1919, p. 108] argued that the newer immigrants had little understanding of democratic institutions, being only "acquainted with despotism of Austria, Hungary and Russia." While Commons' views were clearly enunciated in *Races and Immigrants in America*, these views were present in his pre-1900 writings. [Commons (1896, 1897)] Thomas N. Carver, like Commons, believed that the new immigrants had neither a desire for nor an appreciation of democracy and had only economic and self-gratifying motives for coming to the United States. He also blamed Catholics for widening

the gulf between capital and labor and was himself part of the anti-Catholic movement of the 1890s. [Carver 1893; 1903, p. 4238]

These attitudes were also reflected in the content of American economic journals. The *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (QJE), the *Journal of Political Economy* (JPE), and the AEA published many articles primarily concerned with racial questions.

Possibly reflecting the overriding concern of the elite of the Northeast region with "the idea of decay and belonging to a dying race," [Gossett, p. 301] the Harvard-based *QJE* published numerous articles on the possible reduction of non-native stock in the American population. From 1897-1908 it published thirteen articles dealing exclusively with changes in the ethnic and/or racial composition of the U.S. population.² During this period the AEA chose to emphasize publishing articles on the Negro race. Besides the work of Hoffman cited above, it published five other works on the Negro race.³ Until 1907, the *JPE* confined its racial publications to five articles by Carlos Closson on the state of racial theories in anthropology.⁴

The publication of articles on Negroes in America did not have much direct impact on economic thought or policies.⁵ This was probably due to Hoffman's and Tillinghaust's conclusion that emancipation, by throwing an inferior black race into competition with the white race, had doomed the former to extinction. According to John Haller [Chapter 7], this conclusion was greeted with remarkable equanimity by social scientists, which betrayed traces of relief. However, these articles did create a favorable climate for the application of similar ideas to the evaluation of the socioeconomic effects of non-Nordic immigration.

At about this time (1910) a group of economists began to use William McDougall's instinct theory to criticize neoclassical economics. This group included Wesley C. Mitchell [1910], E. H. Downey, and J. A. Hobson.⁶ Also, Taussig [1915] and Veblen⁷, from entirely dif-

² See Closson [1896b, 1900b], Crum, Cummings [1898, 1899, 1900], Foester, Kuczynski, McDonald, Ripley [1900], Stone [1905], and Willcox [1905, 1906].

³ See DuBois, Ripley [1899], Stone [1901], Tillinghaust, and Tompkins.

⁴ See Closson [1896a, 1898, 1899, 1900a, 1900c].

⁵ Commons [1920, pp. 145-49] did incorporate ideas of Negro inferiority into his analysis of unions. He believed that unions were necessary in order to eliminate destructive competition between workers of the industrious (white) races. Negroes, being lazy, were not inclined to destructive competition and so needed no unions.

⁶ See Suranyi-Unger [p. 216].

⁷ See Dorfman [p. 176].

ferent perspectives, claimed that instinct theory provided a foundation for understanding inventiveness and workmanship. All of these individuals refrained from applying the racial aspects of McDougall's instinct theory.⁸ However, by their very acceptance of instinct theory, they increase its stature, making its racial aspects more credible.

The following ten years (1907-1916) saw a change in the emphasis in the racial publication of the economic journals; the AEA virtually stopped publishing articles on the Negro race.⁹ Instead, it published eleven articles which dealt with the racial aspects of immigration.¹⁰ The *JPE* published eight articles on immigration during this period.¹¹ The *QJE* published no further articles on immigration. However, it did publish three articles on racial theory, including a long article by J. A. Fields, sympathetically reviewing eugenics theories.

Within the movement for immigration restriction economists were dominant figures. Mark Haller [p. 74] considered Irving Fisher to be the most influential spokesman for the Eugenics Movement; Thomas N. Carver, Henry P. Fairchild, and Prescott Hall were active members of the Immigration Restriction League;¹² John R. Commons was a member of the National Civic Federation; and Jeremiah Jenks and W. J. Lauck were the principal researchers for the U.S. Immigration Commission. An important concern of all of these economists was the racial composition of recent immigrants.

Within the entire profession there was substantial disagreement over the effects of continued immigration from eastern and southern Europe. We can categorize these divergent views into three broad groupings: genetic racial, environmental, and anti-racial.

