

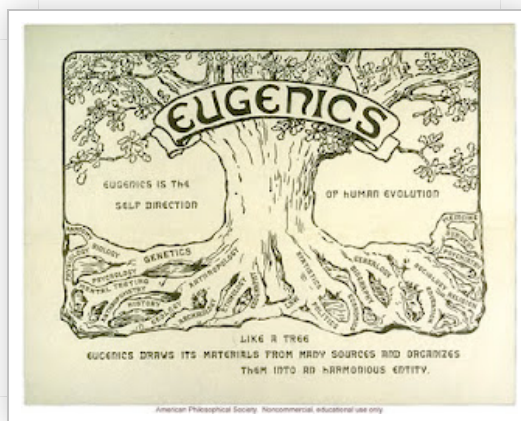
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Friday, March 18, 2011

PROGRESSIVISM?!



According to Wisconsin historian Robert C. Nesbit, John R. Commons should be at the top of any list of professional scholars that shaped the legislation and administration furthering Progressivism. This is a very unfortunate component of Wisconsin history. While Progressivism is sold as something Wisconsin should be proud of, the jury is still out as historians sort out what it really is, rather than what it sounds like. Professor Commons was a white supremacist first and an economist second.

Progressivism gave rise to two crucial philosophies that shaped the modern development of Wisconsin after the Civil War. The Eugenics movement and “The Wisconsin Idea” had catastrophic impacts on race relations and resulted in limiting the growth of Wisconsin’s cultural, political and economic landscape. Racism hid behind the mask of “progress.”

By 1890, when the Progressive era began, nearly 2,000 African Americans lived outside of the city limits of Milwaukee. This equates to about 20% of the African American population living almost everywhere around the state. By 1930, after the extreme acts of harassment and violence that were at a high during the “Roaring 20s,” that percentage changed drastically to about 72%. James W. Loewen, who studied and later confirmed many “sundown towns” in Wisconsin, wrote that “the so-called Progressive movement was for whites only” and any “reforms removed the last local black leaders from northern city councils in favor of commissioners elected citywide.” Commons’s work and the influence of his mentor, Richard T. Eli and their scientific racism would have an impact on Wisconsin, which changed municipal government structure resulting in exclusion of African Americans from many cities.

This is also where the so-called Wisconsin Idea and the Eugenics movement work together to influence municipal government as well. Local level progressivism was being felt in terms of bringing in more “qualified” appointed (rather than elected) officials in the form of city administrators or managers. Progressivism called for “at-large” alderpersons rather than representative districts and governing boards that were entirely appointed. Good examples of these seen today are Utility Commissions, Library Boards and Police and Fire Commissions. These governmental bodies are in complete control of how to spend money budgeted by a city’s common council. This, of course, disenfranchised African Americans and other undesirables by keeping “the good ole’ boy networks” in power.

Professor Commons was very influential on elected officials. The most notable was “Fighting Bob” LaFollette. The position of professor at the University of Wisconsin included recommending policy because of their expertise in a particular discipline. Economics was a pretty powerful discipline and remained high on the totem pole. There was a strong dose of eugenic theory in economic and social policy. The University of Wisconsin school of thought was not only shaping Wisconsin, but the whole United States as well. Progressives felt that the undesirables were not smart enough to govern themselves let alone anyone else. Commons wrote legislation that was good and bad. The good being that he really knew a lot about economic theory and was very valuable as he helped write legislation to improve the conditions of workers. He and the Progressives were very much in favor of white unions. Commons felt that African Americans and other “lower class immigrants” were a threat to “native white workers” because wage “competition has no respect for the superior

racism and because of this the “race with the lowest necessities displaces others.”

In Commons book, *Races and Immigration in America*, a chapter entitled, “The Negro” is written in a very scientific manner. The term “scientific racism” could be applied in this case. He argued for increased wages, shorter workdays and weeks, and just better working conditions in general. These arguments made their way into law. That is what The Wisconsin Idea by Charles McCarthy was all about. The book served as “the manifesto for the progressives’ technocratic vision of professional experts guiding (indeed writing) legislation.” Unfortunately, the benefits were going to exclude those thought to be “unemployable” meaning African Americans, immigrants and women.

Commons influence would be felt throughout the state rather than just the university campus. There are honorable mentions of him in the sociology and economics department facilities today. At the UW the name lives on in the John R. Commons Room on the 8th floor of the Sociology building, and the John R. Commons Club in the Economics department. In 1962, leading up to the year of the march in 1967, the mayor and common council of Milwaukee, had refused to adopt an open housing ordinance. They had worries that it was a problem the entire county shared and if the city shouldered the burden alone it would create “white-flight” to the suburbs.

