



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

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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

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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.