The Genetic Racial Position

This group argued that the recent immigrants (arriving after 1880), were of inferior genetic stock, thus reducing the quality of racial strains in America. These immigrants allegedly had hereditary criminal traits, as well as inferior intelligence. Hence, these economists

⁸ See Taussig [1913, pp. 234-36] for his views on the Negro race. According to Mitchell [1914, p. 26], Veblen did consider the Teutonic people to be a superior race but elsewhere Veblen [p. 7] stated that the differences between all European races was slight.

⁹ One article, by Rose, still dwelt on the increase in population of Negroes.

¹⁰ See Byington, Fairchild [1911, 1912]. Fetter [1913], Henderson, Holcombe, Kohler [1914], Millis, Rose, Smith, and Wilcox [1915].

¹¹ See Fisher [1916], Hall [1913], Hoyt, Page [1911, 1912a, 1912b, 1913], and Reed.

¹² For an account of the involvement of these economists in the Immigration Restriction League see Gossett [pp. 384-87] and Solomon [pp. 131-35].

urged immediate immigration restrictions as part of a general eugenics program. Economists of note who supported this position were Prescott Hall, Frank A. Fetter, and Irving Fisher.

Probably the most influential economist in this group was Hall. As a leader of the Immigration Restriction League, he was the invited keynote speaker at the Immigration Conference of the National Civic Federation. [Hall (1907)] This conference led to the creation of the U.S. Immigration Commission. In 1913 Hall argued that criminality, insanity, and pauperization were highest among recent immigrants and that this was caused by hereditary influences. Hall [1913, p. 753] claimed that

The class of persons, other than the state officials, who are becoming interested in immigration matters, consists of medical men and the medical society. These men come in direct contact with the evil results of the immigration of people of poor racial stock. The studies made under the auspices of the Eugenic Record Office show how much damage bad racial strains can do.

His book, *Immigration and Its Effects*, was considered by individuals of similar views, such as Fetter [1916, p. 353], to be the outstanding scientific work in the area.

It is important to note that Hall and Eugenacists believed it was inadequate to attack immigration mainly because it hurt native workers' wages. Hall criticized the U.S. Immigration Commission for saying little about heredity and nothing about eugenics. Hall [1912, p. 676] said,

. . . but the instincts and habits which cause a low standard of living, willingness to underbid native labor, and migratory habits are matters of race and inheritance. One can not imagine the Baltic races being willing to live as do many of our recent immigrants, no matter how poor they might be.

Fetter was also a vocal advocate of eugenics measures. He [1907, p. 91] believed that

The ignorant, the improvident and the feeble-minded are contributing far more than their quota to the next generation. . . . Unless effective means are found to check the degeneration of the race, the noontide of humanity's greatness is nigh, if not passed . . . Great changes in thought are impending, and these will include the elimination of the unfit . . . and the conscious improvement of the race. Under

the touch of the new science of eugenics, many of our most perplexing problems would disappear, making possible the better democracy which we are just beginning to seek.

Fetter [1904, p. 193] was concerned over the relatively high birth rates of "whites of the mountains, the foreign population, the negro, and, in general, the lower ranks of labor" as compared to that of "the more intelligent elements of the population."

In his very early writings Fetter [1904, pp. 179-80] had thought that "education and native talent are in a degree interchangeable," but by 1915 he discounts any effects of education. At that point Fetter [1915, p. 419] contended, "Few thoughtful persons now hold the view that the race can be improved biologically, rapidly if at all, or by the process of educating individuals." Fetter also indicated that immigration which had "encouraged much defective and vicious strains of humanity, some of the notorious, such as the Jukes, the Kallikak family, and the Tribe of Ishmael" must be restricted as "part of a national policy of eugenics." [Fetter (1916, pp. 368-780)]

Fisher [1907, pp. 298-99] for a time felt that environmental factors and "the influence of training" were also great. However, like Fetter, he began to believe that only genetic factors were significant in explaining social and mental characteristics. By 1911 Fisher [1911, p. 476] saw the problem in the United States as one of "race suicide" and indicated approvingly that a "method of attaining the contrary result—namely reproducing from the best and suppressing reproduction from the worst—has been suggested by the late Sir Francis Galton of England, under the name of 'eugenics'."