The population between 1940 and 1960 grew to 74,500 and by 1980 it reached 182,500. That increased 15 times in 40 years. In 1967, Father Groppi leader of the Milwaukee, WI NAACP, marched with 200 members in support of open housing. 3,000–5,000 whites were there to stop them. The angry whites pelted them with whatever they could find to throw. Milwaukee struggled with the bulk of civil rights violence and militant protest because that is where most of the African Americans lived. The fact that elected officials that would make their voice heard did not represent the huge African American population in Milwaukee is obvious. Nesbit reports, even though the African American population grew very rapidly the city’s elected officials remained indifferent to their cause.

The Eugenics movement was interwoven into the fabric of Wisconsin society. The KKK had membership numbers reaching as high as 75,000. *Wisconsinhistory.org* notes that “many Milwaukee Socialists joined the Klan out of their contempt for Catholicism, despite Victor Berger’s condemnations of the group.” To Nesbit, “the areas of Klan strength are significant,” as concentration of Klan membership was in Milwaukee, Kenosha and Racine counties. These areas had most of the Polish and Italian Catholics and Russian Jews. “The Klan also won active support in the Fox River Valley, in Dane, Green and Rock counties in south-central Wisconsin, and in Eau Claire and La Crosse counties.” Rusk County was also Klan territory with a large number of Polish newcomers. The KKK “found fertile soil in Wisconsin society.” Nesbit did refer to the Wisconsin Idea as indefinable. Perhaps the connection of the Progressives and the Eugenics movement can eventually lead us to a definition. It does really call into question what is really meant by the term “progressive.”

Works Cited

Robert C. Nesbit, *Wisconsin: A History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973, 1989), 426.

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Term: Ku Klux Klan in Wisconsin

Definition: The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) first appeared in the United States in 1866. Founded by veterans of the

Confederate Army, its main purpose was to resist Reconstruction through violent means. The Civil Rights Act of 1871 essentially destroyed the KKK. In 1915, a second group using the same name was founded by William Joseph Simmons. The organization grew slowly until the end of WWI when Klan recruiters known as "kleagles" traveled around the country to sign up new members. Postwar fears of radicalism and disloyalty led Klan members to organize and declare themselves the defenders of Americanism. The Klan was openly hostile to Catholics, Jews, African Americans, immigrants, freethinkers, and radicals. No one knows for sure how many Americans joined but the best estimates are around 2 million members, some 15,000 of which were in Wisconsin.

The Klan first appeared in Wisconsin in 1920. Under the leadership of Milwaukee insurance broker William Wieseman, the Klan grew throughout Wisconsin, though Milwaukee continued to have the highest number of members. Because the Catholic church was the only group on the Klan's list of enemies that had any real power in Wisconsin, the Klan went to great lengths to identify itself with American Protestantism and saw Masons (long condemned by Rome) as a logical source of members. Many Milwaukee Socialists joined the Klan out of their contempt for Catholicism, despite Victor Berger's condemnations of the group. Linking crime with immigrants (many of whom were Catholic), the Klan gained power in Madison by promising to maintain order in the city's Italian neighborhood, the Greenbush. The University of Wisconsin had a student group that called itself the Ku Klux Klan Honorary Junior Society. In 1924, Wieseman was replaced by Charles B. Lewis who secured a state charter for the Wisconsin affiliate from the national organization, a sign of organizational vitality and recognition. Unlike Klans in other states, the Wisconsin KKK did not resort to violence, choosing instead secret and extralegal actions. The Klan was already in decline by 1926, however, and had all but disappeared from Wisconsin by 1928.

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Klan took on new life nationwide, including Wisconsin. New chapters were formed and demonstrations held throughout the country, and according to the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Intelligence Project," three Wisconsin chapters existed as late as 2004.

[View pictures](#) relating to the Ku Klux Klan at Wisconsin Historical Images.

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[Source: The History of Wisconsin vol 5; Robert A. Goldberg "The Ku Klux Klan in Madison, 1922-1927," in Wisconsin Magazine of History 58 (Autumn, 1974)]

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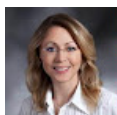


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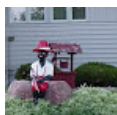
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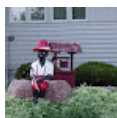


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