Fisher later became vice-president of the eugenics-oriented Race Betterment Foundation. In his professional writings Fisher [1916, pp. 710-11] began recommending that "by a policy of restricting immigration by excluding those unfit to become American citizens . . . we shall help solve some of our problems, including that of the distribution of wealth." Fisher [Fisher and Fisk, pp. 299-300] suggested that "the 80,000 prisoners supported in the United States are recruited not evenly from the general population, but mainly from certain family breeds." To correct this he recommended the "segregation of defectives so that they may not mingle their family traits with those of sound lines" and "sterilization of certain groups of hopeless defectives." [Fisher and Fisk (pp. 323-24)]

In the early 1920s, when many academicians left the eugenics move-

ment because of its gross racist and anti-scientific turn,¹³ Fisher became one of its leaders. During this period he actively raised funds for the eugenics movement,¹⁴ and was instrumental in the formation of the American Eugenics Society, becoming its first president.¹⁵ For the first time Fisher explicitly argued along racial lines. In criticizing the U.S. Immigration Commission Report, Fisher [1921, p. 226] said

The core of the problem of immigration is, however, one of race and eugenics, despite the fact that in the eighteen volumes of the report of the Immigration Commission scarcely any attention is given to this aspect of the immigration problem.

The Environmental Position

This group, which included many of the Progressives,¹⁶ tended to emphasize economic reasons in their arguments against further immigration. They argued that continued immigration would lead to a lowering of native workers' wages. Also, they believed that immigration fluctuated as a lagged response to economic conditions. This lagged response led to higher immigration at the bottom of the business cycle and lower immigration at the peak. Hence, immigration accentuated the American business cycle.

In addition to these arguments there were assertions concerning the racial inferiority of the recent immigrants. The environmentalists believed that the non-Nordic European races were inferior primarily due to cultural and social factors. That is, while the environmentalists did not dispute the "fact" that genetic differences were present, they felt that environmental factors dominated. Furthermore, they felt that cultural changes could effectively offset the deficiencies of the new immigrants.

In economics these thoughts were most identified with Commons, but also included Jenks, Lauck, and Henry P. Fairchild. Commons' *Races and Immigrants in America* was the most influential work by this group. In it Commons did not hesitate to voice his views on the quality of the new immigrants. For example, according to Commons [1920, p. 78]

¹³ See Ludmerer [pp. 120-25].

¹⁴ See I. N. Fisher [p. 216].

¹⁵ See American Eugenics Society [p. 3].

¹⁶ For a brief exposition on the reasons behind liberal racial beliefs see Gossett [pp. 172-75]; for a fuller account see Pickens.

The North Italian is an educated, skilled artisan, coming from a manufacturing section and largely from the cities. He is teutonic in blood and appearance. The South Italian is an illiterate peasant from the great landed estates, with wages one-third his northern compatriot. He descends with less mixture from the ancient inhabitants of Italy [non-teutonic].

Commons [1920, p. 213] believed that the problem of southern and eastern European immigrants was one of primitiveness of civilization and that "all children of all races of the temperate zone are eligible to the highest American civilization." Commons' union strategy was interwoven with his racial and nativist notions. For example, in his analysis of the anti-Chinese movement in California in the 1880s Commons [1918, pp. 252-3] contended that

The anti-Chinese agitation in California, culminating as it did in the Exclusion Law of 1882, was doubtless the most important single factor in the history of American labor, for without it the entire country might have been overrun by Mongolian labor and the labor movement might have become a conflict of races instead of one of classes.

Commons believed that unions were instrumental to the assimilation of the new immigrants. He [1920, p. 220] said

The influence of schools, churches, settlements, and farming communities applies more to the children of immigrants than to the parents. The immigrants themselves are too old for Americanization, especially when they speak a non-English language. To them the labor-union is at present the strongest Americanizing force.

Commons considered the union shop particularly important in helping develop democratic values in the eastern and southern European immigrants. He [1919, p. 108] said that

When this particular shop scheme was started, many of the workers were newly arrived immigrants, acquainted only with the despotism of Austria, Hungary, Russia Many were what is known as Bolsheviks Many were successful agitators, hostile to employers as a class. In the course of time their employers were astonished with the changes that came over them.

Commons also believed that immigration, by increasing competition among workers, would lower the overall standard of living of the working class. This argument was standard for other Progressives, such

as Lauck and Jenks, These two, while minimizing cultural factors in their summary of the U.S. Immigration Report, emphasized them in other publications.

In his book, *Immigration*, Fairchild emphasized the cultural deficiencies of immigrants as the main argument for immigration restrictions. While earlier¹⁷ he was against immigration solely for its negative effects on wage levels, Fairchild [1913, p. 27] now argued that before the War of Independence, America was made up of only the Nordic race and that now democratic ideals were being threatened by the non-Nordic immigrants.

The differences between the environmentalists [E] and the genetic racialists [G] can be summed up briefly:

1. E believed cultural factors were most responsible for inferior qualities. G believed genetic factors were most responsible.
2. E believed cultural conditioning (schools, unions) could eliminate inferior traits. G believed no amount of cultural conditioning could offset inferior genetic strains.
3. E believed that the primary social problem caused by the new immigrants was due to their anti-democratic heritage. G believed it to be intellectual and social (crime, insanity) inferiority.
4. E desired methods to further assimilation of immigrants already here while G desired methods to maintain race purity, as sterilization and anti-miscegenation laws.
5. E proposed methods of social control (schools, unions, social welfare agencies, while G proposed methods of elimination (sterilization, institutionalization).

The Anti-Racial Position

Though less influential than the previous two groups, there were a number of economists who were opposed to any belief in racial inferiority. Within this anti-racialist grouping were Emily Balch, Max Kohler, Isaac A. Hourwich, E. A. Goldenweiser, and Jacob H. Hollander.

Balch [1912, p. 64] argued that literacy tests were not good predictors of intelligence. She [1910] also claimed that the slavic immigrants had had an overwhelmingly positive effect on America. Kohler [1913, p. 369; 1914, p. 108] consistently argued that attacks on immigrants were based on pseudo-scientific arguments. He [1911] tried

¹⁷ See Fairchild [1911, p. 753; 1912, pp. 53-62].

to disprove the belief that immigrants were thriftless, lacked a sense of cleanliness, or took in boarders to send money abroad.

Goldenweiser attempted to change the belief that immigrants reduced the birth rate among native Americans. He found that the birth rate among native Americans had been falling consistently since 1810. More importantly, he showed that the correlation was not between the number of immigrants and the birth rate but between the degree of urbanization and the birth rate. Finally, in Australia, where immigration had been negligible, there had been a similar fall in the birth rate.

Hourwich [1912] attacked the widely held view that immigration lowered wages. He [1911, p. 618] tried to show that wage increases were highest in areas which attracted immigrants, that immigrants did not come according to shortrun economic conditions, and that, in general, the supply of labor over the period 1890-1910 did not keep pace with demand.

In a similar vein, Hollander [pp. 54-84] argued that low wages were due to an undervaluation of output by consumers, necessitating minimum wage legislation. He also believed that unemployment was caused by business practices and structural conditions but not immigration. According to Hollander [p. 5],

. . . . neither national qualities nor national characteristics account for the presence of such poverty It can not be identified with alien elements in the native race stocks. Wholesale immigration is likely to be attended by urban congestion and industrial exploitation, but these are supplementary phases of the problem of poverty. Even in the United States, where immigration has attained proportions unexampled in the world's history, there is no reason to believe that such influx — bearing in mind the part it has played in creating and enlarging industrial opportunity— has permanently affected the conditions of poverty.

The major finding of the paper is that there seemed to be three distinct groupings: genetic racialists, environmentalists, and anti-racialists. These divisions may very well correlate with differences among economists of that period on economic policy. For example, the anti-racialist were not only against immigration restrictions but disputed Commons' view that immigration was destabilizing and lowered native workers' wages. Economic analysis of unions also reflected racial attitudes. Besides Commons, we find in the professional

writings of Robert F. Hoxie explicit use of racial arguments. Hoxie [p. 173] stated,

I am inclined to think that revolutionary unionism in this country; especially as regards the quasi-anarchist revolutionary variety, is largely a matter of individual and racial temperament. . . . A growing portion of the workers — largely as a result of recent immigration — are temperamentally radicals.

According to Hoxie [pp. 66-67], temperament is a factor “perhaps equally potent [as environment] and certainly more permanent . . . which shows [itself] as being different in races and individuals.” Similar arguments were used by many economists to explain the rapid increase in labor unrest during this period.¹⁸ Other policy areas where racial attitudes may have influenced economics were minimum wage legislation, anti-poverty policy, and the distribution of income.

A second area which needs further exploration is the influence of racial theories on assumptions economists made concerning economic behavior. During the period 1914-1924 numerous articles on the relationship of psychology and economic behavior appeared in the leading economics journals.¹⁹ As previously mentioned, the work of McDougall on instinct had an especially significant influence on economists.²⁰ McDougall, like other leading psychologists, believed instinct and intelligence to be not only genetically determined but racial fixed as well. Therefore, it is not unwarranted to hypothesize that many economists were not only influenced by these psychologists in concluding how man acts (instinct) but also how these acts are determined (racially and genetically).

Examples of the influence of racial writings in psychology on economic behavior can be found in the works of Sombart and Fisher. Sombart believed that “certain races of people; e.g. the Florentines, the Scots, and above all the Jews, have a rooted disposition towards trading.” [Taussig (1915, p. 5n)] According to Fisher [1907, p. 292]

Among communities and people noted for lack of foresight and for negligence with respect to the future are China, India, Java, the negro communities of the southern states, the peasant communities of Russia, and the North and South American Indians.

¹⁸ See Fetter [1918], Fisher [1917, p. 20], Mitchell [1918], and Parker [1918, p. 213].

¹⁹ See Carver [1918], Clark, Dickinson [1919, 1924], Frank, Mitchell [1914], Parry, and Snow.

²⁰ See Dobriansky [p. 250]; Dorfman [p. 276]; Schumpeter [p. 799] Suranyi-Unger [p. 243], and Taussig [1915, p. 8n].

Owing to this high rate of time discount Fisher was able to explain the high rate of interest in all these countries and regions.

It should be noted that economists were not much different than other social scientists and the population with respect to racial views. Economists did not play a leadership role in the development and application of racial theories to the explanation of social phenomena. Economists were mainly influenced by the other social science disciplines. Sociologists, such as Lester Ward, E. A. Ross, Charles Cooley, and Albion Small; psychologists, such as Edward Thorndike, G. Stanley Hall, and William McDougall; and historians, such as Herbert Baxter Adams, Alfred Bushnell Hart, Andrew Dixon White, and John Burgess, were far more important than any economists in the dissemination of racial theories within the academic community. For many of these academicians racial thought was a central aspect of their intellectual pursuits. For example, many of Hall's students, such as Lewis Terman, Henry Goddard, and Carl Brigham, and McDougall's students, such as Sir Cyril Burt, continued to try to prove that intelligence was genetically and racially determined.

On the other hand, for almost all American economists racial thought never was the primary aspect of their economic inquiries. Moreover in economics, unlike these other disciplines where the genetic racial position was dominant, the environmental position was the majority position. Even many of the economists who eventually supported the genetic racial position, such as Fisher, Fetter, and Carver,²¹ were environmentalists during much of this period. For these reasons racial thought never substantially affected the training of economists during this period and was relatively easily rooted out. By 1920 virtually no journal space was given to racial thought articles in the economics profession.

One could probably draw some parallels between the early American economists and the current academic grouping of genetic racialists. However, these parallels would appear to be more appropriate with the early American psychologists.²² One similarity which should be pursued is the continued uncritical acceptance of environmentalist theories by many economists. In the last ten years theories of black cultural inferiority have been generally uncritically accepted by econ-

²¹ For Carver's environmentalist views see Carver [1911]; 1924. p. 139]. For his genetic racial views see Carver [1949, pp. 267-69].

²² See Kamin for one important recent work which thoroughly refutes the genetic racial position and draws parallels with this earlier period.

omists, especially those writing principles textbooks.²³ It has also been incorporated by some economists attempting to explain racial labor market characteristics within a neoclassical framework.²⁴

²³ See Samuelson [p. 791], McConnell [pp. 666-69], and Nickson [p. 217].

²⁴ See Piore and Masters [pp. 9-10].

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